

The Roots of Societal Resentment in a Town in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Societal discontent has increased in the Western world over the past decades and has found its way to the polling stations in the shape of populist-based political parties. This study researches the general attitude of the inhabitants of a semi-peripheral town in the Netherlands over five months. Over the course of this period, several different crises erupted in the Netherlands (and the wider Western hemisphere). The theoretical background is adapted from Nancy Fraser's (in)justice theory, where the rural component was added and different themes were followed upon. A qualitative cross-sectional case study was conducted where eight different in-depth interviews were held with inhabitants of the town of Holten, Overijssel. Additionally, anonymous field notes were obtained during the time period of this study. The participants of the research did express different feelings of societal resentment rooted in either the political or the cultural spheres, resentment based upon economic hardship was far less present. However, no real traces of deteriorating resentment or possible radicalisation were found in this case study. This research concludes by providing options and conclusions that can help people understand the regional societal resentment felt in the countryside of the Netherlands and includes a caution for the government.

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Introduction

This research focussed on the roots of perceived societal resentment present in the selected semi-rural town of Holten, the Netherlands. It researched the sentiments felt by the town's inhabitants towards the current and future state of (Dutch) society. The recent wave of political populism – major examples being the Brexit vote of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump in the United States of America – is often attributed by political analysts to collective neglect of hinterland (or peripheral) regions. This was most prominently discussed by Rodriguez-Pose (2018) on the rise of populism in Europe in his *'the revenge of places that don't matter'*. There are enormous societal, political and economic consequences as these places experience i) a lack of trust in the future, ii) a fear of being left behind and iii) (the confirmation of the former through) the use of pejorative language (e.g. in the American case: rustbelt, flyover counties) from others – whether they are in a position of power or not. More recently, van den Berg & Kok (2021) identified different types of regional societal resentment in the Netherlands and discussed its consequences: social, political and economic stability (with)in a country is at risk through (extreme) voting behaviour and anti-system sentiments and protests. One example is the resistance towards major socio-spatial interventions that these regions have to undergo in a changing world that is trying to mitigate or adapt to climate change (Sovacool, 2016). The need for an energy transition is clear due to climate change and changing geo-political relations and resentment in the countryside stands in the way of a fluent transition (e.g., Lindeman, 2021). The rise of populism and the radical right already is one of the most frequently studied areas and many researchers have tried to either analyse or explain the rise of populism in the Western world (e.g., Carolan, 2020; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Harteveld et al., 2021). However, most of the previous research focusses primarily on the right-wing populism (Harteveld et al., 2021; see also Mudde, 2016 for thematic elaboration). This research has its niche by trying to look beyond the scope of the right-wing populism – most often those with the loudest voices – and grasp the societal resentment of those that are 'disengaged' (de Voogd & Cuperus, 2021). According to those authors, the people that are disengaged in the Netherlands tend to have anti-system sentiments and vote for anti-establishment parties. Additionally, more often than not, these disengaged citizens tend to live outside of the centre of the country, which is the Randstad in the Dutch case. This research mainly used and – where applicable – added to Nancy Fraser's (2007) framework for socio-spatial justice by looking at the beneficial and adverse effects of just (re)distribution, recognition and representation. This theoretical framework is at the forefront of progressive justice theory focussing on peripheral issues and combines the cultural,

economic and political dimensions of justice. It allowed for an empirical examination of whether rural injustices are felt by those perceived to be affected by it. The village of Holten, Overijssel is researched in a case study due to multiple factors: i) the town is not classically a radical right stronghold, but the share of the vote has risen in the past elections (Tubantia, 2021) and ii) the researcher serves as the insider in his own community, thereby lessening some of the burdens doing contingent political research (Damhuis, 2020). Lastly, this research tried to come up with transferable answers and – where possible – solutions from this case study that can mitigate the developing resentment in the Dutch countryside.

The main research question in this research was: *What are the roots of the resentment towards societal development in the town of Holten, the Netherlands?*. The research did not work with pre-set secondary questions, but the participatory nature of the research led to additional questions, explored in this study during the iterative qualitative research cycle. The aim of this study was to try and find reasons and explanations for wider societal resentment in the town of Holten, the Netherlands. It researched the possible rural resentment as a part of wider societal resentment as Holten is a town located in the (semi-)periphery of the Netherlands. The researcher based the forthcoming answers upon preliminary socio-spatial justice frameworks in existing literature and empirically gathered data. Since the research was a cross-sectional case study and no previous research has been conducted in this study area, it is not possible to extrapolate findings directly from research in other localities as every place is different. However, assumptions could be made based upon research in similar regions. This research found its niche in its qualitative nature as no earlier ethnographic research focussing on wider societal resentment has been conducted in the Netherlands as most research is quantitative in nature (e.g., Hartevelde et al., 2021). Other qualitative research has always solely focussed on voters of populist right wing parties (e.g., Damhuis, 2020). The qualitative approach allowed for a deeper insight into the attitudes and emotions of the inhabitants of Holten, which quantitative research cannot encapsulate. In its essence, this study aimed to find transferable theory that can be applied in other similar towns/regions in the Netherlands. Similar towns include those in the relatively well connected semi-peripheral countryside of the Netherlands, which do not (yet) have to deal with typical rural issues such as population decline and a loss of facilities (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

In the basis, this research focuses on the three axes of social injustices identified by Fraser (2007): cultural *recognition*, economic *redistribution* and political *representation*. Classically, this framework has been the benchmark for different justice researchers, working on individuals' perspectives. However, since the aforementioned populist turn in politics and the consequent identification of territorial voting patterns, more attention is put on the geographical component of injustice and its consequences (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; de Voogd, 2017). Florida (2006) argues that the world is divided into spikes – the city-regions and winners – and valleys – the lesser-connected and losers – due to globalisation. If there is a degree of resistance or resentment present in a particular area located in a valley of globalisation there can be further consequences – beyond the ballot vote – for wider society. Up until recently, research in the Netherlands focussed on disengaged citizens, particularly those voting for right wing populist parties, where (the non-violent) disengagement or other concepts like nonparticipation in society are seen as accurate descriptions of political distrust (e.g., Kemmers et al., 2016). However, different levels of societal resentment can quickly spiral out of control if the resistance turns into radicalisation when feelings of i) distrust (towards governmental institutions), ii) superiority (towards other societal groups), iii) vulnerability (through a changing socio-economic environment) and iv) injustice (through a lack of attention) are felt by the people within a certain region (von Essen et al., 2015). In a way, the regional and political division has never been clearer in the Netherlands as the recent wave of farmer's protests is a form of radicalisation, where all four components have come together to aggravate the demographic (NRC, 2022).

Economic Redistribution

Resentment can come in/from many different shapes and have different roots. Traditionally, the focus is mainly on relative economic hardship compared to other regions. While the European city regions are becoming ever-more prosperous, the economic growth in the hinterlands has stagnated (Martin et al., 2018). This has led to uneven regional development across the European Union, where the international difference has decreased, but regional differences within countries have increased (Butkus et al., 2018). The results: population decline, brain drain, the disappearance of facilities and social services (e.g., Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). However, rural regions have always possessed a higher degree of civic

engagement (e.g., de Voogd, 2017) and according to the author these places should be able to sustain themselves and their facilities – albeit on a lower lever – through community initiatives. It must also be noted that the studied area (Holten) does not (yet) experience direct negative effects of regional convergence. Thus, it is important in this case to go beyond standard (international) analyses that focus on economic hardship and focus on other influencing factors (Harteveld et al., 2021). Perhaps it is more relevant that in some cases, this form of economic marginalisation has led to peripheralisation: a region being perceived not to be able to socio-economically develop – or even sustain – itself. One well-illustrated example is Cornwall, United Kingdom (see Willett & Lang, 2018). Geographically distant from the core of the country, historically a land with different cultures and economically suffering from the marginalisation and consequent peripheralisation. Similar regions have found success with new approaches to socio-economic development, combining bottom-up and top-down forces into neo-endogenous development (Bosworth et al., 2020). However, as long as those that possess the power in the self-proclaimed core of the country (London in the UK or *de Randstad* in the Netherlands) do not see the particular region as a place of possibilities, these efforts often go in vain (Willett & Lang, 2018).

Cultural Recognition

Prejudices are not only based on gender, skin tone, sexuality or class, but also on place: where you are from is part of our identity. Being from a region means representing that region in the eyes of others, whether you – as a person – identify with the perceived identity or not. People living in rural regions have their way of life – hobbies, practices, habits, accents and vocabulary – devalued (or even ridiculed) compared to those living an urban, more cosmopolitan lifestyle (Carolan, 2020). However, Carolan (2020) also notes that these prejudices are often subtle. Hochschild (2016) attributes this comparison and often consequent devaluation of another person's lifestyle to the presence of an 'empathy wall': the sociological barrier that divides (socio-)spatially segregated groups. Those on either side of this barrier find the other's outlook on life and daily intricacies strange. Willett & Lang's (2018) aforementioned peripheralisation of Cornwall can also – to some degree – be attributed to (a lack of) recognition. Furthermore, the identities of the regions affected by these issues are constant processes, influenced by inside and – especially relevant here – outside factors (Paasi, 2003). The values and prejudices attributed to the people living in a particular region affect them and their identity. Moreover, research in the Netherlands has shown that these (negative) identities can also be perpetrated

by those within the region (Meij et al., 2020). Here, intergenerational cycles of poverty have led people to believe that their precarious situation belongs to them, because of internal perpetration and external confirmation of prejudice. Carolan (2020) also highlights speech and accents as a mode of devaluation in rural Colorado, USA. Earlier research in the Netherlands has shown that accents can be a barrier to complete participation in society (Ghorashi & van Tilburg, 2006). Nonetheless, this research focussed on in-migrants, where the authors note that the participants also had to cope with prejudices and exclusion based upon ethnicity and not just education level and language proficiency. Little work has been done on the effects of speaking and language where other social dimensions of identity (such as ethnicity) have not been mediated (such as Ghorashi & van Tilburg, 2006). However, Block (2018) notes that it is important to identify the damage resulting from regarding one way of speech (e.g., accents and dialects) inferior to others. Consequently, addressing these issues should increase the self-esteem and even empower those denigrated in society based upon speech (Block, 2018).

Political Representation

Resentment through or towards wider societal development has found its way to the polling stations (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). The increased globalisation has spatially differentiated effects and the consequences are felt by those that are in the “places that don’t matter”. More often than not, these voters end up voting for radical right parties (e.g., Hartevelde et al., 2021). However, based upon Fraser (2007), this can be identified as a form of misrepresentation – more accurately misframing – where those excluded from one political community are included as subjects of justice in another to create a political division. In the Dutch case, the *engaged* are represented by the establishment parties and those that are *disengaged* by the anti-establishment parties (de Voogd & Cuperus, 2021). Although these votes for the radical right used to be attributed to contextual factors (such as economic **maldistribution**), recent research has put focus on the compositional factor (Maxwell, 2019). In short, people living in cities vote in similar patterns because they live together with those with similar (cosmopolitan) values and vice versa for those in regions and (more) conservative values. Additionally, Bovens and Wille (2017) identified a ‘new’ phenomenon in the Netherlands: the *diploma democracy*. Those with the highest educational qualifications have the biggest say in politics and, consequently, those that have more practical education do not. A substantial proportion of society is thus no longer represented in the political discourse. It is important to remark that those with higher educational qualifications tend to live clustered around university cities or dispersed in the

Randstad-region of the Netherlands (e.g., Kooiman et al., 2018; CBS, 2020). Thus, the beneficiaries of the suggested diploma democracy reside in different spatial entities as those they are also meant to represent politically. Finally, it is important to note that local political parties have been gaining momentum for the past few elections (NOS, 2018i; NOS, 2022i). Hypothetically, these parties are well-suited to represent the electorate due to their place-specific contextual knowledge. However, in practice this does not remedy geographical resentment as the institutional capacities of these municipal governments are rather limited (e.g., Flacke & de Boer, 2017) within the decentralised Dutch state (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2018). Therefore, the sole fact that local political parties are winning ground in the municipal elections does not remedy the misrepresentation that is occurring on the larger (national) scale.

Methodology

This research relied primarily on a qualitative cross-sectional case study wherewith theory-generating approaches – such as grounded theory and some ethnography – were used (Baxter, 2016). Hereby, the gathering and analysis of qualitative data was an iterative cycle and not formally inductive nor deductive. It should be stated that because this research was a case study, the focus was then not to find generalizable data. Rather, findings from this research could be made transferable towards other cases by i) carefully selecting the researched case and ii) creating useful theory that was neither too abstract nor too specific (Baxter, 2016). The former was assured as Holten is a town that votes relatively similar to the Dutch national average and therefore it could be argued that it could represent an average Dutch town (AlleCijfers.NL, 2022i). While this research focussed beyond the voters of populist parties, it still was important to select a study area that reflects other places. Furthermore, a critique on case studies is the robustness of the gathered data. This research endeavoured robustness by trying to achieve theoretical saturation: the point in the research where no new themes emerge or appear and relationships between themes are fully understood (Carolan, 2020). Cross-sectional implies the scope of time of the research: the research was written as a Master's thesis and thus worked with a strict time frame. To be precise: the research ran from March 2022 until August 2022, in the second year after Dutch national elections were held. This came with challenges for the researcher as participants were not as politically engaged in a post-election year. However, the researcher levied this issue by making this research piece a co-operation between researcher and participants, by using (voluntary) participatory approaches. For example, the researcher asked participants after interviews or more informal talks in the town what they wanted to know

from other inhabitants. As a result, several other questions were added to the interview guide (see appendix II). Furthermore, the Netherlands – and the global North in general – is currently coping with a myriad of different crises: the Covid-19 crisis, the inflation crisis, a housing crisis and – particular to the Netherlands – the nitrogen crisis concerning farmers and the countryside (NOS, 2022ii). In theory, this also levied the issue of non-engagement with politics. The latter was especially relevant for this research as Holten is originally a farmer's village that has steadily grown to the town it is now, thus meaning that there are still multiple connections to the agricultural sector.

The researcher has found wide interest in the topic of this research from previous (not-so academic) informal interrogations and investigations into voting behaviour and wider resentment in his own locality. The participants helped with recruiting further participants, thereby using the snowball sampling technique, which came with potential issues that were addressed (Emerson, 2015). Every participant could only suggest one further participant. Additionally, assisting with the interpretation of early and final findings, (re)designing the interview guide and the communication of the preliminary results were also fields where the participants cooperated with the researcher. The methodology employed in this research is thus rooted in ethnography and an example of this approach can be found in Meij et al. (2020). The main data collection method for this research was semi-structured in-depth interviews that focussed on content and dealt with the issues that the researcher deemed relevant for this research (Dunn, 2016). It did employ an interview guide which can be found in appendix I, but it also allowed for flexibility between researcher and participant. The interview guide was based upon thorough literature research, but also investigates additional themes brought up by the participants. Therefore, the interview guide was subject to constant changes. In the end, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with inhabitants of the town. The participants were equally distributed between (self-identified) male and female. Furthermore, the researcher made use of field notes obtained during participatory research, similar to Carolan (2020). The field notes were completely anonymous and acquired during day-to-day life in the town. An example of when field notes were obtained and used in the research process was when taking part in the 'Proathuus' sessions in the town. This is a biweekly get-together in a café in the town centre for those – usually elderly people – that aids social bonding in the community. Its original purpose was to fight perceived loneliness by urging people to talk to other people. Those gathered were made aware of the presence of a researcher and his double role as this could have potentially disrupted full freedom of speech for the participants. However, the researcher

deemed this more informal way of gathering data plausible, as it is extremely detailed in nature as gatherings are set-up to be slow conversations with ample time for probing questions. Thus, the researcher had access to rich, detailed information as an inhabitant of Holten and could make use of this information in writing a cohesive research piece. The interviews were done in Dutch, as it is the mother tongue of both the researcher and participant, allowing a free flowing, more comfortable conversation during a semi-structured interview. An English translation of the relevant parts and quotes is provided in the analysis. The interviews were analysed completely inductively during transcribing, wherewith the possible deductive codes found in the theoretical framework were kept in mind. Participants were selected by the researcher based upon criterion sampling to get a representative view of the inhabitants of the town. To exemplify: as the 'Proathuus' meetings usually consisted of elderly people, younger residents were selected for the interviews.

Ethics and Positionality

In order to ensure confidentiality of the participants, the transcripts of all interviews were completely anonymised if requested by the participant. Furthermore, the participants had to sign an informed consent form where they confirm their willingness to participate in this study. The consent form included an option to withdraw at any consent during the research, in line with the academic code of conduct approved by the University of Groningen (2018). The filled-out forms and transcripts were stored safely by the researcher. Additionally, the field notes that were obtained during day-to-day conversations with inhabitants of Holten were made completely anonymous. The field notes were stored on an offline mobile phone, accessible only by the researcher, confidentially locked behind a password. Anonymity in this research was especially relevant as sometimes racism, xenophobia and bigotry towards those failing to display heteronormativity is present in the rural countryside (e.g., Wuthnow, 2019). Voluntary participation in this research should not lead to negative consequences or harm for the participants. There was a task for the researcher to constantly and critically reflect upon his own subjectivity and positionality as an insider in Holten. As a counteracting measure, the researcher wrote short, reflexive diary notes after each interview, as proposed by Dowling (2016). The diary notes helped the researcher to keep a clear mind between different interviews and allowed the researcher to keep note of possible improvements in his passive and active interview technique. The researcher was not in a position of power over the participants and did not benefit financially from this research. Furthermore, the degree of rurality of the village had to

be determined by the researcher as this affects the issues determined to be relevant in this research. Whereas Holten is located in one of the more ‘rural’ provinces of the Netherlands, the researcher does not consider the village to be classically rural for reasons that are particular to the Dutch countryside (see: Haartsen et al. (2003) as before). Generally speaking, almost every participant in this research tended to agree with this viewpoint as Holten was often seen as a semi-peripheral town.

Case Study Description

This research was conducted in the ‘rural’ Dutch village of Holten, Overijssel, which has approximately 9.000 inhabitants. The town is located next to the Sallandse Heuvelrug National Park and therefore relies upon the leisure and recreation economy for a share of its income. The annual average income per capita is €27.300, which is a little below the national average (AlleCijfers.NL, 2022ii). It is important to note that Dutch rurality is always relative to other regions in the Netherlands as classic rural issues such as improper (digital) infrastructure are less likely to be present (Salemink et al., 2017). Rurality in the Netherlands is based upon visual-figurative aspects rather than socio-economic divisions between regions (Haartsen et al., 2003). Additionally, almost all of the places within the ‘rural’ region are located in the close proximity (+– 30km) of a regional centre of economic activity, such as Deventer in this particular study area.

Holten falls under the municipal jurisdiction of Rijssen-Holten, which is a relatively new municipality formed at the start of the millennium. This merging has always been debatable and is relevant to keep in mind when discussing local relations. There were several arguments made against the merging: i) the crossing of cultural-historical borders: Holten belongs to the sub-provincial Salland region, while the inhabitants of Rijssen long towards Twente and ii) Rijssen is considered to be an exclave of the Dutch ‘Bible Belt’ (see Knippenberg, 2005), which can be concluded from the fact that around twenty percent of the municipality practice the Reformed faith, which is the highest share in the province of Overijssel (Knippenberg, 2018). However, most of those included in that percentage are inhabitants of Rijssen as can be made up by looking at the voting

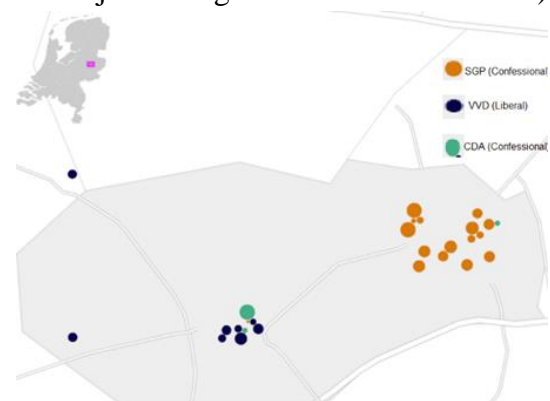


Figure 1: Map of Rijssen-Holten and winning party per polling station in 2021 Election (KRO-Pointer, 2021).

patterns in national elections. The inhabitants of Holten vote much more akin to the national average, while the inhabitants of Rijssen vote for the conservative-confessional SGP (see figure 1, adapted from KRONCRV-Pointer, 2021). Additionally, the Netherlands is an extreme country with many different dialects that have developed over centuries which resulted in observed differences on a micro geographical scale. For example, even within a minor municipality such as Rijssen-Holten, there are two different dialects.

This study area was selected because of the researcher's ability to function as its own insider, due to his close connections to the people of the village. The insider position in this research signals similarities between the researcher and the participants (Dowling, 2016). On the one hand, the information and interpretation of said information could be more valid than those of an outsider as (lingual, socio-cultural) boundaries are less likely to be present. On the other hand, it did bring questions regarding positionality with it that were addressed in a following section. On top of the aforementioned easy way of entry into the village's community and access to participants, Holten has seen a shift in voting behaviour from traditional establishment parties to more anti-establishment parties (Tubantia, 2021). Although de Voogd and Cuperus (2021) do not consider Holten disengaged to the degree that other (relatively) rural regions in Netherlands are, the researcher has anecdotally gathered suspicions over the past years that suggest a different picture. Hence, the researcher deemed it especially relevant to take a closer look at the roots of resentment in a study area that has not yet translated its discontent into democratically legitimate (e.g., voting behaviour, protests) or illegal (e.g., violence or radicalisation; see von Essen et al., 2015) extremes. Additionally, as tourism is integrated in the town's economy, it was interesting to see whether the argued socio-psychological contact benefits – such as erasing prejudices – between outsiders (tourists) and insiders (inhabitants) can be confirmed (Çelik, 2019). It is argued that different social groups need the interaction to develop (e.g., Tsing, 2005) and this could be present on the micro-scale as well. Furthermore, the town has seen a continued influx of outsiders that know the region and its pleasant scenery from earlier recreational visits. Earlier research has shown that this can lead to internal struggles: i) the incomers trying to preserve the rural idyll – the somewhat constructed reality of what living in the countryside is like (Peeren & Souch, 2019) – and ii) locals being prized out of the housing market due to their lower financial capabilities compared to the incomers (Shioji, 2014).

Timeframe

The Netherlands as a country in the global Western hemisphere is struggling with the same unprecedented crises that other countries camp with as well: the (aftermath) of the Covid-19 crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis and – particular to the Netherlands – the nitrogen crisis (NOS, 2022ii). For some general background on the latter, consecutive political cabinets have neglected the opportunity to do something about the relatively high levels of nitrogen pollution in the country, which endangers the ‘natural’ growth of protected nature areas in the Netherlands. Therefore, the current government has to comply with the EU-wide net zero regulations and ensure that the emission of nitrogen is drastically reduced. As Holten is located in one of the more ‘rural’ provinces of the Netherlands, personal connections to those affected in the nitrogen crisis are easily found. On top of that, the government of the Netherlands is struggling to house all of the asylum seekers that come to the country in proper housing as the cooperation between local and national actors is lacking. As a result, the central agency has opted to buy real estate in the country to accommodate them, which has led to mixed reactions (e.g., NOS, 2022iii). All of these crises combined have had an obvious influence on the morale and consequently the responses of the participants in this fieldwork. On the one hand, it was extremely interesting to see and analyse the reactions of people along the constantly new developments and turns. On the other hand, these rapidly changing circumstances can – and have – lead to short-sighted answers and discussions as participants found it difficult to look beyond the current (micro) trends while doing this research. The goal of this research originally was to paint a picture of the course of societal development over a longer timeframe. However, this is something out of influence for the researcher and therefore no additional measures were taken.

Discussion

In this section, the findings from the fieldwork are discussed and related back to principles of socio-spatial justice. In general, the participants felt proud to be living in Holten and considered the town to be a great part of their own identity, perhaps best illustrated by this participant (F, 56): *“Holten is me and I am Holten”*. Holten feels like a home to most of the participants and most would not consider moving. *“It can be the tractors that make too much noise when I walk away from the train station, it can be that I walk into the supermarket and have to greet ten people because I know them all, (or) a certain smell”*, one participant (F, 21) said. Furthermore,

the (subjective) attractive recreational character that Holten possesses aids with generating a positive view of the town. Therefore, almost all of the participants agreed that the influx of tourists is something positive for the town's development. However, there is no evidence that psychological barriers could be broken between the locals and the tourists, as suspected by Çelik (2019). Participants often noted that tourists have different attitudes than locals with the words "*bolder*" and "*in themselves*" being used to describe the tourists.

However, this research is not here to paint a perfect picture about the town if there are mistakes in the painting. As previously discussed, racism, bigotry and xenophobia are very much (still) present in the countryside towards those that do not fit the normative standard (Wuthnow, 2019). It is difficult as a researcher to decide what to do in certain situations where you morally feel obliged to act upon something that does not sit right without breaking your alter ego or hindering your fieldwork. One participant (M, 29) also reflected upon these barriers between different groups that prevent further progress in society, also known as empathy walls (Hochschild, 2016): "*it is not that I feel like Holten is racist, but it can have its racist tendencies... because there is still too much discrimination in Holten. This goes close to my heart as a normal citizen that has an open view on the world, because you are powerless as the group that participates in the division is still too large.*" The same participant also said that there is a role for local government to engage citizens in more activities that can mitigate this issue.

With the previous paragraph being mentioned, the participants often expressed a general discontent towards societal developments. The most relevant themes are discussed in the following section and it should be noted that the participants had no prior knowledge of the pillars of Fraser's social justice (2007) and the interview was set up in such a way that no direct links could be made towards these axes.

Misrepresentation

One of the returning themes was a feeling of misrepresentation by those voted to be in office. Oftentimes, participants felt that the issues that are specific to certain regions are not dealt with equally across the country. One of the participants (M, 21) hypothesised that one of the reasons for this feeling could be something along the lines of geographical disparities: "*as the people that represent us, out of them a lot live in the West and they originally come from the West as well*". 'The West' in this sentence is an us versus them notion that is present in the Netherlands,

where ‘the West’ or the Randstad is positioned opposed to the rest of the country in terms of social, cultural and political values. It was interesting to note that most of the participants felt like those people that come from the West are generally more vocal and louder about their issues, which was also brought up when discussing inter-regional contact between those from the West and the rest of the country. One participant (F, 56) said: “*verbally they are stronger and they have more courage, while we are calmer until we cannot cope anymore and then we will come*”, where the latter part is an example of possible resentment that can spiral out of control and radicalize if certain conditions are met (von Essen et al., 2015). The fact that there is a feeling that a majority of politicians represent these (different) ideas is a sentiment of **geographical** misrepresentation (Fraser, 2007). This is an overarching feeling among a lot of participants, as another remarked: “*the perfect picture always has to come from the Randstad I think that the government makes choices based upon things that come from the Randstad and that sometimes the rest of the country is neglected.*” Additionally, another participant – a man in his early twenties – tried to come up with one of the reasons for this: “*there is always a certain tendency, most people live in the cities therefore most attention will be directed towards there*”. Obviously, there are problems connected to neglect of the hinterlands where the issues that are relevant to other parts of the country are sometimes overlooked (see Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). One participant (F, 50) argued: “*if you feel connected to it [a certain region within the country], it is easier to stand up for it*”. This leads to a disconnection between politics and the people and one possible way to address these sentiments of resentment is to make sure that there is an equal geographical distribution of representatives, which is a job for the different political parties in the Dutch electoral system when they are setting up their candidate lists. Sentiments of needing more geographical representation are common between the participants, as illustrated when a participant (F, 56) was questioned on what is needed for better representation: “*getting the right people at the right places and then also the people that sometimes listen to us*”. Another participant (F, 50) felt it was unfair that the geographical representation is skewed across the different regions in the Netherlands.

Additionally, the topic of misrepresentation came up out of the blue during one of the ‘Proathuus’ meetings when one woman in her 70s remarked that she used to feel more connected to the politicians of the past because the representatives used to be more ‘of the people’. When questioned on what this meant to her, she said that nowadays all politicians seem to have gone to universities, compared to undergoing more practical education and eventually ending up in the national parliament. To her, this signals some form of disconnection between

the people and those that are meant to represent them as this is not a proportional representation of Dutch society. Another participant (F, 56) remarked in an interview: *“if you rise on the social ladder without a diploma, you really went for it ... while they [those with higher formal education qualifications] can come across like: ‘yes, we have already made it’”*. Therefore, she feels like she is completely unrepresented in the Dutch national parliament. This is an extension of Fraser’s misrepresentation (2007) into the dimension of the so-called ‘diploma democracy’ by Bovens & Wille (2017), where a large share of the population is not adequately represented in parliament or government due to the differences in educational qualifications. Right now, there is a certain distrust and dissatisfaction in ‘the state’, consisting of politicians, parties, government and its agencies and officials, which has been documented more thoroughly before (Kemmers et al., 2016).

Misrecognition

Devaluation of rural hobbies and traditions – as explained by Carolan (2020) – is another topic that is close to the heart of those participating in this research. Several participants aired their concerns regarding the devaluation of rural traditions. For example: Holten and its hamlets have an age-old tradition of building big bonfires at Easter, where communities work together and bond in order to build either the biggest or the prettiest Easter bonfire. One participant (M, 23) juxtaposed negatives to the aforementioned tendencies when the norm is where the most people live: *“if you for example look at the Easter bonfires here that is a certain tradition that is around, and it will always be frowned upon with regards to the environmental numbers which is another example of that the countryside will always be frowned upon.”* These fires certainly are not appreciated in the same way by local people as compared to those on the outside of the communities. To the insiders, it embodies the closeness and strength of the community where every family – including mothers and daughters – works together (almost) daily for weeks to build the most prestigious, prize-winning fire. On the other hand, from an outsider perspective, it simply is an Easter fire of which there are hundreds in these parts of the Netherlands. Additionally, the bonfires have been criticized more often than not for their pollution (e.g., NOS, 2018ii). One local living in a nearby hamlet remarked that prior to this research, people migrated into the area and consistently complained about the noise and air pollution coming from the fires. This did not sit well with the locals, which led to them being excluded from the village community and consequently another move. This is a prime example of the tension between newcomers and locals documented by Shioji (2014). The incomers want

to preserve the rural idyll – the pleasant, calm greenery and scenery – that attracted them to this region and see the Easter fires that smoulder and smoke on for over a week as a nuisance, without knowing that this is a generational local tradition.

Initially, even though Holten is not a farming community, as most of its inhabitants do not have direct relatives or other links to farmers in the surrounding hamlets, the participants often expressed a general feeling of solidarity towards the farmers in the rest of the Netherlands amidst the so-called ‘nitrogen-crisis’ that the country is facing. Besides that, some more practical concerns regarding the nitrogen-crisis were also raised during the interviews. One participant – a man in his twenties – mentioned that the support for Dutch farmers is necessary for food price stability in the wake of sudden changes in the market. While the extreme of this point – the *no farmers, no food* slogan that protestors use and is visible throughout the Dutch countryside – has been refuted by experts (e.g., EenVandaag, 2022), a drastic reduction of agricultural activity in the Netherlands can still have an effect on the food market. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that farming is much more than an economic activity for certain families. It is an identity and a way of life, which has persevered for over generations, further rooted in the landscape (Niska et al., 2012). Sudden changes in this dynamic between occupation and identity can have lasting, damaging effects for those involved. However, over the remainder of the period in which this research was conducted, the attitudes towards the farmer’s protests changed. Whether that was down to the disrupting nature of the protests or something else depended on who was questioned. Those that were often affected by the protests personally (e.g., in the form of journeys from and to work being prolonged) fall in the former category, while others had more issues with the tone of the public debate (e.g., the usage of ‘questionable’ symbols). Nonetheless, what became clear from informal conversations during the fieldwork is that the anti-establishment BBB party has gained a lot of support in favour of the establishment CDA party, which can be a signal that Holten is moving from engaged to disengaged (see de Voogd & Cuperus, 2021).

On top of that, there are certain (subtle) prejudices connected to living in a more rural area of the Netherlands. They differ per region of the Netherlands, but participants of this research found themselves often associated with farmers and the wider agricultural sector when they came into contact with others. One participant (M, 21) mentioned: “*if I go to another place in the Netherlands, there are different views on people from the East, sometimes you hear some of the prejudice: farmer-like, vulgar and so on...*”. It is clear that these prejudices could affect

the way that people are treated (Carolan, 2020). Furthermore, it can be argued that this evidence of Hochschild's empathy walls (2016). These (hypothetical) walls function as a barrier between different societal groups and hinders mutual understanding. As long as these prejudices are still experienced by those living on the Dutch countryside, it hinders societal progress. Different groups need the interaction between one another to develop further (Tsing, 2005).

Someone's ability to hold conversations in the local language is pivotal for their success in a society. As mentioned before, the Netherlands is a peculiar country with many different dialects. Previous research has shown the adverse effects of different languages being spoken simultaneously and the damage that can be done to someone's self-esteem and confidence if they are speaking a language (or dialect) that is considered inferior to another (Block, 2018). This research does neither completely confirm nor deny these issues to be present in Holten. On the one hand, participants complained about having the feeling that they need to change their accent based upon the social situation they found themselves in in off-record conversations. On the other hand, during recorded conversations, several participants remarked that they never experienced these issues or even admitted positive experiences, as illustrated by this participant in his twenties: "*Sometimes, people even appreciate it if you are yourself and you have your own accent*". Afterwards, they added that it is also a source of pride that they represent the place that they have always enjoyed living in and that they do not feel shame about portraying it. One possible explanation that the degradation of someone based upon their speech was not felt to be as important by the participants can be that participants were not selected based upon their level of Dutch or the degree of dialect they speak on a day-to-day basis. While those selected are representative for the population of Holten, it somewhat underexposes those affected by these aforementioned issues, as it concerns a minority (as is often the case).

Maldistribution

Most of the international literature focusses on economic redistribution as a source of rural injustice (e.g., Carolan, 2020). Contrary to previous qualitative research on this topic, feelings of resentment based upon economic situations were not common in this research. This could arguably be down to the fact that common precursors of resentment – such as population decline and the disappearance of facilities and social services (e.g., Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017) – are not (yet) present in this region. The level of facilities and services has stayed roughly the same in the town and although it is not at the level of larger towns or cities, the inhabitants are satisfied: "*we do have our shops, but it really is a grocery village, not a shopping village, but*

that is okay". In a way, this confirms the earlier assumptions on the presence of resentment that it is important to look beyond the standard of economic hardship as causation for populist attitudes (Harteveld et al., 2021). Although several participants remarked that they felt that the (cultural or political) attitudes of the West (or Randstad) were more often discourse than those of the rest of the country, no one expressed the suspicion that more money was (unfairly) invested in the West. Therefore, it is perhaps more interesting in this case study to look at maldistribution on a local scale. Most of the comments made on this topic were aimed at the micro scale (e.g., the municipal government) rather than on the national level. As residents of the smaller town in a two-town municipality, the participants generally felt the need to vote for what is best for the town rather than for themselves, perhaps best summed up by this 21-year old's (M) quote: "*Nationwide, I choose for myself, so I opt for [what is best for] education and on the municipal level I opt for what is best for Holten as Rijssen is kind of a Christian community and a lot of Christian people then vote for the Christian parties and there we get automatic influence as the decisions they take will have effect in Holten. For example, the fact that shops are closed on a Sunday while a majority in Holten wants them to be open we have to respect and listen to that.*" However, these issues are often either cultural or religious, as specified before. The fact that a certain level of facilities in Rijssen-Holten is upheld is down to the relatively stable financial position of the municipality. Therefore, the participants tend to, after a rocky start to the municipal relationship, see the positives of being in a municipality with Rijssen, illustrated by the same participant (M, 21) as before: "*Rijssen also offers a lot of positives to Holten, such as extra municipal money, there are a lot of extra changes and Holten has become very pretty in the time that it has been added to Rijssen*". This could be an indication that the municipal relationship is getting better, which is vital for local politics. Furthermore, the local ban on supermarkets being open on Sundays was lifted during this research, which - after years of discussions – hypothetically strengthens the tie from the Holten-side.

There is no real indication in this research that the compositional factor is more important to the development of similar beliefs and attitudes towards societal development than the contextual factor as previously discussed by Maxwell (2019). Most of the participants agreed that although politics and society are commonly discussed between groups of friends and relatives, rarely are viewpoints and stances adopted from others. Generally, the group of participants found themselves independent thinkers that come to their own political views via different means: traditional media, party leaflets or previous decisions. On the other hand, this

might be down to some sort of social desirability bias, where participants were not eager to share with a critical researcher that they could be influenceable (e.g., Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

Limitations and Recommendations

Obviously, this research piece is not an all-encompassing overview of the (dis)sentiments in a Dutch semi-rural town. Holten is only as representative for the general Dutch countryside as the next person deems it to be. The cross-sectional nature of the research does however allow for a snapshot of how current socio-cultural and political-economic phenomena are perceived by its inhabitants. On top of that, a qualitative study where eight inhabitants were interviewed and dozens of others were questioned informally is not representative for the attitude of the whole town. Additionally, it is beyond the capabilities of one researcher to come to grasp with all the complexities and underlying information of the acquired data even though the researcher functioned as an insider. Furthermore, decisions had to be taken about what to include and exclude – obviously more than the former – which could have led to some vital information being cut out from the final research piece. Generally speaking, participants were more eager to share information when conversations were not recorded or in a more informal setting. It felt like sometimes participants were even biting their tongue due to a certain social desirability to give the right answers as they knew that the research was going to be published.

Conclusion

In general, the timeframe in which this research was conducted is completely unprecedented. The protests that have been clearly visible throughout the Dutch countryside are signs for wider societal resentment, symbolized by the appearance of upside-down flags throughout the Dutch (semi-)periphery and which goes beyond the current theme (NRC, 2022). It was interesting to see the opinions and attitudes of participants and inhabitants alike change over the course of this research piece. While at first, support for the farmer's protests was overwhelming among the inhabitants of Holten, it fizzled out over the next months due to reasons mentioned in the discussion. Additionally, while the pandemic was still a relevant topic at the start of this research, it got less relevant and therefore less brought up in discussions the further the research progressed. It shows that it is very difficult to get an accurate snapshot of the attitude of people towards society or societal development as a whole, as people tend to view 'the current thing' as the most important and are likely to form their opinion based upon what is said at that time.

One might even wonder then how representative elections are if they are held once every four years.

To conclude by answering the main research question, the roots of resentment towards societal development in Holten cannot be attributed to the economic situation that the town finds itself in. None of the participants expressed feelings of dissatisfaction based upon the (more international) injustice of maldistribution (e.g., Carolan, 2020). Rather, the resentment can be found in the political and cultural realms. For the former, it feels like the representation in the Dutch ‘state’ is disproportionately off, either geographically or based upon educational qualifications, which leads to a disconnect between politics and the people. Whereas for the latter, there seems to be a socio-psychological disconnection – or an empathy wall so to say (Hochschild, 2016) – between people from the Dutch Randstad and the rest of the country. Participants want their daily life to be seen of the same value as others’, without their hobbies or traditions being devalued or personally being subjected to prejudice.

Finally, Holten is not a radical right stronghold and is never likely to become one, based upon the findings of this research. However, this must not mean that the resentment towards societal development that is felt by its inhabitants can be shoved away as irrelevant. Resentment portrays itself in various ways – such as nonvoting and nonparticipation (Kemmers et al., 2016) – and can also be detrimental to a healthily functioning society. The likelihood that Holten will move from engaged (as it is now according to de Voogd & Cuperus, 2021) to disengaged is increasing the longer it takes for appropriate action to be taken by central government. Although it is impossible to observe patterns of nonvoting and nonparticipation yet due to the relative prematurity of these phenomena, it still raises concerns. Additionally, radicalisation of certain groups is a danger that is always looming is feelings of distrust, superiority, vulnerability and injustice are felt (von Essen et al., 2015). Specifically this dangerous cocktail has come together and ignited the previously discussed farmer’s protests in several different places of the Dutch countryside during the timespan of this study. The struggle to accommodate asylum seekers in human-worthy places in the country can be the next if the underlying issues are not addressed. These incidents are symbol for the underlying regional societal resentment that is present in the Netherlands (van den Berg & Kok, 2021) and stand in the way of societal progress. Only one match is needed to light another fire in another place.

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Appendix I: Consent Form Interview (in Dutch)

Introductie

U wordt uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan een Masterscriptie van een student aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Het project heeft als doel om inzicht te bieden naar de tevredenheid van de inwoners van een doorsnee dorp in Nederland ten aanzien van sociale ontwikkelingen.

Samenvatting en duur van het project

Het project duurt ongeveer 20 minuten. Het vraaggesprek zal – indien gewenst – op een privé-locatie plaatsvinden om deelname aan het project niet openbaar te maken voor anderen. De onderzoeker zal tijdens een interactief interview verschillende vragen stellen welke u zodoende vrij mag beantwoorden. Aangezien het onderzoek een Masterscriptie betreft, zal het openbaar gepubliceerd worden.

Privacy

De audioresultaten die tijdens dit project met een spraakrecorder worden verzameld zullen strikt vertrouwelijk behandeld worden. De gegevens worden door de onderzoeker geanalyseerd en kunnen – indien nagevraagd – gedeeld worden met de begeleider van het project. Als u er voor kiest om anoniem deel te nemen aan dit onderzoeksproject zal de onderzoeker er voor zorgen dat de verzamelde gegevens niet direct tot u zijn te herleiden. De data die wordt verzameld worden drie jaar bewaard in een beveiligde omgeving met multi-factor authenticatie.

Deelname

Deelname aan het project is vrijwillig. Het is uw keuze om deel te nemen en u kunt zich op elk moment terugtrekken uit het project zonder hiervoor een reden te hoeven opgeven. Stoppen met deelname zal op geen enkele wijze gevolgen voor u hebben. Daarnaast kunt u op een later moment – na afname van het interview – besluiten om uw deelname in te trekken.

Verdere informatie

Als u nu of tijdens het project vragen hebt kunt u die altijd stellen aan de onderzoeker. Mocht u na afloop nog vragen hebben, dan kunt u de onderzoeker ook nog e-mailen.

- Ik heb de projectinformatie gelezen. Ik heb de mogelijkheid gehad om na te denken over mijn deelname en heb vragen kunnen stellen aan de onderzoeker.
- Ik geef vrijwillig toestemming om aan dit project deel te nemen.
- Ik geef vrijwillig toestemming voor het gebruiken van mijn antwoorden voor de doeleinden die in de projectinformatie vermeld staan.

- Ik wens dat mijn gegevens geanonimiseerd worden en hierdoor niet tot mij te herleiden zijn.

Handtekening participant:

Contactgegevens Onderzoeker



Appendix II: Final Interview Guide (in Dutch)

Hallo, mijn naam is Tijmen Traanman en ik doe op dit moment onderzoek naar regionale ontevredenheid voor mijn Masterscriptie aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Hiervoor heb ik een kort interview opgezet met verschillende vragen waaraan u deelname hebt toegezegd, waarvoor dank. Ter herinnering: dit interview is op vrijwillige basis, dus als u een vraag niet wil beantwoorden hoeft dit niet en u kunt te allen tijde besluiten te stoppen met dit interview.

Zou u een korte omschrijving van uzelf kunnen geven?

- Wie bent u, hoe oud bent u en hoelang woont u al in Holten?
- Heeft u hiervoor al eens ergens anders gewoond? Zoja, wat was de reden om (weer) naar Holten terug te keren?

Kunt u een standaard doordeweekse (werk)dag van uzelf beschrijven?

- *Indien contact met andere Nederlanders:* Hoe is het contact met mensen uit andere regio's?
- Wordt er wel eens iets gezegd over een (mogelijk) accent?
 - o Hoe voelt u zich daarbij?
- Zijn er wel eens verschillen qua inzichten merkbaar vanwege de verschillende regio's waarin u woont?

Wanneer beschouwt u uw eigen leven als een succes als u op uw oude dag reflecteert op je leven?

- Welke van deze twee personen vindt u succesvoller: persoon A met een hoger inkomen zonder HBO/universitair schooldiploma of persoon B met hoger schooldiploma maar een lager inkomen?
- Zou u deze keuze kunnen verklaren?

Hoe denkt u dat er van buiten Holten naar het dorp wordt gekeken?

- Wat zijn de positieve aspecten binnen deze regio?
- Wat zijn de negatieve aspecten binnen deze regio?
- In hoeverre is Holten een onderdeel van uw eigen identiteit?
- *Hoe identificeer je je naar buiten? (Als Holtenaar of iets anders? Waarom?)*

Er zijn binnen de geografie verschillende gradaties van stedelijkheid mogelijk, variërend van centrum via halve/semi-periferie naar periferie als meest plattelands. In welke categorie zou u Holten plaatsen?

- Wilt u uw keuze verklaren?

Zou u uw eigen politieke ideologie willen omschrijven?

- Hoe kijkt u op dit moment naar de staat en ontwikkeling van Nederland?
- Welke ontwikkelingen beschouwt u als positief?
- Welke ontwikkelingen beschouwt u als negatief?
- Wordt er volgens u naar elke regio in Nederland even goed geluisterd door de landelijke overheid?
- *Zo nee, hoe zou dat opgelost kunnen worden?*
- *Hoe vindt u dat u vertegenwoordigd wordt in de politiek?*

Waarop baseert u uw keuzes in het stemhokje indien er gestemd mag worden?

- Welke verschillen zijn er in uw stemgedrag tussen de verschillende verkiezingen?
- Zijn mensen in uw omgeving van invloed op uw politieke standpunten?

Hoe denk je over de toeristen die Holten aandoen?

- Hoe zijn de interacties met de toeristen?
- In hoeverre vindt u het investeren in toerisme in en rondom Holten een goede zaak?

Zijn er nog dingen waarvan u zegt: ik vind het raar dat dat me niet is gevraagd of dit wil ik nog graag toevoegen aan dit vraaggesprek?

- Dan wil ik u bedanken voor dit interview!