Attracted and repelled

Transnational relations between civil society and the state in the history of the fair trade movement since the 1960s

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Transnational relations between civil society and the state in the history of the fair trade movement since the 1960s

Peter van Dam

'I can't live with or without you' – it isn't likely that Paul Hewson thought of the relationship between civil society and the state when he jotted down this now famous line. Few people, however, are probably more aware of the tense relationship between civic organizations and state actors than the Irish singer-songwriter, better known as Bono. U2’s frontman regularly appears in news broadcasts around the world attempting to enlist powerful politicians in his support for political causes such as human rights and poverty reduction. Even though very few public figures oppose his philanthropic aims at such occasions, he is frequently confronted by a lack of support by national and international agencies. Besides, the wheels of political deliberation turn far slower than the hopes of the impetuous showman permit. Thus, he habitually resorts to raising funds for private initiatives which might promote his honourable causes – and to making music, of course. Bono’s experience exemplifies the relationship between civic organizations and state actors. Whilst both have much to gain from cooperation, joining together also often threatens their individual aims. Thus the relationship constantly oscillates between attraction and repulsion.

Recent years have seen a remarkable increase in attention for the history of transnational civil society. It had been long in the making: in 1971 Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane had urged scholars to include the transnational relations between non-state actors and between such actors and (inter) national agencies into their frames of analysis. Although several types of civic organizations have since extensively been studied by social scientists and historians, a comprehensive focus on civil society only came about in the wake of the astonishing transformation of Eastern European societies during the late 1980s. At the same time, the astute awareness of globalization combined with the disorientation of the post-Cold War order to foster interest in the ‘transnational’. As Thomas Risse-Kappen stated in 1995, this necessitated a reappraisal of the subject of transnational relations. The debate on these relations would have to move beyond the question of whether states or non-state actors were most influential, to assessing in what situations they could impact national and international politics. A rich body
of work on the dynamics of networks of activists across borders and the corresponding dynamics of political contestation soon developed.

The following analysis of the influence of civic organizations on transnational relations is informed by three relatively recent observations in scholarship on this topic. Moving beyond research which had focused on civic organizations which operated mainly on an international level, recent scholarship has highlighted the role of civic organizations in reacting to and in turn shaping globalization through such activities as protesting, creating networks of experts, promoting new policies and developing international standards. A second strand of research on transnational civil society has highlighted the importance of relating different spatial dimensions to the activities at hand: a protest movement might for example address national and transnational issues, whilst being above all rooted in a local context. A third issue recent scholarship has focused on is the influence of civic organizations on traditional state policies. Matthew Hilton has pointed out how civic organizations established themselves as experts in fields of policy and dominated public and political debates on the subjects they were concerned with based on that claim to expertise.

The Netherlands are a highly suitable point of departure for researching transnational civil society. The country harbours a rich tradition of civic organization and displays a long-standing cooperation between state and civil society. The historiography on this topic, however, has been burdened by the tradition of casting Dutch foreign relations as a struggle between the figures of a self-interested merchant and a morally concerned clergyman. Whereas realist politicians and business representatives are associated with the interest-driven merchant, idealist politicians and civic organizations are related to the clergyman, who has only morals in mind. To understand the role of civic organizations in shaping transnational relations, we have to move beyond this Manichean metaphor. By suggesting a divide between foreign policy driven by interests or by morals, it fails to acknowledge the moral claims about security, economy, solidarity, prestige and guilt and ecology which underpin transnational relations.

Moreover, by personifying these relations, the metaphor reinforces the image of foreign policy as the domain of eminent men making history. If we regard them as part of a history of transnational entanglement instead, the manifold relations between civic actors outside ministerial buildings become a crucial part of the image. In the following, I would like to connect these perspectives on how civic actors as part of an arena in which these relations have been shaped.

Ironically, the historiography about the role of Dutch civic actors in establishing and maintaining contacts across national borders has by and large been divided along the same lines of self-interest and idealism. On the one hand, it has highlighted the activities of idealistic enterprises of above all left-wing international solidarity and peace movements. On the other, the financial relations between civic organizations and government agencies have drawn the attention of several scholars. These studies point out two roles frequently played by civic organizations. They provide alternative channels for creating transnational relations, whilst they could also function as partners for state actors looking to impact these.

In the following, I will analyse the contestation of postcolonial global economic inequality in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the role of civic organizations in shaping transnational relations. By analysing the activities of the movement for fair trade in the Netherlands and its predecessors, I will argue that these organizations have structured the arena by providing the public and experts involved with relevant information and by establishing their own relations. Second, by maintaining transnational networks, these organizations have been able to constitute an alternative to government foreign policy. These relations enabled them to formulate critiques and practice alternative approaches. Third, civic organizations have functioned as partners for government agencies, providing them with crucial expertise and enhancing the legitimacy of their policy. The latter, I will argue, crucially hinges on the ability to perform the other two functions.

Forerunner

The problems of global economic inequality were to a large extent addressed by actors operating outside the traditional nation-state apparatus during the early post-war era. On an international scale, new United Nations (UN) agencies such as the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization extended global networks of actors concerned with the issue of 'development'. Through these networks, a new sense of global responsibility was fostered. Among those living in less favourable conditions, this created what Amy Staples has dubbed a 'revolution in expecting', a world where people take the development of what became known as the 'Third World' to heart.

In the Netherlands, these transnational networks spurred civic action to address worldwide economic inequality since the 1950s. Within the labour movement and the social-democratic party Partij van de Arbeid, the eminent economist Jan Tinbergen, the politician Geert Ruylgers, and the economist Harry de Lange successfully promoted the cause of development, with which they themselves had become acquainted through their activities in the realm of the UN and its agencies and the resulting contacts with like-minded people across the world. Similarly, the Protestant minister Han Hugenholtz attempted to muster a civic movement to support developing countries from the early 1950s. His participation in the international peace movement had provided him with information about the issue and with examples of what a civic initiative might look like. Hugenholtz's attempt was particularly inspired by attempts in Norway, about which he corresponded with the Norwegian Ake Anker Ording, who as a staff member of the United Nations Secretariat had initiated the United Nations Appeal for Children fundraising...
Peter van Dam

Figure 9.1 Pastor Simon Jelsma (1918-2011) - one of the founding fathers of the Dutch Third World movement - holding one of his weekly sermons in the centre of The Hague, 1955 (Nationaal Archief/Collectie Spaarnestad/Jan van Eyk)

campaign. Hugenholtz soon found fellow campaigners among a loosely connected circle of activists which had become known as the 'Plein-groep' for their regular meetings at the steps of the Dutch Supreme Court at Plein­square in The Hague. Out of this coalition, the Nationale Organisatie Voor Internationale Bijstand ('National Organization for International Assistance', NOVIB) was born in 1956. As exemplified by its widely distributed periodical Onze Wereld ('Our World'), this organization promoted a distinctly global outlook among the Dutch public, stressing the same ethos of global responsibility which were also current within the aforementioned international institutions.

Well before development assistance became represented by a separate minister in Dutch government in 1965, the issue of global economic inequality had gained a strong foothold in Dutch civil society. As the first United Nations Development Decade got underway in 1961, this foothold was expanded by a circle of specialized journalists and by the transformation of missionary agencies into organizations dedicated to development. Around the first and second United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1964 and 1968 the demands of developing countries - united as the Group of 77 - increased along with their frustration over the lack of commitment to development demonstrated by northern countries. This frustration was shared by groups of activists in the Netherlands, who were encouraged by political commentators to devise ways to bring to their own government to make a more substantial commitment to work towards more equal global relations.

Focusing on the issue of global trade above all else, activists initiated what can be regarded as a first wave of fair trade activism during the second half of the 1960s. These were related to, but certainly not identical with, older groups focused on hunger, poverty and development. Their first large-scale campaign, cane sugar campaign, which started in the autumn of 1968, was a direct result of this post-war construction of a network of like-minded activists and organizations. The campaign was initiated by a group consisting predominantly of youthful activists, who wanted to visualize the imbalances of the global trading system by focusing on one concrete product. Sugar was exceptionally suited in this respect, because the sugar cane produced in developing nations was nominally cheaper than the beet sugar produced in Europe. However, because of the tariffs levied by the European Economic Community on importing cane sugar and European agrarian subsidies for producing beet sugar, the latter turned out cheaper for European consumers. Thus cane sugar demonstrated how developing countries were denied a fair chance at the world market, reversing the blame for a perceived lack of 'development' on their part back onto the global north. ‘They receive 15 cents per kilo of sugar, we pay 60 cents per kilo of sugar on export subsidies’, a campaign brochure stated.

By selling cane sugar locally, demanding it at nearby grocery stores, organizing national rallies and debates, and circulating information, fair trade activists successfully called for attention for the issue. Their ultimate aim was twofold: creating a lasting awareness among the public about the invidious circumstances in which countries in the global south had been positioned through global politics, and creating pressure on Dutch and European politics to address this issue. The campaign managed to muster considerable local support as well as national attention. All over the Netherlands, local cane sugar committees were founded. On several occasions, Dutch parliament considered the issue of the global sugar trade. The main publication aiming at informing the public had sold around 40,000 copies, whilst a counter-publication and media-offensive by the Dutch sugar industry had raised the profile of the campaign.

The campaign soon managed to attract the attention of national politicians. Activists engaged members of government and parliament directly during a demonstration in The Hague in December 1968, during which Minister of Economic Affairs Leo de Block was offered an ostentatious heart made of cane sugar, accompanied by a call to ‘put a heart into the global economy’. A wide range of issues around the campaign was debated in parliament, varying from the stance of the Dutch government in global trade negotiations...
to the dangers the campaign might entail. Did the soiled-looking cane sugar pose a threat to public health, one Member of Parliament inquired? Wouldn't the cane sugar-producing communists in Cuba be the main beneficiaries of the campaign, another MP wondered? Beyond such amusing episodes, however, parliamentary debates and public statements made clear that the ministers involved felt pressure to accommodate the activists' concerns.

From early on, the activists acknowledged the importance of expanding their campaign to other European countries for exerting pressure on European politics. During a national radio debate at the start of the cane sugar campaign, the sympathetic labour party spokesman Henk Vredeling urged the activists to voice their plight on a European level, where the policies concerned were in fact decided. The campaign's secretariat drafted an English letter summarizing the concept, goals and opportunities to participate as early as January 1969, and distributed this letter to the international relations of a host of Dutch organizations supporting the campaign. Changes in the EEC sugar policy are unthinkable unless there is political pressure in the other member countries as well, the Dutch activists openly asserted in a new letter which was circulated in a year later. By their estimation, over 2,000 contacts abroad had received their information. Their initiative had been recommended by the ecumenical Committee on Society, Development and Peace in cooperation with the World Council of Churches and had been taken up by activists in Great Britain, whilst like-minded contacts in Belgium, Denmark, France and West Germany also considered joining. At an international congress of Third World action groups in 1970, the possibilities of hosting a Europe-wide campaign were discussed at length, resulting in a plan for its implementation.

However, the different national agendas in European politics, the emergence of more attractive forms of campaigning against global inequality and the increasingly complex workings of the global sugar market soon eclipsed the chances of a Europe-wide cane sugar campaign. Nonetheless, the transnational networks forged in the course of the campaign would continue to facilitate an exchange of information, suggestions for actions and co-ordination across borders. By the early 1970s, civic organizations rallying around the theme of global inequality had successfully drawn attention to the issue, gathered and distributed relevant information and action models among the public and policy-makers, and established transnational networks which could be drawn upon for future exchanges and activities. These organizations had firmly established an ethos of global responsibility and framed the issue of development as a Dutch responsibility in particular. The installation of the prominent development activist Jan Pronk as a Minister of Development in 1973 underscored how civic organizations had managed to surpass the expertise of governmental development experts with whom they had competed throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Alternative

The networks constructed during the early post-war years allowed civic organizations to provide alternative channels for international cooperation, but also to engage government agencies through critiques and recommendations for alternative policies. The cane sugar campaign had been a clear example of the latter: it explicitly aimed at pressuring national and European politics to change their policies in order to give producers from the south a fair chance to sell their products on European markets by removing tariffs and reducing the subsidies to European farmers producing competing goods. Its emergence had also been tightly connected to the ability of civic organizations to provide alternative channels of information. The pioneering development agency Novib had set up an independent news service to cover the second UNCTAD-conference in New Delhi in 1968. This news service allowed for a more extensive coverage of the conference than regular media services could provide. It also enabled an independent perspective on the course of events, including a critical assessment of the role of the Dutch delegation. Through such channels, those sympathetic to the plight of southern countries could explicitly be called upon to find means to pressure their own governments into a more cooperative stance.

The network which was established during the cane sugar campaign provided the foundation for the proliferation of a new action model which was pioneered in 1969: the world shop ('Wereld winkel'). The first world shop had been established in Breukelen by a group of local citizens, who cooperated with Stichting SOS, an organization which imported handicraft products from southern producers and sold them in Western Europe in order to support their efforts to establish successful businesses. The initiative was supported and promoted by SOS. It soon drew attention from like-minded activists across the Netherlands, who recognized an opportunity to expand their efforts beyond selling cane sugar. The world shop-model provided a chance to sell different products and moreover to establish a location which could function as a local focal point for activism around the issue of fair trade. World shops quickly appeared all across the Netherlands. In 1970, ten world shops formed a national alliance. Within two years, 120 shops had joined their ranks. The model was also successful outside the Netherlands, especially in West Germany and in Belgium, where world shops soon appeared in similar numbers.

Similar to the cane sugar campaign, world shops sought to pair a critique of global politics with options for practical action which appealed to activists and a wider range of citizen-consumers alike. World shop activists often debated the importance of actually selling products as a means of supporting southern producers as opposed to favouring activities to create awareness for global inequality. The balance between the two shifted, reflecting the belief among activists in attaining meaningful change through international politics. For example, the world shop movement served as an important
platform for mobilizing and informing the public in the run-up to the 1972 UNCTAD-conference in Santiago de Chile. After two disappointing conferences in 1964 and 1968, many people expected more from this conference, which was hosted by the Salvador Allende's leftist Chilean government - a beacon of hope for many leftist northern activists because of its democratic rise to power. After this conference once again brought little by the way of tangible results, many fair trade activists changed their approach of this global issue. Instead of changing the global market all at once and focusing on large-scale events such as the UNCTAD-conferences, they aimed at raising awareness among the local public, pressuring individual companies and supporting individual liberation movements.

Selling products on behalf of southern producers remained a mainstay of the fair trade movement. Directly supporting people in the global south, fair trade activists established alternative transnational relations, effectively as well as verbally challenging state-led development aid. This approach as much divided as united the movement, for even activists critical of the capitalist retail practices approved of selling products on behalf of revolutionary movements. Stichting Ideële Import, an organization which imported products exclusively from leftist countries, presented this practice as preferable to political solutions, 'if they [Southern producers, Pvd] do not want to lose themselves in a permanent dependence on loans and development aid, and the accompanying political and social effects'.

The slogan 'Make a start with true development aid' and the accompanying critique of government aid which purportedly served the interest of northern countries above all else, underlined how the fair trade movement continued to foster relations with government agencies, whilst articulating a markedly different vision of development policy. In line with these differences of opinion fair trade organizations also maintained different partnerships than their government counterparts. Some of these relations were beyond the reach of national governments because of their modest size, such as the small cooperatives of coffee producers which could survive the crisis of the international coffee market since the late 1980s because of the support from fair trade organizations. More controversially, fair trade activists would maintain relations which governments could not maintain because of political sensitivities. For example, part of the fair trade movement was actively supporting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua well after governments became critical of its politics.
of targeting specific audiences in order to convince them of the proposed measures for international development. In its plenary session, the United Nations adopted this idea, calling on 'developed countries' to involve their citizens in the issue of development, for example by charging a national agency with informing public opinion. Dutch officials reacted by installing the NCO as a national body which would coordinate and subsidize initiatives to promote awareness about development.

An alliance between development activists and the NCO seemed only natural, in the light of the fact that both aimed primarily to raise awareness about global inequality and the need for development. The government officials involved in the birth of the NCO, however, regarded it as a useful instrument to steer activism around the issue of development on a moderate course. Initially, the NCO therefore supported well-known government allies such as UNESCO and trade unions. The National Federation of World Shops was one of the few recent initiatives to receive financial support during the first years of the NCO's activities. This mutual entanglement was personified by the hiring of Paul van Tongeren, the former secretary of the cane sugar campaign and of the first attempts to unite local world shop initiatives, as an NCO-staff member. The NCO-subsidies to the federation of world shops were mainly intended to help the federation support local initiatives by providing training and regional co-ordination. The federation also received support from the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, which allowed the federation to hire two permanent secretaries to staff its national office.

These subsidies provided the federation of world shops with the much-needed stability, allowing it to consolidate its position through the 1970s. At the same time, the periodical reviews attached to these subsidies and the obligations attached to their granting often collided with the views and wishes of the federations' membership. Since the early 1980s, reforms of the NCO led to cuts in the subsidies for the federation as well as to a less expansive mandate. During the latter half of the 1970s, the NCO had by and large accepted the view that the disadvantageous position of the global south would have to be addressed by raising awareness about worldwide inequality among the Dutch public. The resulting closer alliance with activist groups would soon come under pressure within a political climate wary of government expenditure. Its critics argued that the projects supported by the NCO were politically one-sided and too expensive - its budget had been raised from 1.5 million Guilders in 1971 to almost 13 million Guilders in 1980. As a result of reforms during the 1980s, the activities sponsored by the NCO were required to focus on themes directly related to development. Moreover, the influence of Third World activist groups within the organization was limited by reducing the amount of votes these organizations could cast in its member meetings.

The roles of partner and alternative to government agencies have often been intertwined, as the activities of the Stichting Ideële Import point out.
This alternative trading organization started importing goods from left-wing countries in the global south in 1976. Products such as wine from Algeria, candy from Cuba, and coffee from Nicaragua and Tanzania were transported to the Netherlands, but also to a wide array of other countries, and sold to world shops and other interested parties. At the same time, the organization used its expertise in the area of transportation and its contacts with the governments of countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Algeria, and Vietnam to export goods to these countries through the Netherlands as a form of development assistance. Stichting Ideële Import did not limit itself to Dutch partners for such projects: in 1985, it announced it would deliver a new type of fishing boat to Cape Verde, which had been paid for by the West German Weltfriedensdienst and Ministry of Development Aid. Its extensive network enabled it to promote the foundation of the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT). IFAT—known nowadays as the World Fair Trade Organization—did not only represent European alternative trade organizations, but also became a major platform for producers from the south to engage in debates on the aims and means of fair trade activism.

Such initiatives were part of a broader pattern of fair trade activism since the 1970s: local and national organizations sought to establish transnational relations. Once these were established, they built up European and international organizations to coordinate their efforts from the late 1970s onwards. This was not just true of Stichting Ideële Import, but also of the other alternative trading organization SOS. Although SOS's attempts at expanding its activities as a Europe-wide importer failed, their activities had created a network of people concerned with importing and selling products from the global south. Even if these people did not always act in concert, they continued to exchange their information and views. Eventually, this would lead to the setting up of a European platform for alternative trading companies, which would be named European Fair Trade Association (EFTA), which operated informally since 1987 and was officially instated in 1990. Since 1976, members of local world shops from across Europe met regularly to discuss joint practical and ideological issues. World shops from thirteen European countries decided to found an official network in 1994, which would be called Network of European World Shops (NEWS!).

The crucial importance of transnational networks has been apparent throughout this analysis. These relations often provided civic organizations with incentives to spring into action. They also made the channels and the respective roles state and civic actors have played in these relations develop and the respective roles state and civic actors have played in these relations. Civic organizations attempted to gain access to the resources the European Union had to offer, as well as to use the status and visibility of European institutions to enhance their standing and promote their own activities.

Conclusion

Regarding the role of civic organizations as forerunners, alternative and partner to state actors enriches the understanding of transnational relations as a field in which state actors operate within a larger network, in which they co-operate or compete with, or choose to ignore non-state actors. Such a perspective produces a more accurate view of the field in which these relations develop and the respective roles state and civic actors have played in this field. By explicitly defining this field as a transnational arena, it also becomes clear how the actors involved have to position themselves at once within their local, national and transnational frameworks. This becomes abundantly clear in regard to fair trade activism, which was a direct reaction to the governance of the global trading system, attempting to pressure policy at the global, European and national level, but drawing its strength from activists who operated on a local level first and foremost.

Analysing transnational relations from a civil society perspective also brings themes, issues and venues into focus which are often neglected by a more traditional view of these relations. The case of fair trade activism demonstrates the societal relevance of economic relations beyond periodic rounds of negotiations on global trade and the alternative channels through which economic relations have been established and debated. Moreover, the importance of the development of an ethos of global responsibility to both civic organizations and state actors and the resulting competition about the direction of this development can be observed in the conflicts and partnerships which surround attempts to create awareness for global inequality and the need for fair trade during the 1970s and 1980s.

The crucial importance of transnational networks has been apparent throughout this analysis. These relations often provided civic organizations with incentives to spring into action. They also made the channels and the knowledge available which these organizations could use to build up an independent presence in the field of transnational relations. The potential to provide foreign policy with knowledge, alternative channels and legitimacy as well as the potential to dispute foreign policy, made civic organizations appealing partners for cooperation in the eyes of state actors, either because...
they could benefit from cooperation, or because a partnership could be instrumental in moderating critical voices. On the other hand, the cooperation with state actors could also provide civic organizations with greater capabilities and larger budgets, enhance their credibility and provide them a chance to change state policies. At the same time, this cooperation constantly threatened their position by limiting their ability to establish an independent presence, and to voice and practice alternatives.

The analysis of these attempts to address global inequality challenges a traditional view of international politics in several ways. Policies concerning these issues took shape within a force field of attraction and repulsion between state and civic actors. Within this field, the lines between traditional state representatives and civil society actors moreover become blurred. Finally, it turns out that there is no clear-cut divide between international and national politics. Considering this history as a history of transnational relations not only allows for these blurred lines, but places them at the heart of a better understanding of the dynamics of politics and civic activism. The Netherlands turns out to be an excellent starting point for revaluing these dynamics because of the existence of a vibrant civil society and state actors who are often open to cooperation with these actors. If only because it has turned out that these actors were part of a transnational arena, this history of interactions between state and civil society bears empirical and conceptual significance across the Dutch borders.

Notes

3 Pierre-Yves Saunier, Transnational History (Basingstoke 2013).
Traditionally, the Dutch prime minister did not play an important role on the international stage. Foreign policy was seen largely as the responsibility of the Foreign Minister. In the early 1970s this situation changed with the rise of multilateral summity, regular meetings of the heads of government. Especially through the creation of the European Council in 1974 the prime minister became an important spokesman for the Netherlands.

This chapter analyses how Prime Minister Joop den Uyl and Foreign Minister Max van der Stoel managed to deal with the anomalous situation. Was the expansion of the prime minister’s involvement in foreign affairs mainly caused by international developments or were Den Uyl’s personal preferences involved? And what was the reaction of the central stakeholder in Dutch foreign policy, the Foreign Ministry and of Parliament, a secondary stakeholder?

This work forms part of my research into the role played by the prime minister in Dutch foreign policy since 1945. Den Uyl—leader of the social democratic party (PvdA) from 1966 to 1986 and one of the most important Dutch politicians of his time—is an interesting case as he is above all known as a ‘national’ politician, who concentrated on domestic policy, while at the same time having little interest in international affairs. His international activity as prime minister (1973–1977) is totally absent from Anet Bleich’s extensive biography; the author merely states Den Uyl went by Van der Stoel’s ‘compass’. This omission is at least striking considering the unprecedented increase of the prime minister’s international activities during Den Uyl’s watch. Thus the image of Den Uyl and the way he exercised the premiership should be adjusted. This chapter also makes a contribution to the growing literature on the changes in international politics in the 1970s and on the rise of summity in particular. Recent historical studies by Daniel J. Sargent and Kristina Spohr showed how, during the crises-ridden early 1970s, international leaders like Henry Kissinger and Helmut Schmidt formulated strategies for reorienting the West towards the management of interdependence. The emergence of a permanent forum of discussions amongst heads of government created ‘a new way of life’ in European politics, as...
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Shaping the International Relations of the Netherlands, 1815–2000
A Small Country on the Global Scene

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Samuël Kruizinga,
Vincent Kuitenbrouwer and
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