

# Meaningful Diversity: Origins of the farming style concept

E.W. Hofstee's interest in the concrete, the lived, and the particular marked his inclination towards an "inductive" research methodology. He combined in-depth descriptions of social groups with a comparative approach (Hofstee 1938: 7-8). This grounded theoretical approach yielded the concept of *farming styles* in agricultural production. A farming style can be defined as shared normative and strategic ideas about how farming should be done. Hofstee's concept of farming style implied an important analytical inversion: one should not try to understand the practice of farming from the structural conditions to which the farmers responds but rather move to the center of our analysis the agency of farmers as creative actors. Hofstee thought that rural sociology should emancipate itself from structuralist and functionalist "adjustment sociology," as the understanding of rural life in terms of an adaptation to "order" was not only narrow and incomplete but also wrong: it erased the agency of people in the creation of the world they inhabit.

In his 1946 inaugural lecture, Hofstee (1946) explained how he had arrived at the idea of farming styles. For this, he took us to the north of the Netherlands, the province of Groningen, or, to be more precise, the Zuidelijk Westerkwartier, a region in the western part of the province bordering Friesland, and the Woldestreek, a region in the eastern part of the province. In the Zuidelijk Westerkwartier,

animal husbandry was dominant, while the Woldestreek was almost exclusively characterized by arable farming. The question that Hofstee posed concerned how this difference was to be explained.

In his lecture, Hofstee first explored whether the differences between the two regions could be understood as having arisen from differences in the *geographical characteristics* of these areas, an explanation he dismissed. On the contrary, he argued, it is difficult to find two other agricultural areas in the Netherlands that show such a strong geographical similarity. Both are part of a belt of low-lying ground, consisting for the most part of low peat soils intersected by a few higher sand ridges with the peat soils turning to low clay soils in the north. Should we explain the differences by *market relations*? This he considered very unlikely. The locations of the two regions in relation to the central market of the province, the city of Groningen, was almost the same, and the distance to and infrastructural connections with the main market were quite similar, as were their legal and political relationships to this market place.

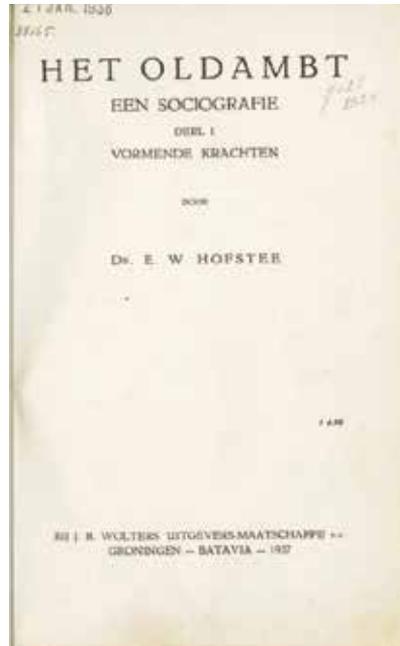
Then, could it be that distinctions in *social relations* might offer an explanation for the differences? Servitude and serfdom had disappeared very early in both regions, and the farmers' right to land was similar. When the areas were colonized, the farmer was

allowed to draw ditches forwards and backwards through the rough terrain perpendicular to the road. The farms that emerged from this practice were thus long, narrow strips of land stretching from the road into the landscape. The village created in this way typically emerged as ribbon settlements. Thus, explanations based on social relations also failed to solve the conundrum.

Did the differences have particular *historical backgrounds*? No, Hofstee argued. Until the mid-nineteenth century there were no essential differences between the two regions. The difference in the agricultures of the regions had developed in more recent times. Or rather, it was Woldestreek that had changed. In fact, the land there that had been used and seem predetermined for animal husbandry had been converted into arable land, a change effected at great expense, both in terms heavy, laborious work and high cost.

### Why?

From the many reflections on and descriptions of agricultural life in Groningen in this century, it was clear that the people in Woldestreek had specifically chosen to take up arable farming. This, Hofstee argued, was the farmer's pride and glory. Arable farming became a *collective ideal*, one that every member of the farming community tried to pursue as much as possible. So, he concluded, the huge change that occurred in Groningen over the course of around a century in total was primarily the result of a changing group ideal. It had been this that led to the different style of farming, which gradually acquired a strongly normative character. To the west, however, in Zuidelijk Westerkwartier, which was close to Friesland, the old style of farming, in which cattle-breeding was taken as normal and self-evident, kept its full force. Thus, Hofstee concluded that the structure of agricultural life in a certain area cannot be



Cover of Hofstee's PhD thesis

considered merely as or in terms of the sum of attempts to adapt to the external circumstances with which its farmers are confronted. This structure of farm life is also, sometimes to a large extent, indeed decisively, determined by ideals, perceptions, and ideas that consciously or unconsciously live within a social group in question. And this, then, may result in a particular farming style.

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Hofstee, E. W. (1946). *Over de Oorzaken van de Verscheidenheid in Nederlandsche Landbouwgebieden: rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar aan de Landbouwhogeschool te Wageningen, op 30 oktober 1946*. Wageningen, Landbouwhogeschool.