The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics
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Prologue

Outside dead wars grind into barren sunsets, all wars now frying heaven’s roses in globalizing deserts

Nathaniel Tarn
Overview

With systemic threats to our survival—wars raging around the planet, economic crises, gendered violence, environmental devastation—how does the Dutch flower industry even matter? Again and again between 2008 and 2010 I found myself asking this sort of question as I conducted fieldwork, partly in Ethiopia but primarily at the premier Dutch horticultural auction located in Aalsmeer, about twenty kilometers from Amsterdam. It’s the largest flower auction in the world and remains very much a local institution, although it’s central to the global industry. Of course, FloraHolland Aalsmeer does not hold the key to our grave environmental, social, and economic troubles. But unexpectedly, I found that the Dutch flower business does in fact correspond with some of the world’s foremost issues in direct and indirect ways. Because the agricultural sector uses more oil and gas than almost any other part of the global economy, for instance, the organization and management of the flower industry epitomizes both problems and possibilities in the ways we grow, sell, and distribute basic necessities. Also, at the heart of our global economy and the horticultural system sit auctions, this curious method of assigning price and value for everything from government bonds and oil, to paintings, corn, herring, and tulips. That’s not all. Dutch flowers also crop up in several prominent contemporary political controversies, from the Israel-Palestine conflict to the land grab in East Africa and other aspects of globalization. And more generally, our use of flowers is strongly associated with values of beauty and aesthetic practices; flowers themselves (particularly roses and tulips) have been and are powerful tropes for emotion and ethics; the incipient Dutch flower industry of the Netherlands’ Golden Age helped to launch the world’s first modern consumer society; and cut flowers are today a key luxury commodity, with the power Bourdieu famously named *la distinction* (1984 [1979]).

Crucially, what links these larger issues to the Aalsmeer auction is not merely a facile association or thematic overlap; often, through personal networks, the industry is never more than one or two degrees of separation from national policies, ranging from foreign affairs to infrastructural planning. This was the case as the industry took root in the seventeenth century and it has been even more true from the Aalsmeer institution’s

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2 Second only to automobiles.
3 Depending on which source is consulted, the birth of consumer society has been variously located in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Britain and the U.S., in eighteenth-century France, in Renaissance Italy, in premodern Russia, and in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, among other times and places (Braudel 1973, Brewer 2003, Goldgar 2007, Hochstrasser 2007, Polyan 2001 [1944]). Sensible arguments can be made for each of them; the early Netherlands overlap of commerce, new commodities, wealth and capital accumulation along with expanding horticulture and visual culture struck me as particularly convincing.
founding at the beginning of the twentieth century until today. While this thesis focuses on the background and daily workings of a contemporary Dutch institution, these ongoing intersections and convergences nevertheless seem compelling, as they illustrate historical continuities in the Netherlands and suggest lessons for other contexts, and other industries. The general issues that underlie contemporary Dutch horticulture remind us of the remarkable connections and correlations of our era. But besides these sometimes explicit, sometimes oblique relationships between local practices and values with Dutch national policy and broader topics, the global flower industry and FloraHolland fit into an even larger story about the role of flowers in the evolution of human life, into what one might call the *really* longue durée. Ultimately, I’m convinced that the operations of Dutch horticulture gesture to this wider scope, a blurred horizon of economic, cultural, and social issues somewhere in the distance.

After all, the use and cultivation of flowers is one of the oldest and most enduring of human activities. Flowers have turned up in Iron Age grave sights in northern Europe and Mesopotamia, and have been a part of most communities and societies around the globe as long as agriculture has existed, and probably much longer. From our earliest existence, our relationships to flowers and to each other have been intimately bonded, and suggest a lot about our values and civilizations. Conceived of as more than merely ornamentals, flowers have performed and continue to serve widely ranging and essential functions for human societies and the development of the planet. Botanist William Burger reflects that “[f]lowering plants have been central to the evolution of primates and swinging apes, to the origin of bipedal humans, and to the origin of agriculture. Today, flowering plants provide a bit more than 90 percent of our caloric intake; and they are the primary food of our domesticated animals as well. In 1990, it was estimated that we humans were raising 1,294 million head of cattle, 856 million pigs, and 10,770 million chickens—mostly fed with flowering plants. Clearly, flowering plants are the foundations for larger human communities over the entire planet. Putting all these observations together, one can easily claim that without flowering plants we humans and our grand civilizations simply wouldn’t be here” (2006: 233). Fifty years earlier, the naturalist Loren Eiseley put this sentiment in even more stark and poetic terms. He concluded his essay, ‘How Flowers Changed the World,’ with these words: “Without the gift of flowers and the diversity of their fruit, man and bird, if they had continued to exist at all, would today be unrecognizable. Archaeopteryx, the lizard-bird, might still be snapping at beetles on a sequoia limb; man might still be a nocturnal insectivore gnawing a roach in the dark. The weight of a petal has changed the face of the world and made it ours” (Eiseley 1957: 78).

Our world today, facing threats as well as possibility, continues this enduring relationship with flowering plants, not only through agriculture and medicine, but in our ceremonies and rituals around love and death, as well as our more refined sensibilities
around class in consumer society. The Dutch horticultural industry invites us to wonder at this, and to ask: how should we manage resources, and how might we sustainably cooperate and compete? And fundamentally, what are the values, practices, and organization behind our economic institutions? Emily Dickinson wrote: Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant. This thesis looks at the world through Dutch flowers, from that slant or vantage point, how the horticultural system plugs into contemporary Dutch life and our sphere at large.

Specifically, the thesis argues that the Dutch horticultural industry is built on a few fundamental things which intersect and complement each other in various ways. Male networks is an important one: social, artistic, scientific, and economic, this Dutch variety of old boy system launched the industry and has made it work at every stage. State planning and funding account for other huge aspects of the horticultural system’s growth and success from its beginning until today. What makes these points characteristic of the Netherlands has to do with the size of the industry relative to the country (no one is far removed from the industry), and the prominence of horticulture in a lot of what the country has done, from colonial exploits in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries to its legendary water and land management, from its models of economic success to its artistic achievements in still life painting. In other words, horticulture has been integral to the modern nation. Another argument of the thesis is about how this successful ‘market system’ works in actuality: it’s not about only the strong surviving and the individual entrepreneur or company fighting it out to win and dominate. It’s also about values and practices not usually associated with capitalism and contemporary industry: namely, cooperating, distributing risk, sharing knowledge, and pooling resources. The thesis explores how this cooperative institution actually functions in a dynamic global sector. One of the chief lessons is that economic practices do not really run on the basis of abstract principles, disinterested values, and other hackneyed but standard beliefs about ‘the market’. When you look closely at FloraHolland, it is clear that beyond bottom line profit, its daily working owes more to social mores, sentiments, loyalties, and historical patterns than to laws about the behavior of markets, or the ingenuity and character of entrepreneurship and capitalism.

Also, besides what they imply or suggest, the history and practices of the Dutch flower industry are themselves intriguing. In FloraHolland Aalsmeer’s auctions and across the industry, I met quirky, passionate people with visions of the world that sometimes seemed charmingly off kilter, sometimes banal, but often insightful and steeped with implications. I learned a lot from them, and do my best to let them speak for themselves and to allow rich description to flesh out the arguments of this thesis. But abstract ideas also have their place. Theory helps to connect the specific to the general, to suggest how the specific institutions and practices may apply to or have bearing on expansive social situations. I have sought to communicate theoretical insight in clear,
forthright terms, and to elaborate such general insights with ethnographic detail. Together the general and the specific form a pattern of concepts related to Dutch horticulture, a pattern that informs my arguments. This conceptual framework is discussed below, but for now, its terms are familiar, and simple to list: *moral economy, commodity, world system, networks, horticulture, aesthetics, masculinity, cooperative, and the market.*

This prologue amplifies these ideas and situates them in a body of literature in the last four sections ('cooperation and cooperatives', ‘moral economy, commodities, and the world system’, ‘masculinity, networks, and aesthetics’, and ‘horticulture’). But the ideas may be generalized even further. For example, the contact and kinetics of material, symbolic, and social capital provide an ongoing touchstone for the thesis (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], 1986). Flowers are an especially ephemeral form of material culture. As aesthetic objects and capital, they have captured the social imagination (still life painting, popular traditions, marketing); and in the form of tulip bulbs, gardens, and copyright laws, flowers have held together social, political, scientific, and commercial networks in the Netherlands (Foster 2007). They also form the basis for the planning and organization of numerous enterprises closely tied to state and economic power both today and in the Dutch past.

Another indispensable insight that unifies my conceptual framework is that all auctions, including Dutch horticultural auctions, are primarily social institutions with some economic outcomes, an idea articulated by sociologist Charles Smith and that’s fleshed out in Chapter Three (1986). During fieldwork and in analyzing what I was seeing and reading about Dutch horticulture, a comparative view of economic institutions and their place in society over time provided a vital critical perspective regarding principles of exchange and the relationship between subjects and objects (Mauss 1990 [1950], Polyani 2001 [1944]). Similarly relevant to my thinking were the religious and cultural values of Calvinism and their complex relationship to the production of wealth in the Netherlands (Weber 1947 [1905], Schama 1987). Early aesthetic, economic, and horticultural practices associated with tulipmania lend historical resonance to this thesis, particularly in chapters one and four (Goldgar 2007). Other basic, recurring notions rely on analyses of world systems, the origins of capitalism, and commodity chains in the global economy (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994, Wallerstein 1974, 1994). Finally, one leitmotif of the thesis involves the real and imagined presence of China in Dutch horticulture (comments and references came up repeatedly in fieldwork and research), and rests on broad arguments about the place of flowers in east-west trade and the creation of the modern world (Goody 1993). No doubt some talk of China simply reflects that it’s a popular topic of conversation, that in the span of a few decades the nation went from a poor rural country to an industrial powerhouse (though still poor and rural in many respects) and the second largest
economy in the world (or possibly now the biggest, depending on how one calculates). But the allusions to and remarks about China also seemed to gauge general ideas about ‘globalization’ and industry growth, and to index notions about patterns in the world system.

Something else must be mentioned here at the outset, events of continual consequence that influenced my understanding of Dutch horticulture during fieldwork and writing. One involved the 2008 horticultural auction mergers that have left today just two auction institutions: FloraHolland (the ‘one auction to rule them all’) and the considerably smaller Plantion. Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer joined FloraHolland, consolidating the bulk of the horticultural industry into FloraHolland (with six different sites in the Netherlands: in Aalsmeer, Naaldwijk, Rijnsburg, Bleiswijk, Venlo and Eelde). This merger was approved by the Aalsmeer coop’s grower-members in 2007, and was beginning to be carried out just as I began my fieldwork. The merger has swayed the industry in obvious and subtle ways, affecting daily trade on the floor in Aalsmeer, the outlook of participants, the power of the institution nationally and internationally, and the internal dynamics of the cooperative. Chapter Two explores the history of the auction and some of the effects of the merger, but its significance pervades the industry, impacting both the theory and practice of Dutch cooperatives.

The other factor to mention is familiar to everyone, a systemic world event that encompasses Dutch horticulture but is not limited to it: namely, the collapse of the financial industry in 2007-2008 and the seismic turmoil it has triggered in the years since. This continuing crisis was initially most severe in the U.S., is now wreaking havoc in the eurozone, and marks a catastrophe of epic proportions. Among its pernicious effects so far, it has bankrupted entire countries, impoverished millions of people, led to speculative frenzies, and driven up the price of commodities that have in turn devastated populations and inspired riots (among other places, in Haiti and in Egypt in 2010). Although not on the tips of the tongues of horticultural traders in Aalsmeer, these events have affected their business, and influence many seemingly distant and disparate institutions, policies, and economies. The proliferation of crises and corruption within the financial sector and its sweeping effects on the larger economy have demonstrated the ties between global and local events, as well as between systemic economic trends and Dutch horticultural institutions. A recent report by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy at Tufts University concluded that “[a] paradigm shift is underway, caused by the deepening integration of agricultural, energy, and financial markets in a resource-constrained world made more vulnerable by climate change.”

discussing the market practices in part of the agricultural sector (i.e. FloraHolland Aalsmeer) is in some ways not even a microcosm of or metaphor for the global economy.

Responses to the economic crisis so far have dramatically changed social and economic policies around the world, and not coincidentally, the ‘solutions’ (mostly austerity in the U.S. and the eurozone) have exacerbated the problems. In late 2008 and 2009, many executives in the Dutch horticultural industry still saw the crisis as brief and contained, and they predicted continued growth and prosperity for the horticultural sector. But although the horticultural industry may have fared better than other parts of the economy, it soon became clear that they had not grasped the depth of such events. It’s not yet certain if this represents part of the end of a long cycle of the world system, and the beginning of a more sustainable and just system, but it seems clear that the collapse and the official response to it represent the failure of the ideology of markets, of a range of economic practices, and for better or for worse, probably signals still more dramatic changes to come (Wallerstein 2010, 2011; Graeber 2009, 2011). As events unfolded week by week and month by month, I came to see the auction as a small system with its own logic, but embedded literally and ideologically in the mutating world system. The Aalsmeer auction is connected to state policies, to Dutch national discourses, and historical legacies in ways that conform to and also challenge how we understand business. The crisis made far more urgent the links between the auction and larger policies, and between the horticultural market and ‘the market’. One market is a specific place for buying and selling that is managed by institutions, and the other is abstract, disembodied, deterritorialized. But the ways many in the Dutch flower industry conceptualized markets, they often amounted to the same thing, even though in practice it was plain that FloraHolland did not work according to the espoused market principles.

Over the course of fieldwork and writing, these sorts of issues have left their imprints on this thesis; my hope is that, in turn, the thesis illuminates and contributes to debates around the Netherlands and the global economy.

and profit driven state and private agriculture has devastated many regions, particularly in Africa.

5 Many thinkers have been asking if this crisis marks the end of a cycle of the U.S. centered the world system. French historian Fernand Braudel argued that the world economy follows a pattern of long-term cycles, beginning in medieval Europe around the twelfth century. Certain cities, and then nation states, became centers of these cycles, and their collapse, notable for today’s context, was always brought on by a crisis in credit. Venice and Genoa were the centers of the world system in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, followed by Antwerp in sixteenth century, Amsterdam in sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, and finally London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it was only around the sixteenth century that the density of trade began to resemble a modern capitalist cycle (Braudel 1973).
Approaching FloraHolland Aalsmeer and the Dutch Horticultural Industry

There are a number of benefits of ethnographic approaches to economic issues, from providing a bottom-up view of organizations and communities to broadening our understanding of material culture. With a sustained and (hopefully) equitable gaze, ethnography examines how institutions work in actuality, the day-to-day practices of participants, and what they say and is said about them. It brings a rich explanatory power to issues such as, how are decisions made? and, what sorts of patterns and values seem to define this community or this institution?

I spoke with hundreds of people involved in the industry at every step of the value chain, including breeders, growers, importers and exporters, FloraHolland officials, auctioneers, workers on the floor, office staff, and florists. Beginning in 2008, I spent many early mornings in the Aalsmeer auction observing, asking questions, and making notes, and in that way I befriended several traders and workers on the floor. I attended industry events and meetings in the Aalsmeer auction and at venues around the country. I also spent five weeks in Ethiopia visiting flower farms, interviewing Dutch growers and officials, as well as people from Ethiopian civil society and Ethiopian commercial horticulture. I was interested in what sorts of relationships the flower farms had with the home auction in the Netherlands, the personal, commercial, historical, and political relationships that inform the industry. And given that East Africa has displaced the Netherlands as the biggest rose producer, and the rose was the Aalsmeer auction’s founding flower, I wanted to know what Dutch growers on the ground in Ethiopia had to say about such issues.

In addition, to better ground myself in the topic and to understand how policy makers, social thinkers, and participants perceive and talk about Dutch horticulture, I consulted a range of academic literature as well as industry publications. Often this rhymed with or helped to frame issues and ideas that cropped up in my discussions and observations. Furthermore, I kept in mind the relevance of aesthetic values to cultural practices, recalling Mauss’ contention that “[a]esthetic phenomena form one of the largest components in the social activity of human beings, and not merely their individual activity...All aesthetic phenomena are in some degree social phenomena” (Mauss 2007: 68).

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6 The arguments and the sentiment are Mauss’s; the wording is not. This work originally appeared as Manuel D’Ethnographie, but was not composed by Mauss. Rather, it was assembled from the lecture notes of a former student, Denise Paulme, who went on to become an anthropologist herself. As the introduction to the ‘manual’ explains, the book grew out of a series of over 30 of Mauss’s lectures at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris and is closer to what today is thought of as philosophy or social theory than an instruction manual.
Sometimes what is most obvious is also the most difficult to see. It may be the case that what everyone assumes to be true is on some level mistaken; it might be the case that what is perfectly plain to insiders is unknown or baffling to outsiders. Examples of each leap to mind about FloraHolland Aalsmeer and the Dutch horticulture industry. To insiders, the idea that networking and cooperation explain a good deal of industry success seems obvious, and it turns out that cooperation and networking are both practiced and celebrated. But to this American observer steeped in the logic of every-man-for-himself competition, the sharing and working together one finds among Dutch growers seemed strange and counterintuitive. Freely offering tips and advice, trusting one another and sticking together are not values associated with entrepreneurship; they might seem, rather, to lead to financial trouble by giving away one’s trade secrets. But one shouldn’t oversimplify: competition coexists with cooperation in a variety of ways in this industry, and what people say must be considered along with what people do. Participant explanations about the workings of the auction, for example, often failed to account for the patterns and functioning of this institution. Their experience provided them with a penetrating and deeply felt understanding of auction procedures: a sense of place, ownership, and belonging, as well as a belief that the rules and historical context of the institution were more or less natural. But at the same time they shared commonly held views about auctions that are misleading and incomplete: namely, that the institution works according to abstract, mathematical ‘market principles’ and not according to historical patterns, beliefs such as trust, and the generous social sanction of community and familiarity. And while no one involved could escape noticing that Dutch horticultural auctions are dominated by men, not many participants thought this had anything to do with how their institution worked in practice.

Methodology is never really removed from theory, a dynamic that seems very relevant to an ethnography of a Dutch horticultural auction. Local values, community, and institutions connect to economic institutions and the market in fluid and (I believe) uncontroversial ways. Here is a simple formulation of how an abstract idea about the economic system leads to a methodological approach. “The motor of capitalism is profit making but I shall suggest that even the most market-driven actor—the national or global corporation—mixes the two realms [social networks and the market] and relies on the presence of communal relations and resources for its success... Economic anthropology attends to industrial life as well as ethnographic situations, because comparable processes in comparing and managing things are found everywhere” (Gudeman 2001: 1-2). Not only are economic actors and institutions embedded in social life, but other aspects of social life make similar comparisons and evaluations of value. Another useful aspect of identifying and discussing actual practices and beliefs informing economic decisions and institutions is that doing so highlights the moral
dimensions of socioeconomic life. No institution or practice is value-neutral, though anything to do with ‘the market’ is typically conceived of along these lines. After several decades of economic anthropology, the issue should not be if social mores influence or even shape economic practices, but what are the social practices and how do they affect the institution? David Graeber, a vigorous and iconoclastic thinker on these issues, recently investigated the history and practice of debt. Within the framework that Gudeman described, he made the point that “If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, it seems to me that we must start with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all” (Graeber 2011: 89). The ordinary features and minutiae of daily life ground our ethical and economic values. The details, characteristics, and sensibilities found in FloraHolland Aalsmeer and in Dutch horticulture—be they related to commerce, aesthetics, masculinity, or historical continuity—inform this dissertation.

As Weber acutely illustrated over a century ago, our economic system has an important cultural dimension—one can not simply remove monetary or financial aspects of it with forceps, as is often pretended. Feminist economist and historian Nancy Folbre described the issue like this. “If we use the word ‘capitalism’ to describe the world we live in, rather than some idealized abstraction of economic texts, we should recognize that capitalism is not equivalent to ‘the market’ but to a complex combination of markets, families, communities, and the state” (2009: 325). But while ‘capitalism’ certainly encompasses more than prices and records of transactions and ownership, ‘the market’ is also a vague term, something both literal and figurative. Outside of technical jargon to delimit specific definitions, this fuzziness seems inevitable. If one accepts that both ‘capitalism’ and ‘the market’ involve cultural and social factors, the broadness and overlap of both terms necessarily follows. That said, whenever relevant, this thesis distinguishes shades of meaning and applicability. Often, I let industry participants speak for themselves, and when they speak in general terms about how and why Dutch horticulture works as it does, they tend to use the term ‘the market’.

Before addressing how the institution of FloraHolland is framed within the market, it’s helpful to point out a general truth about wealth and poverty in the world system because these categories are too often taken as given, the invisible parameters of market logic. The historical and ethnographic experiences of Dutch horticulture suggest a lot about the workings of the world system, the role of commodities within it, and the relative wealth and poverty of nations and regions. Rich and poor are relative designations and are caused not merely by individual decisions, fate, or even specific policies, but result from the very structure and institutions of an economic system. This notion is strongly supported in anthropological literature. In his landmark Stone Age
Economics, Marshall Sahlins argued that “the world’s most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization” (1972: 37). This perspective was (and remains) controversial, especially among market ideologues who insist that our current economic order is a meritocracy, value-neutral, and has produced unprecedented, widespread prosperity. But Sahlin’s view was not at all new or even particularly “anthropological”; in fact, his thesis was prefigured by several popular Enlightenment figures. For instance, in Agrarian Justice Thomas Paine made the same point in nearly identical words: “Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilized life” he wrote. “It exists not in the natural state. On the other hand, the natural state is without those advantages which flow from agriculture, arts, science, and manufactures” (Paine 1795: 1). Similarly, Rousseau reasoned that “as there is hardly any inequality in the state of nature, all the inequality which now prevails...clashes with natural right...a distinction which sufficiently determines what we ought to think of that species of inequality which prevails in all civilized countries; since it is plainly contrary to the law of nature, however defined, that children should command old men, fools wise men, and that the privileged few should gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitudes are in want of the bare necessities of life” (Rousseau 2005 [1752]: 99-100). Regarding both theory and methodology, these strident words are remarkably apposite when considering the place of luxury commodities like flowers in our contemporary world system.

Dutch horticulture and FloraHolland exist in this market-based world system. In addition to literature on and methodological approaches to the market, organizational ethnography has provided a useful frame during both fieldwork and composition stages of this thesis. The market is made up of institutions. The study of institutions (and social networks within them) began with early theorists such as Georg Simmel, who analyzed how industrial capitalism effected complex patterns of affiliation, organization, production, and experience. My approach to networks is qualitative, not quantitative: I do not map relationships within FloraHolland, or between FloraHolland and other organizations and settings. Networking and the related male bonding were part of the organizational culture I observed. Linda Smircich conceived of organizational culture as a kind of accepted logic worked out in social settings through the structures and practices of institutions (1983). As such it encompasses an organization’s values, norms, language, historical patterns, location, beliefs, and institutional practices. Also relevant to such a view is how the institution is understood in broader contexts; how do those not employed and other non-members of the cooperative see FloraHolland? This thesis regularly situates FloraHolland in historical perspective as well as in contemporary Dutch and international contexts. I attempt careful, fair analyses that shy neither from
judgement nor from acknowledging the limits of one’s perspective, a goal that seems consistent with how organizational ethnography has been described. Instead of researchers seeing themselves as innocent discoverers of data, they understand their reports as interacting with and being partly produced by the people and environments that shape their experience; these ethnographies come about through reflexivity and modesty, as opposed to undeclared omniscience (Yanow 2009, 2012).

There were many challenges to approaching an institution of this size and complexity, and in seeing where, when, and how it plugs in to both Dutch policies and to the global market in cut flowers and plants. FloraHolland has six auction sites in the Netherlands, and more than 10,000 people pass through FloraHolland Aalsmeer each day. Aalsmeer’s is both the largest and serves the most diverse markets locally, regionally, and globally. Both nationally and internationally Aalsmeer is the face of the industry, and Aalsmeer hosted the Netherlands’ first horticultural auction. For all these reasons, it seemed like the best place for this ethnography. I began with some ideas gleaned from economic anthropology, but often these studies were of small markets in ‘developing’ countries or else stock markets in more ‘advanced’ economies. Little seemed directly relevant to understanding how FloraHolland actually worked or even in framing how to think about it. While the horticultural auctions, like the stock market, are male domains with clear insiders and outsiders, and where participants require specialized knowledge, the stakes are totally different. Profits, incentives, the status of both the traders and the industry, and where these speculative arenas fit into industry and society radically differ. In a related way, while Dutch flower growers share commonalities with rural cooperatives that may sell goods at local markets in ‘developing’ countries, the similarities are limited.

Also, being neither Dutch nor an industry insider afforded advantages and disadvantages. My limited fluency in the language, near total unfamiliarity with growing and handling flowers and just that I was an unfamiliar face all marked me as a stranger. And at FloraHolland, people were pretty busy: many didn’t have the time or didn’t see much point in talking with me. On the other hand, some did step away from their work for conversation, or allowed me to accompany them and ask questions: sometimes they welcomed the attention not only as an opportunity to talk about themselves and their careers but as an opportunity to reflect on their work from a ‘foreign’ perspective they might not otherwise entertain. And of course, as self-aware as I aspired to be, I nevertheless had my own assumptions and curiosities. For instance, initially, I sought to explain patterns and behaviors in terms of ‘Dutchness’ and other aspects of identity— issues that came to seem less central and less relevant in conveying how and why FloraHolland and the industry work as they do.

Though this thesis looks at the Netherlands and the larger world through the slant of horticulture, the institution of FloraHolland Aalsmeer is the ethnographic focus.
What general issues does it raise and how are they approached? The proceeding four sections explore some of the background theory and literature that inform and animate the themes and ideas of this thesis.

**Cooperatives and cooperation.**

More than merely working together toward a shared goal, cooperation refers to the various processes and institutions in which relationships, resources, information, and activities are shared within and between social groups for communal advantage (Oka and Fuentes 2010: 5). Cooperative behavior and practices have been around as long as human societies, very likely formed a decisive part of our pre-human evolutionary past, and have been observed not only in our closely related primates but in elephants, dolphins, rats, and other mammals (de Waal 2009, Gintis et al 2005). Cooperation and cooperative activities can also be understood as a variation on or compliment to practices of gifting and reciprocity that have been observed among indigenous peoples as well as peasant societies (Mauss 1990, Scott 1976).

Around the world today, cooperatives are big business, but their place both in agriculture and the global economy are sometimes underappreciated. According to eRNAC (the electronic european research network of academic researchers of agricultural cooperatives), a third of world food production passes through cooperatives. To put this in a global perspective: the European Union has 132,000 cooperatives with 83.5 million members and 2.3 million employees; the US has 47,000 cooperatives with 100 million members; and China has 94,771, with 1,193 million members. Because of their prominence and emphases on working together, small farmers, and sustainability, the UN declared 2012 the Year of the Cooperative, and in the Netherlands, the NRC (Nationale Coöperatieve Raad voor land-en-tuinbouw) sponsors events and regularly publishes material on the achievements, potential, and appeal of cooperatives. In a recent NRC report, ICAO (International Cooperative Agricultural Organization) president Won-Byung Choi articulated a key reason why cooperatives today are especially valuable: “cooperatives are an alternative that can alleviate the negative effect of laissez-faire,” he said, since free trade agreements often destroy small farmers (NCR 2012). Though integrated in the global economic system, coops represent an appealing and vital model that can provide a buffer from the ravages and vicissitudes of market forces. They offer a different way of doing business. Membership is open, and members own and govern their institutions, collectively managing their affairs and collectively benefitting—instead of decisions taken by a board of directors and profits merely enriching managers, CEOs, and shareholders. In theory, coops are organized by and run for the membership; in practice they hew closer to or further from this ideal, and exist in many sectors (including retail, consumer, housing, and agriculture).
Of the 300 largest cooperatives in the world, 15 are based in the Netherlands. For over a hundred years, cooperatives have occupied marked positions in the Netherlands, particularly in the agricultural sector, and within the financial institutions that support agriculture. “In the Netherlands in 2001, cooperatives processed 84% of all milk and 63% of all sugar beets; they supplied 54% of all compound feed, provided 87% of all credit to farmers, and sold 95% of all flowers and potted plants” (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003). According to the NRC, the total profits of the forty largest cooperatives in the Netherlands in 2010 was just under 37 billion euro. (For an arresting perspective, note that the non-cooperative Royal Dutch Shell’s profits for 2011 were 31 billion\(^7\)). All told, cooperatives in the Netherlands employ about 74,000 workers (and if one includes related services, the 4,000 Dutch cooperatives in existence employ about 150,000 people and account for 85 billion euro in profits.)

In addition to the prevalence and profit of coops in global and national terms, within the Dutch horticultural industry, cooperation is also a prized value. The pleasure of success is often attributed to samenwerken, working together. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that all Dutch trade communities will automatically form cooperatives. In fact, in many cases they have not. Jojada Verrips investigated the community of Dutch bargemen to understand why, of the many barge-master’s associations that have formed and then dissolved over the decades, only a few have enjoyed much longevity (1989, 1990).\(^8\) These men would seem to share a lot in common with horticultural entrepreneurs: a masculine occupational culture, a tradition passed down in families and communities, regional and national values that support and encourage working together, and some favorable legislation that does not present hindrances to forming occupational and professional institutions. There may even be a parallel between male grower’s attitudes toward their flowers and bargemen’s affinity for their boats, since both objects

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\(^7\) The figure comes from their 2011 Fourth Quarter Report: http://www-static.shell.com/static/investor/downloads/financial_information/quarterly_results/2011/q4/q4_2011_qra.pdf. Though the profit figures are important, the distribution of profit within these very different kinds of institutions must also be emphasized.

\(^8\) In recent years, anthropologists have been asking this sort of question more generally and broadly. For instance, Oka and Fuentes write: “Why do substantial and cooperative infrastructures endure throughout history (both social and evolutionary)? In trade and commerce, where competition is key, why does cooperation emerge as a structuring mechanism? Why do groups that could gain ‘more’ through contest choose instead to gain ‘less but sufficient’ through cooperation? We argue that the key benefits of cooperation, those of sustainability and adaptive resilience, are powerful forces that cause the ‘selection’ of cooperative behaviors to mitigate against external attritional pressures, namely, predation. “We present our approach not as a one-size-fits-all solution to understanding socioeconomic behavior but as an additive-alternative to the dominant paradigm of the competing maximizing rational actor-driven evolution” (2010: 4).
tend to be conceived of as fragile, curvaceous, and feminine. Verrips found that men often named their boats for women and expressed an emotional attachment to their ships ("with ribs, a belly, flanks, a face, and a rump...[bargemen said that] 'a boat feels like a woman'" [1990: 112]). And there is another comparison with the flower industry. As a country criss-crossed with canals, the Netherlands hosts the world’s largest national inland fleet that employs many skilled people, so as national figures, bargemen could be said to be as notable as flower growers, although in the public imagination bargemen may be less yolked to national identity, even if as cultural types they predate flower growers. But crucially, unlike horticultural growers, bargemen display a sort of stoic independence; they tend not to see themselves as part of a collective, and lack the necessary fellowship. Verrips concluded that the comparative weakness of their associations is due to this quality of individuality, of ambivalence toward valuing and maintaining organizations.

Among other communities of Dutch watermen, the patterns of disunity are similar, but for different reasons. Rob Van Ginkel sought to discover how and why fishermen in Texel formed cooperatives, unions, and collective organizations between 1870 and 1930 (1996). He found that the values of cooperation were strong and that there was often an eagerness to establish trade cooperatives and other associations of solidarity, but that few lasted. The frequent effort to create unity demonstrated that one common explanation was false—that fishermen were too solitary, individualistic, and independent to think collectively. So why, again and again, did their trade associations peter out? Van Ginkel argued that the group loyalty expressed was real but limited, based on extremely local affiliations that were not broad enough to sustain much power, and that ultimately, economic and institutional forces encouraged fishermen to see one another more as competitors than potential partners with shared interests and concerns (1996). Remarkably, this remained true despite the fact that the fishing industry, like the horticultural business, sells its commodities via auctions, and that one of the functions of auctions is to stabilize a community and encourage collectivity (Smith 1989). In the early 1990s Alex Strating studied the lijnrijders ⁹ (traders and wholesalers) of a small town horticultural auction, in Rijnsburg, and found a mixture of cooperation and competition: as community members, lijnrijders stuck together and were loyal to their local identity and institutions, but as businessmen, they were often fiercely competitive.

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⁹ There isn’t an exact translation to English because the profession is uniquely Dutch. A lijnrijder (literally, a line rider or hauler) is someone who buys flowers at auction and then sells them wholesale to regular customers on a delivery route. Renowned for his expertise and experience with a variety of flowers and plants, he is a sort of trader, entrepreneur, wholesaler, and local horticultural figure wrapped in one. The first lijnrijders came from Rijnsburg and the occupation really took off in the mid 1960s, as transportation and distribution allowed and demanded.
and individualistic, engaging in serious but somewhat affectionate rivalries (1993: 90-105).

What do these similarities and differences say, finally, about the practice of horticultural cooperatives and the ideology of cooperation in the Netherlands? In keeping with Van Ginkel and Verrips, I contend that the cultural value of working together is necessary but in itself not sufficient to build and maintain a cooperative institution; in addition to camaraderie, structural considerations must also be in place (market advantage, shared interests, a legal framework, physical and financial infrastructure). But the two sides (psychological/social and material/economic) are also closely related. For example, the very structure of collective interest in cooperatives may foster powerful feelings of solidarity and stimulate a social norm of communality (Staatz 1987: 33-60). But also, when and if the material advantages and incentives of working together shift—due to market changes or legal or political power dynamics—cooperative structures can quickly break down. Some variation of this is what took place in the 1990s with the Dutch fruit and vegetable cooperative auctions. Before explaining what occurred and suggesting what it might mean for FloraHolland and Dutch horticulture, some further context must be laid out.

The coop movement in the Netherlands began in the late nineteenth century, at a time in western europe when industrial capitalism was coming to dominate production and social life. Work was brutal, low-paid, and unregulated. Individuals and communities began to understand that they could protect themselves to some extent from an exploitative system by forming collective organizations. From the beginning, enthusiasm for the Dutch cooperative was social and spiritual as well as economic—religious groups, for instance, advocated for the cooperative movement at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in rural cooperative banking (Colvin 2010). During this same period of cooperative development, a range of social theorists began to grapple with the structure and meaning of the economic system and its relationship with societal development, articulating concerns relevant to Dutch cooperatives and society. Fruit and vegetable auctions, and slightly later the Aalsmeer flower auctions, were founded in this milieu of agricultural cooperatives, industrialization, and a sense of egalitarianism. In pre-cooperative auction days, agricultural growers had an isolated and weak position, facing a buyer’s market that regularly undercut their prices and fostered a precarious existence (Kemmers 1987: 12-18). It’s not hard to understand that cooperatives enjoyed strong practical as well as ideological support.

At this time as well, although social Darwinism was increasingly celebrated by the powerful, some theorists argued that human society was based more on mutual aid and concern than on cut-throat competition and individualism. When Peter Kropotkin investigated a range of societies as well as animals in their natural environment, he found a sort of cooperative instinct, which he concluded is “of the greatest importance
for the maintenance of life, the preservation of each species, and its further evolution” (Kropotkin 1902: 10). Rejecting social Darwinism (but not Darwin’s theory of natural selection), he reasoned that “[i]t is not love to my neighbor — whom I often do not know at all — which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me” (Kropotkin 1902: 11). It was equally this sort of friendly and practical sensibility that helped stoke the early cooperative movement.

During the depression of the 1930s, many countries passed legislation to encourage cooperatives. The Federal Credit Union Act (1934) in the U.S. ensured credit was provided to farmers and “people of small means”; it was specifically intended “to stabilize an imbalanced global financial system” (Meyer 2008: 4). European laws did likewise. The Netherlands enacted an ‘auction law’ (also in 1934) which favored cooperatives and was meant to mollify the severe effects of economic crisis; it mandated that all growers of fresh produce sell their goods via cooperative auctions (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 4). Auctions were established as grower-owned cooperatives, and they proliferated until the mid 1960s when the auction law was repealed. Between 1970 and 1995, the number of cooperative auctions in the Netherlands shrank from 88 to 6, and those that remained were in the horticultural sector (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 4). Today the structure of the fruit and vegetable market in the Netherlands is different: they no longer sell via auction, and although most growers remain part of a cooperative, since 1996 (when 20 cooperatives merged into one) they’re part of a single, centralized, wholesaler called The Greenery, which supplies 70 percent of Dutch grocery stores (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 6-7).

Why did this happen, and could flower and plant auctions be going the way of fruit and vegetable auctions, toward extinction? Chapters two and three offer some perspectives on the latter question, but here it’s possible to comment briefly. In the early 1990s, many Dutch fruit and vegetable growers felt pinched by the regional auction system primarily because it didn’t seem to interface well with the market: the auction seemed to introduce a lag time between buyer’s changing needs and grower’s adaptation

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10 On the other hand, some of this collective thinking and values led to disastrous policies in the twentieth century when states pursued centralized hierarchical programs in the name of the collectivization, industrialization, and peasant development in places as diverse as the Soviet Union and Brazil (Scott 1998). Though such programs were promoted as democratic, socialist, and cooperative, in fact they were part of a rigid, top-down form of governance that James Scott calls “high modernist” state planning (1998).

11 The March 2009 issue of FloraHolland’s monthly magazine emphasized the benefits of cooperatives in times of crises in capitalism, in an article called “Coöperatie, krachtig in crisistijd” (“Cooperation, powerful in times of crisis”).
(Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 3-7). The solution pursued was first to merge all Dutch fruit and vegetable auctions into one new cooperative, in order to take advantage of economies of scale, prevent inter-auction competition, and establish countervailing power. Next, the new auction cooperative would become more of a marketing cooperative specializing in direct trade with major food retailers. Today The Greenery is by far the largest marketing cooperative for fresh produce in the Netherlands, enjoying annual profits of 1.5 billion euro, and selling about fifty percent of all vegetables produced in the Netherlands (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 7). In 1996, out of the 20 extant auctions, nine came together to form the Cooperative Voedingstuinbouw Nederland (VTN) and combine their assets and activities into one central marketing firm, The Greenery BV, which is connected to but autonomous from the VTN.

These structural changes and particularly the schism between The Greenery and the VTN have been celebrated as a great success. But it is also commonly conceded that “...the separation was intended to give management more freedom to operate” (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003: 6). They sound familiar, these two highlights—merging all auctions to one and increasing management power. They were complaints I heard from Dutch grower-members of FloraHolland in the first several years after the merger of Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer and FloraHolland, which left just two horticultural auctions, the smaller and more local Plantion, and the internationally oriented FloraHolland, with its six auction locations. But the flower and plant auctions don’t exactly mirror the fruit and vegetable auction, and because the changes were approved by the membership, the fruit and vegetable growers understandably did not vote to ruin themselves. Nor have they reverted to nineteenth century, pre-cooperative days. In fact, The Greenery remains a cooperative, though it is a less democratic institution than what came before. One big difference now is that the structure of decision making changed so that the authority and strength of management has been greatly enhanced. Likewise wholesalers are sitting in the catbird’s seat: now just 25 percent of fruit and vegetables are sold via the auction clock because The Greenery provides wholesalers with another option and they prefer direct negotiations for better price control and a stronger competitive position.

But small growers have not been eliminated and replaced with one super grower company that has a monopoly, along the lines of Monsanto in the U.S., for example, continuing a long established pattern there of centralized and hierarchical practices in agriculture. In the U.S. over the course of the twentieth century, agriculture’s high equity, low-variable cost structure turned farmers into little more than indentured servants of the big centralized industrial producers (Hogeland 2010: 215-237). As different as this history is from that of the Netherlands’ agriculture and horticulture, there are some parallels worth noting. Already in the 1940s, one response in the U.S. to the comparative weakness of small growers and local cooperatives in the face of the staggering power and wealth of the big companies was to create ‘orderly market
cooperatives’. Different agricultural coops would pool resources to do joint marketing campaigns before and after the growing seasons, thereby lengthening the sales period, augmenting profits, increasing their visibility, and gaining some autonomy. Well known brands today like Sunkist, Sunmade Raisins, and Ocean Spray all began as agricultural cooperatives that adopted this strategy. Their marketing power provided an ‘extra bid’ against the authority of the regional monopolist, and the pre and post cooperative price difference was known as ‘the competitive yardstick’, which could compensate for market exploitation and protect farmers by providing fair prices in exchange for members’ production and loyalty (Hogeland 2010: 217). If there’s a lesson for Dutch agricultural and horticultural cooperatives, it’s that ‘small d’ democracy and cooperative structures engender greater local control and a fairer distribution of profits. Also, management structures need to allow for flexible policies and quick decisions, but not at the expense of majority interests. Though cooperatives vary in practice and design, their essence is a representative, egalitarian approach.

In the Netherlands, cooperative values enjoy a strong pedigree. Though sometimes exaggerated or debunked as myth, popularly celebrated values of political compromise and consensus building must be acknowledged, and they seem directly related to the values of the cooperative. Probably the most conspicuous area to underline in this regard involves the policies and discourses of the polder model.

A polder is a chunk of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea or a river, and depends on dykes and levees for protection and maintenance. Up to seventy percent of the country today consists of such reclaimed land, so the well worn saying ‘God created the world, but the Dutch made the Netherlands’ is more than a fanciful bit of national pride, and what the Dutch call the ‘polder model’ also occupies a renowned space in Dutch civic affairs. An accurate topographical designation, a metaphor for the founding of the country, a characterization of the political system, a description of widely held social values, a depiction of the historical framework that led to great wealth and widely distributed prosperity: the polder model is all of these things. Like many concepts with political cache (globalization is another), the polder model is rooted in both myth and reality.

Since this lowland and river delta region regularly floods, inhabitants have long perceived the common threat of deluge, and already in the Middle Ages they set up water boards (waterschappen), local institutions to manage water and land, which they did in a number of ways, including the creation of polders. The argument goes that this response to the lay of the land determined social structures and practices over the centuries, in which small, local democratic councils emerged and gradually evolved into more modern political arrangements (Besamusca and Verheul 2010: 39-43). There are direct and indirect connections to these early modern cooperative waterschappen models, including the fact that today, twenty-seven water boards around the country
determine water policy (Besamusca and Verheul 2010: 26). Pointing out the importance placed on collective decision making and the state’s ability and popular mandate to regulate the economy, the polder model has often been invoked to explain contemporary institutions, political practices, and more. But this is less true today than in recent decades. And in fact, historians question their political legacy and dispute how democratic the practices of early modern water boards really were. Some argue it was less the water boards and more the early urbanization of the country that led to the small cooperative processes that characterize ‘the polder model’ (Israel 1995, Huizinga 1968). Yet regardless of its historical accuracy in describing the development of the modern nation, the polder model remains a potent national trope, and spacial planning continues to depend on the management of water and lowlands.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, the different social polders were often divided along religious lines or pillars (Catholics and Protestants), each with different schools, social institutions, and political parties. But by the end of the 1960s, the importance of religious affiliation had decreased considerably. From the 1980s onwards, three polders (trade unions, employers organizations, and the government) comprised the anatomy of the body politic, and together they reached agreements on wages, work hours, and industrial policy. In these and other ways, the polder model encapsulates some of the common features of what is sometimes called ‘the Netherlands’ business system’ (Besamusca and Verheul 2010: 33). Bargaining, finding a consensus, forming coalitions: these common features of collective decision making in social, political, and economic realms of Dutch life are perceived as part of the polder model. And these broadly held communitarian and cooperative values have informed the development of Dutch horticulture.

**Moral economy, commodities, and the world system.**

Flower growers in the Gaza Strip have had an especially difficult past several years. In the recent Gaza War, the Israeli military targeted civilian infrastructure, including agricultural land and production facilities as well as schools and hospitals. But even

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12 Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemned Israel for these crimes, as well as for their use of white phosphorus, a chemical weapon, against unarmed civilians. The U.N. Human Rights Council came to similar conclusions. In what is commonly known as the Goldstone Report, the UNHRC wrote “The blockade comprises measures such as restrictions on the goods that can be imported into Gaza and the closure of border crossings for people, goods, and services, sometimes for days, including cuts on the provision of fuel and electricity”, which it stated is a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention (UNHRC REPORT: 9-10) http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/specialsession/9/docs/unffmgc_report.pdf
before that late 2008-early 2009 bombardment, Israel caused severe problems for the Palestinian flower sector by cutting off export routes. In non violent protest of the blockade that kept their flowers locked in Gaza and rotting, in February 2008 Palestinian farmers hauled and dumped their roses and carnations at the borders held closed by their captors. Those flowers had been destined for sale in Aalsmeer as part of the Valentine’s Day boom. According to Mahmoud Khalil, the President of the General Land Owners in Gaza, berry and flower exports constitute important commerce for the Strip, each year earning about thirteen million dollars for flowers, and about eight million dollars for strawberries. Combined, in 2008 the two sectors employed over eight thousand people, including production and secondary services. As part of the General Agricultural Cooperative, a spokesperson for Shafi Ahmed rose farmers warned that “if the problem of exporting agricultural products is not solved, the Gaza Strip will face yet another catastrophe.”

Trying to prevent the total collapse of the main export industry, Gaza’s Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Mahmoud Hebbash sought to provide immediate assistance to farmers in the agricultural, floral, and berry sectors, and joined a host of farmers and agricultural organizations in demanding Israeli compensation, though they did not expect to receive it.

In early 2008 Dutch news broadcast images of Gazan-grown flowers wilting by the thousands in heaps, representing for many viewers heart-wrenching scenes that brought home the harsh realities of the Israeli siege and blockade. Quickly but quietly, Dutch diplomatic pressures mounted, likely motivated more by financial interest than communal values or humanitarian concerns. In addition to impinging on the profits of Dutch import and export companies, the Dutch stood to lose on their investment in Gazan horticulture. According to the Agrarisch Dagblad, from 2007-2009 the Netherlands loaned seven million euros in support of the Gazan flower sector. In March 2009, Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen met with his Israeli counterpart Tzipi Livni in Brussels to negotiate opening the border for Palestinian exports to the Netherlands, but at the time Livni would give permission only for flowers, no berries. Though drastically weakened and impoverished by Operation Cast Lead and the enduring blockade, a dedicated group of Palestinian farmers resumed work. Today they continue to operate under extreme duress.

Prior to the Israeli blockade, Gaza was a valued source of flowers and strawberries for European markets. According to the Oxfam-partnered Palestinian Agriculture Relief Committee (PARC) which manages Gaza’s cash crop exports to the Netherlands, before the blockade Gaza used to export about sixty-five million flowers annually (fifty million of which were carnations), along with 1,500 tons of strawberries. By 2011-2012, five years into the blockade, total flower exports have been reduced to

13 “Palestinian flowers turned into cattle feed,” FloraCulture International November 2009
nine million, and strawberry exports have shriveled to 447 tons. In addition to the devastating material consequences, this continuing collective punishment has caused frustration, sadness, and outrage toward Israel first and foremost, but also toward the European Union and the Palestinian Authority for permitting the policy. “Shame on Israel” Mohammed Hijazi told the Palestinian Center for Human Rights. “But shame on the Palestinian Authority, too. My father represents many local flowers farmers in southern Gaza, but no-one from the Ministry of Agriculture has even contacted us during this crisis. And shame on the European Union, because they have done nothing either. Why are they standing back in silence and allowing this to happen to us. Tell me – what is the security risk in exporting flowers?”14 Throughout the blockade this father and son hung on. Along with a sense of despair, these flower farmers expressed remarkable restraint, humility, and humanity. Watching female workers packing flowers for the negotiated export, Hejazi commented, “My flowers will be a means to spread peace in the world, this is a message to the whole world that peace and love start from Gaza.”15

As the plight of Gazan farmers vividly portrays, the flower industry is embedded in international politics and trade, as well as moral economies. FloraHolland Aalsmeer imports from over sixty countries, and the global panorama of production and trade dynamics of this horticultural commerce are explored in chapter five. Here it’s valuable to frame the issues more generally, in terms of a moral economy, commodity chains, and world system patterns and trends. This gives some deeper background on the issues and locates them in historical and institutional contexts— which is another way of saying that the messages from flower growers and lessons from development policies seem urgent and broadly applicable.

Economic practices seem inherently connected to morality. In support of this idea, one might point to Weber’s observations about the associations between ethics and economic development, but the relationship goes back much further. In Roman mythology, for example, it was commonly perceived that ‘the market’ (even this precapitalist one) should be regarded with skepticism. It had a quality of strangeness, suspicion, possibly of not belonging. Mercury was thus the god of a triumvirate: the market, eloquence, and thieves.16 That those three types would be grouped together reveals a common logic and critique that there’s something innately unfair and distrustful about commerce. There are numerous examples of such implicit values embedded in the words and phrases of many languages. In Dutch the noun ‘afzet’

14 “Narratives Under Siege (5): Hassan Sheikh Hijazi Flower Farm,” Palestinian Center for Human Rights. Security risks was the official reason Israel gave for blocking Gazan exports.
15 ibid
16 Thanks to Alex Strating for pointing this out to me.
simply means ‘sale’ or ‘market’, but the verb ‘afzetten’ means ‘to overcharge, cheat, or swindle’. Similarly, in many languages, the vocabulary around lending and owing money overlaps with words for judgement and ethics (in Dutch ‘schuld’ can mean both ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’, for instance). So if economic relations inevitably pose ethical problems, the term ‘moral economy’ may seem redundant. But in fact it has a more specific meaning, one especially suited for approaching the Dutch horticultural industry, since the concept’s origins are explicitly linked to people’s response to the sale of commodities in a capitalist market.

In his 1971 study, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” E. P. Thompson explored why people remained fragmented and accepting of difficult, exploitative circumstances for much of history, but sometimes public anger would explode and people would spontaneously revolt and demand change. In eighteenth century Britain, as the country moved out of feudalism and reformed its market, bread prices shot up; people could no longer afford to buy their basic staple, and began to go hungry. They rioted, demanding lower prices. Thompson argued that British peasants rose up not merely because their stomachs were empty, but because their sense of the social compact and natural rights had been grossly violated by the emerging ‘free market.’ The new economic relations offended accepted notions of fairness, seemed an affront to basic decency, and so could be resisted with violence if necessary. In Thompson’s words, “…these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action” (Thompson 1993: 79). This was written at the dawn of the neoliberal age, when Adam Smith had not yet been launched into full apotheosis. In a prescient critique of neoliberal values Thompson wrote (against Smith’s acolytes), “[i]t should not be necessary to argue that the model of a natural and self-adjusting economy, working providentially for the best good of all, is... superstition...” (Thompson 1993: 91).

It’s important to underscore that the moral economy is communal, widely shared, and not based on or emerging from supposedly male assertiveness and violence; on the contrary, “[i]nitiators of the riots were, very often, the women. In 1693 we learn of a great number of women going to Northampton market ‘with knives in their girdles to force corn at their own rates’”, while men stood on supportively, vowing to destroy ships and cargoes if the women were threatened or harmed (Thompson 1993: 40). Nor is this logic peculiar to centuries-old English sensibilities. Since 2008, as commodity prices have skyrocketed, food riots have erupted around the world—again because implicit social pacts have been trounced. Of course, as Mauss keenly observed, the
transactions and relations around all sorts of commodities have been the focal point of values and reveal the logic of systems in vastly different societies with a range of social and economic institutions. Today’s market legitimacy depends on it seeming, on one hand, to promote efficiency and general prosperity, or on the other, at least to represent a neutral and disinterested system. If the economic system or institution doesn’t seem natural and ineluctable, it lacks legitimacy and authority, will likely be challenged, and may collapse. And in fact, although providing excellent mechanisms for extracting fantastic wealth for a few, capitalist markets are extremely destructive for the majority of the population. Even ‘natural disasters’ may be caused or exacerbated by markets (global warming today, disease and famine in previous centuries).

As Amartya Sen has shown, famines are primarily caused not by actual shortages but by rational market mechanisms of hoarding and rationing in the interest of price control and profit. This was the case for some of the twentieth century’s worst tolls of starvation and malnutrition, whether in Bangladesh or Ethiopia (Sen 1983: 39-45). The lack of food had little to do with availability or the capacity to produce it, even locally. But the necessity for profits and the capitalist model of distribution ensure that people who are poor remain poor and food insecure while the rich reap rewards and grow richer. These effects are as old as market based world systems. The first international market in food in the modern era was the global market in wheat established by the British in the nineteenth century. It replaced traditional practices by imposing market based rules, which led to vastly increased production, but mostly for export. Selling wheat on the international market meant that South Asians could no longer afford the fruits of their labor. For the two thousand years prior to the nineteenth century, small scale famines occurred about once a century on the Indian subcontinent; in the British-imposed, market driven, ‘world system’ mode of production and distribution, there was a much greater scale of famine and they occurred once every four years (Davis 2001: 311-341). Although more food was being produced, many more people went hungry and died. During the second half of Victoria’s reign (the last decades of the nineteenth century), between 31.7 and 61.3 million people died in holocausts of “truly planetary magnitude, with drought and famine reported as well in Java, the Philippines, New Caldonia, Korea, Brazil, southern Africa and the Mahgreb....” (Davis 2001: 6-7). Finally, “[a]t issue is not simply that millions of poor rural people died appallingly, but that they died in a manner, and for reasons, that contradict much of the conventional understanding of the economic history of the nineteenth century...Millions died, not outside the ‘modern world system,’ but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures” (Davis 2001: 9). Given the vastly increased (and increasing) global scope of industrial agriculture, these sorts of disasters are possibly even more true in the twenty-first
And although the discussion of famine, wheat, and rice may seem removed from the world of a luxury commodity like flowers, it’s not. The incentives, production, distribution, and moral economy of the Dutch-centered horticultural industry only make sense if understood, in part, through this commodity-driven world systems framework.

In the Netherlands, the intersection of international trade and commodities with the idea of a moral economy has its own powerful history. The 1860 novel Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company (Max Havelaar, of de koffi-veilingen der Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappuy) exposed Dutch policies in Java and Sumatra and horrified the public, who demanded reforms. The book chronicled the colonial government’s hallmark Cultivation System, which mandated Indonesian farmers uproot staple foods like rice in order to produce a quota of commercially tradable crops like tea and coffee, and levied an onerous and corrupt tax regime. This program caused abject poverty and widespread starvation among the population, and stoked shock and outrage in the Netherlands. The response of citizens at home to the production of goods they were consuming made it clear how they were linked and indirectly responsible for those truculent but geographically distant policies. Max Havelaar exposed what today are called global commodity chains, and commodities like coffee, chocolate, and flowers are now often thought of in these terms (as a result, today Max Havelaar may be best known as a Fair Trade label). Public response to the book also led to an era of reform policies, and one of the companies to appear during this period, a sugar business called HVA, eventually moved, after Indonesian Independence, to Ethiopia, where it indirectly helped to launch the Dutch flower industry there (a story discussed in chapter five).

And it is likely that today, as in the nineteenth century, the numbers of those affected will go largely unacknowledged, and the cause-effect relationship remain obscured between market-based, large scale agricultural production and numerous deaths and other deleterious effects. A realistic assessment of such consequences would have to include everything from the massive small scale farmer suicides in India in recent decades, genetic engineering, and shortages and diseases due to corporate monoculture, to environmental and public health crises that have emerged from farming and breeding—such things as the avian flu and hoof-and-mouth disease, for starters—all of which are ultimately caused by a market-driven, hierarchical model of development and agricultural production.

Furthermore, Eric Hobsbawm has argued that “[i]n the long run the vast surplus essential for the development of a modern industrial society was to be achieved ... by raising productivity and expanding the cultivated area through capitalist farming. Only thus could agriculture produce not merely the necessary food surplus for the towns — not to mention the raw materials — but also the labour for industry. In the developed countries, notably the Low Countries and England, signs of agricultural revolution had long been visible, and from the middle of the seventeenth century they multiply” (Hobsbawm 1954: 47-48).
The moral economy of the Dutch horticultural industry emerges from this lineage. Understanding the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities also highlights for researchers certain complex social and economic patterns in the world system. Gareffi and Korzeniewics claim that “[g]lobal commodity chains allow us to focus on the creation and distribution of global wealth as embodied in a multidimensional, multistage sequence of activities, rather than as an outcome of industrialization alone. In this sense a GCCs [global commodity chains] approach provides the theoretical and methodological basis needed for a more systematic analysis of micro and macro processes within a new political economy of the world-system” (1994: 13).

Most of the research on commodities over the past two decades falls in three closely related categories: world systems analysis, that brings longue durée historical examination to commodity chains; the global commodity chains (GCC) framework, which combines organizational sociology with comparative development studies; and global value chains (GVCs) analysis, which adds transaction cost economics to the GCC scheme (Blair 2009: 1-2). These theoretical accounts are often used interchangeably, but each may have subtle valences, emphases, methodological and disciplinary preferences, or favor particular agendas. If the GCC approach to commodity chains tends to brush over or ignore the long historical trajectory of such chains as articulated by Wallerstein, it has some advantages for understanding FloraHolland’s position in the production of horticultural commodities. Since FloraHolland’s auctions funnel about sixty percent of the production of cut flowers sold on earth, it would seem to make good sense to pay attention to the practices and policies of this institution. The GCC mode places “its analytical emphasis on the activities of firms, and especially the chain drivers that play the lead role in constructing and managing international production networks, gives greater weight than a more orthodox world-systems approach would to the role of firms as capitalism’s organizing agents” (Blair 2009: 10-11). Some theorists have added the concept of networks to the study of commodity chains, arguing that networks capture complexity of relationships between producers, distributors, and consumers, in spacial relationships where actors “are seen as complex webs of interdependence rather than fixed, vertical and unidirectional relationships” (Hughes and Reimer 2004: 4).

That said, none of these positions on commodity chains offers a well defined methodology, or a universal analytical framework. Much of the debate over framing preferences comes down to disputes over emphases and inclusions in the various generalizations, and disagreements about the denotations and connotations of terminology. And since “there is no clear consensus” about the terminology, theory, and methodology regarding the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities, it seems sufficient merely to stress here which aspects of the various approaches seem most useful for understanding horticultural commodities (Blair 2009: 12). This involves
the role of networks and institutions, and takes as its cue the expansive historical sweep that begins with the Amsterdam-centered world system taking shape in the seventeenth century. Hopefully, readers will have no trouble understanding the specifics, generalities, and implications of views expressed here on horticultural commodities. The emphasis is on historical views of the development of floral commodities in the Netherlands, and on current ethnographic accounts of how that took place and is evolving. As Hopkins and Wallerstein observe, most theorists of commodities regardless of their particular studies would probably concur that commodity chains are central to the world system’s fabrication of social production (1994: 17).

But the world system constitutes more than commodity chains. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, establishing the first world system required three things: the expansion of the geography of the world, the development of new labor controls for different products and different zones of the world economy, and the creation of state machineries in what would become the core-states of the capitalist world economy (1974: 38). The world system is a useful concept for framing the contemporary flower business, as well as for understanding the development of horticulture more broadly, and world systems theorists are not alone in adopting the style of inquiry. At the same time, world systems and commodity chain analysis do not exhaust the palette of analytical approaches to commodities. Often elements of different styles and disciplines bleed together—the point being not to adhere to step by step formula but to present insight. In The Culture of Flowers, Jack Goody took a millennia-long view of the evolution of horticulture, stating that “…the edge of my argument has to do with the comparison of systems of knowledge and practice in the East and West, especially at the time of the Renaissance, and in their relative position regarding the growth of the modern world” (1993: 2). Too many scholars treat Europe as sui generis, he argued, and therefore fail to appreciate the dynamics of development between Europe and Asia (and other parts of the world) “either because of ‘practical ethnocentrism’ or ‘theoretical’ notions of the process of modernization” (Goody 1993: 3).

Global currents of information and goods not only communicate and transmit economic data and commodities, but also embody cultural categories of political and social relationships. Commodities convey cultural messages, and while they are real things, their existence points toward a number of abstract processes—you might say they embody production, exchange, distribution, and consumption. And while the market assesses them for monetary worth, ultimately their value is embedded in culture and in the world, so that commodity flows can never be assessed merely by economic logic, through laws of supply and demand or the supposed rationality of buyers and sellers, or even a single rubric of analysis. Commodities must be examined within their social matrix. As Ellen Hertz argued in her ethnography of the Shanghai stock exchange, “[t]he circulation of valuables is thus a social practice before it is a utilitarian
one. It is by placing forms of production and exchange alongside forms of aesthetic, moral, and political practice that we discover society’s latent and frequently contradictory logics of social order” (1998: 21). The study of commodities unavoidably entails ‘contradictory logics’ as well as ambiguities. As Igor Kopytoff wrote, “[f]rom a cultural perspective, the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must not only be produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are seen as appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another. Such shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions” (1986: 64).

Networks, masculinity, and aesthetics.

In terms of the Dutch horticultural industry, these ‘visible transactions’ take place in a male milieu, the auctions, which represent the main seat of activity for the business, and embody a central intersection of horticultural networks. This thesis highlights the place of Dutch networks in the contemporary business as well as historically: each chapter identifies the value of networks, both as directly observed and as industry participants attest. Framing networks conceptually in the cut flower and plant trade entails accounting for both masculinity and aesthetics, since these networks are composed almost entirely of men, and everyone involved (from growers and traders to florists and consumers) is concerned with the beauty and presentation of the flower or plant. Masculinity was an important ingredient in the cultural familiarity that makes networking ties come easily and naturally. And these networks arose and continue through close personal interactions, which are sometimes reinforced by media (today with the telephone and internet; in the seventeenth century, tulip enthusiasts not only regularly met around gardens but maintained contact through letters [Goldgar 2007, Pavord 1999]).

As explained in chapter 1, these early networks engaged in several intimately related activities, ranging from spacial planning to commerce. One historian has noted that “[t]hirty-one of the forty-one members of the Amsterdam government appointed between 1600-1625 were involved in one way or another in trade”, which through family and networks spanned the globe and encompassed sizeable interests19 (Prak 2005: 128). Marriages “were meant to forge alliances between two families, each of whom hoped to gain an advantage through its link with the other. Merchants preferred to have relatives as partners in their trading firms; regents always took family ties into

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19 But this trade-politics connection “slackened” over the course of the century (Prak 2005: 125).
consideration when conferring offices” (Prak 2005: 128). In fact, many practices and factors intersected, contributing to Amsterdam becoming the center of the world system as well as the forging and expansion of political, social, and trade networks. The sixteenth century herring business with the Baltic region and Russia set the stage for the Republic’s emergence as a major trade power. Fishermen needed ships and rope; to preserve their catch, they required salt, which they imported from Portugal, Spain, and France, along with wine, which they then sold to the Baltic countries—in this way, powerful trading networks began: in the service of commerce, well organized herring fleets exploited the Lowland provinces’ location, seafaring skills, and its small interconnected population (Prak 2005: 95). Horticulture, too, was an integral part of the launching of commercial and aesthetic Dutch networks. Gardening, tulip culture, and still life painting became fixed in the cultural environment and helped to invigorate the networks.

In various ways (both qualitative and quantitative), social network analysis studies these sorts of structures to identify local and global patterns, and examine the dynamics of these formal and informal structural relationships. Networks don’t have an inherent ideology. They can be part of egalitarian cooperatives or elite, extremely hierarchical multinational corporations, as Swiss researchers recently demonstrated in examining control of the global economy.20 Mapping the architecture of international ownership, they analyzed about 37 million economic actors, both individuals and firms located in 194 countries; at the center of this web, they discovered a cartel or ‘super-entity’ of 147 even more tightly knit companies that collude to dominate total wealth. They found that less than one percent of these mostly financial institutions (including Barclays, JP Morgan Chase, and Goldman Sachs) control 40 per cent of the entire network, and much of the global economy. And about 1300 corporations control 80 percent of the global economy. It turns out that public opinion is not far from the truth when it decries the oligarchical power of financial institutions and corporations. Another paper analyzed corporate governance networks in the 250 largest corporations of the Netherlands between 1976 and 1996, and found that although networks thinned between financial institutions and industry, overall such Dutch networks remained “compact and connected” (Fennema, Heemskerk, and Mokken 2003). Though my study differs in that it’s ethnographic, it similarly prioritizes personal relationships in international commerce to consider networks, policy, and the world system—not as the conspiracy of a controlling cabal, but as linked institutions lubricated by personal relationships (which are in turn further categorized in terms of culture, gender, etc). It’s worth pointing out

that this perspective runs counter to the assertions of many prominent social theorists. They tend to envision the global economy as a vast, decentralized, competitive market with ever more complex relationships and ‘flows’ (a term used most notably, and with slightly different meaning, by both Appadurai [1996] and Castells [1996]); in this grand scheme, social ties and personal relationships are not fundamental parts of international trade and ‘globalization’.

In fact, both Van Dijk’s and Castells’ views on contemporary network society emphasize the role of electronic media, and argue that these sorts of mediated relationships have made (or will soon make) face-to-face communication obsolete (1991, 1996). Although proponents claim their points have been proven by technologies and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and other social media, their arguments ultimately seem overstated and unconvincing. Instead it seems that while technologies clearly impact human relationships, real world communication and physical space remain vital to building and sustaining community. And in terms of the Dutch horticultural networks, personal relationships as well as physical space and interactions remain not merely relevant, but essential for the business at every level, from growers and breeders to traders at auction and florists. This is illustrated by a number of practices, meetings, and institutions, including Horti Fairs, auction membership gatherings, and bloemencorsos or flower parades (events detailed and explained in chapter four’s exploration of Dutch horticultural aesthetics). Fealty, nearness, personal and cultural familiarity, kinship, and masculinity all bear on forming and maintaining connections in Dutch horticultural networks.

Closely related to the cement of these cultural and commercial networks is social capital. Independently coined more than six times in the twentieth century, the term social capital has both individual and a collective aspects, and has meant different things to different theorists (Putnam 2000: 19-20). Bourdieu’s taxonomy of capital seems most pertinent to FloraHolland and the Dutch horticultural industry (1986). As Loïc Wacquant summarized, “for Bourdieu (1986), capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it” (2006: 269). Bourdieu identified four types of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital refers to traditional, material notions of capital like property, ‘the means of production’, cash, and other assets; symbolic capital accrues from positions of honor and prestige bestowed by traditions and institutions (royalty, war veterans) and occasionally by acts of valor; cultural capital involves education as well as the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values that accord status in society. In Bourdieu’s scheme, cultural capital often overlaps with habitus, a sort of psychological state involving one’s background, habits, and socially learned assumptions and ways of seeing, which in turn reflect one’s dispositions and taste. Though cultural capital is somewhat relevant to the Dutch horticultural industry,
Bourdieu’s social capital seems the most directly applicable. This explicitly focuses on personal relationships, group membership, and networks, which form both real and potential resources. “In other words,” says Bourdieu, “the network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, i.e., at transforming contingent relations, such as those of the neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)” (Bourdieu 1986: 52).

Put simply, networks are a form of social capital. Bourdieu wrote that “[a] general science of the economy of practices, capable of reappropriating the totality of the practices which, although objectively economic, are not and cannot be socially recognized as economic, and which can be performed only at the cost of a whole labor of dissimulation or, more precisely, euphemization, must endeavor to grasp capital and profit in all their forms and to establish the laws whereby the different types of capital (or power, which amounts to the same thing) change into one another” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). Another way of saying this might be that aside from performing work, there are social behaviors and activities that nevertheless produce economic outcomes, in that they may establish earning power through a sort of cultural cachet or belonging, and that this is so basic to a society as to constitute a ‘law’. Social capital is detectable not only in networks, but also in the range of behaviors and attitudes which inform relations of power. These cultural signals are so essential to capitalist economies and the maintenance of class distinctions that they merit the term capital. And these signals run like a current, charging network connections.

Masculinity and aesthetics form part of social capital in these networks. For Bourdieu aesthetics is an essential part of class formation, but obviously, aesthetics predates class society and philosophers have approached the subject for millenia. In terms of the horticultural industry aesthetics constitutes a kind of craftwork, which has been a significant but overlooked part of social capital (Sennett 2008). With craftwork, knowledge, skills, and values are communicated and passed on socially, between individuals operating within institutions (either narrowly or broadly defined). Another way of describing this is participating in a tradition, whether as carpenters, fish mongers, or musicians, craftspeople dedicate themselves not to mainly to pursuing profit, but to their vocation, since that provides a sense of intrinsic value (Sennett 2008). An aesthetic sense and a connection to tradition are clearly important to many of these artisans. Tradition is about reproducing an aesthetic sense, a notion of beauty.

Elaine Scarry has argued that in aesthetic and socioeconomic terms, the beauty of a thing and its replication represent a kind of duality, whether discussing painting, art,
gardening, or the commercial reproduction of flowers, beauty. She opens On Beauty and Being Just with a question and an assertion: “What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it. Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people” (Scarry: 3).

While specific tastes change, and today conform largely to class and other sociopolitical forces a la Bourdieu, Scarry’s aesthetic observation runs deeper. In a comment on beauty that presages hers by several centuries, Horace Walpole (in The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening, 1771) wrote that the British had perfected the art of the garden, by “softening Nature’s harshness and copying her graceful touch” (quoted in Wulf 2009: 243). On this level, the creation of horticultural beauty represents a profoundly felt impulse, one that in fact doesn’t seem far removed from gardeners, flower breeders, florists, and others in the business of creating horticultural beauty—or for that matter, of the traders, exporters, wholesalers and others involved in the more pragmatic business aspects of the industry.

Something that initially impressed me and that strikes many outside observers of Dutch horticulture is how this aesthetic industry is dominated by men. On reflection, given that horticultural occupations often provide the breadwinner’s salary, this may not be so surprising— in the Netherlands these are traditional male occupations. Male networks are familiar enough to have earned a colloquial expression, ouwe jongens krentenbrood (literally, old guy’s currant-bread), which isn’t specifically an old-boys system of power but more a general fraternity, which may or may not enjoy much power or prominence. It refers less to the exclusive male environment of elite institutions (bank executives, say, or the alumni of prestigious universities) and more to ordinary male groupings and culture (guys who get together to play soccer, go fishing, or hang out in a bar). It’s an ideal expression to evoke the Dutch horticultural environment, and gives a sense of the tone of horticultural networks.

“Masculinities are configurations of practice within gender relations,” argues R.W. Connell, “a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality. Masculinity is institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character or personality. Thus we can speak of a kind of masculinity being embedded in the gender regime of an institution such as an army, a corporation, or a school” (2000: 29). Institutional values, networks, and masculinity come together in theoretical conceptions as well as literally, in FloraHolland. “Making an issue of masculinity, therefore, means not only focusing on men, but on the institutions, cultures, and practices that sustain gender inequality along with other forms of domination such as race and class. This will involve questioning symbolic as well as material dimensions of power. It means working on, and
recognizing the connections between, the personal and the professional, the politics of institutions and the global system” (White 1997). Attention to masculinity has sometimes fixated on simple-minded pop psychology, as in the men’s movement of the 1990s in the U.S., or has gotten bogged down in techno-jargon. Despite these shortcomings, ultimately, studying the practices, values, and institutions that create masculinity seeks “to build a more civilized, more survivable, more just world” (Connell 2000: 7).

But Connell also argued that “the ‘ethnographic moment’ in masculinity research[,] productive as it has been”, has run its course, and now it’s time to move on (2000: 32). While this strikes me as absurd (ethnography shouldn’t be abandoned), it was nonetheless disappointing that very little of the ethnographic literature on masculinities and the market offered much insight into the workings of the Dutch horticultural industry. Some work, like Geertz’s classic “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight”, indeed addressed ‘masculinity and markets’ but tied in to the Dutch flower market only in the most indirect of ways. Studies of financial traders suggested some commonalities such as risk taking and homosocial bonding, but there were too many differences to be much use beyond the general. The stock market in New York and FloraHolland Aalsmeer are both forms of auction, and the traders are mostly male, but the ways these institutions plug into the larger economy, the stakes involved, the traditions, and so on seem so distinct that conclusions in one environment hold only a basic relevance for the other. Other studies of gender and markets have focused on rural markets in the ‘developing’ world and also had limited applicability to the dynamics of contemporary Dutch horticulture.

_Horticulture and the social world._

As different as the world would be, it could run without contemporary financial institutions, people could thrive without nation states, and our current political and economic systems could be jettisoned or radically reimagined. But without the botanical and biological contributions of flowers, entire ecosystems would collapse and most non sea life would quickly perish. Also, the history of civilization shows that our cultivation of plants (as opposed to hunting and gathering) marked a profound switch, affecting every area of human development and social organization, from gender and sexuality to health, religion, eating habits, and more (Manning 2004, Ryan and Jethá 2010, Sahlins 1972). Due to the rise of agriculture, in a short time span humans went from small, scattered, nomadic groups to living in larger and larger settlements where land, tools, and property became significant. Today’s commercial horticulture does not involve such dramatic transformations, but flowering plants remain central to contemporary society, especially our food system. Industrial agriculture and horticulture share many characteristics, use the same infrastructure, and in the Netherlands, the two often
overlap in policy and social networks. All of these considerations suggest the relevance and background in which to understand our relationship to horticulture.

Today, reliance on fossil fuels spans the chain of production, from breeding, irrigation, and planting, through watering and spraying, to harvesting, processing, packaging, refrigerating, and distributing. Almost every aspect requires oil and gas, including the roads, vehicles, ships, and planes criss-crossing the globe with goods, as well as the construction and repair of equipment, including tractors, greenhouses (both heating and cold storage), and processing facilities. And most pesticides are petroleum-based, while commercial fertilizers are ammonia-based, ammonia being produced from natural gas. In the twentieth century, governments and private industry have entrenched this oil and gas intensive system. As Michael Pollan has pointed out, after the second world war, the U.S. government converted much of the munitions industry into agricultural fertilizers—since ammonium nitrate is the main ingredient of both bombs and chemical fertilizer—and shifted nerve-gas research toward inventing new pesticides. It was a rather sadistic twist on the spirit of the expression ‘swords into plowshares,’ since this destructive mode of agricultural production may ultimately prove even more insidious and harmful than war. During the same period in the Netherlands, agriculture and horticulture also became increasingly industrialized, especially accelerating in the 1960s and 70s after the 1959 discovery of gas fields off Groningen in the North Sea made cheap gas available for greenhouse heating and for fertilizer production. Though green technology is beginning to have an impact, Dutch horticulture still relies heavily on gas and oil.

But horticulture is more than part of the fossil fuel based global system or a key contributing factor to millennia-old societal metamorphoses. Horticulture may best be conceptualized as a matrix of concerns: “the art and science of plants resulting in the development of minds and emotions of individuals, the enrichment and health of communities, and the integration of the ‘garden’ in the breadth of modern civilization” (Relf 1992). Through the cultivation, consumption, and celebration of plants, in striking ways horticulture connects science, art, economics, and the social world, and this relationship has been particularly poignant in the Netherlands. Of course, it’s the social aspect of horticulture in the Netherlands that this thesis explores. One recent story helps

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21 At that time, Gasunie became the largest public-private commercial enterprise in the world, comprised of Royal Dutch Shell (25%), ExxonMobil (25%) and the state of the Netherlands (50%). In 2005 the company split into GasTerra, a gas trading company which maintains the same public-private ownership division, and GasUnie, which became exclusively a gas transportation company and is entirely state-owned. (Curiously, the discovery of gas also led to a dubious economic condition known as "the Dutch disease", whereby the exploitation of a natural resource supposedly leads to a decline in manufacturing for the national economy.)
illuminate some important facets of Dutch horticulture and suggests its diverse contemporary impact on Dutch society. Somewhat misleadingly referred to in the press as a modern day tulipmania, the story also touches on many of the themes and concepts probed in the thesis: the tulip as a symbol, male networks, economic bubbles, traders, and the Dutch Golden Age as a frequent reference.

The story centers around two shady companies, Mark van der Poll’s Sierteelt Bemiddelings Centrum (SBC), a Dutch market-making company[22] that specialized in new tulip varieties, and Marco Vrijburg’s Novacap Floralis Future Fund, a Dutch investment vehicle established to identify and support profitable tulip varieties. Before it went bankrupt, SBC’s job had been to find buyers for bulbs whose cultivation had been funded by investors via Novacap. Between 2000 and 2004, the companies created a scheme in tulip bulb trading that eventually bilked rich investors of over 85 million euros. The cast of characters in this absurd affair includes corrupt flower bulb producers, multi-million-euro players from the upper echelons of Dutch society, government bureaucrats, and even Hell’s Angels. And through an even more unusual turn of legal events, the two figures at the center of the controversy have escaped prosecution.

Van der Poll and Vrijburg grew up in Lisse in families in the bulb business, and both achieved early financial success. To high-power Dutch investors, the young men must have seemed reassuringly familiar—shrewd, rakish, and prosperous (like many of his financiers, Van der Poll drove a Porsche). Through their networks of entrepreneurs, they attracted over 100 well heeled and well connected supporters from inside and outside the tulip bulb trade who were lured by the promise of a 30 percent return in 18 months, and were convinced by the young insiders’ knowledge and brashness. In exchange for such huge and fast returns, these investors were required to contribute 100,000 euros each. Vrijburg took the money and invested it in new tulip varieties from the harvest of 2003, which Van der Poll identified and in turn purchased. The idea was as follows. The bulbs would then be planted, and their flowers would be severed from the bulb and sold at the flower auctions. Because tulip bulbs typically divide once they flower, the bulbs would multiply before the next season. In this way, the 2004 harvest would consist of more tulips, which would be sold in the 2004 auctions, as would more

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22 A market maker can be an individual, a company, or a financial institution that quotes both a buy and a sell price for a commodity or financial instrument which they hold in inventory; they do this in order to profit on what is called the bid-offer spread. Common among foreign exchange markets and banks, but not in the horticultural business, a market maker makes money by buying currency (or stock, commodities, or financial instruments) at a lower price than what they will sell at, or by selling at a higher price than that at which they will buy back the currency (or stock, commodity, or financial instrument).
bulbs (which would divide and flower again in 2005, and so on): the more bulbs sold at the high prices would cinch the 30 percent profit. Novacap ensured that the buyers of the harvest of 2003 were protected against the risk of failing to find buyers for the harvest of 2004 because Van der Poll would have already identified the 2004 buyers. With both buyers and sellers guaranteed in advance by these charming fellows, the plan seemed quite promising.

Novacap Floralis quickly attracted people to contribute a whopping 120 million euros—85 million from external investors and 35 million from within the tulip bulb trade. They included some powerful figures of Dutch society: Cor Boonstra, the former CEO of Philips, invested 200,000 euros; media mogul and publishing scion Willem Sijthoff invested 800,000; Blumex’s23 Peter van der Velden contributed 11 million; and the de Rijcke family (former Kruidvat owners, with a net worth of 1.7 billion euros) put in 12 million. ABN AMRO offered credit to potential participants through a subsidiary, the Hollandsche Bank Unie (HBU), which supplied 60 percent of the 85 million euros. HBU’s director himself, Pascale van den Boogerd, invested 200,000 of his own money; HBU account manager Bas Welling set aside 100,000 in his father’s name; and Jan Maarten de Jong, a former ABN AMRO board member, ponied up 300,000. Even a former researcher in fiscal fraud at the Ministry of Finance and previous director of the de Rijcke family’s Hoge Dennen Holding, a man named Sushilkumar Ong-A-Swie, threw in 200,000. The calibre of investors inspired confidence, and financial regulators saw nothing amiss (and since Vrijburg himself had once been a tax inspector, the whole business seemed impeccable). In 2003, the Netherlands Authority for Financial Markets (AFM) approved Novacap Floralis, and set in motion ‘the money making machine’ (as the NRC Handelsblad called it).24

At first, the machine ran smoothly. When Novacap closed the fund to new investments in September of 2003, it had bought bulbs worth 75 million euros (with real money) and had managed to sell them for 160 million euros (in unsigned contracts or promissory notes). But since the bulbs had to be planted in order to multiply, the 160 million euros could only be claimed in cash once the bulbs had been harvested. Until that point, Van der Poll maintained he was content with the promissory notes. He trusted that the model would pan out, and anticipated handsome commissions from the purchase and sale of tulip bulbs, as planned.

But then, something curious began to occur: one by one, in very similarly phrased letters, the potential buyers began to cancel their purchase orders. It turned out

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23 Before declaring bankruptcy in 2011, for 40 years Blumex was one of the Netherlands’ leading flower import/export companies, and one of the first to locate its office in the Aalsmeer auction.
that, lo and behold, none of the buyers had actually signed the promissory notes in the first place, so they had no binding legal power. SBC declared bankruptcy. This is where the parallel to the seventeenth century tulip bubble seems most apt. Then and to some limited extent now in the tulip bulb trade (but not in cut flower auctions\(^{25}\)), gentleman’s agreements and individual honor and reputation could seal agreements; they did not require signatures (Goldgar 2007: 204-226). But then, a much broader swath of society was included in the bulb trade than now, with the hundred or so rich investors involved in this scandal, and the vast sums supposedly lost in the tulip bubble of 1637 turn out to be myth, unlike the very real 85 million euros that vanished in 2004 (Goldgar 2007: 377). When the purchasers defaulted in early 2004 and SBC went bankrupt, Novacap was left with many tons of unsold bulbs. The real money contributed by those wealthy investors was now gone.

According to lawyers, the funds had been siphoned off and secreted away through other shell companies to Lugano Switzerland, post addresses in London, and trusts in the British Virgin Islands. It turned out that the prospective buyers guaranteed by SBC had come from among Van der Poll’s tulip growing friends. Between themselves they had bought and sold certain tulip bulb varieties in what is known in bulb business slang as ‘kasrondjes’, ‘tussenstationnetjes’, or ‘heen-en-teruggies’—a carousel of buying and selling that drives up the market price of the bulb but which none of the buyers will ever actually purchase.\(^{26}\) When first rumors, then investigations, and then newspaper articles exposed that this had occurred, some condemned the unethical behavior in language that sounds like it was lifted from seventeenth century popular pamphlets. “De ‘bollenboefjes’ zijn er met het geld vandoor”\(^{27}\) (the bulb-scoundrels made off with the money), said Bert Oosthout, an investigator critical of both the bulb dealers and the Dutch financial regulators (the FIOD, de Fraudedienst van de Belastingdienst, and the OM, the Openbaar Ministerie). In a ludicrous twist on the scam, even Hell’s Angels seems to have heard about the investment opportunity, and contributed a hefty sum to Novacap, though through a third party, since they are barred from investing in the Netherlands. When SBC announced bankruptcy, Van der Poll

\(^{25}\) Another distinction between bulb cultivars and flower growers is that the bulb community is even smaller and more insular (a “veel onderlinge handel” [Gijsberts and Zwetsloot: 127]), where an individual might be grower, buyer, and exporter. Traditionally flower growers have stuck to the business of growing, although today this is beginning to change in the cut flower sector with growers taking on multiple-functions.

\(^{26}\) In cut flower and plant auctions, this is not possible, since they operate on a descending bid or ‘Dutch auction’ system. Chapter three explains in detail how Dutch flower and plant auctions work.

\(^{27}\) NRC Handelsblad November 3, 2008.
reportedly received certain threats—the sort of ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ Hell’s Angels is known for.

Though the incriminating evidence was overwhelming, both Van der Poll and Vrijburg managed to elude jail (and death) through a peculiar and even more unlikely chain of events. As in a Hollywood thriller, some laptop computers contained volatile information and held data key to the whole affair. One recorded the history of all of Novacap’s transactions. At some point in 2007 during investigations it was discovered that the hard disk containing Novacap’s records had been irrevocably damaged, had been replaced with a clean disk, and that regrettably, the back up copy also somehow had been ruined, so there was no reliable way of knowing what Novacap’s assets actually were. The administrators concluded that the Novacap management had deliberately mishandled the records of the fund: and this suspicious record keeping is what alerted the authorities to investigate SBC and Novacap in the first place... But there was another wily computer involved in this story.

Joost Tonino, the chief public prosecutor in the case against Mark van der Poll and SBC, had saved a lot of the information regarding the investigation on his laptop, which he misplaced one day in the Hague. It was lost but not gone: a taxi driver rescued Tonino’s computer, and sought to return it. But while looking for information about its owner, he came across official government documents and child pornography stored on it, and turned it over to a television crime reporter, who had a field day. Tonino unconvincingly claimed the porn had been downloaded by mistake; the incident cost him his job (though he was later reinstated) and discredited the state’s case. Possibly worse from a legal standpoint were Tonino’s files containing illegally recorded conversations between Van der Poll and his lawyers. This caused the entire case to unravel. In March 2009, after almost a decade of official investigations and legal procedures, the court had reluctantly to conclude that the confidentiality of the lawyer-client relationship had been so severely compromised that the evidence presented against Van der Poll and his associates had to be dismissed. Mark van der Poll walked away scot-free, and the much weaker case against Marco Vrijburg also collapsed. In 2009, Vrijburg said “[after this whole affair] personally, I’ve resumed a normal life in a flower export company in Lissebroek. Because finally, flowers are what I do best with.”

Van der Poll is writing a book called Tulpenmafia.

This story seemed worth recounting here for several reasons. In an outlandish way, it illustrates that horticulture in the Netherlands encompasses a number of themes and sectors of society: it evokes some similarities and differences with the famed

28 “Ik heb zelf het gewone leven weer opgepakt en werk in een bloemenexportbedrijf in Lissebroek. Want bloemen, daar blijf ik toch het beste in.” Quote May 18, 2009
tulipmania, and demonstrates how references to the Dutch Golden Age and financial bubbles remain in circulation; it also exposes the small world of male power networks in the Netherlands and shows how easily and naturally they can overlap with the horticultural world. Though both national and international news organizations covered the story, it is notable that very few industry publications discussed it. And while some had heard about it, no one I met claimed to know more than what was reported. Nevertheless, the unusual episode seems in keeping with Dutch horticulture.

Tulipmania is a perennial subject, inspiring several books (fiction, non-fiction, and historical) over the past decade alone, and it is frequently invoked in the press regarding the internet bubble of the late 1990s, the housing bubble of 2008, and the ongoing financial scandals today. But already a hundred years ago, Dutch horticulturalists were complaining about tulipmania’s undue attention. In 1913 Ernst Krelage was bemoaning the continual uproar over tulipmania, and in a short, probably ironic article, he even warned of a ‘gladiolamania’ taking hold and threatening the incipient industry’s reputation; but this leading bulb grower and President of the Dutch Gardening Council went on to write an entire book on tulipmania (called *Bloemenspeculatie in Nederland*) in 1942. The subject continues to tickle people in and outside the Dutch horticultural industry, and this latest scandal is sure to unleash further commentary (as this introduction attests). It occupies a sort of niche motif within Dutch horticulture and views of the Netherlands.

As much as the rose gardens of medieval European monasteries or contemporary marriage rituals involving flowers, the sorts of social and financial aspects of Dutch horticulture revealed in this latest installment of ‘tulipmania’ also belong to what Jack Goody called ‘the culture of flowers’ (1993). The concept has widespread application. The phrase refers to “the complex social and cultural organization of cultivation”, the language, emotion, and meaning we assign to flowers, as well as the association of such meanings with the rise of civilizations and a modicum of affluence and leisure, particularly since the nineteenth century (Goody 1993: 25-27). It’s broad enough to encompass the commercial activities in today’s horticultural auctions, ancient Greek flower cults, and seventeenth century botanical experiments in Leiden. Similarly, the following chapters cast a wide net over the Dutch culture of flowers, especially its contemporary commercial practices in a central institution, FloraHolland Aalsmeer. Throughout these pages, tulipmania occasionally appears as metaphor, historic incident,

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29 One obvious explanation is that it reflects poorly on the industry; another is that those involved were not the types often directly involved in Dutch horticulture, so the story seemed practically irrelevant; and since the players who were cheated of their money were ultra-rich, possibly there was less sympathy in the industry for the losses than if they had been incurred by ordinary folks.
or cultural symbol; the culture of flowers, though rarely named as such, permeates every section. The aim is to convey a full, well rounded account of Dutch horticulture, and to situate it in our historical moment: to *tell it slant*. 