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8 #Proudofthefarmer

Authenticity, populism and rural masculinity in the 2019 Dutch farmers' protests

Anke Bosma and Esther Peeren

Introduction

On 1 October 2019, hundreds of tractors clogged the motorways leading to The Hague, where a big farmers' demonstration took place. The tractors caused a major disruption and the largest traffic jams in Dutch history (NOS, 2019a). In the following months, more demonstrations and blockades by farmers followed. The protest wave came after a tense summer, which began when, on 13 May, animal rights activists occupied a pig farm in Boxtel, demanding to film the conditions under which the pigs were being kept and to evacuate any sick or injured animals. The political response to the occupation was overwhelmingly critical, with Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Carola Schouten stating: "This is one of the businesses providing our daily food. They must be able to do this without constantly having to look over their shoulder and being intimidated" (Huijben, 2019).¹ The events of 13 May led to the founding of two new farmers' organisations: the Farmers Defence Force (FDF), which aims to fight back against "the excesses of environmental extremists" while comparing itself, in its willingness to take radical action, to Greenpeace; and Agractie, dedicated to representing farmers' interests and connecting farmers and citizens, but also prepared to engage in direct action.

The immediate impetus for the 1 October protest, which involved both the FDF and Agractie, was a statement by MP Tjeerd de Groot of the social-liberal D66 party that the number of pigs and chickens in the Netherlands should be cut in half in order to comply with EU regulations on nitrogen deposits. Despite the fact that De Groot excluded cows, goats, sheep, horses, rabbits, ducks and turkeys from his plan, it was presented in the Dutch media as aiming for a reduction by 50% of all livestock, and was taken by many farmers as posing a direct threat to their livelihoods (Winterman, 2019). De Groot's political opponents rushed to side with the farmers and denounced the plan. MP Gert Jan Segers of the Christian progressive party CU summarised it in a television interview as aiming to "take farmers down a peg" (Nieuwsuur, 2019).

Coming so soon after the Boxtel pig farm occupation and in a context of widespread anger among Dutch farmers at negative media coverage of

agricultural issues and changing government regulations, De Groot's plan may have been the catalyst for the protest, but it was not its only or even most important motivator.² Significantly, one of the organisers of the 1 October protest, sheep farmer Bart Kemp, stated in an interview with regional newspaper *De Gelderlander* that the main aim was to prompt a long overdue re-appreciation of farmers (Van Essen, 2019a). To achieve this, the protesters sought to present themselves as hardworking guardians of the food supply (through the slogan “no farmers, no food”), unjustly beleaguered by politicians and misunderstood by a general public concentrated in urban areas.

In this chapter, we analyse the role played by a particular notion of authenticity in the discursive framing of the Dutch farmers' protests of late 2019 and early 2020 by the protesters and various politicians, as well as in the remarkably sympathetic initial public response.³ It is our contention that the authenticity claimed by and ascribed to the protesting farmers drew legitimacy from the intimate association of authenticity with the rural identified and critiqued by the German philosopher Theodor Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973). The fact that the rural in general, and farmers in particular, have long been taken as exemplifying authenticity and thus as inherently authentic has made the “authentic farmer” a pleonasm. This ingrained idea, we will show, was not only what drove the early support for the farmers' protests by a large majority of the Dutch public, but what also facilitated an alignment between the protests and a populist-nationalist politics.

The idea that farmers are inherently authentic and thus people to be proud of (a sentiment expressed by the popular protest-related hashtag #proudothefarmer, from which we take our title) relies, as we will make clear by way of Adorno, on an idyllic image of farming that has little to do with its realities and is therefore open to contention. At the beginning of the protests, the farmers successfully evoked this idyllic image by presenting themselves as running vulnerable family farms, intimately connected to their land and animals, and working 24/7 to feed the nation not for financial reward but out of pure dedication. However, public support declined when news reports began to appear that challenged this framing.⁴ These reports eroded the “perceived authenticity” (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003) of the protests, revealing them to be “strategically staged” (MacCannell, 1973) by political actors making dubious statements.

First, it was reported that the number of Dutch farms had already declined from 410,000 in 1950 to 54,000 in 2018 because of the long-standing policy of scale enlargement and that, in the same period, livestock numbers had grown rapidly, with pigs increasing from 2,407,000 in 1956 to 48,971,000 in 2018, laying hens from 33,024,000 to 47,302,000 and, most staggeringly, broilers from 2,407,000 to 48,971,000 (CBS, 2019). This undermined the farmers' claims that there would be an unprecedented reduction in the number of farms if livestock numbers were halved and that Dutch farming was still characterised by small-scale family businesses. Second, the fact that 75% of Dutch agricultural produce is exported (Leijten, 2019) undercut the idea that all existing farms are needed to feed the nation. Third, the repeated claim

that farmers work extremely hard for very little money was challenged by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) researcher Peter Hein van Mulligen, who tweeted that 18% of Dutch farmers are millionaires (Phvanmulligen, 2019). Since, according to Lionel Trilling, “money [...] is the principle of the inauthentic in human existence” (Trilling, 2009, p. 124), pointing out that not all farmers are barely able to sustain themselves and their families made the protesters seem less authentic and consequently less deserving of sympathy. It also cast doubt on whether the protesters, who had stressed farmers’ financial struggles, had “accurately represent[ed] th[eir] values and commitments” (Jones, 2016, p. 492), sowing the seeds for accusations of hypocrisy. Fourth, press coverage revealing that the farmers’ protests had received substantial financial support from agricultural multinationals such as slaughterhouse company Vion and fodder companies De Heus and ForFarmers (Verhoeven, 2019) challenged the communicated image of the protests as a grassroots effort and of farmers as paragons of self-sufficiency.

Our main focus in this chapter is on how the farmers’ protests were so successfully presented and eagerly accepted as authentic and therefore justified, especially at their start but also later on (almost half of the Dutch public continued to support the farmers). As noted, we argue that this was facilitated by the continuing traction of the idea of the inherently authentic farmer. Now that this idea is increasingly being used, in the Netherlands and in other countries, to buttress nationalist-populist politics, it is especially urgent to understand and connect its historical and current manifestations. Accordingly, we will first use Adorno’s work to specify the long-standing link between farming, authenticity and nationalism, before showing how this link was revived, by certain Dutch politicians and some protesting farmers, to align the protests with a populist, anti-immigration politics. Subsequently, we draw on the work of Sara Ahmed and Michael Kimmel to explore how this alignment also involved the association of the protesting farmers with a particular form of rural masculinity that marked their anger and violence as innate and therefore authentic and justified. Finally, our conclusion details how, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, a video made by Agractie once more appealed to the idea of the authentic farmer to rebuild public support for the farmers, suggesting that people’s investment in this idea and its mobilising power persist.

Farming, authenticity and nationalism

One notion repeatedly evoked by the Dutch farmers to frame their protests was that farming is not something you do, but something you *are*. Thus, in an article on the website of the national television broadcaster NOS, 27-year-old dairy farmer Jelle Treurniet, who hopes to take over the farm started by his great-grandfather, was quoted as saying: “Being a farmer is part of you. If you disagree with farming policy, you cannot suddenly say that you do not want to do it anymore” (NOS, 2019b). Similar statements that “a farming business is not just a job, it’s in your genes” and that “you either are a farmer

or you are not one” were made by other farmers interviewed about the protests (Boerderij, 2019; Nieuwsuur, 2019), as well as by Wageningen University researcher Melle Nikkels in the national newspaper *Trouw*: “For agriculturists, ‘being a farmer’ is their whole identity. Their work is also their way of life” (Van Velzen, 2019b). The idea of farming as an essential, internal identity – and therefore not something that can easily be given up – evokes what philosopher Somogy Varga calls the “ideal of authenticity,” defined as the sense that “one should lead a life that is expressive of what the person takes herself to be” (Varga, 2011, p. 1). If farmers take themselves to *be* farmers, this ideal prescribes that they should do everything possible to continue to live as they believe farmers should live.

In “The Paradox of Authenticity,” Varga distinguishes three western models of authenticity that he argues followed each other historically: a quantitative, a qualitative and a performative one. The quantitative one, exemplified by the 19th-century works of Samuel Smiles and John Stuart Mill, relates the idea of self-realisation that is central to authenticity to the internalisation and “realization of something (at least thought to be) generally human” (Varga, 2011, p. 4). This model of authenticity is about being in tune with social norms regarding what it means to be what Smiles, in his 1859 *Self-Help*, calls “a man [*sic*] of character” (Varga, 2011, p. 3). Qualitative authenticity, in contrast, is about achieving harmony with “a unique, introspectively accessible core self” (Varga, 2011, p. 4). It is a 20th-century individualised model of authenticity that relies on the idea of a person realising herself as what she already *is* deep inside: an essential core that is considered invariable. Finally, Varga argues that the 1990s saw the emergence of a performative authenticity that conceives of authenticity as “developed in (strategic) interaction with others” and manifesting as “the *energy of difference*” (Varga, 2011, p. 6, emphasis in text). It “no longer refers to an inner teleology, but instead to a process of self-creation or difference-creation” that is without an identifiable origin and subject to change (Varga, 2011, p. 6). Its main aim is to differentiate the individual or collective self from others.

At first glance, the ideal of authenticity evoked by the farmers and identified by Nikkels seems to accord with the qualitative model of authenticity. However, we want to suggest that it also fits the quantitative model in referring to an essential inner core that is not individual but collective. Rather than being a unique identity, “being a farmer,” as Nikkels emphasises, is a shared identity predicated on internalised social norms that equate being a farmer with being a “man of character”. For Treurniet, moreover, being a farmer is an identity that is externally performed as different from and more authentic than other identities, as becomes clear when, in the same interview, he notes: “Those men with those ties in The Hague don’t know anything about our business. They constantly tell us what to do, and it is always something different” (NOS, 2019b). This illustrates how his self-creation as an authentic farmer who could not be anything else is simultaneously an act of performative difference-creation through which he distinguishes himself from government politicians and bureaucrats. The latter are marked as

inauthentic because instead of being what they do, like farmers, their jobs are considered external to their being, like the ties they wear. In addition, they are associated with a changeability (“it is always something different”) that contrasts negatively with the fixed inner core of the authentic farmer.

Thus, the discourse of farming as an identity evoked in the framing of the protests combines elements of the quantitative, qualitative and performative models. This allows farmers in general to be presented as conforming to the ideal of authenticity, as living a life that expresses not just who they take themselves to be, but also who a large part of the Dutch general public, participating in upholding the social norm of the farmer as a hardworking “real” person, takes them to be. Because the notion of farming as in and of itself an authentic activity is widely shared in the Netherlands, the ideal of authenticity in this case implies that nothing should be done by anyone – including the government – to prevent farmers from living their farming lives.

The deep roots of the connection between farming and authenticity are revealed in Adorno’s *The Jargon of Authenticity*. There, he argues that the German existentialist notion of authenticity, championed most prominently by Martin Heidegger in his 1927 *Being and Time*, relies on “the silent identification of the archaic with the genuine” (Adorno, 1973, p. 51). In taking farmers and shepherds as exemplifying the archaic and therefore the genuine, Heidegger is seen to ascribe a “false eternity” to “agrarian conditions” and to reify “transitory social forms which are incompatible with the contemporary state of the forces of production” (Adorno, 1973, pp. 56, 47). According to Adorno, the jargon or cult of authenticity that emerged from, among others, Heidegger’s account shows an “ignorance of everything we have learned about rural people” in identifying rural dwellers as rooted and therefore authentic, and urbanites as dispersed and therefore inauthentic (Adorno, 1973, p. 55). This overlooks not only the hardship and exploitation that capitalism imposes on small farmers, putting their livelihoods in “perpetual crisis”, but also how the lack of prospects drove the younger sons of German farmers to commit “the worst atrocities in the concentration camps” of World War II (Adorno, 1973, pp. 55, 27). In Adorno’s view, the Heideggerian jargon of authenticity, in its emphasis on a rootedness that is identified as specifically “Germanic-Swabian” and associated with purity, endogamy, inwardness, self-sufficiency and a distaste for the unknown, underpinned the fascism of Nazi Germany (Adorno, 1973, p. 54).

Heidegger was able to invest farming with an inherent authenticity on the basis of an ahistorical, idealised perception of the rural that was not unique to him but can be traced back to the ancient genre of the rural idyll. As the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin explains, the idyll, across its different historical forms, conjures a fantasy of a limited, autonomous space in which everything is familiar and nothing ever really changes as time moves in a cyclical pattern, with each generation engaging in the same activities and maintaining the same worldview (Bakhtin, 1983, pp. 224–225). This fantasy easily accommodates the type of nationalist space of rootedness, homogeneity and timelessness that Heidegger saw the rural as embodying.

Fernando Molina and Antonio Miguez Macho supplement Adorno's and Bakhtin's work by highlighting the crucial role the rural idyll, as an "ethno-romanticist rural imaginary" that exceeded the literary realm, played in the emergence of nationalism across Europe in the 19th century (Molina & Macho, 2016, p. 688). They argue that the "rural archetype" forged by the nation-builders of this era (which included both politicians and artists) "transmitted the essential values of the nation: permanence, biological purity, common ancestry. These values fed into the most basic discursive structure of nationalism, turning the peasantry into a living icon of the nation as an ancestral community" (Molina & Macho, 2016, p. 688). In the contemporary context of the Dutch farmers' protests, we will show next, the long-standing, intimate link between an idyllic notion of farming, the idea of authenticity and an exclusive nationalism was reactivated both by populist, anti-immigrant politicians who aligned themselves with the protests and by the protesters themselves.

Protesting farmers as populist heroes

At the 1 October protest, Tjeerd de Groot's speech, in which he tried to justify his proposal to curtail livestock numbers, was drowned out by the protesters' jeers. The same happened when the leader of the progressive green party Groen Links spoke about the importance for the environment of limiting nitrogen emissions (NOS, 2019a). A much more positive reception, however, was given to the speeches made by two populist-nationalist MPs: Geert Wilders, leader of the PVV (Party for Freedom), and Theo Hiddema, MP for the FvD (Forum for Democracy), led by Thierry Baudet. Wilders climbed onto a tractor and framed the farmers as emblems of nationalism: "You are the heroes of the Netherlands. Where would the Netherlands be without our farmers? You provide our food ... What you deserve is not hassle, but respect" (Geertwilderspvv, 2019). Hiddema, a lawyer who grew up on a farm, was interviewed on the main podium and professed that his "farmer's heart" was "warmed" by the protests (Forum voor Democratie, 2019a). His message that Dutch farmers had been fooled by mainstream political parties for too long and therefore should continue to protest was greeted with loud applause and cheers. At a follow-up protest in The Hague, on 16 October, Baudet joined Hiddema to reinforce the FvD's message of support. On this occasion, Hiddema explicitly invoked the idea of farmers as inherently authentic and thus superior to other groups by referring to them as "people with a real job and real worries" (Forum voor Democratie, 2019d). On 9 and 11 October, moreover, Baudet spoke in support of the protesting farmers in Parliament.

Tellingly, Baudet's 11 October speech is presented by the FvD on YouTube under the title "The City Versus the Country". The speech is grounded in the nationalist "dichotomous dynamic" that Molina and Macho summarise as "country/tradition/moral purity versus city/modernity/corruption" (Molina & Macho, 2016, p. 689). It takes as its starting point the conservative British

philosopher Roger Scruton's argument that industrialisation has uprooted people from an organic engagement with the earth, the land and animals. Crucially, Baudet does not link this lost organic engagement to a nature untouched by human hands (which he considers a romanticised delusion on the part of animal rights and climate change activists), but to husbandry (Forum voor Democratie, 2019c). In the 9 October debate, Baudet heralds the *boerenstand* or peasantry as "constituting our connection with the earth, with the seasons and with the animals" and as shaping "the Netherlands that we know, the Netherlands that we associate with our youth and our history," which, for him, is the Netherlands as it was painted by Frans Hals and Vincent van Gogh (Forum voor Democratie, 2019b). Here, the dehistoricised "rural archetype" Molina and Macho describe is enlisted to invest present-day Dutch farmers, many of whom run large-scale, heavily automated and digitised businesses, with the supposed naturalness and authenticity of pre-industrial, feudal peasants.

Moreover, Baudet's insistent use of "we" and "our" in the speeches is designed to exclude immigrants, who cannot claim roots in what he designates as "our splendid (at) home" (Forum voor Democratie, 2019b). That the FvD's glorification of farmers as upholders of the Dutch nation is designed to reinforce its demonisation of immigrants is made explicit in an interview, where Baudet calls the peasantry the "last bastion against state bureaucracy" and argues that the disempowerment of farmers is intrinsically linked to the pressure put on "the land" by "mass immigration" (Boerenbusiness, 2019).

It was not just that Baudet and Wilders strategically linked their populist-nationalist anti-immigration politics to the protests; such a politics, based on the "ritualized demonization of an 'other' seen as unravelling the threads that weave together the idealized unified 'traditional' national culture and the core ethnic stock" (Berlet & Sunshine, 2019, pp. 480–481), was also mobilised by some of the protesters. Thus, FDF board member Sieta van Keimpema, instead of denying the nitrogen crisis, shifted the blame for it onto immigrants:

The nitrogen problem grew because of immigration. Every human breathes out nitrogen; if there are more humans, that will therefore cause an increase. Immigrants also bring with them their own consumption patterns. That [the foreign products immigrants want to consume] must come from somewhere. Population growth therefore also produces nitrogen.

(quoted in Goudsmit & Straver, 2020)

In addition, at a December 2019 protest in Hilversum, a Confederate flag – often presented as a general symbol of rebellion, but widely linked to white supremacy – was flown from a pick-up truck, while a homophobic text was painted on the back of a caravan implying that those on the left side of the political spectrum are "not real men" (Mascini, 2019). In the next section, we expand on the role the notion of the farmer as a "real (heterosexual) man" played in the framing of the protests.

The righteous anger of the farmer as a “real” man

The idea that “modern urban civilization had a feminizing effect”, which has been prevalent in western thought since the late 19th century (Kimmel, 2017, p. 47), identifies the rural as a masculine realm. According to Jo Little, moreover, “physical aggression, and strength” are central to the type of masculinity associated with the rural, which is “performed through control of the landscape” (Little, 2002, pp. 480–481). Farming, as the major form such control has historically taken and as traditionally (but not necessarily presently) involving heavy and dirty physical labour, is considered the epitome of rural masculinity. The heavy machinery involved in modern farming further contributes to its masculine image.

The idea of farmers as “real men” was central to a protest-related campaign launched in November 2019 by farmers’ organisation Team Agro NL. It sought to get the song *De boer dat is de keerl* [The farmer that is the man] by the Dutch band Normaal voted to a high spot in the Top2000, an annual list of ‘best songs ever’ broadcast on public radio (Aalbers, 2019). Normaal’s songs are known for expressing rural pride, and the band has been on a “quest to redeem the farmer and the rural Netherlands” since 1975 (Zwiers, 2015, p. 86). *De boer dat is de keerl* ended up in the number 9 spot, underlining the sympathy many Dutch people felt for the protesting farmers (Aalbers, 2019). The song’s title equates farmers with masculinity, suggesting that farmers, more authentically than any other group, embody manliness. Furthermore, this is a superior kind of manliness, as the farmer is not just *a* man, but *the* man, with *keerl* specifically indicating a manly man.

Tellingly disregarded by the song, and also partially in the protests, is the possibility that a woman could be a farmer. In Dutch, instead of both sexes being included in the word “farmer,” a gendered derivation is used: the male farmer is a *boer* and the female farmer a *boerin*. The way in which all the main protest-related hashtags and slogans used *boer* consigned women farmers to invisibility. Moreover, even when they did become visible in the protests, they were presented as women with masculine traits or a “manly” devotion to fighting for the cause. An interview with the aforementioned Van Keimpema in the national newspaper *De Volkskrant*, for example, pictured her holding a rifle (Schoorl, 2019), while another newspaper published an article headlined “Sieta van Keimpema a Militant? That Depends on Who You Ask” (Ruitenbeek, 2019). It is no coincidence that Van Keimpema’s militancy was questioned – not just in terms of whether she *was* militant, but also in the sense of whether, as a woman, she *should be* militant – while the combativeness of the male protesters was taken as part of their authentic farmer selves and therefore considered legitimate.

In *Angry White Men*, Michael Kimmel describes how emotional vulnerability in men – feelings of anxiety, sadness, grief and worry – can be transformed into political rage. He argues that this is most successfully done by populists, as “populism is more an emotion than it is an ideology. And that emotion is anger” (Kimmel, 2017, p. 8). Showing emotions may not conventionally be

what “real men” do, but this does not go for all emotions, with masculine anger in particular being considered “socially inherited and justified” and even “innate” (Helal, 2005, pp. 80, 88). In the terms of Varga’s qualitative model of authenticity, male anger – and the violence flowing from it – can thus be taken as a sign of men being in harmony with their core self (Varga, 2011, p. 4).

The figure of the “angry white man” is common in present-day populist politics throughout the western world. Kimmel explains its emergence by referring to “aggrieved entitlement”: a feeling of having lost or being on the verge of losing control and power in areas where white men expect to have – and feel entitled to – dominance. In the American context, on which Kimmel focuses, it indicates “the sense that ‘we’, the rightful heirs of America’s bounty, have had what is ‘rightfully ours’ taken away from us by ‘them,’ faceless, feckless government bureaucrats, and given to ‘them,’ undeserving minorities, immigrants, women, gays and their ilk” (Kimmel, 2017, p. 32). As our discussion of the presence of anti-immigration rhetoric, racist symbols and homophobic slurs in and around the Dutch farmers’ protests has shown, this way of thinking also played a role there. The protesting farmers framed themselves – and were framed by politicians such as Baudet – as the rightful heirs of the bounty of the Netherlands, threatened by environmental and animal rights activists and government bureaucrats – in the guise of “those men with those ties in The Hague” that farmer Treurniet complained about – and in danger of losing out to (non-white) immigrants. Aggrieved entitlement, Kimmel shows, allows angry white men to claim victimhood and dominance at the same time. This is also true of the protesting farmers, who framed themselves and were framed by populist politicians as beleaguered victims, but also as maintaining the capacity to dominate culturally, as the guardians of “the Netherlands that we know,” and materially, by blocking highways with their imposing tractors and causing damage to protest sites and government buildings (Winterman, 2019).

That this framing was not recognised as strategic, but taken as expressing who the Dutch farmers really, authentically *are* is clear from the initial acceptance of the anger of the protesters by a large proportion of the Dutch public as legitimate. Even when the protests turned violent, there was relatively little condemnation from the public or politicians (Gargard, 2019). It seems that, because the farmers were perceived as “real” Dutchmen, they were seen to have the right to express their anger in materially destructive ways and to claim dominance.

In “The politics of good feeling,” Sara Ahmed argues that “good things” are considered sources of happiness both because “happy” emotions get stuck to them and because there is a shared orientation towards these things as being good or as bringing happiness. She presents the white, heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family as an example of a “good thing”. We contend that the initial public reaction to the farmers’ protests illustrates how, in the Netherlands, farmers have also been constructed as “good things” or “good people”, enabling them to get away with violent acts of protest and expressions of

anger that would not be tolerated from other groups. As Ahmed emphasises, the expression of anger does not necessarily inspire a negative response, but will do so when anger is expressed in a certain way by people regarded as not participating in a society's shared orientation towards things generally considered as being good. Thus, feminists who do not see the patriarchal nuclear family as bringing happiness are not seen as legitimately angry about women's oppression but as "kill joys" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, by expressing anger that is not considered legitimate, such feminists can become the point of tension in a room so that "the exposure of violence becomes [perceived as] the origin of violence" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 6).

This mechanism was arguably activated in the response to actions by Extinction Rebellion in late 2019, which included a traffic blockade in Amsterdam by protesters lying down in the street. Not only did the blockade lead to 90 protesters being put in jail for several hours (Verbeek, 2019), but the public and political response was a lot more negative than that to the farmers' protests. Politicians from centre-right parties and from the FvD and PVV denounced Extinction Rebellion in particularly strong terms. By calling out the violence being done to the planet, livestock and plant life, the environmental activists, much like the occupiers of the Boxtel pig farm discussed at the beginning of this chapter, became points of "bad feeling" conceived as "disturb[ing] the promise of happiness" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 6). Indeed, one seasoned Extinction Rebellion protester explained that when people criticise her, she is often told to "take into account other people's feelings" (De Ruiter, 2019). In contrast, the protesting bodies of (white) male farmers on tractors, which also caused disruptions and broke laws, were not (or not as widely) seen as generating "bad feeling." Notably, at the 1 October protest, only seven farmers were arrested (NU.nl, 2019).

A link can be made to authenticity here in the sense that the altruism represented by animal rights and environmental activists – who protest primarily on behalf of others (animals, the planet, future generations) – may be less readily perceived as authentic than self-interest, given that "authenticity's focus on being true to oneself seems to privilege one's desires over others" (Jones, 2016, p. 491). In addition, unlike the protesting farmers, who benefit from a social context in which "being a farmer" is equated to being an authentic "man of character", these activists are not perceived as authentic merely by virtue of their activism. In fact, environmental activists are often represented as hypocrites – and thus as inauthentic – in news reports and blogs that point out how they use products that are bad for the environment (Piotrowski, 2017, p. 845). This was precisely what CDA politician Diederik Boomsma did when he noted that because police helicopters had to be deployed, the Extinction Rebellion protest had caused extra CO₂ emissions (Verbeek, 2019). In addition, whereas the protesting farmers were constantly characterised as "hard workers" or, in Hiddema's words, "people with a real job", the Extinction Rebellion activists were, according to a tweet by Wilders, "leftist professional deadbeats, jobless climate hippies and ecological

layabouts” and thus inauthentic protesters (Verbeek, 2019). By adding that such inauthentic protesters “naturally feel at home in Amsterdam”, Wilders replicated Heidegger’s mapping of the authentic/inauthentic divide onto the rural/urban. In the end, it was the Dutch public’s shared perception of farmers as inherently authentic “men of character” or righteously angry “real (heterosexual) men” which ensured that, for a while, their protests received broad support.

Conclusion

After the initial wave of protests in late 2019, the farmers’ organisations were invited to discuss the nitrogen emissions plans with the government, but when talks stalled, another protest followed on 19 February 2020. The police made clear that, this time, they would not tolerate tractors on the highways, but some farmers disobeyed, leading to a number of arrests (RTL Nieuws, 2020). By mid-March, the Netherlands had gone into lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19. During the lockdown, Agractie released a video message addressed to the Dutch public (Agractie, 2020). It starts with the sound of klaxons and an image of a long procession of tractors on a road over which the hashtag #OurFarmersOurFuture appears. A voice-over states: “You know us from the farmers’ protests of the past months...” Then, the screen goes black and the klaxons stop. The voice-over continues, over images of food being harvested and a few cows eating, while sentimental piano music plays:⁵ “But not now. Now our farmers are working hard to provide honest and safe Dutch food for everyone and to keep our businesses alive in this crisis. For the future of our Netherlands.” The video ends by superimposing the Agractie logo on a soft-focus image of a boy feeding some cows. On the logo, it says “Our sector is at stake”.

The video’s narrative, and especially the stark transition from the klaxons and the imposing tractors to the piano music and reassuring images of harvesting and feeding cows, suggests a certain atonement for the disruption caused by the farmers’ protests. To an extent, the video also breaks with the idyllic image of farming as small-scale and relying on the human labour of the farmer, as it portrays large harvesting and sorting machines, farm workers and an immense field being ploughed. However, the video does not show any intensive animal farming, the type of farming considered to require most scrutiny from animal rights and environmental perspectives; nor does it show any chicken or pigs, the proposed reduction of whose numbers was the main catalyst for the protests. In addition, the video reaffirms the framing of the protests through the link between authenticity, farming and nationalism. Its emphasis on the farmers’ hard work and on the honesty and healthiness of the food they produce to sustain the Dutch people re-associates the farmers with an idyllic imagination of the rural as a realm of authenticity central to preserving the nation – a realm of authenticity that is implicitly contrasted with the inauthenticity of COVID-19 as a threat from abroad. Within this renewed frame of authenticity, the video reinforces the farmers’ claim that

everyone in the agricultural sector is having trouble keeping their head above water in “this crisis”, which may be read as encompassing both COVID-19 and the proposed livestock reduction that precipitated the farmers’ protests. While it is not yet clear whether the video succeeded in reinvigorating public support for the protests, which gained new momentum in June 2020, its message suggests a continuing confidence in people’s susceptibility to a discursive framework that ties farming to authenticity and nationalism.

It was this susceptibility, evinced in the initially overwhelmingly positive public response to the protests, that sparked our investigation and led us to identify a particular notion of authenticity with long-standing links to the rural and nationalism as underpinning both the almost reflexive public support for the protests and their rapid embedding in a nationalist-populist “politics of the rural” (Woods, 2006) grounded in the reinvention of the rural–urban divide as one between “the people” and “the elite” (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2019). What our examination of the case study of the Dutch farmers’ protests has highlighted is that fantasies like those of the inherently authentic farmer and the rural idyll, because of their long-standing affective overdetermination, which causes people to remain attached to them despite their lack of grounding in actuality (Peeren, 2018), remain highly effective political mobilisers. As long as the engrained idealised perception of farming and the rural that underlies these fantasies is not definitively dispelled, important rural policy discussions are easily derailed and populist narratives will continue to seem commonsensical to many.

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Notes

- 1 All translations from Dutch are the authors’.
- 2 In 2018, the national newspaper *Trouw*, in collaboration with Wageningen University, conducted the largest ever opinion poll of Dutch farmers. The 2018 results showed more than 80% of respondents agreeing that “farmers work hard, but barely receive any recognition” and that “in the media farmers are always blamed” (Trouw, 2019).
- 3 A poll presented on the RTL talk show *Jinek* put public support for the protests on 1 October at 89% (Jinek, 2020).
- 4 The poll presented on *Jinek* showed support for the protests falling to 60% on 16 October and 49% on 19 February (Jinek, 2020). Another RTL poll showed support dwindling from 70% in October to 55% in December, with 54% considering the disruptions caused by the protests unjustified in December, compared to only 34% in October (RTL Nieuws, 2019).

- 5 The piano plays a slow, conventional harmony in which any tension caused by dissonant chords is immediately resolved to create a reassuring and comforting listening experience. Research has shown that this type of music, when used in commercials, results in consumers perceiving a brand as “softer, more reserved, devoted and gentle” (Zander, 2006, p. 474).

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