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Dutch Domestic Colonization: From Rural Idyll to Prison Museum[1]

Hanneke Stuit

- Paupers
- Colonists
- Patients
- Guards
- Inmates
- Refugees
- Collaborators
- Smugglers
- Prisoners

These are some of the denominations imprinted on inhabitants of the Colonies of Benevolence (Koloniën van Weldadigheid) over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conceived by colonial officer Johannes van den Bosch (1780-1844), the Colonies' stated purpose was to address extreme levels of paucity in Dutch cities after the Napoleonic period. This was a charitable initiative that also addressed the moral, social, and political threat poor populations were thought to pose to the ruling elites. The plan ultimately led to the creation of several agrarian colonies in the rural Dutch province of Drenthe, which "was home to a number of largely subsistence-oriented farm communities organized as semi-feudal marke."[2] The colonies that would come to occupy the otherwise "unused" sandy and peaty wastelands of Drenthe were Frederiksoord (1818), De Ommerschans (1819), Wilhelminaoord (1820-1822), Willemsoord (1820-1823), and Veenhuizen (1823). Later, Colonies were also erected in the Southern Netherlands, now Belgium, following the same model: Wortel in 1822 and Merksplas in 1825.[3] These internal colonies were to provide livelihood, education, and moral uplifting for the urban poor, and to create additional food supplies for the rest of the country.[4] The Colonies were supposed to be completely self-sustained within sixteen years of their inception in 1818,[5] but it soon became clear that a large number of colonists were unable or did not want to work the land, that the soil was not suitable for large

crops without the added structural costs of obtaining manure from elsewhere, and that management lacked the necessary agricultural experience.[6] The Society of Benevolence could not shed its debts and the regime within the Colonies became grimmer.

Figure 1: Veenhuizen, Tweede gesticht (Second institution). Emily Ng, 2019.

Whereas people volunteered to join the first colony of Frederiksoord (even if it is debatable how "free" this choice really was), it did not take long for two penal colonies – de Ommerschans and Veenhuizen – to be erected. These were used to (temporarily) banish and discipline "bad" free colonists and to house orphans and vagrants from urban environments, who were denoted as "verpleegden" (patients) in need of help.[7] In 1859, the Society transformed the former "free" colonies into large-scale farms, and the lands and estates of the penal colonies were transferred to the Crown.[8] With this shift, the charitable aspects in Veenhuizen started to fall away.[9] Housing refugees from the south of the Lowlands during the separation of Belgium from the Netherlands and the First World War, Veenhuizen became an increasingly carceral site during and after the Second World War, when its population was broadened from vagrants and beggars to include collaborators and smugglers. It developed into a closed prison village harboring not just prisoners, but also offering housing for prison guards and their families.

UITGANG
ENTREE
WINKEL

Figure 2: The courtyard of the National Prison Museum in Veenhuizen. Emily Ng, 2019.

Nowadays, Veenhuizen contains no less than four prisons and an ammunition depot owned by the Ministry of Defense. Two of the prisons are still in function, the third is empty but ready for service, and the fourth was used to house refugees up until May 2018 but now stands unused. At the same time, the village is extensively marketed to tourists, and the Society of Benevolence, which still exists, is working on a bid for it to become a UNESCO world heritage site.[10] Tourists can visit the National Prison Museum housed in one of the many surviving Colony buildings or take a guided tour of the village and the "stand-by" prison. Veenhuizen is also framed as the ideal gateway to the surrounding countryside. Yet, financial problems continue to threaten Veenhuizen's future: about a third of its estates, now in possession of the Government Buildings Agency, are currently being put up for sale.[11]

Figure 3: Interactive display on Veenhuizen's position in the surrounding landscape at the National Prison Museum. Emily Ng, 2019.

This cluster is based on a trip to Veenhuizen in the context of the Rural Imaginations project, which focuses on "the crucial role played by cultural imaginations in determining what aspects of contemporary rural life do and do not become visible nationally and globally, which, in turn, affects how the rural can be mobilized politically."[12] The project is conducted at the University of Amsterdam and funded by the European Research Council. During the trip and the development of this cluster, it became increasingly clear that the rural plays an important part in the history of Veenhuizen and the other Colonies, up to the present day. Initially, the Colonies of Benevolence were purposefully located in the countryside because this setting was considered beneficial to the moral uplifting of the poor. The choice of the countryside, however, was not just inspired by the idyllic paradigms of fresh air, inspiration, and exercise commonly projected on the rural. Instead, the notion of agricultural labor was central to the Christian-cum-Enlightenment thought on which the Colonies were based (Bosma and Valdés Olmos). As a comparison between these Dutch internal colonies and Maoist initiatives of sending urban educated youth to the countryside in China clarifies, the imagined effects of agricultural labor were fundamental to the philosophical underpinnings of the Society's liberal discourses of subjectivity (Ng). In other words, this social experiment was intended to produce a laboring population that could unite the Lowlands economically and would allow it to enter the Modern era.[13]

At the same time, however, the persistence of the idea of the countryside as pleasant and wholesome allows for the specificities of colonization and oppression in Veenhuizen and the other Colonies to remain unnoticed. From the visual material available on the Colonies, it becomes clear that rural idylls operated in conjunction with "carceral idylls," which naturalized the displacement of considerable parts of the population to the edges of the Dutch Kingdom in the name of moral improvement (Stuit). Even though about a million Belgian and Dutch people can trace their lineage to the Colonies[14] and despite the popularity of Suzanna Jansen's seminal work on Veenhuizen (*Het pauperparadijs*, 2008), in which subpar living conditions in Veenhuizen are amply discussed,[15] little debate in the public sphere focuses on the problematic aspects of the Colonies' heritage, or on its ties with Dutch colonization abroad. Rather than commemorating colonial subjects or engaging with the issue of lineage critically, finding out about one's ancestors there is now an integral part of the marketing of the Colonies as a tourist destination.[16] In the touristic exploitation of Veenhuizen, especially in the National Prison Museum's gift shop, it becomes clear that decontextualized and nationalistic notions of the rural render invisible these histories of colonial oppression, both in a national and international context (Peeren).

We ask, therefore, how current uses of the Colonies in general, and Veenhuizen in particular, seem to gloss over the ways in which the carceral, the rural and the colonial intersect. How do these uses obscure the Colonies' uncomfortable connections to Dutch colonization in the East and West Indies? Which views of Veenhuizen are actively pursued and sanctioned, and which are disavowed? In order to explore these connections and questions, this cluster brings together close readings of contemporary elements of Veenhuizen, the historical context of the Colonies of Benevolence, and its resonance with other contexts that pertain to the colonial, the agricultural, and the carceral. As these joint contributions show, imaginations of the rural offer an idealized setting for lofty ideals and spectacularized consumption that render the rural invisible as a situated territory traversed by various structures of power and control.

Notes

- 1This publication emerged from the project 'Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World' (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 772436).
- 2Albert Schrauwers, "The 'Benevolent' Colonies of Johannes van den Bosch: Continuities in the Administration of Poverty in the Netherlands and Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43.2 (2001): 308-309,
- 3See the Koloniën van Weldadigheid website.
- 4Schrauwers, "The 'Benevolent' Colonies," 316.
- 5Wil Schackmann, *De strafkolonie. Verzedelijken en beschaven in de Koloniën van Weldadigheid, 1818-1859* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2018), 15.

- 6 *The Colonies of Benevolence: An Exceptional Experiment*, ed. De Clercq, Van den Broek, Van Nieuwpoort and Albers (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum Publishers, 2018), 33.
- 7 Schackmann, *De strafkolonie*, 19-20.
- 8 Koloniën van Weldadigheid website.
- 9 Suzanna Jansen, *Het pauperparadijs. Een familiegeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2008), 107.
- 10 A new submission is currently being prepared after feedback from the ICOMOS (the UNESCO advisory committee). The bid is expected to be filed by the Dutch and Belgian governments in January 2020, and a decision is expected in the summer of 2020. The four visitor centers in Merksplas, Ommerschans, Frederiksoord and Veenhuizen have also submitted a joint request for a European Heritage Label. Koloniën van Weldadigheid, "Bericht aanpassing Nominatiedossier," 10 September 2019.
- 11 Jurre van den Berg, "Te koop: gevangenisdorp Veenhuizen t.e.a.b.," *De Volkskrant*, 28 August 2019.
- 12 Esther Peeren, "Rural Imaginations Project Description," (2019).
- 13 Schrauwers, "The 'Benevolent' Colonies."
- 14 Koloniën van Weldadigheid website.
- 15 Jansen, *Pauperparadijs*, 104-105.
- 16 See the Koloniën van Weldadigheid website, the tourism website for Drenthe, or Allekolonisten.nl.