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An annotated letter to a grandfather

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

Introduction

This chapter is written in the form of an annotated letter containing anecdotes and conversations: a form of presentation used by writers varying in style from Kafka (1983) to Chayanov (1976).¹ This might seem an unusual way to reflect upon the work of Norman Long. There is indeed a difference between a scientific article and a letter. However, since the letter contains many elements that are dear to me – and which are at the same time difficult to integrate into scientific discourse – I have decided to use its form as a way of presenting this paper.

The letter discussed here is in several respects a confusing document, as I will explain later. I have nonetheless chosen for this slippery road simply because Norman Long, to a considerable degree, has formed me intellectually. I do not mean to imply with this honest statement that creating confusion is a thing I have learnt from him. Far from that. The point is that the letter seems to be, if I am not mistaken, a nice vehicle with which to highlight some of the less visible cornerstones and complexities of the approach developed by Norman. Thus, the presentation of the letter and the accompanying discussions might also be understood as an indirect expression of my admiration for him².

The first issue hidden in the letter regards the relevance of context and hence the importance of local cultural repertoire. As the combination of letter and explanation that follows will make clear, any exposition is meaningless when isolated from its context. Even more so since context is to be found *within* the exposition itself, i.e. in the form of language, symbols and implied meanings. Such an observation is probably the most powerful argument against the often articulated criticism that Long's actor-oriented approach is identical to methodological individualism. Firstly, an actor-oriented approach not only implies an inquiry of context; it is one of the most powerful and precise tools for the analysis of relevant context and the implied 'structural settings'. Secondly, the letter underpins another important element of Long's work: the notion of *interface*. The letter is telling, especially where it highlights the confusion (and

¹ The letter to be discussed here, though, is not a letter to a father. Nor is it a message from the future. This letter goes back to the past and the person to whom it is addressed is a man who died long ago.

² It is very difficult for Friesians, like me, to express admiration and praise in a direct way. In our culture praise is highly suspicious. It usually implies the opposite.

some new insights) emerging out of the encounter of different cultural contexts. In his *Introduction to the Sociology of Rural Development*, Long (1977) stressed the importance of the interlocking of (until then) isolated value circuits for the ‘kick-off’ of development processes. There is some resemblance here; by being exposed to different cultural repertoires, specific notions often acquire new and often highly valuable meanings. *Inter alia*, this also shows how ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1985) emerge in sometimes unwilling ways. Thirdly, the letter refers to a completely different issue: the relevance of development sociology *outside and above its own privileged object and domain*. I myself am one of people to whom the cry ‘they are going back to where they came from’ applies to. This might sound a bit cryptic, I am sure, but the discussion that follows will clarify this point. Finally there is a related issue of the ‘travelling capacity of concepts, words and symbols’. They move, as it were, from town to countryside and *visa versa*. They travel between Catacaos in Peru and Burgum in *Fryslân*, between past, present and future. This travelling is illustrated in the letter as well. In the conclusion I will return to the meaning of ‘travelling concepts’.

A brief introduction to the letter

The original letter upon which this article is based is not mine. A friend who happened to have studied in Wageningen as well wrote this original and fictitious letter³. It was originally addressed to a grandfather who had already passed on several decades before. I encountered the letter sometime later by accident and have translated and annotated the original. I am aware that considerable confusion might arise from the fact that the original author carries exactly the same name as mine. This is due to the fact that his grandfather (just as mine) was also called Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. In our Friesian kinship system, the first son of every son and the second son of every daughter is named after the grandfather. This could imply that the original author and the translator/annotator probably have some common ancestor. Robert Goddard (2001) might be able to ground current events firmly in the complexities of the past but speculation is the only possibility in Friesland.⁴ Having a common ancestor gives me the confidence that I am somehow authorised to use Jan Douwe’s letter.

A confusion that arises is that several Jan Douwe’s play a role in this text. There is one who found, translated and annotated the original letter. Then there is another Jan Douwe who wrote the original letter. Where necessary, the first Jan Douwe will refer to the latter by saying ‘the other Jan Douwe’. *Oare* Jan Douwe (i.e. the *other* Jan Douwe) is an expression often used in the context of extended families where many youngsters carry the same name. I will use the same solution here. Finally, there is the grandfather (or *Pake*) who is also called Jan Douwe. The latter mostly figures as *Pake* in the following transcripts. I will interrupt the flow of the text every now and then to explain events and notions. Although headings are of course lacking in the original letter, I took the liberty to insert some to make the text accessible.

³ This friend ended up, very sadly, in the lunatic asylum of the Friesian city of Franeker.

⁴ This is partly due to the fact that during World War II, the Friesian resistance destroyed considerable parts of the existing civil registration systems.

Dear Pake

I am very sorry that it has taken me so long to write you to again, and to inform you of my whereabouts. I remember it well; I could explain it to you perfectly. It was in the autumn of 1974, around the time of my experiences in the North of Peru. I had just spent two years there, mainly in the Comunidad de Catacaos, the heroic village about which I wrote to you before. Although you were already an old man at the time (more than 80 years old if my memory serves me correctly), I distinctly remember you asking me a range of very pertinent questions. What struck me so much then was that you seemed quite familiar with the situation that, for me, was a complete surprise: another world so distinct from the one I had known until then.

Notes on a dialogue and on the language used

We were speaking, at that time, our own Friesian language – the ‘tribal language’ as outsiders call it. I remember this seemingly irrelevant detail so vividly, because my girlfriend of that time was participating in the conversation. Participating is probably too big a word. As you may remember, she could more or less follow our conversation, but she was not able to express herself in Friesian. What else could you expect from a girl from Amsterdam? Anyway, the presence of my girlfriend resulted in some funny complexities. Since she was Dutch speaking, you addressed her as ‘Jo’. Evidently that made no sense at all. She should have called you Jo, but she couldn’t since she was not familiar enough with our language. But an elder man like you, calling that poor young girl Jo, was hilarious if not a bit ludicrous.

I interrupt the letter to spell out some of the particularities of the pronouns in the different languages involved (see also the following scheme offering a synthesis). Without a firm knowledge of these particularities, the above extract from the letter would be pure nonsense. Evidently, it is not. For dialogues, Friesian language offers two pronouns: *jo* and *du*. The first expression resembles the English pronoun ‘*thou*’ as used in prayers or in medieval encounters with noble people. The latter *du* is only apt for discussions between very good friends, people of the same age and/or within the family. An expression in-between (such as the Dutch word *U*) is lacking.

Friesian	Dutch	English
Jo	Gij	Thou
	U	
	} Jij	You
Du		

I understood the background to your use of ‘Jo’. You have been engaged in hierarchical relations almost all your life. As a young boy and later as teenager, you were hired out for one guilder per year to a rich farmer on the clay soils in the west of the province. Later you became a worker in the peat industry and after the big strikes, when you were fired, you went off to work as a hannekemaaiër (an immigrant worker in Germany engaged in jobs like mowing, JD), and finally, you became a peasant. A peasant quite dedicated to the art of poaching (as, I guess, nearly every peasant was at that time). You have been constantly surrounded by superiors – schoolteachers, landlords, clergymen, highly ranked policemen, judges, military

*men, and traders – all of whom were Dutch speaking*⁵. *In the world you lived in, Dutch was the language of authority, of power. The authorities had to be addressed in Dutch language and if they weren't, severe sanctions would follow. Kneppelfreed [the Friday of the Truncheons], an episode that occurred many years later, only underpins the point I am making here.*

This memory refers to a particular and telling episode out of recent Friesian history. In oral history the story is still very much alive but official recordings are thin and misleading, if not almost entirely absent. The *kneppelfreed* event occurred somewhere in 1956 or 1957. It actually started some years earlier when the central government in The Hague decided that all weights and measures should be according to the metric system and be expressed in Dutch. Until then milk for example was sold in Friesland by the *mingle*. That had to become the *litre*. A different word, and a different amount. As always, nobody in Friesland paid much attention to the new imposition. However, the authorities became irritated and new orders were communicated. The unavoidable occurred. In the village of Beetsterzwaag a police officer hidden behind a big tree witnessed a conversation between a housewife and a milkman about the required amount of *mingles molke* (milk). The poor milkman was arrested and brought to trial in Heerenveen. Fedde Schurer, a Friesian poet and well-known advocate for what was called 'Friesian freedom', became his defender. The milkman, though, was declared guilty, after which the case went to the High Court in the provincial capital, the city of Leeuwarden. The lawsuit was scheduled on a Friday. Two details, which are far from irrelevant, need to be explained here. First, the High Court is located in the so-called *zaailand* (literally: the seeding ground), a central square in the city of Leeuwarden. Second, the weekly provincial cattle market was organised every Friday on this same square. Fedde Schurer and the *Friesian Movement for Freedom* had organised some 10 to 20 sympathisers to protest against injustice in general and the fate of the milkman in particular. What happened was the following. The mobilised policemen (some 100) started to knob the demonstrators who fled and tried to hide amongst the many thousands of farmers and cattle traders on the square. In their enthusiasm, the constables started to hammer the farmers as well.

Then there is a third indispensable detail. The *zaailand* was just a normal square during the week. The keen observer would notice, however, that there were small holes in the surface of the square. These were used on Fridays for the placement of iron and wooden poles, to which horizontal poles were fixed so that the cattle could be attached. Now, the farmers and traders, having been hammered on their heads by the policeman, decided to take these poles and convert them, as it were, into a rich arsenal of truncheons. The police fled, the now cheering crowd took arms and proceeded to the military quarters. By the end of the day, the now unarmed military men and police had been hunted and flocked into the pastures surrounding the city. New military forces from the South arrived in the night, but the farmers and traders had already returned to their homes and daily affairs. This is the story of *kneppelfreed* and as such, it continues to be told and retold, even now at the beginning of the third millennium.

⁵ Even if they knew the Friesian language (which often was not the case), in formal situations Dutch language was used to underpin unequal relations.

Dutch language was the tool and vehicle of others: of the powerful. We were assumed to have respect for them, but this was more or less identical to self-defence. This meant in the first place that you had to address them in a respectful way. You spoke 'jo' to them. I remember that you yourself were especially clever in cheating the 'others' with your use of the 'jo' word.

The interesting point here is that language as used by the actors concerned, divides the world into 'macro-actors' (ref. Mouzelis, 1991), who figure as the strong, important, clean and well educated category because they are Dutch speaking. On the other hand there is the mirror image: the pagans, the ones who can't even speak properly. This division, however, is not understood here in the Mouzelian way, that is in an *a priori social hierarchy*, which is merely reflected in everyday language.

Of course, cheating or tricking her was not your intention when you addressed my girlfriend with the 'jo' term. It was a simple matter of routine for you: talking to Dutch speaking people could not avoid the use of that particular word and it's implied power relation. It was in your bones, you couldn't do it differently. To me, however, it seemed to be a complete turnabout. Talking to the mighty implied Dutch language. And by talking Dutch it was almost automatically assumed that the person being addressed was mightier than thou: a 'jo'. And this made a humorous contrast with the girl that should have been addressed with the pronoun du.

Evidently, there would have been another, quite obvious solution. I was aware of it and I am sure you had thought about it as well. The absence of the obvious made the situation even more hilarious. Nobody else, though, would have understood this, since they would not have been sufficiently familiar with our tribal language, let alone with the particularities of my private situation.

In order to avoid the social hierarchy implied in pairs of words such as jo and du, Friesians very often use the third person in conversations to refer to a person who is present.

It is quite interesting that without knowing the respective theories, the other Jan Douwe points to the phenomenon that it is through language and the cultural repertoire entailed in it, that relatively amorphous situations are defined and ordered into 'structural settings'. Further on in this letter he will apply the same point of view in his description of modern farming in Friesland.

When talking face to face to e.g. a large farmer, you would not normally say 'what do you (jo? or du?) think about...' but instead you would say: 'what does the farmer think about this or that...' Probably the other will then reply 'well, I would have to tell the labourer (feint) that...'

This refers to social positions seemingly being fixed, rigid if not objectified in this way. One's identity is reduced to one's socio-economic or class position. Or to put it the other way around: professional identities, class positions, etc. are used as a vehicle in the interpersonal contacts, amongst others to avoid the assessment of some hierarchical order between the involved persons.

Class never has been a strange word for you, although you normally talked about ûs slag minsken (our type of people, JD).

The grandfather Jan Douwe was a fervent follower of Domela Nieuwenhuis, the clergyman who became the leader of the very strong anarchistic movement in

Friesland in the late 19th century. The old Jan Douwe had a portrait of Domela on the mantelpiece in his house. Whoever said a wrong word about Domela would receive a severe beating. Hence, class and class struggle were indeed familiar notions.

Later I encountered lots of people who indeed did what you seemingly did. They understood the world as fixed. They talked about 'structures' that governed us, that made us, to coin a phrase, like puppets on a string. We knew of course already knew that this was all nonsense. Yes, we used the words that referred to seemingly rigid positions, but in the meantime people like you moved quite differently. You danced through time. It was not an easy dance. That was why the dancers, or should I say the moving people were called wrotters.

Literally, the word *wrotter* can translate to *burrower* but it also can mean a *hard working person*. In the latter case, however, the association with moles and other burrowing rodents remains because the word has subterranean connotations; equally it is a word with associations of being physically strong and a bit stupid. But there is more: *wrotter* also implies that somebody going ahead, creating his own room for manoeuvre.

To make this particular concept more clear to a non-Friesian public I could possibly refer to the beautiful Irish movie 'The Field'. The central person in this movie, the Bull, would be a typical '*wrotter*': strong, fighting and struggling like hell for progress, engaged in many fights, tough and demanding in the eyes of others with strong feelings of justice, but in the end also terribly stupid and tragic. Of course, this stupidity is not so much an individual trait, but an attribute emerging at the interface of being a 'bull' in a hostile environment.

The typical *wrotters* from Friesland started e.g. as daily workers in the peat industry or in agriculture. Through much hardship they finally obtained a small, (if not microscopic) farm, which they subsequently tried with much toil and suffering, to develop into something more decent, in order to obtain, as the beautiful expression in our language goes, *een pear skonken onder it gat*, i.e. to get a pair of legs under one's backside. This reflects the struggle for autonomy, for room of manoeuvre, as Long would argue (ref. Long, 1984). The use of this phrase is omnipresent in Hylke Speerstra's breathtaking account of Friesian immigrants. Wherever they went (South Africa, Paraguay, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States) they fought to obtain *skonken onder it gat* (Speerstra, 1999).

The letter discusses how being a *wrotter* is at odds with the notion of social hierarchy and a fixed social division of labour. People *move through* these hierarchies and patterns of division, instead of being entrapped by them. But there is more. The letter even seems to suggest that the very concepts of social hierarchy and a more or less fixed social division of labour seem to be suspicious:

You have been pretty much a wrotter yourself. Walking to Germany, mowing the endless fields, returning and meeting on your way back the woman that later become your wife, and my grandmother. But before that could happen she was your fiancée for some seven years. The both of you first had to save enough money to buy a cow and a pig. Co-habitating and having children would not have been deemed proper by you, her or ùs slag minsken, until that minimum requirement had been acquired. And then your being a wrotter continued, until you had two sons, seven cows and a

garden for horticultural production. And of course the klaverkamp (a pasture full of clover, JD), which I remember so well. Turning back home from the klaverkamp with the wagon full with hay, two horses pulling heavily– that really was a joyful ceremony. And yes, your son, my daddy, was in a way an unbelievable wrotter as well. He had the chance to go to the secondary school. The master had said he should do so. Through self-study in the evenings (the bloody amount of courses he did!) finally became a schoolteacher. And a fine florist to boot, but that doesn't matter here.

Here the notion of *wrotter* is coming very close to the idea of a self-made man. This is not a denial of the more general meaning spelled out heretofore; it is rather a time and place bounded specification of the general notion. But there is a clear consequence:

Ha, I remember how my pa got very upset when I used the Marxist jargon in the '70's. For you class was not a forbidden word. My pa got mad though, saying that all that structure you're talking about, is nonsense, if people really want and fight for it, well, then they might well succeed. You would not agree that much with him, I think. It is a pity that it is too late too ask you...

It is at precisely this point that we encounter the endless debate that surrounded the beginnings and further development of Long's actor oriented approach. Is it a methodological device that allows you to better understand the 'mechanics' of the world (including situations of exclusion, marginalisation, etc) and to obtain a glimpse of the possibilities to ridicule, to resist and/or to move through this world? Or is it a substantial description of a world containing *per definition* a certain range of degrees of freedom, at whatever location in time and space? This somewhat fruitless debate comes down to the different opinions of a grandfather, a father and the confusion of the son.

And finally myself. Am I a wrotter? No, I don't think so. It would be far too much honour for me. I would be degrading the meaning of the word by referring to myself as a wrotter. But one thing remains: the tremendous stubbornness I inherited from you and your son and, I guess, from the women involved as well. It's in my genes. I drive my girlfriend mad sometimes. Others as well possibly. But what can you do: it is, as it were, built into me.

Notes on places and farmers faraway

Anyway, the issue at stake is a different one. It is about the words we used in what was probably our last encounter when I had just got back from Peru. Remember? - This is when my girlfriend from Amsterdam accompanied me. The easy way out would have been to refer to her in the third person. We have in Friesian language a wide repertoire of words to do so. There is joffer, and frou, and mefrou – all implying hair-splitting differences in social status. Saying frou to the wife of the local medical doctor would have been an insult. I remember my pa told me that Beppe, your wife, had to correct him very frequently – the more so since others in the village had been complaining about his mistakes.

Nonetheless, this reservoir of potential ways out of the dilemma could not be used. My girlfriend and me were not married although she was visibly pregnant. Hence, whatever word would have been used, be it frou, faam, joffer or whatever, the Gordian knot (the impossibility to slot into established routines) would only have been enlarged further. It was like the song I learned much later, a song about 'a boy

named Sue'. You solved the dilemma in your own, albeit hilarious way, by calling her 'Jo'. It was even trickier (you never knew), because her father, who was one of the founders of the first communist party in the Netherlands, was named Jo as well. I remember the surprise on her face. Jo? There's no Jo around here! 'His father died a year ago, so what are you talking about' she must have thought. Whatever the confusion that arose at this particular interface...

In the original letter the Friesian word *grinsflak* was used. Generally speaking, Friesian language contains very little abstract words. On the other hand, it is very rich in metaphors, in specific terms derived from the world of visible and material entities, which in turn imply more general or more abstract concepts. Room for manoeuvre, for instance, is a concept impossible to translate directly and *as such* in Friesian language. But then, *earmslach*, literally 'elbow room' (Fryske Akademy, 2000) pops up as an adequate and typically Friesian alternative (see also Fryske Akademy, 1990). The same applies to *grinsflak*, which I translated here as 'interface'. Later on, Norman Long would use this concept in his academic work (Long, 1989; Long and Long, 1992). I remember vividly the genesis of this word (and the underlying notion). Norman Long and I became increasingly unhappy with the notion of interlinkage, as developed especially by the Leiden School of Sociology. A world perceived of as consisting of interlinkages (*schakelingen* as the colleagues from Leiden used to say) all ran too smoothly for us and during one of our conversations Norman suddenly arose and said: 'Eureka, it is all about structural discontinuity and we will call it *interface*.'⁶

Whatever the confusion created at this particular interface, we had a crystal clear discussion. You asked me what a deihier was in the Peruvian fields. At first I didn't understand you. I had never heard the word before.

Deihier is an old Friesian word, not in vogue anymore. It refers to the daily wage a daily worker could obtain for a day's job. Literally, the word means 'the rent you have to pay for one day'. One has to take into account here that (the other) Jan Douwe did not have any formal training in Friesian language. In those days Friesian language was not allowed at school, even at the level of the Kindergarten. Like many other Friesians of that generation, he is able to speak it, but writing had to be learned later, outside of school. Anyway, the other Jan Douwe managed to do so in one way or another as is illustrated by the original Friesian letter. I on the other hand, was never able to do so and remember the cold shower when going to school for the first time. A horse (*hynder* in Friesian) was suddenly a horse no more - it was a *paard*. A considerable backlog was created in this way and the boys and girls concerned became 'special needs pupils'. I feel like I've stayed in this category all my life.

⁶ What nobody knows is that Norman was one of the first in Wageningen with a PC and a printer. This is where he got word 'interface' from. And given the proverbial uneasiness of a social science professor with technology, he really believed that 'interface' meant 'something that is not functioning'.

But then I realised that it was the same as jornal, the daily wage golondrinas would obtain...

Golondrinas literally means swallows. In Peru, it stands for the daily workers who follow the annual cycle of differently distributed harvest periods. They go, as swallows, from the sugar cane harvest in the middle of the country to the cotton harvest in the North and then on to the citrus harvest in the valleys near Lima and so on and so forth. In the corresponding literature they are mostly referred to as *eventuales*, i.e. those who don't have stable and protected labour relations, but who will work if they are able to get a day's work.

But then I realised that it was the same as jornal, the daily wage golondrinas would obtain after a day of hard work. Working for a deihier was something you were familiar with right from your youth. I only discovered it when I was 23 years old and working in a place as remote as Peru. It seems that sometimes you have to travel far before you understand your own place and time. Or the place and time of your own pake. Anyway I explained the deihier to you about and the different arrangements it was embedded in. You were not surprised either when I told a bit about the struggles going on over there. Strange contrast: when I wrote a lengthy paper for my study on it, my professor (who was a nice guy, but that's beside the point) was sceptical. He said, 'I don't believe that all those guys (i.e. those peasants, JD) have studied Marxism'. Jo, who could easily follow this part of the discussion, agreed completely with you. She didn't understand much of Marxism. It was even worse than that; she didn't even bother with it. Nonetheless, she was neither very much amused with daily wage systems, be it through jornales or deihieren.

You were intrigued by my story about the 'gringo pobre'. In Catacaos, as in other places in the department of Piura, people mostly referred to themselves as 'nosotros los pobres del campo' (we, the poor people of the countryside). Transferred to other places that might sound a bit pathetic but there it was: simple everyday life language. Of course, there were other versions as well, sometimes more cruel, sometimes far sharper, and sometimes more humorous. You nearly died of laughter when I told the story about my compadre Perez, one of the local leaders of the then FEDECAP, the farmers' union of Piura. It was at a meeting in Chulucanas, that small place where all those lemons are grown. Perez was from the big co-operative, Luchadores del dos de Enero. Anyway, at the meeting in Chulucanas, (it was a protest meeting to make clear to the regional authorities that the life peasants were living had become unbearable, although I have to admit that I do not remember anymore the exact reasons or causes), my compadre Perez took the floor and at the end of his flamboyant speech he shouted: 'Don't you see that el campesinado is dying of hunger?' To underpin his words he opened his shirt in a dramatic gesture. A big, fat belly flopped out at the very moment he was referring to hunger. Both the authorities present and the mass of protesters burst into peals of laughter. I mean, the pobres del campo had a great sense of humour and knew how to joke and have fun. Nonetheless, the barrier was clear as well. On the one hand there was us, nosotros los pobres del campo or, as you would have said, ùs slag minsken. On the other there were the others, the gringos. Those from Lima were frequently addressed in that way. But it applied especially to foreigners. To people from Germany, Italy and Spain who at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century had taken their lands. And to those from the United States, of course.

Yes, in the beginning it was difficult for me. I am tall, blond and especially in the beginning my Spanish must have been awful. But then I joined the cotton harvest in one of the common production units the community was having at that time.

One understands that the concerned 'unit' was one of the *Unidades de Produccion Comunal* (UPC), more specifically the UPC called *San Pablo Sur*. It

seems that this particular experience had a considerable impact on the then young (other) Jan Douwe. The remarkable point was that in these UPC's a man to land ratio was realised (a famous and much discussed issue in debates on land reform) that was far superior to the one realised in both the previous *haciendas* and in the later state controlled co-operatives. The thus defined 'room for manoeuvre' would play an important role in the thoughts the 'other' Jan Douwe developed later and which, eventually, would bring him a step closer to the lunatic asylum. Through his travelling he gained a lot of new insights, which allowed him, in the end, to obtain a refreshing view on the Dutch context to which he returned. However, the price he paid, especially when he further developed his type of analysis, was an increased rejection: you are mad, man. The particular experience described here drew a first cleavage, to say the least, between him, that is the other Jan Douwe, and his particular context, i.e. the body of institutionalised knowledge.

It was terribly hard work, starting at 3 o'clock in the very early morning. And then continuing in the burning sun. I fainted several times: the pesticides used during the cultivation enter into your body one way or another. It was frustrating as well, especially in the beginning: young kids picked far more mota (cotton) than I could. Step by step, though, I got a bit more experienced. You know, I engaged in this work to better understand the functioning of these Unidades, a kind of organisational innovation designed by the comuneros themselves. It was great to learn all this and much more. Anyway, joining the cotton harvest had another effect that I came to know only later. The first time was in a chicheria (a local pub where mainly maize beer is served, JD). Behind me I heard old men talking about me. They were not aware that I was listening. It touched me that they referred to me as el gringo pobre (the poor gringo). Of course, gringo because of my physical appearance, but also pobre due to the fact that I had been picking cotton for so many weeks. "Cotton picking is what we, los pobres del campo, are doing" seemed to be the underlying rationale behind them calling me the poor gringo. Hence the (at first sight at least) impossible combination. This is how seemingly unbridgeable clefts within or between classification schemes might be overcome. Dancing through time (omwarberje as we say in our Friesian language) is, as it were, playing and moving with words, inventing sometimes even new expressions and phrases. And making new realities ... sometimes, at least.

Notes from the present

From here on the letter is, I think, extremely rich in referring to the particularity of Wageningen. 'We are the place where we are' as Buttell (1997) would say years later. The interesting point about Wageningen is, of course, that it represents an ongoing, multi-faceted and often extremely rich encounter of different places, different views and different disciplines. This is echoed in the following parts of the letter, where many insights from development sociology (the concept of peasant, the notion of involution and the image of the limited good) are used to enrich rural sociology: that is, the understanding, analysis and representation of agriculture in so called 'western societies'. The *comparative method*, as advocated strongly by Long has evidently inspired the other Jan Douwe. For him it became nearly identical to let concepts travel. He increasingly felt that he was just a vehicle that caused concepts, stories and insights to travel. During the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century, such an approach ran

increasingly counter to the views that became dominant with the merger of Wageningen University and the State Research Institutes. The high-ranking officials of the new 'enterprise' (as the outcome of the merger was called) made it increasingly clear that there was only room (sic) for one 'corporate view'. Contrasting visions, they said, would just add to confusion and severely threaten the newly acquired corporate identity. They constructed, as it were, a new 'context' and sanctioned everything they believed to be deviations.

Sorry Pake, but I have to come to that point. If this weren't a letter but a straightforward dialogue instead, you surely would have interrupted me by asking to stop with eamelje (whining, nagging, and talking in a non-directed way)

It is to be noted, though, that Friesians are, amongst themselves, very fond of *eamelje*. It is only in contacts with strangers that they can be very short, blunt and/or silent.

By repeating all these memories, I only want to make clear that in your time, you were quite a keen man, not only understanding your own peasant world in a perfect way, but also able to come to grips easily with other peasant realities far away from your own direct experience. That was and still is a thing that turned out to be far more difficult for me myself. And maybe I have to assure myself, by repeating all these well-known points of reference, that I am not yet completely crazy. It was as if I am looking for some solid anchors. The rest of the story really needs them. You really wouldn't believe it! During the last 10 years or so I have been wandering through what they now call modern Dutch agriculture. I have focused especially on Friesland. It seems that the world of agriculture has gone mad. There are new words and expressions. People talk new phrases. And behind all these new words and phrases is a dazzling confusion sometimes. Words and world do not seem to correspond anymore. Let me try and explain some of this confusion to you. There used to be boeren (farmers), simply because 'sie oan't buorkjen wienen' (farmers, because they were farming).

There is no proper linguistic difference between farmers and peasants in either Dutch or the Friesian language. There is just one standard expression i.e. farmer (or *boer* in both Friesian and Dutch). In rural sociology, however, a clear difference is made between peasants and (agricultural) entrepreneurs. I elaborated on this discussion recently (Van der Ploeg, 1999). Here I demonstrated that, from an analytical point of view, it was precisely the *peasant* features and strategies that made modern Dutch agriculture as strong as it is (see also Jollivet, 2001).

It will be understood that (the other) Jan Douwe is referring here to 'peasants', the more so since he discusses here the situation of small Friesian farmers from the eastern sandy soils, to whom the availability of and control over (own) resources - and therefore, autonomy - was central. The same notion, though, applied to nearly all farmers/peasants of that time. Only the so-called '*hereboeren*' (large farmers who contracted several wage labourers on a continuous basis) were different. It should be noted that no equation can be made between small and peasant and large and entrepreneur. A large farm might very well be run in a peasant way, and vice versa.

These farmers were also wrotters, simply because although they had started with little, they tried to make something out of it.

There is an interesting similarity here with the work of John Bennett (1981) who described and extensively analysed the (folk) schemes of classification as used by Canadian farmers. 'Scrambler' is probably the Canadian term that corresponds most with the Friesian word *wrotter*.

Then of course there were other farmers also, the well established, the well-known breeders, de neiboeren. 'Alles hie in namme' (it all had a name).

Intriguing is that this phrase was used many years later in another novel 'De Kalde Erfenis' ('The Cold Heritage') written by Hielke Speerstra (2001). In this novel, the story of skating and especially of the famous 200 kilometre 'Tour of the Eleven Cities' is retold. The story of the landscape and of farming intermingles in the novel as well. In the past, 'everything and everybody had a name' according to Speerstra, who at the same time deplores the loss of all of these names. Everything seems to have become anonymous, just another numerical expression of an abstract category.

It was all quite logical. First you struggled to 'get your feet under your backside'. This meant that you would be able to pay more attention to your work and the things you worked with.

Following Bennett, one could argue that the locally valid competence axis is discussed here. The other Jan Douwe used the beautiful Friesian saying: 'de dingen hun gerak jaen, in which 'dingen' might refer to cows, fields, canals, but also to activities such as mowing and milking and, finally, also to people e.g. the wife, the children, the neighbours etc'. The Friesian expression 'De dingen hun gerak jaen' implies 'giving things what they need', e.g. giving the land what it needs, in other words, not treating it in a regardless, disrespectful way. This expression fits very well with the more general expression of 'kreas buorkje', which means farming gently (see Van der Ploeg, 1999 and for an example from elsewhere Zuiderwijk, 1998). *Kreas* has strong aesthetic connotations as well. For example, a 'kreas frommes' means a beautiful girl. 'Kreas' work, means work that is well done or properly finished in such a way that the end result looks nice, even tempting.

An interesting issue here is the use of metaphors by farmers. Many of these are derived from sailing. In the following part of the letter a reference to this emerges. The expression used ('heavy winds') refers to adverse markets.

And once you had done this, you were able to proceed step by step on your own account or, in the worst case, defend yourself when the winds were heavy and in the wrong direction.

Farmers like you, however, are an exception nowadays. Even the word itself seems to be taboo. Everyone is talking now with new words, especially that new and strange caste of high priests who are telling us how farming should be done. They talk about agricultural entrepreneurs. And they say that these entrepreneurs are different and that they also act differently. Entrepreneurs, they argue, are risk-takers. They take large loans out and carry heavy financial burdens. They work with many resources they obtain in the market. They don't make hay anymore, let alone from a clover camp. All the fields are the same now. They all produce spinach and

nothing else. As well as this, these entrepreneurs buy the feed and fodder they require for each year. You and your companions never would have done that. That would have been shameful in your day. Only a bad farmer bought his feed. And then the heavy loans I told you about. In your time, you would not have had much pity with those so heavily indebted farmers. If the wind turned they could easily go broke. Risks, you would have argued, are abundant enough already: you could find yourself easily engaged in a kneppelfreed if you went to Leeuwarden market, the winds could change and your most beloved cow could die. I still hear you saying: 'hell! why put your head even further into the gallows?'

The entrepreneurs of today are not engaged in the steady struggle for more resources anymore. The hard, meticulous and gentle work is no longer understood as the road towards a better resource base. What many entrepreneurs do – and are told to do – is to mortgage the future of their business. Heavy loans, large purchases of additional quotas and land, cartloads of feed and fodder, week in - week out, an open account with the customs worker to be settled at the end of the year (no settling of accounts with half a pig and some cheese!)....

Here reference is made to the then prevailing practices of socially regulated exchange that were omnipresent till the midst of the 20th century. For a vivid description, see Van den Akker (1967).

...huge amounts of chemical fertiliser (whilst simultaneously degrading the quality of the manure as produced by the available cattle), buying time and again expensive cattle. They engage in a heavy burden,

From other studies published much later it can indeed be derived that these quickly expanding, large farms (later on the notion of mega farm became *en vogue*) do as a matter of fact have relatively high cost price levels. However, both the concerned farmers and the involved institutions and state apparatuses that drive farmers in this particular direction, maintain that such high cost price levels should not be seen as problematic. What counts, in their opinions, is the future cost price. A high cost price now, is understood as a precondition and as a legitimisation for a low cost price later on.

...expecting that this will all be remunerated in the near future. I guess many of them know how tricky the game is, but they feel obliged to do so since they are told that in the near future only very large farms will be remaining, and not so many of them either. They believe that the future can be a joy only for a happy few. That is why they engage in this race. Or maybe I should say: that is why they have created the race. They are afraid.

What is described here is evidently the well known 'image of the limited good' (Foster, 1965). It is often assumed that such an image is only relevant to describe and understand places far away in time or place. This description, however, demonstrates that this very 'image of the limited good' might well be one of the main driving forces in current Dutch agriculture, the agriculture sector considered to be one of the most 'modern' of the world.

They think they cannot do otherwise. They are entrapped in their own beliefs, projects and practices.

It is somewhat remarkable that (the other) Jan Douwe does not describe this type of entrepreneurial behaviour in terms of 'structural development' as is normally

the case in the Netherlands. Here the concerned practice is identified as a particular practise, which is not understood and represented as the more or less unilinear unfolding of assumed technological and economic laws. Instead, it is presented as being inspired by local development and informed by particular notions and relationships.

And they take away for many others the possibility to proceed step by step. Yes, many people are grumbling.

This is evidently related to the currently prevailing 'zero sum game' as introduced by the quota-system. This type of omnipresent regulation implies that growth and progress for the one seems to imply inevitably reduction and backwardness for the other. As well as the growing impact it has had on rapidly expanding expert-systems, the same regulation has also had a far-reaching influence on identities.

'Hell!' you might ask me, 'why are these guys behaving in such a silly and selfish way'. To tell the truth, that is not easy to explain. I only know part of the answer. But I am afraid that it is not the complete answer. The difficulty is that the more elements I find, the more other people are saying that I am crazy. Anyway, a big difference between your time and the situation I am describing now is that in your time you and your fellow farmers could go their own way. If you were farming in a kreas (gentle) way, people would respect you. Now, however, there is a new cast of priests. They are everywhere.

My Italian colleague Benvenuti (1985) had already referred to this phenomenon in the 1980s. This can be found in his now widely accepted theory (see e.g. Long, 2001) with a special emphasis on the role of expert systems (i.e. the *priests* the other Jan Douwe is referring to) and the language they use, in the subsumption and standardisation of seemingly 'free' agricultural entrepreneurs. Maybe it is coincidental, but Benvenuti was also very much a 'travelling man', who caused surprises and concepts to travel all over the place.

And they use many disguises. Sometimes it seems to be the tongue of science, at another moments it is the voice of law, industry, or even more flabbergasting, the echo of nature. I learned from you about birds and flowers, and how nests had to be removed carefully before mowing started. It was your neighbour, you remember, the one on the left who was so bloody proud of the owls in his barn. It is strange. When we moved later to the city I encountered a duck with its feet frozen into the ice one winter. I did what I learnt from you. I grabbed the poor thing and wrung its neck. The city people, though, were upset, they admonished me for torturing the poor bird. It is the words, feelings and people of the cities and of science that nowadays prescribe what is to be done in the countryside. They have a point of course, a lot is going wrong. But it is precisely those farmers who have joined the story as dictated by government, science and the city, that are doing things in rûge [that is: rough, as opposed to gentle] ways. This makes for all kinds of new rules and ceremonies and the strange thing is that the result of all this is that it is the gentle ones who become victimised in the end.

We used to have such a fine language, it was precise, everything had a name. Now both words and story telling have become rough, sometimes very rough. As a consequence, practices are getting rough as well. You would feel ashamed, I am sure, to be mentioned and identified in the same breath as those who pose themselves as 'the real entrepreneurs'. You would feel uncomfortable with their 'programme',

their claims that everything and everybody should make way for them. And so many people indeed feel uncomfortable about this. They are not really entrepreneurs, they are peasants, which precisely the reason they have been able to make solid and beautiful farms - farms they are proud of. Farms that are their skonken under it gat. But nobody addresses them as such. They are addressed as entrepreneurs and then the priests tell them that they also have to act and to behave as such! That makes many people feel lost. They feel non-existent. They do exist and they made their farms themselves, but it is as if the others do not want to see them...

At the same time you would be comforted again if you were to just wander around in the countryside like I did, just watching and talking to the people.

You would probably just observe their cows and their fields initially, perhaps asking a few questions. And then you would realise that there are still many people going their own way and making farming into what it is, just the way you did. But would also realise that, these days at least, these people are invisible people.

Here again a remarkable association is evoked. In Peruvian storytelling, painting and literature (see especially Manuel Scorza, 1977) the theme of invisibility is omnipresent and very telling: peasants tend to become invisible in the world governed by state, capital, *caciques* and priests. Equally, in today's descriptions of Dutch agriculture the reality of peasants and the way in which they construct multi-functionality at grass-root level (meeting thereby a range of new demands and expectations of society at large) is completely neglected i.e. made invisible. This goes to the extreme that farmers having an exceptional record on the sustainability dimension are sent anyway to court (remember the beginning of *Kneppelfreed*), because they do not use the holy and sacrosanct tokens prescribed by the current priests. The encounter that occurred on the *Zaailand* could soon repeat itself. Equally interesting in the last phrase is the underlying social constructivism. "Let me observe your cows and I will tell you who you are". Interestingly enough, in rural sociology such an approach has been considerably developed recently (see e.g. Groen et al, 1994).

The stories that the omnipresent priests tell do not allow anymore for their existence. It makes me sad, it makes me feel sick, to think that you and all these peasants that have been made invisible. I'm sure you would feel the same, the peasants too. We all feel as if we are trapped in their lunatic asylum, but if we say so, they look at us as if we were we crazy.

Dear Pake, I hope that the land you loved so much rests softly upon you,

You're loving grandson, Jan Douwe

Post script: on travelling concepts

The story from the other Jan Douwe, as it emerges in a fragmentary way from the letter to his grandfather, entails some intriguing references to the interrelations between concepts and the empirical world. The other Jan Douwe has always been fascinated by a story that his father, the botanist, had told him. It was about a particular plant, the description of which was lost somewhere in the late 19th century. From then on the plant was neither mentioned nor found by botanists again. During the 50's of the 20th century, the description and the corresponding name were reintroduced into the world of Dutch botanists - this

was due to increasing international contacts. From then on, that is when the plant name became available again, Dutch botanists began to encounter and describe the particular plant by the dozens. It is everywhere. The moral of the story is that you only see, find and experience what you know.

What the other Jan Douwe knew, and here we enter in the second story line, was remarkably influenced by his experiences elsewhere. It was through his experiences in Peru that he began to appreciate the notion of peasantry and it was only after the concept had 'travelled' with him to the Netherlands, that the notion (and the associated concepts discussed in this paper) became explicit. It is precisely here that the strategic relevance of the discussions with his grandfather resides. They sharpened his views and he rediscovered the basic features, continuities and changes apparent in Dutch agriculture. Unfortunately, those controlling the official schemes of classification (the *Lineaus* type of thing) were not particularly amused by the modifications he proposed. They still had a large stock of floras to be sold and making public that these 'accumulated bodies of knowledge' entailed considerable flaws was not the best argument for further sales. This is how the other Jan Douwe became increasingly lost. He now fills his days reading Jollivet (2001), Goddard (2001), Speerstra (2001) and that kind of work, which seems are better option than fooling around in the countryside and confusing people with his ill conceived ideas.

Poor other Jan Douwe. But let's look at it from another, brighter side as well. Ironically, Franeker (the lunatic asylum town) is the place where one of the first universities of the Netherlands was located; the other Jan Douwe is probably far better off there than in what is currently called the Wageningen University and Research Centre. That you may spend your remaining time, dear other Jan Douwe, in blessed isolation!

We should neither forget the other important element highlighted by his whereabouts (and somehow condensed in his letter). Yes, *context* (or more generally speaking: structural setting) is damn relevant. But what if, as they said in Peru, *el mundo se vuelve loco*? What if context increasingly represents *organised irresponsibility* (Van der Ploeg, 1999), *institutional thrift* (Jacobs, 1999), *ignorance* (Hobart, 1993) and/or *incapability* (Roep, 2000)? Then, I would say, a situation is emerging that requires a drastic revision of theories on actor-structure relations and in which, remaining *uncaptured* (just as Hyden's peasantry, 1980) i.e. *being at odds with context*, is probably the most logical and rational stance.

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