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Polder Panda: Imperfection and Love in Dutch Dairy Farming

Oskar Verkaaik

In the spring of 2018, the Dutch Association for Endangered Domestic Animal Species (Stichting Zeldzame Huisdierrassen, SZH) launched the so-called “Polder Panda” campaign. Since this media event, “Polder Panda” is a nickname for a local Dutch heritage breed, known as the *Blaarkop* or “White-head” (Figure 13.1). The “White-head” is a cow, not a panda. But its head, a play of black and white, with black spots accentuating the eyes, vaguely resembles that of a panda. Moreover, the nickname conveys an emotional attachment to a loveable but endangered animal. In the Netherlands, the *Blaarkop* is rapidly becoming what anthropologists call a “charismatic species,” that is, a species that attract “a disproportionate amount of attention in conservation” because of its appealing physical features.¹

Today the *Blaarkop* is generally considered an “imperfect” cow, even by the growing number of farmers and activists who care for the animal. Its alleged imperfection is a matter of comparison. Dutch dairy farmers consider the *Blaarkop* imperfect compared to the dominant Holstein breed. The Holstein is an originally Dutch cow that was exported to the United States in the early twentieth century, where it was improved to produce an enormous amount of milk and then exported back to the Netherlands to replace almost all other breeds. Since the 1970s, most heritage breeds, including the *Blaarkop*, have become endangered breeds because they simply cannot compete with the Holstein in terms of milk production. If the Holstein is the perfect milking cow, all other Dutch breeds have become lesser cows.

For centuries, humans have tried to improve cows by various techniques of breeding. In that sense, cow breeding can be seen as a forerunner of scientific interventions to improve species by artificial selection and genetic

¹ Monika Krause and Katherine Robinson, “Charismatic Species and Beyond: How Cultural Schemas and Organisational Routines shape Conservation,” *Conservation and Society* 15, no. 3 (2017): 313–21.





Figure 13.1 Blaarkop cows in the fields belonging to the dairy farm De Hooilanden near Bennekom, The Netherlands. Photograph: Oskar Verkaaik.

modification. Margaret Derry, who is an artist and a historian as well as a breeder of “purebred” cattle herself, has shown in books like *Bred for Perfection* (2003) and *Masterminding Nature* (2015) that the objectives of breeding have changed over time and from place to place. Cows have been bred for strength and size, health, muscles and meat, and of course milk production.² “Breeding for perfection,” in Derry’s terms,³ was motivated by various intentions—and as we will see, in the Netherlands this resulted in changing notions of the perfect cow.⁴ What will also become clear below is that under the influence of global agricultural capitalism, in the twentieth century breeding for perfection has increasingly become a single-purpose practice, aimed at the increase of milk production, often at the cost of other intentions, such as the health and the physical strength of cows. One particular kind of breeding has thus become dominant over other ones.

The definition of a “perfect” cow has likewise become more narrow. During my fieldwork among Dutch dairy farmers, I found that there was

² Margaret E. Derry, *Masterminding Nature: The Breeding of Animals, 1750–2010* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

³ Margaret E. Derry, *Bred for Perfection: Shorthorn Cattle, Collies, and Arabian Horses since 1800* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁴ Bert Theunissen, “Breeding for Nobility or for Production? Cultures of Dairy Cattle Breeding in the Netherlands, 1945–1995,” *Isis* 103, no. 2 (2012): 278–309.

generally agreement that the US-bred Holstein is, in local jargon, a “top-sport cow” compared to other breeds like the Blaarkop. But I also saw that an increasing number of farmers, biologists, and activists turn away from the perfect Holstein cow and begin to value other, supposedly “lesser” breeds more and more for reasons of health, taste, tradition, sustainability, and even love. For them, the Blaarkop may be “imperfect” compared to the Holstein; it is also less alienated from its biology.

In her recent book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), anthropologist Anna Tsing defines “alienation” as the process in which things, humans, and animals are “torn from their life-worlds to become objects of exchange.”⁵ In the process, parts of complex milieus become “stand-alone objects.”⁶ Although they do not use this terminology, local lovers of the Blaarkop see this process as the reason behind the success of the Holstein. The perfect cow is a stand-alone cow, torn from its original life-world. To make their point about alienation, farmers argue that the Holstein cannot survive on grass alone and is hence a very demanding cow, which needs to be fed large amounts of food supplies. Its constitution requires that its environment adjusts itself to the cow instead of the other way around. The comeback of the Blaarkop, then, is a powerful critique of an alienating form of dairy production and a plea for more sustainable forms of farming that place the cow back in its milieu. If the Blaarkop is imperfect, it is precisely that quality that makes the cow part of a bigger world. Its imperfection is a way of being connected.

How and why Dutch farmers replaced their local breeds for Holstein cows since the 1970s has been well-documented. I briefly repeat that story here, but the larger part of this chapter is devoted to the comeback of the Blaarkop and other local breeds. I am particularly interested in two questions: how do farmers explain its imperfection compared to the Holstein cow? And how did this imperfection turn into a moral argument for another, more sustainable form of farming, which reestablishes the mutual links between cow and farmer? Placing current developments like the Polder Panda campaign in the historical context of various *regimes of “breeding for perfection”* allows us to see how, increasingly, the definition of the “perfect cow” is framed in terms of milk production maximization. Following the way the term perfection is used by Dutch farmers, I take “perfection” to mean something like “completely achieving its objectives” or “completely fulfilling its functions.”⁷

⁵ Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ Cf. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, “On Perfection: Conclusion.” *Dialectics and Humanism* 8, no. 12 (1981): 11–12.

These “objectives” and “functions” relate to different and changing normative breeding regimes. In a regime of milk production maximization, the norm is to increase the amount of milk per cow. The cow that produces less milk then becomes the imperfect cow, as its production deviates from the norm. In another regime, however, the norm may be to breed healthy cows that are in tune with the environment, which would make the Holstein the imperfect cow. The common understanding of the Holstein as the perfect cow indicates the extent to which one breeding regime has become dominant. In that sense, the act of defining one breed as perfect and the other as imperfect is both normative and political.

Imperfection and the Web of Life

As Anna Tsing, following many other anthropologists, has shown, the effects of capitalism may be dominant in a global market, but at the same time these effects often trigger surprising alternative exchange relations. In Tsing’s example, increasing commodification generates and facilitates elaborate gift-giving relations.⁸ In our case, the trend toward milk production maximization has set in motion a range of unexpected processes and reactions that restrict the capitalist logic. Efforts to maximize milk production have created new, unexpected problems for farmers.

One such complication, as we shall see, is biological in nature. Holstein cows fall ill more often and die younger than cows that produce less milk. Their health issues raise moral-political concerns as to what extent it is ethical to breed a cow that is so far removed from its original biology that it needs complex food supplies to stay healthy and produce. Since these food supplies—soy, corn, and so on—are often produced in foreign countries, there are also environmental concerns. And then there are cultural and aesthetic issues, as when farmers prefer local breeds to the globalized Holstein cows.

The concerns that Holstein breeding trigger, raise questions about the relations between humans and cows—relations that, thanks to thousands years of breeding, rank as a global success story.⁹ Anthropologists have documented human–cow relations ever since they studied pastoralist societies.¹⁰ More recently scholars have developed the notion of “multispecies assemblages.” This concept was coined to be able to look at human–animal

⁸ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, chapter 9.

⁹ For details, see Marleen Felijs, “On the Breeds of Cattle: Their History, Classification and Conservation” (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2016), 11.

¹⁰ See for instance Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

relations from a multiple, rather than exclusively human perspective. Donna Haraway, leading theorist in science and technology studies, defines multispecies assemblages as “a contact-zone of mutual dependencies and asymmetrical relations.”¹¹ The concept is also meant to explain “how species enter the political frame.”¹² What I argue in this chapter is how these multispecies assemblages of human–cattle relations take shape in the context of global capitalism and its local, moral, biological, environmental, and political discontents. In the Polder Panda case, two theoretical debates come together that are usually kept separated. The first is a discussion about the ecological consequences of capitalism. Whereas classical critiques of capitalism, from Marx to contemporary authors like Hardt and Negri,¹³ emphasize the exploitation of human labor and the decline of human dignity, more recently environmental historian and historical geographer Jason Moore¹⁴ has highlighted the ecological ramifications of global capitalism. In labor as in ecology, the spirit of capitalism is based on the assumption that humans have the right and capacity to master the environment and social worlds in the name of freedom. This thinking is based on the same form of human exceptionalism that is theoretically critiqued in the multispecies literature.

The second debate into which the Polder Panda discussions feed is summarized by philosopher Michael Sandel in his monograph *The Case against Perfection*. Sandel argues against the notion of human mastery and the power to manipulate environments in the case of genetic engineering. Genetic modification, according to Sandel, represents “a kind of hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires.”¹⁵ New genetic technologies convert chance into choice,¹⁶ make us less willing and capable to accept “gifts” from nature. Ultimately, they decrease our sense of solidarity, because failure is no longer seen as misfortune or bad luck but as the result of irresponsible choices.

¹¹ Haraway in Laura A. Ogden, Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita, “Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 4 (2013): 10.

¹² Isabelle Stengers, “Including Nonhumans in Political Theory: Opening the Pandora’s Box?” in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. Bruce Braun and Sarah J. Whatmore (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3–33.

¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁵ Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 26–7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

So far, the discussion about genetic engineering mainly focuses on human applications, possibly because in the case of animals, genetic engineering is not so different from commonly accepted practices of breeding. In the case of cows, humans have used breeding to genetically improve the animals for centuries. However, as Derry argues in *Bred for Perfection*, these practices never had such far-reaching biological, economic, and environmental consequences as they did for domesticated species and breeds like cattle, dogs, or horses.¹⁷ The Holstein breed is a case in point. Traditional forms of cow breeding were based on a variety of concerns that prevented the occurrence of genetically inflicted imbalance mainly by avoiding inbreeding. In the case of the Holstein, by contrast, one concern—the maximization of milk production—came to dominate all other aspects of a cow’s life. This took place in the context of an increasing globalized form of rural capitalism. It should not come as a surprise that forms of resistance like the Polder Panda campaign occur in the Netherlands. This small country is a leading player in agriculture, including dairy farming, a position it has managed to maintain thanks to highly innovative agricultural entrepreneurship. The fact that such a densely populated country, where agricultural land costs a small fortune, is still a major exporter of agricultural products, including milk, is in many ways remarkable. But the Netherlands is also the place where this form of scientific capitalist agriculture has met serious criticism. Since 2006 the Dutch parliament includes a so-called Animal Party (*Partij voor de Dieren*). This small but steadily growing party critiques the bioindustry and, more generally, the notion that humans have the right to use and exploit animals for their own well-being. Dutch philosopher Eva Meijer has argued for the notion of “political animal voices,”¹⁸ extending the notion of “political animal rights.” She follows in the footsteps of political philosophers like Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka,¹⁹ who challenge the idea that only humans can be political actors. In this sense, the Polder Panda campaign is part of an increasingly vehement political debate.

The plea for appreciating the imperfection of the Blaarkop and other heritage breeds is in a way a compromise between these radical positions. Although critical of innovative factory farming, most Polder Panda activists do not accept the radical rejection of human exceptionalism cum rural capitalism either. As we will see, they fight for a return to pastoral ways of farming not for nostalgic reasons but because they see these traditions as

¹⁷ Derry, *Bred for Perfection*.

¹⁸ Eva Meijer, “Political Animal Voices” (Ph.D dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2017).

¹⁹ Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ultimately more sustainable than present-day forms of dairy farming. The price we pay for this return to previous practices of dairy farming, they argue, is a reduction of milk production per cow. But other benefits, including economic ones, compensate this loss. Ultimately, their plea for perfection resembles Sandel's defense of imperfection as a condition that generates forms of solidarity, empathy, and social life. The difference lies herein: Sandel mainly talks about solidarity between humans, whereas in the Polder Panda case the point is a restoration of being attuned to a world that includes, but also goes beyond, the human sphere and encompasses what Moore calls the web of life.²⁰

The Rise of the Holstein

The global success of the Holstein has made the Blaarkop an endangered animal. At first, the notion of a domesticated animal being threatened by extinction may seem odd. Intuitively it may be thought that endangered species live in the wild. Moreover, one could wonder why one would allow a creature that is the result of decades, if not centuries, of breeding to go extinct. Wouldn't that be a waste of effort? However, as law-and-ethnography scholar Irus Braverman's shows in her book *Wild Life*, all species are more or less under the care of humans now, even those we consider wild.²¹ It is therefore a question why, until recently, few people cared much about the endangered status of breeds like the Blaarkop, whereas species that are considered wild are under constant conservationist scrutiny. One answer may be that cows, as domesticated animals, primarily have economic value rather than value in terms of life and biodiversity. As such, traditional breeds can become economically redundant in case they can be replaced for more productive breeds, whereas it would feel absurd to most people to argue that, say, whales or rhinos are economically redundant.

The decline of the Blaarkop and other Dutch breeds began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s. Historian of Dutch dairy cattle Bert Theunissen writes that the transition "may have escaped city dwellers, but ... to the experienced eye was dramatic."²² In a very short period of time, a long-standing breeding tradition that had given the Netherlands a leading reputation in global dairy farming came to an end. American Holsteins replaced local

²⁰ Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

²¹ Irus Braverman, *Wild Life: The Institution of Nature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

²² Theunissen "Breeding for Nobility," 279.

breeds like the world-famous black-and-white dairy cattle globally known as the Holland-Friesian. The irony of this story is that the Holstein, in fact, originated from the Holland-Friesian cow. In the late nineteenth century, some 7,500 Holland-Friesians were exported to the United States. In the following decades, the Holland-Friesian would gradually become known as the Holstein. The Holstein, however, had become a different cow than the original Holland-Friesian due to a new breeding logic that departed from the traditional Dutch practice. In brief, whereas Dutch breeding was aimed at creating a “robust” cow—that is, a healthy cow producing milk rich in fat and eventually a tasty piece of meat—American breeding programs mainly aimed at maximizing milk production. Theunissen describes this change as a clash between two “cultures of breeding”²³ and a transition from breeding as an art into breeding as a science.²⁴

Notions of distinct breeds, or in Dutch *rassen* (races), began to emerge in the nineteenth century. In 1822, the first herdbook was established for the English Shorthorn cattle. It took another half a century before, in 1874, the first herdbook for Dutch cattle breeds saw the light. This trend resulted in an increasing attempt to define—mainly by a trained human eye—the pure and authentic traits of a particular breed. It was the skin that accounted for race according to ever-stricter rules. The Blaarkop, for instance, should be completely black with a white head (next to the black-and-white Blaarkop, there is also a subbreed of red-and-white Blaarkop). White “socks” or lower legs were a sign of impurity.²⁵ All this was a radical break with earlier practices, when health, strength, and milk production were considered more important than aesthetics and pure bloodlines, resulting in massive cross-breeding between different types.²⁶ As a result, even today genetic differences within recognized breeds are larger than across breeds.²⁷ The notion of purebred cattle, then, was clearly “an invention of tradition,”²⁸ if not a myth of origin.

The obsession with racial purity was initially a British aristocratic concern. “Breeding was mainly an occupation of the gentry, who emphasized pure

²³ Ibid., 280.

²⁴ Ibid., 279.

²⁵ There is an obvious parallel with nineteenth-century eugenicist discourse and the notion of pure human races constantly under threat of pollution. For a critique of this way of thinking and how it continues to inform present-day imaginaries of ethnic and racial communities, see Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

²⁶ Personal communication with Marleen Felius.

²⁷ Personal communication with Mira Schoon.

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

bloodlines to the point that purebred cattle with long pedigrees became a symbol of the British ruling class,”²⁹ writes Marleen Felius, author of *Cattle Breeds—an Encyclopedia*. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, herdbooks became more and more in demand in the context of overseas trade. Cows and bulls were increasingly bought from catalogues rather than the traditional cattle market. Theunissen observes that “whereas a Dutch farmer would never buy a cow that he had not inspected himself, New World geographical distances necessitated American farmers to rely on catalogues and certified pedigrees.”³⁰ Global capitalism bred racial purity.

Because of the different breeding regimes in America and the Netherlands the Friesians and the Holsteins began to part ways. This was partly the result of the size of the country. In the United States and Canada, there existed different breeds for milk and meat production. American breeders therefore “continued to breed the imported Friesians as a pure dairy type.”³¹ Such a differentiation was hardly possible in a small, densely populated country like the Netherlands. More importantly, in Europe the Friesian increasingly suffered from the reputation that the Holstein has now. Although generally recognized as a “milking machine,” the Friesian was also seen as a weak and demanding cow, only able to survive on the rich soil of the lowlands. The quality of its milk was considered poor and the breed was believed to be susceptible to such diseases as bovine tuberculosis.³² “Effeminate aristocrats,” they were called outside of their local Friesland. As a reaction, Dutch breeders began to breed a different type of animal: the so-called “dual-purpose” cow—both milk and meat—that could survive on poorer soils, gave a richer kind of milk, and was healthier. This decision impacted negatively on the quantity of milk produced. However, it was this practice of breeding that became dominant in the first half of the twentieth century, and that developed into a particular normativity or a “culture” of what was considered proper breeding, known in Friesian as *kreas* (“decent”) breeding, as opposed to *rûch* (“rough”) farming. If the local norm was *kreas*, extensive forms of farming ranked as *rûch*.³³

This does not mean that there were no counter-currents to this culture of “decent” farming. Even before the invasion of the Holstein, the dominant breeding culture was challenged by the rise of artificial insemination from

²⁹ Felius, “On the Breeds of Cattle,” 54.

³⁰ Bert Theunissen “Breeding without Mendelism: Theory and Practice of Dairy Cattle Breeding in the Netherlands, 1900–1950,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 41, no. 4 (2008): 654.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

³² Theunissen “Breeding for Nobility,” 282.

³³ *Ibid.*, 283.

the 1950s onward. Geneticists from Wageningen University, the leading university of agriculture in the Netherlands, argued for what they called scientific interventions to enhance milk production. Breeders, however, saw things differently and farmers followed them. As Theunissen writes, “Breeders and farmers concentrated on excellence of conformation, which in their view guaranteed the robustness of the breed.”³⁴ The perfect cow was the animal that won high prices at cattle shows, where conformation—an indicator of health and strength—mattered more than milk production alone.³⁵ This approach may to some extent have been the result of a distrust of modern technologies, but it is also likely that breeders and farmers knew their history. An exclusive focus on milk production had, after all, damaged the Dutch dairy cattle’s reputation earlier in the twentieth century. Their insistence on “robustness,” then, could also be seen as a warning against the dangers of scientific farming. For them, the perfect cow combined a number of concerns: pedigree, health, looks, as well as commercial value. Breeding for perfection was still considered a balancing act.

The story of why breeders and farmers eventually gave up their resistance in the 1970s and 1980s is a complex one and involves, among other factors, the powerful Christian Democratic policy of rural modernization, as well as efforts by the European Economic Community to restructure agriculture in response to the recession of the mid-1970s. These developments forced farmers to scale up, while colleagues went bankrupt, left dairy farming for good, and aspired to a middle-class suburban lifestyle. Those who managed to survive had, more than ever, to compete globally. Profit margins became so tight that every liter of milk mattered. In that competition, the Friesian and Blaarkop were powerless to the Holstein, which easily produced a thousand liters of milk more per year. Once convinced of the Holstein’s exceptional qualities, Dutch farmers and breeders quickly adapted to the new norms of scientific dairy farming. Companies like Holland Genetics became world players in artificial insemination and scientific breeding, exporting Holstein semen across the world, including the Global South. Other forms of technological innovations earned the Netherlands the nickname of the Silicon Valley of dairy farming.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 291.

³⁵ Ibid., 286.

³⁶ See, for instance, Heidi Schultz, “Step Inside the Silicon Valley of Agriculture: A Powerhouse of Innovation, This Tiny Country Embodies the Future of Farming,” *National Geographic*, October 16, 2017. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/urban-expeditions/food/netherlands-agriculture-food-technology-innovation/>, accessed October 6, 2019.

Before long, however, a new form of resistance against extensive industrial farming came up, this time from new actors, including university-trained biologists; veterinarians; recreational farmers who keep cattle next to a paid, often middle-class job; or new-style farmers who combine organic and other novel forms of farming with such activities as recreation (rural campsites and so on) or alternative forms of care (buddy systems between cows and autistic children, for instance). It is in this context that the Association for Endangered Domestic Animal Species (SZH), which launched the Polder Panda campaign in 2018, was founded. Established in 1978, this organization is one of several European partner organizations that seek to save local domestic breeds from extinction. The SZH no longer contests the notion of the Holstein as the most perfect cow. Unlike Dutch breeders and farmers of the 1950s and 1960s, they accept that, economically speaking, no other breed can beat the Holstein. Interviewing farmers, I have rarely met anyone who argued that the Dutch breeds constitute the most “decent” form of farming. This is hardly surprising, given that several of these breeds have become endangered breeds. The Blaarkop is no longer considered a proud animal that can take care of itself. In the global context of capitalist and scientific dairy farming, it has become an imperfect animal that needs protection and care.

Auke and Reini

To give an example of what this protection and care looks like in practice, I will now give an ethnographic vignette of a Friesian couple who decided to replace their Holsteins for Blaarkop cows. With this ethnographic description I aim to give an impression of the arguments and sentiments behind such decisions. It gives a brief insight into the thoughts and experiences of a farming family and the way in which they gradually turned away from regular dairy farming to a more sustainable form of farming with Blaarkop cows. This example is also meant as an introduction to a more summarizing analysis of the critique of the aspiration for perfection in terms of milk production maximization.

In 2018, I visited and interviewed farmers who replaced Holsteins for so-called heritage breeds like the Blaarkop, including Auke and Reini Stremmer who live near a little village in the province of Friesland and who had recently exchanged their Holstein cows for Blaarkops. I interviewed both of them on their farm, which Auke took over from his parents in 2004. He was still a regular farmer then, like all of his neighbors. In his words, at the time “the general idea was: more, more, more. That is what you learned at

agriculture college.³⁷ Dairy farmers are dependent on banks, food providers, and milk companies, and they all pushed for bigger farms and higher milk production. All his neighbors had Holsteins, and so did he and his wife Reini. But their farm was not very big and they worried about their future. They had young children to care for.

A few years before Auke and Reini took over the farm, the province had presented a plan to create more nature reserves. In the Dutch context, that usually means converting small patches of agricultural land into areas where birds and insects can live without being disturbed by industrial farming activities. The use of fertilizers is prohibited, but organic farming without the use of chemical manure, antibiotics, and elaborate food supplies is usually allowed. The idea is to reestablish a pastoral landscape in which farming goes hand-in-hand with the return of flower diversity, meadow birds, and insects. On regular farmland, this agricultural diversity has disappeared up to the point that you will find a larger variety of flowers, birds, and insects in a city like Amsterdam than in rural areas.³⁷

Auke thought little of these plans. Converting good farmland into nature reserves appeared to him like giving hard-won polders back to the sea. For him it felt like going into the opposite direction of progress. When the province asked him to consider organic farming, he said no, and continued to do so for several years. But then a friend who had started a new farm in another part of the country invited him for a visit. It turned out that half of this friend's cows were Blaarkop cows, the other half Holsteins. He also explained to Auke that Blaarkop cows are not demanding cows. According to him, Holsteins only eat 75 percent of what you feed them. He fed the leftovers to the Blaarkop cows. He also told Auke that their milk was fatter with more protein and that he was paid a higher liter price.

As Auke told me, he thought his friend's arguments very persuasive. He also talked with him about his concerns about converting farmland into nature reserve. Most of the land on which Auke and Reini farmed was not theirs. It belonged to the province of Friesland, which put pressure on them to buy it. Agricultural land cost 40,000 euro per hectare. They needed a loan to buy the land, which the bank was not willing to give. His friend, however, explained that when agricultural land becomes nature reserve it drops 85 percent in value. On a little piece of paper he showed Auke that they would be able to buy the land from their own savings.

Auke related to me how his friend had explained that it was impossible to turn farmland into nature reserve and continue keeping Holsteins. When

³⁷ See, for instance, <https://synchroon.nl/inspiratie/biodiversiteit-in-de-stad/>, accessed October 8, 2019.

land becomes nature reserve, one is no longer allowed to mow the grass before June because of the meadow birds' nests. By then the grass will be eighty centimeters high. Holsteins, he explained, only eat long grass when they are not giving milk, but the Blaarkop will eat it at all times.

At the end of that visit, the cows came back from the field to the barn to be milked. Auke and Reini were watching the animals as they returned. Reini said to Auke, "I like them, they are beautiful cows." Auke thought so, too. In his recollection that was the moment Reini and he decided to change to Blaarkop cows. He sold his Holstein sperm on the internet, bought Blaarkop sperm instead, and began to cross-breed his Holstein cows with the new sperm. The first calf looked like a Blaarkop. During the time of my visit, almost all of their cows were Blaarkop.

During the interview it became clear to me that Auke had become a fervent advocate of Blaarkop cows. He talked enthusiastically, for instance, about the ways in which he had seen their land change. "In summer," he said, "our land used to be yellow, because of the drought. When you use fertilizers, the grass does not root very deep. But if the soil becomes poorer because you do not manure it any more, the roots will dig deeper until they reach the clay. There is more water in that deeper layer, and more minerals, too. Now the grass stays green all season." He also explained that the cows leave the barn a little later in the season, because they have to wait until the birds have finished brooding. When the chicks have left their eggs, the cows go outside because the birds need insects to eat, and the insects arrive with the first cowpats. When the birds are still sitting on the eggs, Auke said, he never goes into the field to look for them, because at night predators like foxes and stone martens will follow the human scent to track the nests and eat the eggs. "You never had to worry about these things with Holsteins," Auke said. But he also explained that he liked worries like these. He felt that there is more life around him. It used to be him and Reini, the kids and the cows, he said, stressing that now there are birds and eggs and foxes to take care of, too.

In a similar vein, he talked about how their social world has changed. They had started a little farm-shop to sell their own cheese. It brings other kinds of people to the farm, like tourists who enjoy the scenery, or chefs in search of local cheeses to serve in their restaurants. For a while, Auke said, he feared losing contact with his neighbors, who did not understand what they were up to. Even his own father said: "You must have bumped your head real hard." But over time they became curious. According to Auke, "a lot of people would like to farm in a different way. But most of them are prisoners of banks and consultants who push farmers to scale up. But more and more I'm being asked to talk at information meetings. So I tell them I would not have survived if I had done it the old way. I would have been too small."

Their production of milk has dropped with three thousand kilos a year, but they get a higher liter price because of the milk's quality. Auke claimed that they spend less on the vet, on antibiotics, and on food supplies. "We have scaled down instead of up," he concluded, adding: "I had never thought that was possible."

Framing the Heritage Breed Case

The Stremlers are but one example of the renewed appreciation of heritage breeds. This new awareness, however, runs parallel with an ongoing diminishing of the heritage breed's population. According to the SZH, the organization that started the Polder Panda campaign, in 2019 the total number of Holstein cows in the Netherlands was approximately 1.47 million. The second biggest breed is the local MRIJ (named after the three rivers Meuse, Rhine, and IJssel) with approximately ten thousand animals. Next come the Blaarkop with 2100 cows, followed by even smaller breeds like the original Holland Friesian or Black Pied Dutch Friesian (1600), the *Lakenvelder* or Dutch Belted (1600), the *Brandrood* or Dutch Burnt Red (950), the *Fries Roodbont* or Red Pied Friesian (500), and the *Witrik* or Dutch Whitebacked (500).³⁸ According to the Rio de Janeiro Declaration of Biodiversity of 1992, a breed or species is considered endangered once less than ten thousand individuals are left. According to this definition, all of these breeds are endangered, except possibly for the MRIJ, of which some ten thousand are left. Most of them showed decreasing population numbers in the last few decades. Only the most charismatic of them, like the Blaarkop, remained more or less stable, while the Lakenvelder population showed an upward trend in the late 2010s. The number of breeders that specialize in these particular breeds also rose, from twenty-eight for the Lakenvelder in 1980 to more than three hundred in 2014.³⁹

When the SZH and analogous organizations were founded in several European countries, probably the main concerns were the loss of biodiversity and the well-being of cows. The SZH itself is a good example of how biologists from Wageningen University, together with veterinary scientists from Utrecht University, took the initiative to protect local breeds and warn against the dangers of a Holstein monoculture. SZH-affiliated biologists and

³⁸ See "Onder de paraplu van de SZH," *Zeldzaam Huisdier*, Vol. 42, nr. 3, page 14. No author mentioned.

³⁹ Reurt Boelema, *De Lakenvelder: Niet uit het veld te slaan* (Zutphen: Roodbont Publishers, 2014), 94.

geneticists argued that breeding practices were focused too much on short-term incentives to increase milk production, while losing sight of the long-term perspective to prevent inbreeding and maintain biodiversity.⁴⁰ The genetic material of large populations often goes back to the sperm of a very limited number of bulls. According to already quoted geneticist Sipke Joost Hiemstra, you need twenty-five unrelated bulls and twenty-five unrelated cows to prevent inbreeding, but in practice breeders often only use one or two bulls. The genetic variety within the Holstein population therefore became very small. For this reason alone, biologists argued, it was necessary to maintain a sustainable population of other breeds. Their genetic material was needed to keep the Holstein population healthy. Partly for this reason, the Centre for Genetic Resources of Wageningen University keeps a sperm-bank of heritage breeds.⁴¹ From this biodiversity perspective, then, the importance of heritage breeds is emphasized instrumentally as a genetic pool to periodically revitalize the Holstein population. On their part, veterinarians also initially raised the issue of heritage breeds out of concern for the Holsteins. For instance, the veterinarian Geert Boink, who was cofounder and, at the time of writing, chairman of SZH, worried about the health and the constitution of the Holsteins. He called the heritage breeds more “robust,” a term that runs as a buzzword in the heritage breeds discourse. During an interview I had with him, Boink referred to Holstein as “top sport cows” that are programmed to eat up their body while giving milk. Like cyclists racing the Tour de France, he explained, their performance requires an exceptionally high amount of calories—one that cannot be compensated for by the intake of food. Even elaborate amounts of food supplies cannot prevent the cow from becoming thinner and thinner. Typically the Holstein cow has two lactation periods, that is, it calves twice and is milked for about ten months after each birth, and is then considered unproductive. According to Boink, this genetic impulse to give more than the body can compensate for “is at odds with the biology of a cow.” As a vet, he considered it his responsibility to warn against this trend.⁴² It must be said that Holstein farmers contest this gloomy picture, saying that they keep their cows for two or three years longer than Boink suggests.

The way the heritage breed case has been framed has gradually changed over time. With growing resistance against industrial and scientific farming, the number of arguments in favor of the local breeds has also increased.

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Geert Boink, one of the founders of the SZH.

⁴¹ See <https://www.wur.nl/en/Research-Results/Statutory-research-tasks/Centre-for-Genetic-Resources-the-Netherlands-1.htm>, accessed June 24, 2021.

⁴² Personal communication with Boink.

Many of these arguments also feature in the story of the Stremlers. Almost all farmers with whom I have talked said that financially, lower food and veterinarian costs compensated substantially for the decrease in milk production. For this reason, heritage breeds are particularly interesting for smaller farms and a countertrend to the dominant tendency to upgrade. A farmer in the Southern province of North Brabant who keeps MRIJ cows says:

Our cows give seven thousand to eight thousand litres of milk a year—to perhaps nine thousand litres for Holsteins. But I save at least ten percent on the cost of food. My neighbours bring their Holsteins to the butcher when they are five years old and get very little for them because they hardly have any meat on their bones left. I bring my MRIJ cows away when they are six years old and get a decent price for it, because the butcher can sell it to restaurants and upmarket shops as first-class meat.

Increasingly, heritage breeds are promoted in the context of slow-food and local-food trends. This is a relatively new argument in the Netherlands, where the emphasis has been on quantity rather than quality for a long time. Not so long ago, Dutch agricultural products had the reputation of being cheap but tasteless.⁴³ However, Dutch food culture has gradually changed, with a growing appreciation for local products—framed, in some cases, as “imperfect” but “authentic,” as we read elsewhere in this volume—for which customers are willing to pay a higher price.⁴⁴ Apart from the Polder Panda campaign, the SZH also runs the so-called *Zeldzaam Lekker* (“Rare and Tasty”) campaign to promote the special quality of local beef. Like Auke and Reini Stremler, farmers with whom I talked increasingly sell their dairy products and meat from their farm, bypassing the middlemen and raising profits. Others sell their products online directly to customers.

The reorientation on local food also raises questions about future Dutch policies regarding agriculture, and dairy farming in particular. Dutch farmers mainly produce for export; but these economic aspirations have increasingly devastating effects on the local environment. To give just one example, since the bigger and heavier Holsteins are prone to develop foot diseases in the originally swampy meadows of the lowlands, the level of ground water is

⁴³ See, for an exemplary news report on this problem, <https://www.agf.nl/article/83776/telers-strijden-tegen-het-imagoprobleem-van-de-nederlandse-tomaat/>, accessed June 24, 2021.

⁴⁴ See De Hooge’s contribution to this volume; and Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol, “What Is a Good Tomato? A Case of Valuing in Practice,” *Valuation Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 125–46.

artificially lowered to prevent this from happening. (Remember that the Dutch polders are man-made land thanks to elaborate systems of water management.) As a result, the peaty layers just below the surface dry up, releasing the CO₂ that is stored in the peat. Moreover, meadow birds that need swampy land to eat and breed disappear. The return to local breeds that are used to wet grounds would be a solution, but that would lower the export of dairy products.⁴⁵ As a Friesian farmer of Red Pied Friesian said in an interview with me, “the Netherlands produces approximately eleven to twelve billion litres of milk a year. With forty cents a litre, that is some five billion Euros, not a lot on the total GNP. So why would you want to feed the world for such a relatively small profit? The answer is, farming policy is no longer determined by individual farmers but by men in Corleone suits.” In the context of climate change and the significant portion of CO₂ emission from dairy farms, such questions are now increasingly raised by Corleone-suit-wearing men themselves.

The environmental issue is probably the most powerful argument for local breeding today. A Blaarkop farmer in the province of Groningen told me:

Holsteins die when you only feed them grass. They become thin, fall ill, and eventually die. You need to feed them corn and soy and other stuff that is imported from South America. Within thirty years, with the climate change transition coming up, that practice will come to an end. So we need the local breeds again, they are the cows of the future.

Or listen to a Blaarkop farmer near the town of Wageningen. Not from a farmer family herself, she started with Holsteins.

But they are horrible cows. When they reach their peak, they give sixty litres of milk a day. But we wanted to be an organic farm, farming with what the land offers, without all the food supplies. We thought that the cows would adjust to that, but they simply go on producing sixty litres a day. They are marathon runners, they just go on till they drop dead. Some went lame, others got other infections. We had the vet around almost every day, it felt like we were running an old folks home rather than a farm. The vet said “You need to give them concentrates.” But that is imported from the tropics. You can get rich quickly if you want to, but we didn’t make that choice. I became a farmer because I wanted to work with nature, not destroy it.

⁴⁵ See “Deze koe moet de landbouw in zompig veengebied redden. Nadeel: ze is strontewijjs,” *De Volkskrant*, published March 27, 2019.

The increasing popularity of local breeds is reflected in the establishment, in the course of the past decades, of multiple foundations devoted to one particular breed. It is here that you see the return of strict standards for phenotypes that came up in the nineteenth century. For the Lakenvelder or Dutch Belted, for instance, the foundation has formulated rules about the preferred breadth of the white belt that separates the black or red front from the back.⁴⁶ Lakenvelders, however, are typically cows for recreation farmers. Professional farmers cannot afford to be so choosy. They care less about phenotype than about the cow's constitution or milk production. The same is true for the national heritage argument. Whereas the SZH regularly argues that the Polder Panda and other local breeds are part of the traditional national landscape, farmers are more practical. Some Holstein-rejecting farmers, for instance, have shifted to other European breeds like the Jersey or the French Montebeliarde for the same reasons that others have returned to the Blaarkop or the MRIJ. For them, the main point is a break with industrial scientific farming of which the Holstein has become a symbol, rather than the restauration of the national landscape or the creation of the perfect Lakenvelder or Blaarkop.

Admiration and Love

Throughout the last two centuries, three different ideals or *regimes of perfection* have shaped the practice of cow breeding. I have described these three as the pursuit for purity of blood, for the strong and “robust” cow, and finally for the maximization of milk production. The purity-of-blood regime initially came up as a British aristocratic ideal, but was given a boost due to international trade. Key in determining whether an individual belonged to a particular breed were exterior traits such as the color and the pattern of the skin. In the Dutch language, this ideal led to a language of race (*ras*); globally, it spawned an elaborate scientific discourse on the classification of breeds and the true and authentic characteristics of breeds. In the mid-twentieth century, Dutch breeders and farmers developed a practice of “decent” breeding that emphasized a strong and healthy constitution of animals. Key moments were the many fairs—from local to international events—where animals were compared and praised on traits like the shape of the legs, the patterns of the veins in the udder, or a straight back. The rationale was the so-called dual-purpose cow, which gave a decent amount of milk without eating up its own body before it was taken to the butcher. At the same time

⁴⁶ Boelema, *De Lakenvelder*, 9.

in North America, a new ideal focused exclusively on milk production maximization emerged. That ideal would become the dominant model from the 1970s onward, relegating the other two regimes to the realms of folklore, recreational farming, and the preservation of heritage breeds.

Although all three ideals exist next to each other, the Holstein model has become hegemonic up to the point that the whole infrastructure of dairy farming has adjusted itself to it. Above I have described the elaborate transport of food supplies across continents to feed the Holstein, or the lowering of groundwater levels in the rural regions of the country. Another example is technology. One of the latest innovations is the milking robot, generally considered a welcome improvement in dairy farming. Traditionally a cow is milked twice a day but for the cow's convenience it should be milked a bit more often, say every nine to ten hours. With a robot, a cow can decide itself when it is time for milking. The animal simply walks to the machine that will do the work. But the robot is designed for the Holstein. The funnels that close around the teats are usually not compatible with other breeds.⁴⁷ To break the monopoly of the Holstein regime, then, would mean to develop a new infrastructure for dairy farming or to restore obsolete ones.

It is because of this Holstein dominance that other regimes of perfection have lost pertinence. What I have tried to show is that the ideal of the “robust” cow is increasingly promoted as a more sustainable alternative to the Holstein regime. But while doing so, few advocates of the Blaarkop or other local breeds would make a claim for perfection. The dominance of the Holstein reveals itself in the general acceptance that the Holstein is the perfect or “top sport cow,” a “marathon runner.” What is contested, however, is the desirability of this perfection. Defenders of local breeds and of cows who fall short of perfect standards call for “more space for the imperfect cow”⁴⁸ and point out the price that is paid for perfection—from the self-destructing tendency of the Holstein that gives itself away while producing the desired quantity of milk to multiple environmental problems on both local and global scale. The imperfection of the local breeds—imperfect compared to the Holstein in terms of milk production—is presented as a solution to these problems.

Let me end by pointing out the difference between problematic perfection and the benefits of imperfection in terms of admiration and love. Talking with farmers about their cows, what struck me was a difference in the emotional

⁴⁷ Personal communication with one of the farmers I interviewed.

⁴⁸ Tom van Nespen, “Ruimte voor de imperfecte koe,” *Veeteelt.nl*, November 13, 2017. <https://veeteelt.nl/gezondheid/blog/ruimte-voor-de-imperfecte-koe>, accessed March 2, 2020.

relationship with the animals. Holsteins were mostly talked about in terms of admiration or a form of pity that complemented admiration. Its performance in terms of milk production was praised by everyone, although it was also seen as almost a form of sacrifice. Its self-destruction makes the Holstein an example of how humans have managed to master and control the animal up to its biology. In this hyper-hierarchical relationship, there is room for emotions like admiration and pity, but hardly for love. That is quite different in the case of the Polder Panda. Farmers who keep Blaarkoppen claim to love the animals for their friendly but stubborn character. They are not necessarily easy animals to handle. If they want to go left, it is difficult to convince them to go right. They have, in short, a mind of their own. There is a part of them that cannot be fully understood or controlled. They do not completely fit in the world that humans have designed for them.

This is, at least how farmers describe the Blaarkop cow. To what extent their claims are true or simply a reflection of how farmers want to see themselves is difficult to say. One of course needs to be a little stubborn oneself to go against the grain of industrial farming. What I do want to suggest, however, is that this obstinate remnant of autonomy that farmers attribute to their cows is also the reason why they love them so much.⁴⁹ There is a hint of equality in the relationship that makes it possible to love the animals, rather than merely admire them or feel pity for them. If Michael Sandel argues that imperfection is a condition for solidarity, I would go a step further and say that imperfection makes love a possibility.

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⁴⁹ On the nexus between love and autonomy/imperfection, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), where he argues that “true love is precisely the opposite move of forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect individual” (13).

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