

Changes in Rural Social Stratification in the Netherlands

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As in Western Europe in general, the rural population in the Netherlands consists of three main groups of a different socio-economic type, viz. farmers, farmhands and the rural middle class like craftsmen, shopkeepers, etc. Though in the Netherlands large-scale enterprises in agriculture are practically non-existent, farms show important differences in size. Table 1 shows the number of farms of different sizes according to the agricultural census of 1950.

Table 1. *Size of farms in the Netherlands of persons whose main occupation was that of farmer in 1950*

| Size in hectares | No. of farms |
|------------------|--------------|
| 1-5 | 60,199 |
| 5-10 | 60,603 |
| 10-20 | 47,495 |
| 20-50 | 24,011 |
| 50-100 | 1,874 |
| 100 and over | 117 |

Almost two thirds of the farmers farm less than 10 ha (25 acres), about 30 per cent. less than 5 ha (12.5 acres). Especially on the sandy soils in the eastern and southern parts of the country, family farms of less than 10 ha are common. On the more fertile soils in the northern and western parts larger farms, depending for the greater part on hired labour, are more frequent.

During the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the farmhands definitely ranked lowest in the rural social hierarchy. The life of a farmhand was a life of poverty. Though, at least in the western and northern parts of the country, modern methods of agriculture became more and more common in the nineteenth century and, because of that, outputs increased, the income of farmhands remained on the same level and often even decreased. The patriarchal sphere which in the eighteenth century dominated the relations between farmers and farmhands, gradually disappeared during the nineteenth century and the hard law of demand and supply, which more and more regulated labour conditions did not work in favour of the farmhands.

About 1908 the annual income of a farmhand was practically nowhere higher, and mostly lower, than 450 guilders (at that time about \$180 or £38). In the eighteenth century farmers and farmhands had still shared the same sober way of life, but in the nineteenth century clear

class distinctions came into being, which drove the two groups socially and culturally more and more apart. In the north-eastern parts of the country especially, sharp differences between the two classes developed which split the village-community into two groups, almost without any personal contact, except in working-hours. In the greater part of the country the relations between farmers and farmhands remained more intimate, but everywhere the farmhand was the underdog, considered as his social inferior even by the peasant who farmed only a few acres.

As to the rural middle-class, craftsmen and tradesmen certainly ranked higher than the farmhands. Their position differed of course in the various parts of the country and according to their personal circumstances, but in general they were considered as being on about the same level as a peasant, farming 10 ha or less. Their position and their income was measured with an agrarian yardstick; unconsciously the farmers and the rural middle-class themselves, too, compared them with peasants, working with no or with a single help. Their income was much lower than that of their colleagues in the towns and cities and the salary of their servants was hardly higher than that of a farmhand. For almost every farmhand, who had not accepted his position as an inescapable fate, the highest ideal was to become an independent smallholder. Wonders of economy and toiling have been accomplished by farmhands, who by buying or renting one piece of land after another, succeeded in building up a small farm of some hectares and who laid in this way the basis not only for better living, but also for a higher position on the social ladder.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century social conditions in the countryside have changed gradually but radically. Already during the last decade of the nineteenth century, under the influence of the socialist movement, the first strikes of farmhands in the northern parts of the country occurred and after some time a modern trade-unionism developed amongst the rural labourers. With increasing success the trade-unions tried to get better wages and better working conditions in general for their members. Especially after World War I a system of regional collective labour contracts came into being, which were consolidated, after World War II, into one nation-wide collective contract with only minor deviations for certain regions. At the same time a system of social security for farmhands developed, which was completed after World War II and which now covers practically all risks. After 1945 the Dutch Government, which still controls the wages, adopted as a principle, that the wages for the farmhands have to be on the same level as those in industry; as a standard it chose the wages in the building-industry. It seems very probable that this relation between industrial wages and the wages of the farmhands will be maintained in the future. When expressed in kilograms of wheat, the annual income of a farmhand was in 1908 about 4,000 kg. of wheat or less, in 1938 about 8,000 kg. and at the moment the wages of the

farmhand, together with the part of the contributions for social security paid by the farmer, amount to 12,000 kg. of wheat or about 3,200 guilders.

Already earlier than the social conditions of the farmhands, those of the other members of the working class in the country changed. Workmen and work-mates working with rural craftsmen, traders, etc., got their collective contracts—now also nationwide—and also their social security. Before the war there was still a considerable difference between wages in the towns and cities and those in the country. After the war this difference disappeared for the greater part. At present the variation between the wages in the large cities and the rural parts in the Netherlands is no more than 10–15 per cent. This increase in the income of the non-agricultural labourers in the country meant almost automatically an increase of the income of the craftsmen and other non-agricultural employers. For their services they mostly charge the costs of labour plus a certain percentage for overhead costs. So higher wages for the labourers does not only mean a higher payment for their own labour, but also a higher income as an employer in the strict sense.

So in general since the beginning of this century the income of the farmhands and of the non-agricultural group in the country has increased sharply and is now almost on the same level as that of corresponding groups in the towns and the cities. At the same time the income of the farmers also increased. Especially on the sandy soils, the use of fertilisers and improved methods of farming resulted in a much higher output per acre. In general the output of grain and other crops per acre is now twice as high as it was half a century ago. The number of pigs, cows and hens per acre increased too. Roughly estimated, the total production per acre on the small family farm on the sandy soils is perhaps $1\frac{1}{2}$ –2 times as high as in 1900. In the western and northern parts of the country, the increase in output was less, because agriculture here was already on a rather high level at the beginning of this period.

However, at the same time costs of agricultural production, even on the family farm not using hired labour, increased. Fertilisers, fodder, selected seeds, insecticides, etc. which were of no or little importance for the peasant 50 years ago, now require a considerable outlay. The net income of a farmer is of course to a high degree dependent on fluctuating prices, but assuming that in the long run the ratio between prices of agricultural products and other products will remain constant, the real net income per acre on the sandy soils will now probably be no more than about $1\frac{1}{2}$ times as high as in 1900, but as was stated above, the real income of the farmhand is now about three times as high as in 1900, while the real income of the non-agricultural active population in the country increased hardly less. This means, that, notwithstanding the improvement of their own conditions, the relative position of the farmers, as compared with that of the other social groups in the country is far less favourable than some decades ago.

The average net income per ha, being the return from the work of the whole family on the farm, the interest on capital investments and net profit on family farms of about 5 ha can be estimated to have been about 600-700 guilders during the last years. So a farmhand—without the help of his family—earns as much as the average farmer—often with considerable help from his family—on a farm of about 4-5 ha. This means that probably about 25 per cent. of the Dutch farmers are earning an income no greater and often less than that of a farmhand. From this fact originates one of the most difficult problems in the Netherlands, the so-called “small-farmers-problem”. In the Netherlands this problem is mostly considered as an economic one. Agricultural economists point out that the productivity of labour on the small farm is too low, that the area of land on which the peasant is working is too small, etc. These facts as such cannot be denied, but they do not explain why fifty years ago no one talked about a “small-farmers-problem”, while it is now looked upon as the most important rural problem. Fifty years ago productivity of labour on the small farms was much lower than today, but notwithstanding that, thousands considered it as attractive to become a smallholder as a farmhand. Between 1890 and 1910 the number of small farmers increased enormously and in general this was regarded as a favourable development!

It is also a mistake to think that the problem is caused primarily by the fact that, because of the mechanisation of agriculture, the productivity of labour on the larger farms increased more than on the smaller ones. That the effects of mechanisation on the large farms are more important is, of course, right, but it is not right to conclude that the better financial position of the farmhands is the result of this mechanisation and that the difficulties of the smallholder originate from the fact that he cannot compete any more with the larger farms. If this was true it would mean that the number of families depending on agriculture in the regions in which hired labour in agriculture prevails, would have declined rapidly during the last decades. This is, as statistics show us, not or hardly the case, at least up to now. The effects of mechanisation on the number of farmhands used on the farms, were for the greater part counterbalanced by the sharp decrease of the number of working hours of the farmhand and by the fact that his wife and his young children are working far less on the farm than fifty years ago. His better financial position is caused primarily by the facts that he gets a higher percentage of the (increased) output of the acres, which are tilled by his labour and that the general taxpayer pays now to give him a decent living during the time of unemployment. The ratio between the acreage tilled by the average farmhand's family on the one side and by the average smallholder's family on the other side did not change so much and the output per acre on the small farm increased as well and perhaps more than on the large farm.

The real problem of the small farmer is a social one, it is the problem of a threatened rural social stratification, which provokes an attitude

of defence of those who feel their position to be in danger. From the sociological point of view the situation shows remarkable aspects. It certainly shows that the position of a certain group on the social ladder is influenced by changes in its relative position as to its income, but also that the reaction is a slow one and that other factors are still of considerable influence on the social hierarchy, even in modern society. In the opinion of the Dutch people in general the small farmer still ranks higher than the farmhand. It is partly because the majority of the population is not really conscious of the fact that a radical change in the situation has occurred, partly because long experience taught them that "being one's own master" is of great importance for one's position with respect to one's fellow-men. The fact that the modern labourer, freed from patriarchal interference in his personal life and safeguarded against poverty and insecurity by modern labour conditions, is hardly less his own master than e.g. the small farmer, has not yet been fully incorporated in the popular concept of our modern society.

Even the farmhands themselves are not yet fully conscious of the implications of the new situation and for an important part their attitudes are still those belonging to the situation of the nineteenth century. But on the other side they feel that their position as compared with that of the small farmer has changed. The feeling of inferiority towards the small farmer is beginning to disappear. Often the farmhand will sneer at "that drudging small farmer" and state that his position is preferable. That in general the social position of a small farmer is not considered as attractive by the farmhand nowadays, is shown by the fact that the endeavour to build up, step by step, a small farm, which was characteristic for thousands of farmhands fifty years ago, has practically disappeared. Obviously they do not regard this any more as a suitable way of getting a better living and climbing the social ladder. Illuminating in this respect are the statistics about the development of part-time farming by farmhands.

Table 2. *Part-time farming by farmhands*

| | | 1910 | 1950 |
|----------------|----|---------------|---------------|
| Less than 1 ha | .. | 62·024 | 17·661 |
| 1-2 ha | .. | 15·386 | 3·486 |
| 2-3 ha | .. | 5·767 | 977 |
| 3-5 ha | .. | 2·907 | 456 |
| Total | .. | <u>86·084</u> | <u>22·580</u> |

Table 2 shows that the number of farmhands, working a piece of land of any importance, has declined since 1910 by about 75 per cent. and that in particular the number of those using more than 1 ha decreased rapidly. This development certainly originated from different causes. Fifty years ago the farmhand was obliged to till some land privately to get the necessary food for his family; now he can afford

to buy it, if he wishes. But especially the sharp decrease in the number of farmhands, tilling 1 ha or more is a clear symptom of their disappearing interest in a small farm and at the same time of the changing social stratification.

The small farmers on the one side try desperately to defend their old position. They do not admit that they are losing their social status; they still see it as self-evident that the peasant takes a higher place on the social ladder than a farmhand and than a workman in general. They fight for their cause. Their spokesmen emphasise the economic importance of the peasant class and its social value in general. It is clear that from their point of view they cannot see the relative decline of their material position as it is, viz. an unavoidable consequence of the improvement of the position of other groups. They do not see its relative character. They simply consider their income as being too low. They feel that as an injustice and blame the government, capitalism, the trade-unions or the cities and sometimes even the farmers' unions for it.

On the other side, many of them know, partly perhaps unconsciously that they are fighting a lost battle. Many small farmers, and especially their sons, have lost their faith in the small farm and try to find a way out. If it was only a question of getting a higher income, the solution would be rather simple. Industry is expanding rapidly in the Netherlands, and especially in the years after the war there was a shortage of labour not only in industry, but in agriculture too. But a number of studies, made during the last years, show that farmers and farmers' sons show a strong resistance against accepting the position of an industry worker, especially that of an unskilled labourer and that it is psychologically almost impossible for them to work as a farmhand. If they leave farming, they prefer the handicrafts, trade, minor administrative functions. Social position and a certain feeling of freedom and independence seem to count more for them than income. Notwithstanding these difficulties, an important number of the sons of smallholders leave the farm. Research, done during the last years, has shown us that the number of farmers' sons, working on the farm, who want to be independent farmers in the future, is in general much larger than the number of their fathers, but on the small farms of 1-5 ha the number of potential successors is smaller than the number of farms of this size which will be available in the future. On the other side the small farmers try to enlarge the farm and it seems—up to now we have no exact figures—that notwithstanding the shortage of land in the Netherlands, an important number succeed. Because of the high rural birthrate and the prevailing attitudes towards vocational training of the youth held by the majority of the peasants, there is in the Netherlands an enormous surplus of young farmers who cannot get a farm. Farms are continually split up and the total number of farms is constantly increasing. But the number of farms of 1-5 ha declined from 66,158 in 1938 to 63,907 in 1948 and 60,199 in 1950! However, the problem cannot be solved in this way within a reasonable time. A solution

becomes necessary. The smallholders, once considered as the most stable element in society show signs of social unrest. They feel that their position is threatened and they protest. The Dutch Government is becoming more and more conscious of the seriousness of the problem.

After the war a great number of schools for crafts and industry were founded in the rural districts to educate farmers' sons for better paid and more highly esteemed jobs than they can get without vocational training or with vocational training in agriculture only. This measure has had some success, but it only works slowly. Migration to Canada, Australia and other countries does help, but still does not solve the problem. More and more rural sociologists, government officials and politicians are becoming convinced that one or another radical measure is necessary. A system of higher prices, fixed by the Government, which would give the small farmer a higher income, is not possible because of the Netherlands' position as a large-scale export country for agricultural products and because it would mean an unreasonably high income for the farmers on larger farms. The only possibilities are to eliminate the farms which are too small to give the farmer a reasonable income, as compared with that of the average labourer, or to give more land to the smallholder. Elimination of the too small farms could be effectuated by forbidding farmers' sons or other new farmers to begin farming on a farm smaller than a certain number of ha. This means, of course, that the majority of the sons of the smallholders have to find other jobs and have to be educated for that. In this way the problem could be solved theoretically within a generation. As to giving the small farmer more land, at the moment the possibility of using the newly reclaimed land of the Zuider Zee, at least partly, for the enlargement of the small holdings by bringing some of the peasants to the new polders and adding the land they leave to that of their colleagues, is being seriously considered. What action will be taken is not yet certain, but it seems to be sure that something will be done. Probably this problem of a threatened hierarchy will result in an important change in the economic structure of Dutch agriculture.

Space did not permit me to give more than a general outline of this problem. Because of the high rural birth-rate and the dependence of Dutch agriculture on export, it demonstrates itself in the Netherlands perhaps more clearly than elsewhere, but it is more or less a problem of continental western Europe in general. It should be given more attention by rural sociologists than it has received up to now.