

# Rereading Jaap Frouws' *Mest en Macht* (Manure and Power) in 2021

In July 2021, more than a hundred tractors driven by angry farmers crossed the lawns of the campus of Wageningen University as one of many farmer protests against proposed Dutch government policies to reduce nitrogen emissions in agriculture. A farmer spokesman stated that this university was an extension of the Ministry of Agriculture (LNV) and that Wageningen University has been writing reports on the request of the government against the interests of farmers and has been induced to defend environmentalist positions. Farmers' protests on the campus grounds are something new as far as I know, but not farmers' protests against restrictive environmental policies.

To understand the overall evolution of farmer protests around the nitrogen crisis, Jaap Frouws' (1994) doctoral dissertation *Mest en macht* (Manure and Power) about the politics of the manure crisis in the Netherlands is highly relevant. Three things have prompted me to write here about this academic work on agrarian corporatism written two-and-a-half decades ago.

First, when I was a master's student Jaap Frouws provided an example proving that academics can be intellectually inspiring and accessible, kind and humble at the same time. I consider him an important figure in the 75-year history of the Rural Sociology group, and his untimely death has been a great loss.

Second, *Mest en macht* provides a key entry point into the history of farmers' representation in the conflict between agricultural and environmental demands. Even after three decades, it has lost none of its urgency. Finally, Frouws' pioneering work has become a point of reference for later researchers on manure narratives, such as Marian Stuiver's (2008) PhD thesis and Janne Hemminki's (2021) recent master's thesis on the current nitrogen crisis. But not everybody reads Dutch, so this contribution hopes to draw the attention of English readers to Frouws' classic Dutch text. One may not be able to read it, but one might become interested in reading some of Frouws' English-language articles derived from it.

The main theme in *Mest en macht* is the nature and decay of agrarian neo-corporatism as represented by the Board of Agriculture (*Landbouwschap*) in the Netherlands. Founded in 1954, the Board of Agriculture – composed of representatives from the three major farmers' and the agricultural workers' union – represented the interests of the whole agricultural sector as a public law organisation. Frouws analyses how the state constructed the organisation of farmers' representation, rejecting negotiations with an amalgam of different representative bodies and deciding instead to negotiate and collaborate with a single composite organisation. Through this horizontal union model,

farmers' organisations as a whole became co-responsible for government policy. For several decades, this structure would incorporate and reduce the autonomy of vertical, product-based, specialized associations. Frouws analyses how the neo-corporatism was structured through a set of resources and rules that resulted in close cooperation between state and representative organisations. The representational monopoly was strengthened by providing early information about planned policies to the Board of Agriculture and giving it privileged influence. The strong involvement of farmers' organisations via the Board provided legitimacy to government policies as the Board functioned to discipline the farmer organisations' constituencies.

Environmental issues, however, have increasingly affected this arrangement. One key problem has been the excessive amount of manure produced by the livestock sector and could not be completely incorporated into soils due to new environmental regulations. The key argument of *Mest en macht* is that the growing 'manure problem' created or deepened rifts in the so-called 'Green Front'. It was increasingly difficult for corporatism to keep divergent interests under political control. For example, views of farmer organizations in the north of the Netherlands clashed with those from the south.

Farmers in the north had relatively more space to apply their manure to the fields, while the south had more manure-surplus regions. Consequently, they took divergent views on the use of duties to handle the manure surpluses, such as transport subsidies. Such differences in interests repeatedly led to political confrontations that hindered policy consensus on related manure policies (their reach and pace, the distribution of financial contributions for transporting and processing the surpluses, and the regulations on buying

and selling manure 'quotas'). Within the state, policy formulation in this domain became less dominated by the Ministry of Agriculture, which for a long time had simply organised and defended farmer demands through delegating policy formulation to the Board of Agriculture. Other voices gradually became less excluded from policy formulation around the manure crisis, including those of environmentalists and members of parliament.

Frouws does not perceive this decay of agrarian neo-corporatism as a mono-causal, unidirectional process. Instead, through an exhaustive empirical study of interview data, minutes of meetings, a survey of farmers' perceptions of representation and participant observation in meetings, he describes the many twist and turns, tensions, deadlocks and contradictions over time. Frouws reveals many examples of an effective lobby by livestock interest groups that softened or delayed restrictive policies. Hence, while the neo-corporatist policy-making community could not resolve the manure problem and its political control of the issue decreased, farmer activism resulted in delaying strategies and the obstruction of policy formulation to address it. Crucial questions regarding the restructuring of the livestock sector were pushed aside in favour of maintaining its competitiveness and export capacity, precluding any discussion of reducing its volume.

Reading the empirical details of these confrontations, delays, and obstructions as presented by Frouws – with an emphasis on what happened in the 1980s – leaves the impression not of Manure and Power (*Mest en macht*) but of Manure and Powerlessness (*Mest en onmacht*). The issues around the manure surplus were not resolved, the state failed to develop proposals to restructure the livestock sector, and farmer representation fragmented. While Frouws refrained from

making predictions about the future of the Board of Agriculture, the pivot of agrarian neo-corporatism in the Netherlands at that time, he rightly observed its decay. Not so long after his dissertation was published, the Board would be dissolved and the representation of farmer interests shifted to a more diffused model driven by specialized, product-based farmers' associations.

*Mest and macht* is most important for what it offers in terms of empirical data, the analysis of neo-corporatism, and a political sociology of agriculture. It centralizes the political sociology of representation (relegating the technicalities of the manure problem to an appendix). Today, with all the talk of 'assemblages' and 'hybrids', nature-technology-society interactions would likely receive a more pronounced treatment in a similar thesis. Nevertheless, *Mest en macht's* 'middle range' sociological theory of agrarian neo-corporatism and its history of manure policies provides us with interesting perspectives for the contemporary political upheaval that led to farmers invading Wageningen University's campus.

Indeed, the dynamics shaping the current episode of the manure/N-emission crisis are quite similar to those described by Frouws. The farmer protests in 2019 initiated by relatively small farmer activist groups resulted in another 'Green Front', when the government negotiated nitrogen emission policies with the *Landbouw Collectief* (Agricultural Collective), a newly-formed platform comprising several farmers' organisations. Just as before – half a century ago – the government preferred to negotiate with a single representative body of farmers. Within months, however, the participating organisations disagreed about the structure of the *Landbouw Collectief*, and it fell apart as quickly as it had emerged. The strategies of 'talking with the government' to

'co-develop policies' and 'political activism' to gain 'respect and farmer freedom' were difficult to combine.

Of course, things have also changed in the 25 years since Frouws wrote *Mest en macht*. Nowadays, for example, many farmers have incorporated 'sustainability' into their farming operations. But the challenges defined by Frouws of getting farmers involved in environmental regulation, 'accepting responsibility for "general" interests, such as the protection of nature', and accepting the need to discuss a restructuring of the livestock sector remain as pressing as ever. It might help to face these challenges were activists, policy-makers and politicians to read Frouws' classic on farmer representation and environmental crisis.

Frouws, Jaap (1994). *Mest en macht: Een politiek-sociologische studie naar belangenbehartiging en beleidsvorming inzake de mestproblematiek in Nederland vanaf 1970*. Wageningen University (PhD dissertation).

Hemminki, Janne (2021). *The Nitrogen-crisis and social differentiations in the Dutch livestock sector*. Wageningen University (unpublished MSc thesis).

Stuiver, Marian (2008). *Regime change and storylines: a sociological analysis of manure practices in contemporary Dutch dairy farming*. Wageningen University (PhD dissertation).

## Vormende Krachten, Veranderende Verhoudingen: Reflecties op het ontstaan van de rurale sociologie

"Noem je dissertatie nooit deel 1" schreef de Wageningse professor agrarische geschiedenis Pim Kooij (Kooij 1991: 9) in zijn inleiding tot het boek "Het Oldambt, deel 2: nieuwe visies op geschiedenis en actuele problemen". Achteraf bezien was het wellicht niet eens zo'n heel slechte keuze van E.W. Hofstee om zijn proefschrift in 1937 "Het Oldambt: Vormende Krachten deel 1" te noemen (Hofstee 1937). Zelf kwam de grand old man van de rurale sociologie er weliswaar niet meer aan toe hier een tweede deel aan toe te voegen, oorspronkelijk beoogd als een integrerende en concluderende afsluiting van het eerste deel. Maar zijn toevoeging 'deel 1' heeft anderen uiteindelijk de uitdaging doen aangaan om met een vervolg te komen. Al was het meer dan 50 jaar later, en niet zo zeer concluderend, maar reflecterend.

Kooij vervolgde zijn betoog dat het schrijven van een tweede deel, door Hofstee wel te verstaan, een tot mislukking gedoemde opgave zou zijn geweest. Hij geeft hiervoor twee voorname redenen. De eerste reden is dat een dergelijk proefschrift maar één keer in het leven wordt geschreven. "Geen gerijpt wetenschapsbeoefenaar zal het in zijn hoofd halen om in zijn eentje te pogen een integrale beschrijving van een samenleving op te zetten, die zich uitstrekt van de vroegste tijden tot het heden en waarbij dan ook nog eens zes wetenschappelijke benaderingen op elkaar afgestemd en deels geïntegreerd moeten worden" (Kooij 1991: 9).

Het proefschrift van Hofstee was een product van jeugdige overmoed. Het startte met een fysisch-geografische duiding van Oldsambt gevolgd door een bespreking van de sociale omgeving, de samenstelling van de bevolking en het karakter van de inwoners van Oldsambt met inzichten vanuit de psychologie en antropologie om daarna aan de hand van historisch en economisch onderzoek de politieke geschiedenis, ontwikkeling van grondbezit en grondgebruik, en standen en klassen, ofwel de sociale verhoudingen, te bespreken en te eindigen met een bespreking van het religieuze leven (Hofstee 1937).

Hoewel Hofstee niet nalaat om het belang te benoemen van deze benaderingen voor de sociografie, is er geen sprake van daadwerkelijke sociografische integratie van deze benaderingen (Kooij 1991: 9). Die integratie had Hofstee wel voor ogen, geïnteresseerd als hij was in de 'vormende krachten' van een samenleving: de processen waaronder gebieden en verhoudingen zich ontwikkelen, en zijn ambitie was om deze uitdaging in deel 2 op te pakken.

De tweede reden die Kooij noemt voor de onmogelijke opgave van een deel twee, zoals beoogd door Hofstee, zijn de veranderende wetenschappelijke inzichten en opvattingen. Theorieën over karakter(vorming) en omgeving als wel het maken van indelingen van een bevolking op basis van schedelvorming