



Pride & Precarity

The Development of Dutch Farmers' Repertoire of Contention and Its Relevance for Germany

Master thesis

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Contents

Introduction	3
Background	3
Research objective	5
Research question.....	5
Theoretical framework	6
Transnational agrarian movements	11
Hypothesis.....	13
Methods.....	13
Delimitation of study area.....	13
Data collection and analysis.....	14
Ethical considerations	15
Findings.....	16
Evolution of Dutch repertoire of contention since 2019.....	16
Dutch farmers impact on famers’ protest in Germany	24
Discussion & Conclusion.....	28
References	32
Appendix I Overview of protest and ROC in both countries	
Appendix II Codebook for Dutch protest.....	
Appendix III Codebook for German protest.....	

Abstract

This research utilizes media content analysis to investigate the evolution of farmers' repertoires of contention in the Netherlands and Germany between 2019 and 2024, emphasizing the influence of Dutch protest actions on the German movement. While both repertoires share similarities, the underlying motives and objectives differ significantly: Dutch protests defend neoliberal capitalism and portray agriculture as a socially beneficial industry, evoking emotional responses through romanticized rural imagery that frames farmers as both victims of state politics, and heroic drivers of the national economy. In contrast, German protests challenge neoliberal hegemony by addressing supermarket pricing policies and demonstrating a greater willingness for dialogue. Ultimately, the thesis reveals that farmers' protests in both countries arise from a shared sense of being unjustly blamed for environmental issues, utilizing distinct populist rhetoric that reflects their unique agricultural local identities and challenges.

Introduction

Background

Throughout the EU, farmers' protests are emerging, opposing restrictive policies related to environmental and climate concerns, international trade agreements, subsidies and taxes (Bosma & Peeren, 2021; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; van der Ploeg, 2020). Predominantly, these policies stem from global environmental concerns yet also from neoliberal influences of the EU's agriculture at large, with increasingly globalised market pressures threatening to undermine the EU farmers' continuation and way of life (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). Whilst unified under a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and in grappling with the consequences of neoliberalism, the challenges facing farmers in individual member states of the EU are divergent (Woods, 2015). For instance, Dutch farmers tend to embrace globalised food markets whereas Italians perceive them as a threat (van der Ploeg, 2020). Further axes of difference contributing to varying dynamics of farmers' protest can be observed in relation to how national governments implement EU environmental regulations. In Denmark, for instance, the decision to soften nitrogen related restrictive policies impeded farmers' protest, albeit temporarily (van der Ploeg, 2020). The dissimilar circumstances present in EU member states hence have led to a variety of triggers for rural mobilisation and protest, alternating in character, scale, timeframe and objectives (Woods, 2015).

The upsurge of farmers in attempting to reclaim power, or at least a right to co-determination, by no means is a novel phenomenon (van der Ploeg, 2020). As Woods (2015) shows, farmers' mass protests have been a constant reoccurrence throughout the EU since the 1970s. These protests not only aim to address government restrictions in relation to agriculture and ensuing economic dilemmas, yet also reflect rural resistance more generally (Kenny & Luca, 2021). The perception of cosmopolitan elites interfering in rural affairs, habitually neglecting the needs of rural populations, for long have been a source of conflict all over Europe (Bosma & Peeren, 2021; Van Vulpen, 2023). Although the EU policy interventions are sector specific, i.e. agriculture, inhabitants not directly affiliated with the sector increasingly sympathise with protests defending the 'rural way of life' (Huijsmans, 2023; von Essen et al., 2015). Grievances and distrust towards national politics on behalf of rural and peripheral communities are multifactorial and embedded in the historic struggle for autonomy and a right to have a say (Valk et al., 2023).

Whilst Europe has witnessed reoccurring farmers' protests during the second half of the 20th century, these took place during times of relative stability of the respective nation state, and Europe at large (Woods, 2015). However, a wave of nationalism and right-wing populism has swept the EU in recent years, with nowadays one in three national government depending on or consisting of a populist party (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; Scoones et al., 2018; von Essen et al., 2015). Decades of structural neglect and political infringement in rural affairs have fostered an increasingly hostile climate between urban elites and rural populations. The upsurge of particularly right-wing populism predominantly thanks its success to rural discontent and its associated constituencies (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). In relation to farmers, this dynamic is accelerated by the fact that an increasing number of farmers in the EU are unable to identify with the traditional farmers' unions and perceive them to fail in representing their needs accordingly (van der Ploeg, 2020). Above all, populist parties tap into the feeling of structural neglect and declare a return to a politics of *vox populi* (De Jonge & Voerman, 2023).

Yet the upheaval of farmers has not been confined to the political realm alone. As Valk et al. (2023) show, Europe, and particularly the Netherlands, has seen a steady increase in anti-government related extremism since 2016. Whilst farmers are heterogeneous in both practices and interests (Leitheiser et al., 2022), the mutual underlying grievances have fostered protest against central government (van der Ploeg, 2020). In the Netherlands, the increased perception of farmers as the pawns of the nation has given rise to the formation of protest groups, e.g. Farmers Defence Force (FDF) and Agractie. These arguably militant and populist groups were central to the emerging protests in the Netherlands in late 2019, responsible for road blocks and occupation of public space. Similarly, other EU member states have witnessed the emergence of militant protest, albeit due to contrasting triggers (van der Ploeg, 2020).

However, and despite the transnational triggers for national protest, to date the EU at large has not seen the emergence of a organised transnational farmers' movement aiming to bring forth coordinated action based on solidarity (Woods, 2015). Protest, thus, has stayed within the realm of national borders and domestic parameters. Protest in this regard is an encompassing term referring to diversity of actions, strategies and tactics that actors invoke on in order to express their discontent and challenge existing hegemonial structures of power (Hanna et al., 2016). As Seifert (2015) outlines, the emerging issues and cross-border nature of challenges facing farmers have potential to bring forth such a movement. However, to date the literature on this topic

remains scarce. In line with Borrás et al. (2008), both the analysis of interconnectivity as well as the connection between studies on social movements and changing agrarian dynamics require more attention in the literature. As van der Ploeg (2020) illustrates, Dutch groups in the past have served as a role model for militant protest in Germany, yet to this date it is unclear how groups such as the FDF or Agractie influence protest movements and collective action in other EU countries and if there are endeavours to bring forth a European agrarian movement transcending national boundaries. Whilst acknowledging social movements as central to contemporary rural politics, Woods (2003) raises the need to understand the practices of organising protest events, the motivations to participate in protest and the perception of belonging and identity. As Woods (2003) further acknowledges, a shared sense of rurality above all is marked by disunity, however, also accommodates capacity for the emergence of novel transnational alliances opposing hegemonic structures.

Research objective

The objective of this research is to identify and describe how the collective repertoire of contention (ROC) of Dutch farmers has influenced that of German farmers. In doing so, the evolution of Dutch farmers' protest since October 1st 2019, the emergence of widespread street protest during which several highways across the country were blocked, was investigated (Bosma & Peeren, 2021). It thus serves as a foundation for inquiry. Furthermore, this study aimed to investigate the interconnectedness of protesting farmers' groups in both the Netherlands and Germany. By doing so, the exchange of strategies were explored. Given that protest derives its legitimacy from broader societal values, exploring national framework conditions becomes essential in regard to how successful protest initiatives are.

Research question

How has the collective repertoire of contention among Dutch and German farmers evolved since October 2019, with a focus on the role and impact of Dutch farmers?

- How has the Dutch farmers' repertoire of contention in the Netherlands evolved since 2019?

The objective of sub question 1 is to analyse the evolution of the ROC among Dutch protesting farmers since October 2019. This ROC encompasses the various tactics, strategies, activities and organisation dynamics of protest that actors invoke. As Hanna et al. (2016) show, protest does not emerge from abstract philosophical discussions but results from underlying conflicts and struggle. Throughout the EU, farmers are struggling with framework conditions and legal requirements in a constant flux. If the perceived illegitimacy and intolerability of these conditions exceed a threshold, protest is likely to occur. Protest in this regard is the redressive action actors take in order to pursue their agenda. Yet this ROC rarely is static yet evolves constantly as part of a learning process. As part of the first research question, the evolution of this ROC will be scrutinized in order to showcase the dynamics it took since October 2019.

- How does the repertoire of contention of Dutch farmers influence the repertoire of protesting farmers in Germany?

The objective of sub question 2 is to explore the influence of tactics and strategies of Dutch protesting groups and their respective counterparts in Germany. Protest can be regarded as learned behaviour that is exchanged and bequeathed between individual groups (Diani, 1992; Rolfe, 2005). However, also innovation of protest can be present, implying that actors invoke on other ROC and bring forth novel ways of redressive action. The FDF since June 2023 also is established in Belgium (FDF-Bestuur, 2023), and first indications of a new branch can also be observed in Germany (Der Spiegel, 2024). The rationale for the selection of countries to be analysed, as well as the delineation of this study area, is included in chapter 3.1 Study area.

Theoretical framework

Despite peasant protest having a long history in Europe, the turn of the millennium marks the departure from the imaginary of an apolitical countryside (Strijker et al., 2015; Woods, 2003). As Woods (2003) argues, the paradigm of the rural as an object of governance increasingly fails to meet broader rural concerns transcending sectoral economic interests. Institutional fragmentation and sectoral policies have rendered the intrusion of neoliberal interests, favouring land consolidation and expansion of individual farmers (Woods, 2003; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). However, with neoliberal and international market pressures jeopardizing the revenue model of European farmers (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020) and restrictions from environmental

policies increasingly gaining momentum, protest rooted in wider resentment and neglect have surfaced (van Vulpen, 2023). Within this, the emergence of agrarian protest forms a response to disturbance on the established rural organisation, order and rurality as a way of life (Strijker et al., 2015). Rural, in this sense, thus has a wider meaning than relating to peasants exclusively and resonates with rural resistance more generally (Strijker et al., 2015). The formation of rural protest hence is embedded in broader sociopolitical contexts and historical legacies and cannot be understood decoupled from those. Collectively, these factors shape the framework conditions under which and how rural protest emerges (Woods, 2015). Parallel to diverging social, political and economic triggers for rural discontent, the various forms of protest similarly are conditioned by and embedded in broader socio-political contexts that form the framework for the legitimacy and appropriateness of protest (Hanna et al., 2016). The employment of any established form of protest herein is sanctioned by the wider public based on its legality, familiarity and expectations whilst unaccustomed forms generally are rejected as inappropriate (Tarrow, 2011).

In regard to who engages in protest, and given the dynamic affiliation of individuals in several groups, a static demarcation of protesting groups does not yield a meaningful understanding. What does however facilitate understanding group dynamics and composition is a social movement approach as proposed by Diani (1992). This approach implies the interaction between a multitude of individuals or groups that take part in a politically or culturally salient conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity. Social movements can be considered as collective actors that are fundamentally not institutional in nature (Diani, 1992). The production of a common identity here follows a reactionary course produced and conditioned by the execution of common practices. The reciprocal production of those practices between individual actors lets social movements gain momentum and ensures their persistence. Social movements are by their nature ‘decentred, multi-layered, amorphous’ (Woods, 2003, p. 324), with various dynamic constellations and diverging authorities, yet limited coordination between protesting groups (Woods, 2003). Within social movements, a formal division of mandate may be evident, alongside hierarchical structures (von Staden, 2020). Social movements thus are ‘sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking a formal representation, in the course of which those persons

make publicly visible demands for the changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support' (Tilly, 1984, p. 306).

Social movements further are characterized by campaigns, ROC, and display of worthiness (alliances with individuals of certain social positions), unity (shared symbols), numbers (collective power based on number) and commitment (sustained display of contention). Perceived asymmetries in power between governing and governed groups hereby have a central position (Hanna et al., 2016). The capacity of actors to mobilise in organised forms depends on the degree to which the groups perceive the established regime, political or other forms of interest representation, to be illegitimate (Woods, 2015). The emergence of protesting groups has potential to bring forth professionalised lobbying groups, yet given their increasing hostility simultaneously can threaten their perceived professionalism by ruling entities (Halpin, 2015). As Strijker et al. (2015) further outline, rural peasant protest groups can be categorised into three broad categories, that may overlap: Independent class action, guided political action and spontaneous political action. Predominantly the last of those three has reoccurred in the Western world in response to modernisation and rural change at large. Beyond, neoliberal restructuring jeopardizing the well-established revenue model simultaneously forms a trigger for spontaneous political action. This type of action often arises when rapid economic shifts undermine established structures and social norms, prompting immediate resistance.

As Hanna et al. (2016) describe, protest is the result of larger social dramas in which latent resentments become explicit. According to Rucht et al. (1999), protest indicates unaddressed social grievances, based on which constituencies make claims in their own interest. Besides informal networks, shared beliefs and solidarity, and collective action focussing on conflict, the usage of protest is a key characteristic to social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Hanna et al., 2016). The progression of social protest can be divided in four main phases: first, a perceived breach of underlying norms and values results in crisis. In the Netherlands, a key event in the formation of FDF and Agractie was the occupation of an intensive farm by animal rights activists in late 2019, threatening farmers' autonomy (van der Ploeg, 2020). During the initial phase of the breach, particularly significant are the discursive elements that shape the orientation of collective action. In this context, the construction of collective identity, as well as the identification of protagonists and antagonists occurs, thereby providing a framework for diagnosing the conflict

and articulating associated calls to action (Steinberg, 1998). The associated crisis prompts redressive actions that can either lead to reintegration or unbridgeable chasm. Arguably, in the case of the Netherlands, the latter has been the case. As Hanna et al. (2016) further show, protest emerges in various forms and is the expression of redressive action. This spectrum of actions that protesting parties invoke on can be considered as a repertoire of contention' As Tilly, p. (1986, p. 4) defines, a ROC is 'the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups'. The metaphor of a repertoire hence employs a limited set of protest means a group can employ in pursuing their agenda (Rolfe, 2005). However, to fully grasp how social movements mobilize these repertoires, it is crucial to examine the role of discursive elements such as framing and narrative construction, which provide meaning and direction to collective actions. Framing involves how social movements present issues to construct public perception and mobilize support, linking specific tactics, i.e. repertoires, to broader values like (in)justice or morality (Snow & Benford, 1988). These repertoires are relational, often shaped by discourse (Tilly, 1984). For instance, Steinberg (1998) notes how discursive repertoires interact with contentious actions to form a dynamic relationship between tactics and meaning. Similarly, narrative construction plays a critical role by creating cohesive stories that help members make sense of grievances and anger in order to build collective identity (Steinberg, 1998). These narratives challenge dominant societal discourses and legitimize specific repertoires, reinforcing a movement's identity and goals (Polletta, 2006). Through framing and narratives, repertoires of contention evolve from tactical choices to powerful expressions of collective action.

However, a protesting group typically will utilize several means of protest at once, not uncommonly addressing more than just one objective. As Tarrow (1993) illustrates, actions arising from particular ROC can be categorized as conventional, confrontational or violent types of protest. Conventional herein refers to actions that take into consideration both legal and cultural frameworks of acceptance. Violent, and to a lesser degree confrontational actions, seek the limits of societal and legal acceptance and usually exceed them in an attempt to realise their claims. As Tarrow (1993) further shows, the occurrence of any of the three is closely associated with another, whereby surges in one frequently correlate with surges in others. However, there is a tendency to progress from less drastic measures to increasingly violent behaviour if claims are unaddressed or ignored by decisionmakers (Hanna et al., 2016). Hence, protest typically does not occur linearly, i.e. does not progress with the same types and intensity of actions over a prolonger

timeframe. Rather, protest intensity fluctuates and is marked by waves of increased and decreased collective activity (Tarrow, 1993).

The reproductive character of social protest also implies that the various tactics and strategies are confined by path dependency (von Staden, 2020): a particular form of protest reinforces itself, facilitates certain emerging alternative ROC, while concurrently diminishing the likelihood of other forms of protest. This implies that the sequence of individual actions alter the social organization, material conditions and belief systems of protesting groups (Tarrow, 2011). Despite their seeming limitlessness, the extent to which groups make use of ROC is confined by both the extent to which actors know how to implement certain forms of protest as well as by societal expectations, and hence, the associated cultural appropriateness of actions (Tarrow, 1993). Repertoires of contention hence can be regarded as performative routines available to a population of a time and place (Rolfe, 2005). Protest can be considered as a learned behaviour that is bequeathed between individuals and groups reciprocally (Diani, 1992; Rolfe, 2005). This process of reciprocal learning can be regarded as diffusion of ROC and their associated activities. Repertoires of contention hence are in a constant state of flux, with innovation being the driving force of performative changes (Rolfe, 2005). Whilst traditionally repertoires of contention were designed by formal leaders who invent and configurate existing repertoires, the shift from hierarchical and organized groups (e.g. trade unions engaging in strikes) to amorphous and polycentric social movements have brought forth a development towards innovation at the margins, hence on the periphery rather than at the center of an organization. (Rolfe, 2005; Tilly, 1993). Indeed, as Tarrow (1993) shows, the evolution of repertoires of contention are protracted processes in which innovation rarely takes place amidst the intensity of conflict, or as Zolberg (1972) coined it, in moments of madness, i.e. exceptional periods of crisis or upheaval. Innovation in this regard refers to creative alterations or extensions of existing routines. However, these routines can be both ineffective as well as problematic (Rolfe, 2005). Innovations are subjected to evaluation, and if deemed appropriate and effective by protesting groups, are adopted into an existing repertoire (Tarrow, 1993). As Tarrow (2011) notes, innovation within protest plays a crucial role in enabling protesting groups to attain their objectives. The performance of protest hence can be regarded as a process of experimental social learning (Rolfe, 2005). Whilst innovation of repertoires can occur within a (semi)confined group, exchange of novel forms of protest similarly occurs between groups (see figure 1.).

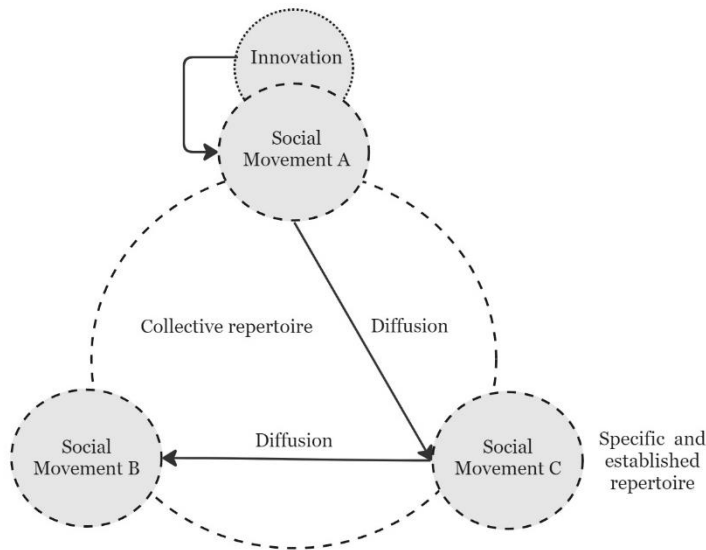


Figure 1: Interaction between social movements and the role of innovation and diffusion in the exchange of forms of protest. Note that this model might be applied to an any geographical context (e.g. national), embedded in wider structures of interaction (also see figure 3).

Particularly when faced with novel situations, protesters tend to reproduce practices of the past rather than turning to new mechanisms of expressing discontent (Euchner, 2016). The familiarity of individuals with preexisting routines facilitates the participation in protest, even though other, novel forms of protest might be more suitable in serving the protesters' interests (Rolfe, 2005). The reproduction of established forms of protest, particularly when a social movement is in its infancy, hence serves as an incubator for gaining strength and momentum. Whilst tried and tested ways of protesting offer a certain degree of effectiveness, it is precisely when novel ways of protesting emerge that weaknesses in the criticized regime are exposed and become challengeable (Tarrow, 2011). Indeed, the momentum of protest is shaped by the level of creativity of protesters as well as the adaptive ability of opponents to neutralize those by means of strategic countermovements (della Porta & Tarrow, 2012).

Transnational agrarian movements

Despite diverging national characteristics and historical legacies, the concurrent emergence of rural peasant protest throughout a variety of EU countries is not coincidental (Woods, 2015). This

development reflects resistance towards transnational forces arising from globalised economies, neoliberalism and environmentalism increasingly infringing on rural affairs. As Della Porta & Tarrow (2005) state, this process can be regarded as *internalisation* of external factors within the domestic realm (see figure 2). As Della Porta & Tarrow (2005) show, there are two other driving forces behind transnational movements, diffusion (see figure 3) and externalisation (see figure 4). The former refers to the adoption and of organisational forms and collective action frames across borders. The later includes supranational protest that in the face of weak national protest attempts to unify and streamline movement. This resonates with Hanna et al. (2016) who found that practices of protest are not exclusively owned by any individual group but rather emerge within the conflict setting of various groups.

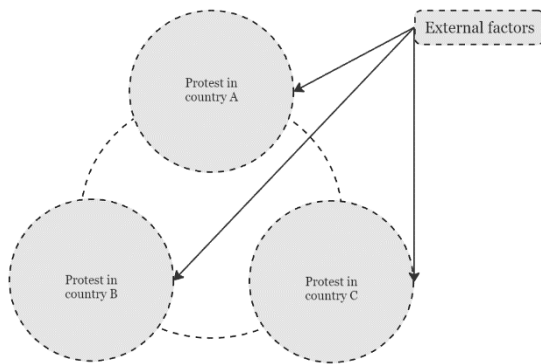


Figure 2: Internalisation of protest as a result of external factors.

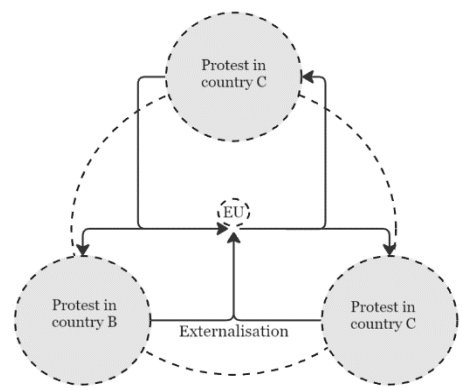


Figure 4: Externalisation of protest by targeting a central governing body (e.g. EU)

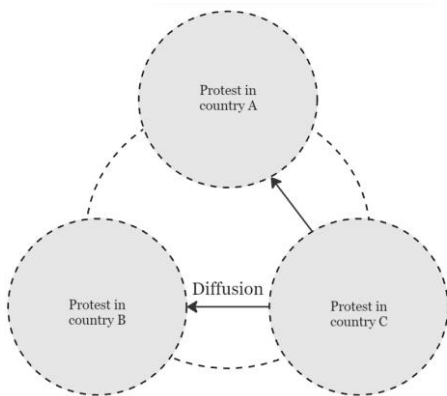


Figure 3: Diffusion of protest between countries (also see figure 1)

Hypothesis

Based on the above, this thesis hypothesises that the national repertoires of contention are in causal interaction with one another whereby diffusion, internalisation and externalisation of protest form the primary mechanisms of initiating protest. Diffusion herein forms the social mechanism of disseminating established and novel forms of protest in which the different national contexts form the arena of experimental social learning that either leads to adoption or rejection of new forms of protest.

Methods

Delimitation of study area

As outlined earlier, rural protest is endemic to a variety of countries and materialises within national borders, however due to diverging reasons (van der Ploeg, 2020). In line with the research question, this study focusses on the Netherlands as a point of departure. The Netherlands has a long history of rural protest; however, contrary to other European countries protest until recently was never in the character of defending rural identities more generally (Strijker et al., 2015). Reasons for this are the close geographic proximity of the urban and rural. However, recent years have brought forth protest on unprecedented scale and dimensions, transcending sector-specific interests (Nanninga et al., 2022). Parallel to diverging reasons for protest, the repertoires of contention that farmers evoke on are becoming increasingly concordant. For instance, Belgium since 2023 has its own spin-off of FDF, which also employs similar tactics and strategies as the Dutch (FDF-Bestuur, 2023). However, to date it remains unclear if and to what degree that practices of Dutch protesting groups are adopted in other EU countries. Similarly, first signs, albeit symbolically, are also present in Germany (Der Spiegel, 2024). Following van der Ploeg (2020), this becomes especially noticeable as Dutch protest has served as a role model of protest in Germany before. Whilst farmers in the Netherlands and Germany are marked by diverging reasons and triggers to engage in protest, recently Brussels as the centre of power in the EU has served as the arena of conflict between protestors and policy makers. The Netherlands and Germany constitute a cohesive region with minimal linguistic and cultural differences whereby the researcher is able to meaningfully engage with collected data.

Data collection and analysis

In order to understand how the repertoire of contention has evolved since October 2019, a Nexis Uni analysis was conducted. Newspapers as a main source of data for research on contention is present in the wider academic literature and has proven to be a successful and suitable way of studying repertoires of contention (Barranco & Wisler, 1999; Earl et al., 2004). Reasons for this are their accessibility, reliability and consistency arising from competition between newspapers (Koopmans, 1998; Wood & Goldstein, 2023). As Earl et al. (2004) further demonstrate, newspapers as a source of data are particularly suitable in the study of repertoires of contention, tactical innovations and diffusions, as well as tactical overlap between repertoires. The timeframe for the query was October 1st 2019 until the end of March 2024. The central keyword for the query was ‘farmers’ protest’, which was considered in both Dutch (*boerenprotest*) and German (*Bauernprotest*). This central keyword was identified through a preliminary newspaper survey, where it emerged as the dominant headline topic and term. In order to ensure the feasibility of the study, a sampling technique was deployed. Per quarter, a total of 10 articles was selected for the Netherlands, and 5 for Germany (see table 1). The articles were selected using a simple random sampling method via Nexis Uni, which offers methodological simplicity but has the potential to exclude significant protest events (Koopmans, 1998). Duplicates were excluded and replaced.

Start date quarter	Netherlands	Germany	Total
01/10/2019 Q4 2019	10	5	15
...	10	5	15
31/03/2024 Q2 2024	10	5	15
Total	190	95	285

Table 1: Overview of sampling strategy per quarter.

Relevant newspaper articles were downloaded and stored on a local folder for subsequent analysis in NVivo 12. In order to categorise the varying forms of protest, the glossary proposed by Hanna et al. (2016) was utilised for initial analysis of the articles. Following Wood & Goldstein (2023), suggesting that manual coding is a suitable way of analysing newspaper data, triggers and objectives of protest was scrutinised using an inductive coding scheme, see appendix II & III for details. A total of 717 fragments were coded, divided in 24 overarching themes and associated sub-themes. Separate NVivo 12 projects were created that, drawing on the same codes, enabled a sequential appraisal of the protest events for both countries. Ultimately, these steps allowed to

create a detailed overview of the progression of the respective ROC, allowing for the documentation, organisation and analysis of protest events. Timelines of protest were created for both Germany and the Netherlands, a summarising version can be found in appendix I.

Given the fact that this thesis focussed its data collection process on archival data, it should be noted that archives are ‘constructed, shaped, produced and manipulated by those who choose to create them’ (Roche, 2021, p. 225) implying that they can be selective in what they include and exclude. This also holds true for media coverage itself, implying that the available data is limited by selection bias of newspapers as well as description bias. Selection bias in this regard refers to whether or not a newspaper decides to cover an event, and if so, to what degree. Reasons for selection bias includes amongst other, the newsworthiness of the event, editorial concerns, proximity and intensity or drama of the event (Wood & Goldstein, 2023). However, whether a protest event is covered by the media provides an indirect statement regarding its significance: a protest that is not perceived or broadcasted is not a protest (Earl et al., 2004). Description bias refers to the way a particular newspaper decides to portray any given event (Wood & Goldstein, 2023). Whilst hard facts tend to be described accurately and reliably, this does not always hold true for the more intangible aspects (Earl et al., 2004). Furthermore, newspaper coverage is not capable of adequacy reporting on internal organisation, protest decision making or leadership of protest, and therefore these aspects will not be analysed in this study.

Ethical considerations

Given the fact this research collects and analyses newspaper articles, issue with confidentiality, data storage and wellbeing of respondents are not of importance. However, it is paramount to avoid becoming experts over others, particularly in light of not having contact with any of the protesting farmers (Catungal & Dowling, 2021) . In order to do so, I adhered to the process of critical reflexivity during the entire research process. According to England (1994), critical reflexivity is a constant scrutiny process, acknowledging that research is not a detached process but is embedded in broader societal structures. This entails that research and its output operates in ongoing social asymmetries and imbalances of power. Particularly the notion that my personal traits represent a variety of aspects that the protesting farmers generally do not identify with or even tend to reject (urban, highly educated, vegan) plays a crucial in the production of knowledge. A guiding question in my reflection on positionality will be the one stated by Catungal & Dowling,

p. (2021, p. 36): ‘How are your social roles and the nature of your research interactions inhibiting and enhancing the information you are gathering?’ The ethical component of my research hence includes an ongoing reflection on my own positionality and how this influences the research process and its outcomes. Given that the data collection process will be conducted using a random sample technique, selection bias of articles based on personal preferences were avoided.

Findings

A summarising version of the timetables created for the evolution of the respective ROC and the comparison thereof can be found in Appendix I.

Evolution of Dutch repertoire of contention since 2019

In late 2019, the initial ROC was characterised by road blockages and occupation of public space using tractors wherein physical dominance, omnipresence, authenticity and victimhood took a focal point. At that time, protest was directed exclusively against state ministries and agricultural policy, particularly nitrogen reductions. Foremost, authenticity and victimhood, arising from hardship emerged as a central driver of the initial protest activities. Favoured by increasing media attention, the social movement gained momentum which was underlined by displays of a profound connectedness between individuals’ self-image and their material work conditions, particularly related to production.

Without a tractor, we as farmers are nothing.¹

That tractor? That is a tool to show our strength.²

Although intended as a public display of strength and physical superiority, these statements and associated performances are at odds with the other two dominant claims made during the initial stage. First, farmers often asserted that farming is not merely an occupation but an inherent part of their cultural identity. Policy interventions threaten to undermine not only their revenue models but, more importantly, the rural identity as a whole and the resulting right to self-determination. This argument stresses the perceived moral license to operate farming businesses in an autonomous way that is not to be interfered with. Policy interventions in farming practices were perceived as tantamount to infringing upon the right to personal autonomy. However, this

¹ A protesting farmer in The Hague, retrieved from *Trouw*, 27 December 2019

² A protesting farmer in The Hague, retrieved from *Trouw*, 27 December 2019

reliance on heavy machinery undermines the proclaimed inherent and authentic idyllic identity of farmers. As the internalized logic of capitalism outweighs inherent authenticity, this reduces the identity to of a farmer to ownership rather than a way of being. Nonetheless, identifying with machinery as a performative display of power and industriousness raised confidence in the movement, which was underlined by the spatiotemporal emergence of roadblocks that, even though temporarily, conveyed the impression of seizing or claiming control over the country.

Blockades and similar disruptive actions gained particular prominence on October 14, 2019 across several provincial capitals. As protests began to target provincial policies associated with the newly announced regulations on reducing nitrogen depositions, the first instances of violent escalation occurred. In Groningen, the provincial government building was besieged by angry farmers who attempted to storm the premises using tractors. This incident shows remarkable parallels with the insurrections on January 6th, 2021, in Washington D.C., and highlights a trend of populist groups attempting to seize power, albeit symbolically, through a coup d'état. Simultaneously, government realised that a large-scale and extensive deployment of tractors in public spaces would be challenging to counteract, particularly if a nonviolent approach was to be maintained. This situation proved particularly problematic as the protesting farmers enjoyed significant public support fueled by the protest leadership. Tapping into wider resentments of the rural population arising from perceived structural neglect, any violent response of the government would not be condoned by a substantial part of the population and could lead to more serious disputes. The protest triggered a chain reaction among provincial governments, leading them to each withdraw from implementing provincial nitrogen regulations.

This public's support was amplified by the belief in farmers' vital role in maintaining the nation's landscapes. Given the substantial historical contribution of farming practices to the development of current landscapes and the nation at large, there persists a prevailing sentiment that farmers have a legitimate claim to protect the unrestricted continuity of their practices. Central to this notion is that farmers are conscientious individuals that operate for the greater benefit of society and act as stewards of nature and landscapes, as displayed on the statements below.

*Farmers are essential to ensure a healthy society and nature.*³

³ Commentary retrieved from *Noordhollands Dagblad*, 2 October 2019

What will be left in 50 years? A few little trees, and nothing else.⁴

The landscape was created and maintained by us. For generations! Who will maintain and pay for it in the future?⁵

The above statements illustrate the deeply ingrained belief that land without stewardship would degrade into wasteland, and that farmers play the crucial role of essential landscape custodians. In light of the vast reduction in number of farmers, the remaining businesses represent a bastion of accumulated historical, societally beneficial achievements legitimizing contemporary practices. Within this, the future is perceived as a finite resource and a zero-sum game, making protest an inevitable outcome. Furthermore, farmers frequently underscored the deep connection they have to their land. However, since a significant proportion of resources are sourced and imported from abroad, a substantial number of farms do not operate within the boundaries of their land (Dutch: *grondgebondenheid*) for providing resources. Historical legacies, self-assigned righteousness and inherent authenticity hence formed the moral grounds on which protesting farmers constructed and legitimised their ROC. Simultaneously, these elements were prominently featured during the protests, significantly shaping the public discourse as well as the way the public would perceive farmers.

Second, the outset provided an opportunity to reaffirm a narrative of a romanticised rural way of life and peasantry practices, embedded in which a moral imperative to protest and above all protect the rural realm. Rural authenticity, and particularly masculinity emerged as central themes in subsequent protest. In December 2019, Team Agro NL, an agricultural umbrella association, attempted to vote '*De boer dat is de keerl*' (The farmer, that's the man) by *Normaal* into the Top 2000, an annual Dutch radio competition celebrating the best songs ever played. Physical and financial hardship alongside industriousness once more gave rise to self-assigned victimhood. The song ended in 6th place nationally, and in some rural regions in first place, underscoring the widespread public support and wider identification with this romanticised, yet commonly held imaginary of the rural. Street protest was accompanied by the presence of leading right-wing populist politicians, e.g. Geert Wilders, that further amplified the glorification and victimhood narrative.

⁴ Protesting farmers in Twente, retrieved from *De Stentor*, 7 July 2021

⁵ An announcement poster during protest in Overijssel, retrieved from *AD*, 15 August 2020

*You are the heroes of the Netherlands!*⁶

Noteworthy again is the concurrent presence of pride and authenticity on the one side and hardship and victimhood on the other. Following Bosma & Peeren (2021), this somewhat paradoxical phenomena can be explained by the threat of an external party, i.e. a *other*, the government, actively engaging in a process of expropriation. Arising from perceived alienation, protesting groups employ othering as a means to impose a negative identity on elites (Modood & Thompson, 2022). In turn, the process of othering is perceived as a anger provoking threat, constituting a connecting agent between pride and authenticity and the thereof derived legitimisation of the former. Above all, the protesting parties adopted a populist ‘*us vs them*’ rhetoric, thereby preventing constructive and target-oriented dialogue with decisionmakers.

To what extent populist content, particularly right-wing and nationalist, intertwined with farmers’ protest is evident from several statements made by the FDF leadership. During an international demonstration in Bremen, Germany, Daniëlle Hekman used the term ‘Climate Salafist’ to directly link climate protection with terrorism, intended to stir up fear. The degree to which farmers’ protest aligned with right-wing populist groups is further demonstrated by a statement from Sieta von Keimpema, member of the FDF board:

*Due to immigration, the nitrogen problem has increased. Every person exhales nitrogen; so, as more people arrive, this leads to an increase.*⁷

It is increasingly evident that the root cause of the nitrogen crisis is consistently attributed to external parties, with a noticeable tendency to employ foreigners as scapegoats. Furthermore, the two statements illustrate how the FDF portrayed nitrogen policy as a public threat derived from an external source, with the state being cast as the source of the problem. In light of the above statement, it is particularly ironic that farmers would later pledge to apply their ‘*boerenverstand*’ (farmers’ common sense) to environmental decision-making.

In the same period, blocking supermarkets established itself as a strategy in expressing discontent. In a letter, Mark van den Over, head of FDF demanded respect for farmers as the suppliers of the nation and aimed to ‘refresh the memory’ of citizens and policymakers. FDF aimed to disturb supermarket supplies in order the remember the public of the 1944/1945 famine

⁶ Geert Wilders in a Video, retrieved from NOS, 1 October 2019

⁷ Retrieved from *Trouw*, 19 February 2020

and the crucial role farmers played in elevating this. Capitalising on the legacy of past actions, while concurrently imposing a sense of debt on the wider public, FDF intended to legitimise contemporary practices as serving the nation's needs exclusively. The fact that a significant portion of agricultural produce is destined for export received minimal attention. Simultaneously, in December 2019 van den Oever compared farmers' position with that of Jews during the Holocaust: an ideologically persecuted, homogeneous group offering legitimate resistance against a systemic opponent. Farmers are not homogenous in beliefs, practices or financial position yet frequently van den Oever orchestrated the staging in that manner. Habitually, the FDF leadership would address its sympathizers as 'Warriors' and 'Defenders'. War-like rhetoric and thereof arising performative practices repeatedly emerged and was fuelled FDF's leadership Sieta van Keimpema, underscoring the populist and anti-establishment narrative:

*The cabinet is out for a civil war.*⁸

The extent to which the protesting farmers presented themselves as victims is further illustrated by their demand for a farmer-friendly label at the end of 2020. FDF advocated for a 3% surcharge on agricultural products, with the proceeds intended to benefit farmers directly. After both supermarkets and the *Centraal Bureau Levensmiddelen* (Dutch Food Retail Association) failed to meet this demand and the associated ultimatum, a small group of farmers decided to take spontaneous action by blocking several distribution centers, leading to supply shortages. The failure to meet ultimatums illustrates how protest groups exploit even minor incidents as pretexts for mobilizing protest actions. Furthermore, this demand, again, is at odds with the prior often-mentioned self-reliance of farmers and their pursuit of economic autonomy. By stressing the need for increased domestic food prices, farmers succeeded in bringing-forth a narrative of national food security, which in turn deflected attention from the high dependence on international export. This strategy was emphasized by the widely repeated slogan 'no farmers, no food,' which fueled public fears about supply security.

However, the upsurge in rural pride and its associated protest activities has not solely originated from farmers themselves. Particularly at the outset, several leading companies in the supporting and processing industry (e.g. For Farmers) made significant contributions to the protest. Financial, yet above all organisational resources facilitated the development of the slogan 'proud to be a farmer', which was widely adopted and celebrated by protesting groups. The extent to

⁸ Retrieved from *Omroep Fryslan*, 18 October 2019

which agro-industrial multinationals exert their influence is further illustrated by their involvement with public figures. Yvonne Jaspers, widely recognized as a prominent host of the TV show *Boer Zoekt Vrouw* (Farmer Wants a Wife), was engaged by the company For Farmers to serve as a promotional figure for their 'proud to be a farmer' campaign. The campaign's format closely resembled that of the television show, underscoring the industry's strategic interest in managing and perpetuating the portrayal of farmers through narratives of rural romance and authenticity. The proud to be a farmer slogan was welcomed and widely adopted by protesting groups, underlining the fact that the protest was not only concerns farmers' economic competitiveness, but struggle of class and identity.

The advent of 2020 witnessed an expansion of protest with multiple objectives: Street protest emerged in Arnhem in the course of calling for more severe penalties for animal rights activities. Simultaneously, demands for government interventions in regard to invasive species inhibiting arable agriculture emerged. The former assumes that agricultural businesses should not be inconvenienced by animals rights activists' protest actions and their objectives and rests on the assumption that farmers should have unrestricted right to execute their practices. Paradoxically however, this argument is double-edged sword as preceding protests have brought forward multiple legal transgression, particularly traffic violations, public disturbances, and the destruction of public property. Appealing to the rule of law, which has been largely called into question by the measures taken, contradicts the fundamental assumptions of the protest movement: the rule of law has lost its legitimacy and serves urban elites exclusively. Furthermore, the perceived failure of the government to take a more proactive role in controlling invasive species, such as Japanese knotweed, illustrates how state interventions are considered desirable only when they align with specific sectoral interests. Consequently, the state is effectively reduced to an enabling agent, primarily focused on removing obstacles to agricultural production. Moreover, the achievements of previous protest in repealing policies has underscored the message that sustained and widespread protest has the potential to ultimately achieve its objective. Whilst national protest had succeeded in addressing national policy, diffusive processes of these practices have cascaded down to protest addressing regional and local agricultural policy. Bolstered by the success of national protest, the confidence of the protesting groups increased, as evidenced by issues beyond nitrogen regulations. For instance, in Friesland, a brief protest led to the rescission of all provincial regulations related to grassland bird management and the protective measures

farmers were obligated to implement, such as monitoring nests of endangered species and leaving grazing geese undisturbed.

At the onset of 2021, the protests had become increasingly spontaneous, smaller in scale, however more intense in tone. For the first time, the protest was directed against a multinational, Friesland Campina, however, soon after its announcement was cancelled due to internal disagreements within FDF. In general, it is evident that farmers primarily attribute the causes of the agricultural crisis to long-established political parties, the European Union, supermarkets, and national consumers. The Netherlands' export economy, along with its leading multinational corporations, received little to no significant attention from the demonstrators. Furthermore, it is also evident that the form of protest has evolved. Since early 2019, the protests were primarily directed against political decision-making centers, at both national and provincial levels, frequently marked by large-scale demonstrations, such as tractor blockades. However, in 2021, new forms of protest emerged. For instance, some farmers have distributed portions of their harvest free of charge to critique supermarket pricing policies. Others have employed more innovative methods; in one instance, protesters showcased two containers, one with calves and one with a running engine to visibly highlight nitrogen emissions from both organic and mechanical sources to the public. Clearly the extent of this display does not capture the impact of both sources accordingly yet nonetheless found support in the public. Above all, this strategy was employed to showcase the extent to which the nitrogen related measures disproportionately affect the agricultural sector whereas the industry and transport-related sectors remained unaffected. Beyond, this strategy, similar to the abovementioned scapegoating, deflects attention from root causes to actors.

Simultaneously, the focus of the protests began to shift towards targeting individuals. Johan Vollenbroek became the focal point of attention in 2020, as he was the driving force behind the lawsuit between Mobilisation for the Environment (MOB) and the state regarding the permit-free emission of nitrogen. MOB won this court case, resulting in a significant number of farms being subject to permitting requirements, which in turn infuriated particularly members of FDF. The subsequent protest action was characterised by intimidation, including death wishes, in which farmers attempted to seek out Vollenbroek at home.

*We know where he lives.*⁹

Similar dynamics were observed in June 2022, when a discontented crowd assembled at the residence of the Minister for Nitrogen, Christiane van der Wal. In 2023, protesters employed torches during a march attended by D66 leader Sigrid Kaag. What these forms of protest have in common is a shift in focus from abstract authorities and the state itself to specific individuals who are held responsible for the nitrogen issue. These escalating dynamics are predominantly present if protest fails to achieve its objectives. With the intensification of protest and widely echoed unacceptability of intimidation of individuals, FDF moved closer to other anti-government groupings. Particularly after the childcare benefits scandal, violating several principles of the rule of law, an increasing amount of citizens had lost faith in government, which was echoed by the concurrent presence of both agrarian and anti-establishment protestors at several protest events. However, concurrently, a growing number of farmers found it difficult to identify with this new dynamic, leading Agractie to abstain from participating in several events due to its political delicacy. In effect, the protest events saw decreased support marked by disappointingly empty protest events.

At the outset of 2024, the farmers' protests gradually externalized to Brussels, the political epicenter of the European Union. On one hand, the farmers had, at least in part, achieved their objectives, a development further underscored by the results of the 2023 provincial elections in which the Farmer-Citizen movement (Dutch: *BBB*) emerged as the big winner. Concurrently, the protest groups recognized that they had reached the limits of their achievable goals within the national framework and thus needed to pursue new objectives beyond these national parameters. The shift in protests from national level to Brussels, particularly in light of the European parliament elections in June 2024. Targeting the biodiversity and climate policy of the EU, protesting farmers denounced the EU's monopoly on agricultural decision-making power. Although the protest was announced by the FDF as a large-scale event, the police reported that only 1,200 people attended, far fewer than the expected 5,000. This reflects a declining interest among many farmers in the protests, likely due to a combination of having already achieved some of their goals and a sense of protest fatigue.

The above demonstrates the deeply engraved self-image of farmers: Authentic individuals operating for the greater benefit of society and nature, which is based on historical legacies . These

⁹ Protesting farmers while on their way to Johan Vollenbroek, retrieved from *Trouw*, 9 July 2020

beliefs are embedded in a romanticized imagery of rural space in which the infringement of urban politics is perceived to be deeply illegitimate. Simultaneously, during the course of their protest, farmers showcased an internalized, and frequently unchallenged logic of capitalism. This becomes evident as farmers have directed their criticisms towards government agencies, individuals, and scientific bodies, while notably refraining from targeting financial institutions or the agroindustry itself. The protest of the Dutch farmers since 2019 is also characterized by a strong hierarchical leadership, particularly in the case of FDF. Agrarian protest in the Netherlands seeks to defend its ever expanding revenue model, disguised as industriousness, integrity and stewardship.

Dutch farmers impact on farmers' protest in Germany

Significant media coverage of the farmers' protests in Germany can be observed from on October 2019, paralleling the situation in the Netherlands. The organization *Land schafft Verbindung* (Land creates Connection) was instrumental in coordinating these protests. In line with the Netherlands, the group condemned the criticism directed at farmers (i.e. farmer bashing) and called for an open dialogue between them and policymakers. The nationwide protests were largely driven by the perception that farmers were being unfairly blamed for all environmental issues, while other sources of pollution were systematically overlooked, paralleling the dynamics in the Netherlands.

Similar to their Dutch counterparts, German farmers utilized road convoys to disrupt traffic and attract public attention. In 2020, farmer demonstrators forcefully entered the office of the local nature conservation organization. However, by and large, the protest remained peaceful, with deliberate efforts made to ensure it was conducted in a public-friendly manner. From the outset, there was a marked divergence in the strategies and tactics employed. In Germany, silent vigils and dialogue demonstrations assumed a more prominent role compared to the more radical and aggressive approaches adopted by Dutch protesters. Slogans used during protest events reveal that the national government is primarily held responsible for the precarious situation of the agricultural sector. Due to the fact that the federal budget violated previously made agreements by the government, the resulting budget deficit was to be offset by cutting subsidies for agricultural diesel, which many farmers were unwilling to accept. Simultaneously, stricter

regulations concerning nitrate emissions and groundwater quality are identified as key triggers for the protests, despite these measures being less stringent in scope and impact compared to those in the Netherlands. It is also apparent that a significant number of farmers perceived decision-making processes as being conducted without their input, underpinned by calls for increased involvement in political decision-making. On posters mounted on their tractors, the farmers demanded *Verlässlichkeit* – reliability, closely echoing the demands of their Dutch counterpart. While both German and Dutch farmers share a common demand for long-term stability and a future outlook, and often view themselves as scapegoats for national challenges, it is evident that German farmers demonstrate a deeper understanding of emerging environmental and economic inequality issues and a stronger commitment to addressing them earnestly.

Additionally, many farmers criticized the pressures exerted by the international market. Early in the protests, demands emerged for increased transparency regarding the origin of food products, particularly in relation to their quality compared to German products. This reflects that the demands of German farmers, in contrast to those in the Netherlands, were more focused on small-scale farming issues and directed toward the domestic market, as the below statement illustrates.

*Farmers' livelihoods are to be destroyed so that German industry can conquer new export markets.*¹⁰

In 2021, it is evident that farmers engaged in protests in solidarity with animal and climate activists, advocating for substantial reforms in agricultural policy. Notably, the farmers' demands do not center on the liberalization of agricultural policy; instead, they emphasize the need for support and development of existing agricultural operations in line with enhanced animal welfare and climate standards.

*We have more overlaps with Fridays for Future than many people realise.*¹¹

¹⁰ Argument by Hans Schreiber, chairman of the Alsfeld district farmers' association, retrieved from *Oberhessische Zeitung*, 3 November 2021

¹¹ Argument by Anthony Robert Lee, member of *Freie Wähler* Party, retrieved from *Kölnische Rundschau*, 19 July 2022

The above statement reflects the deep frustration many farmers feel about the farmer bashing, especially as they strive to meet enhanced environmental standards, while their public image continues to face criticism. Here, another distinction from the protests in the Netherlands becomes clear: while farmers in Germany initially criticized the new regulations regarding pesticides, little distinction was made in the Netherlands between pesticide-related and climate-related regulations. Climate and environmental protection are largely lumped together and associated with the left-leaning urban agenda, wherein nitrogen policy became a *pars pro toto*. This also highlights that, in contrast to the Netherlands, legal restrictions are not preemptively and uniformly dismissed, but rather undergo a thorough and deliberate differentiation to ensure they align with the intended objectives. Similarly to the Netherlands however, extensive demands were made in 2022 for supermarkets to alter their aggressive pricing strategies. The protesting farmers particularly criticized the disingenuous marketing practices of several supermarket chains, which emphasized animal welfare and climate protection, while failing to reflect corresponding changes in sales prices.

*Consumers are not the problem.*¹²

Although supermarket blockades occurred in both Germany and the Netherlands, this strategy was employed in the Netherlands to inflict broader public disruption, whereas in Germany, the emphasis was primarily on criticizing market pricing policies. The statement above is underlined by the awarding of the negative prize, the *Grüne Mistgabel* (Green Pitchfork), which protest groups presented to the supermarket chain *Netto* in early 2021. This symbolic gesture highlighted the farmers' dissatisfaction with the retailer's practices. Indeed, the German market has experienced a significant rise in demand for food that meets higher environmental, animal welfare, and climate standards, a trend to which supermarkets are steadily adapting (Aigner et al., 2019; Hueppe & Zander, 2024; Sanders & Voelkel, 2023). To the frustration of farmers, however, this shift has not been reflected in the pricing policies of supermarkets.

The extent to which right-wing populist parties approached the protesting farmers through narratives of glorification and thereby gained influence has already been mentioned above. In the

¹² Johann Hirschvogel, a protesting farmer during street protest, retrived from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 Feb 2022

Netherlands, this phenomenon is further evidenced by the numerous visits of prominent leaders of right-wing populist parties (e.g. Thierry Baudet). In Germany, however, a different picture emerges. The right-wing populist party *AfD* has repeatedly attempted to co-opt farmers' protest movements for its own purposes, particularly within the context of its anti-establishment rhetoric, which largely draws on the structural discontent of the rural population. Indeed, compared to urban areas, the *AfD* finds more support in rural areas, particularly those with negative demographic trends (Borras, 2020; Deppisch et al., 2022). However, right-wing populist views were categorically rejected by the organization of the farmers' movement which is illustrated by a protest event in June 2020. 500 farmers from Schleswig-Holstein formed a plow and sword with their tractors, sparking outrage as the symbol was linked to the far-right *Landvolk* Movement of the 1920, which has often been associated with nazis. In response to widespread criticism, the LSV organization quickly distanced itself from the action and underlined the distinct historical obligation of the Germans. Beyond, the *AfD* frequently faced criticism from numerous farmers for its policy stance on agricultural development, particularly its opposition to agricultural subsidies. Numerous farmers were therefore aware of the hypocrisy of the *AfD* and rejected their intrusion in protest (Deppisch et al., 2022).

A key event that led to increased momentum and intensity of both Dutch and German protests was an incident on July 5, 2022, when a police officer fired at a tractor occupied by a 16-year-old Dutch farmer. Although protest actions in Germany had been ongoing since the end of 2019, the event sparked solidarity with the Netherlands, symbolizing for many the farmers' position as a political pawn.

*That farmers are political pawns is true on both sides of the border.*¹³

This showcases that increased media coverage of a single event, particularly an emotional one, has potential to let protest gain significant momentum, particularly in situation of emerging solidarity between two distinct groups acting within separate frameworks.

¹³ ¹³ Argument by Anthony Robert Lee, member of *Freie Wähler* Party, retrieved from *Kölnische Rundschau*, 19 July 2022

Discussion & Conclusion

By examining media's coverage of farmers' protests in both Dutch and German contexts, this thesis illuminates the emerging repertoires of contention, with an emphasis on how Dutch processes have influenced the German protest movement. In both countries, the prevailing belief among farmers is that agriculture is unjustly blamed and scapegoated for various environmental issues, while creation of these problems is often attributed to the actions and policies of the respective national government. By adopting this approach, the protest leans on populist rhetoric, framing the issue as a conflict between 'us' and 'them', hence The Hague, or Berlin positioned against *the* countryside (Voerman & de Jonge, 2023). While it emphasizes a binary opposition, it also neglects the presence of third parties, e.g. the industry and global commodity markets. Following Bosma & Peeren (2021), populist rhetoric is less focused on ideology but more on evoking emotions, as evidenced by the performative displays of authenticity, pride, and definitions of true industriousness. Indeed, it is precisely at the point where issues of identity and authenticity emerge that an affected constituency's ability to tolerate structural neglect becomes depleted to the point of rejection. This holds true not only in regards to farmers, but to any resentful demographic, as evidenced by Deppisch et al. (2022). Affiliation with the agricultural sector or rurality, in itself, is not a proxy for a higher likelihood of resentment. Rather, it is structural neglect and the perceived sense of being left behind that are more closely linked to such feelings (Haffert, 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; van Vulpen et al., 2023). And indeed, in both countries it is evident that farmers and their protests function as symbolic representatives and spokespersons for the broader, hardworking yet dissatisfied rural population precisely because it reflects the structural economic differences between urban and rural areas, extending far beyond the role of agriculture (Haffert, 2024). How else could the *BBB's* electoral success in 2023 be explained? It represents a case of revenge through the ballot box, a classic element in the repertoire of contention for places—and, more importantly, people—that do not matter (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Although the *AfD's* program stays remarkably silent on agricultural issues, it still thanks its success to rural constituencies, however, contrary to *BBB*, does not rely on agriculture as a decisive theme (Deppisch et al., 2022). The underlying reasons can be attributed to the minimal engagement of the general population in agriculture, which contributes no more than 2.29% to

the value chain, even in predominantly rural areas (Haffert, 2024). In line with von Essen et al. (2015), this thesis finds that attacks on sectoral interests alone are not capable of mobilizing sufficient resistance. However, the perceived attack on identity resonating with rural autonomy does. In the Netherlands, this fact had also been recognized by leading agribusiness companies, which skillfully capitalized on it through their public relations campaigns emphasizing rural pride and authenticity. This strategic use of rural pride by agribusinesses also highlights the broader socioeconomic context in which farmers' protest operates.

While protests in both countries have blocked supermarket distribution centers, their respective objectives reveal a fundamental difference in the underlying assumptions upon which protesters have built their repertoires: In the Netherlands, this tactic was employed to underline the centrality of Dutch agriculture in providing food for especially the domestic market, thereby creating a moral license, or even duty, to maintain this status quo. Agriculture, in this regard, is deployed of any responsibility as it serves the needs of the public (van der Ploeg, 2020). Predominantly the notion that the national security of supply could be at risk took a focal point which, together with the act of drawing on historic legacies to inflict feelings of guilt, was intended to create legitimacy for agricultural practices. A brief look at the value of Dutch agricultural exports in 2023, worth 124 billion euros, showcases the high dependence on foreign exports and the thereof arising ever-increasing demand to expand and reduce cost (Rijksoverheid, 2024; van der Ploeg, 2020). In the Netherlands, protests did not target the agroindustry itself, which underscores the internalized logic of neoliberal capitalism and its impact on the objectives of collective action (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). Here, protest is used to project the internal problems of industrial agriculture onto others, the government and consumers, that deprive farmers of their economic opportunities. Conversely, protests in Germany were directed at the pricing policies and food quality of supermarkets, thereby reflecting the relatively smallholder-oriented demands of German farmers as they sought to challenge neoliberal hegemony and market pressures. Indeed, and in line with van der Ploeg (2020), this thesis finds that the degree to which agribusinesses are characterized by entrepreneurial structures, they tend to face hardship and turn their back on the political mainstream discourse, a perspective that is shared by about half of all Dutch farmers (van der Ploeg, 2020) and expresses itself in the unwillingness to engage in meaningful dialogue and tendencies towards extremist behavior. Polarization and a

shifting sociopolitical landscape have the potential to drive radicalization on both sides —among protesters and the state— ultimately risking the emergence of a counterpublic where objectives are seen as justifying any means (von Essen et al., 2015).

Contributing to the literature, this thesis underlines the profound importance of diffusive processes in the emergence of protests and social movements, particularly in regards to action frames and the selection of means of protest. Considering that repertoires of contention serve as a theatrical metaphor (Hanna et al., 2016), the performative displays by farmers—particularly in the Netherlands — are notable for their depiction of rural existence promoting environmental qualities and societal interests. Given the fact that historical legacies and current processes in both countries show remarkable differences (Strijker et al., 2015), the protest in the Netherlands were not the reason but the trigger for protest in Germany. Demonstrating that an agrarian movement has sufficient momentum to significantly impede policy implementation, German farmers adopted the Dutch ROC, albeit in a milder form. Given that the policy's impact on businesses in Germany was less pronounced, the ensuing protest was largely situated within the contexts of legal and societal acceptance. The findings reveal that, although the protests in the Netherlands and Germany utilize similar repertoires with the Netherlands having a chronological precedence, they exhibit significant differences in their self-presentation, the nature of their demands and the way narrative construction was employed.

In line with Della Porta & Tarrow (2005), future research has potential to investigate the role of individuals in brokering strategies and tactics between national contexts. The findings also illustrate that after the initial spikes of protest activities and the celebrations of its success are followed by a period of exhaustion in which disillusionment amongst members spreads (Tarrow, 2011). Yet the subsiding of protest in the Netherlands has not resulted in a return to a situation societally unchanged; rather the political balance of power has shifted, as evidenced by the electoral success in recent years. Furthermore, the protest highlights that the perceived severity of the sanctions is proportional to the intensity of the demonstrations. A key distinguishing feature lies in the contrasting patterns of protest between the two countries: In Germany, protests predominantly occurred at the national level, whereas in the Netherlands, successes at the national level also triggered protests at provincial and local levels. This dynamic emerged as a result of national-level achievements, signaling to farmers that their goals can be realized,

regardless of their relative scale. Beyond, and in line with Tarrow (2011), protest movements typically undergo cycles characterized by periods of heightened activity and decline. This suggests that a subsequent resurgence of farmers' protests is imminent if root causes remain unaddressed. Recent developments in the Netherlands reveal that fundamental issues remain unresolved, as new policies facilitate expansion and scale increases while prioritizing technical innovations (Tielbeke, 2024).

The protest in both Germany and the Netherlands showcases that the rural as an object of governance does not do justice to the emerging crisis of rural identity at the margins and underlines the departure from rural politics to a politics of the rural (Woods, 2003). In regards to what this politics of the rural will need to deliver in order to resolve the rural crisis, and in line with Leitheiser et al. (2022), is questioning the paradigm of modernization that threatens to marginalize small-scale practices and exacerbate agrarian discontent. Technical innovations in agriculture, frequently cited as a universal solutions, have yielded limited successes in recent years and are unlikely to produce significant advancements in the foreseeable future.

While this thesis highlights the protests' dynamics on a national scale, it does not address regional differences. Future research should examine the extent to which factors related to regionally varying structural disadvantages and thereof arising discontent amongst farmers influences the mobilization of protests. For instance, Deppisch et al. (2022) in their appraisal of rurality in Germany found vastly different protest participation corresponding to economic prosperity. Similarly, not rurality but periphery according to de Lange et al. (2021) has explanatory power in regard to protest, at least in the Netherlands. In Germany, the proximity of the East to the political center in Berlin contrasts with the South, which is farther away. This dynamic appears to reverse as prosperity increasingly concentrates in the South, while structural inequalities are more pronounced in the East. Additionally, structural differences and power dynamics within and between the protest groups themselves are not covered, which could not be revealed through a newspaper analysis, requiring more nuanced modes of data collection. Finally, future research should explore the beneficiaries and detractors of farmers' protests, examining the effects on both the farmers themselves and external stakeholders, such as transnational agribusiness corporations.

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Appendix I Overview of protest and ROC in both countries

Date	Country	Event	Key Groups Involved	Government Response	Reasons for Protest	Dynamics/Strategy	Outcomes	ROC
Oct-19	Netherlands	Initial protests	Farmers Defense Force (FDF)	Minimal initial engagement	Proposed nitrogen regulations; environmental policy concerns	Farmers mobilize via social media; grassroots mobilization begins	Low visibility; government dismisses concerns	Rallies, petitions
Mar-20	Netherlands	Large-scale protests	FDF, other farmers' unions	Dialogue initiated with the government	New nitrogen targets set; financial viability at risk	FDF organizes protests; farmers present unified front	First official government meeting held	Rallies, demonstrations
Jun-20	Germany	Farmers unite in protests	Land schafft Verbindung (LsV)	Increased police presence	Similar nitrogen regulations proposed; economic pressures	Dutch protests inspire German farmers; mutual solidarity grows	Formation of alliances among farmer groups	Rallies, petitions
Jul-21	Netherlands	Blockades and road protests	FDF	Aggressive policing	Stricter enforcement of nitrogen regulations; fear of farm closures	Escalation of tactics; media coverage increases	Significant public attention; some policy discussions initiated	Blockades, direct action
Jan-22	Germany	LsV protests against policy	LsV, allied farmer groups	Policy adjustments proposed	Government plans to cut nitrogen emissions; farmer livelihoods threatened	Cross-border support; sharing strategies and experiences	Government acknowledges grievances; policy review starts	Rallies, lobbying
Sep-22	Netherlands	Nationwide farmer strike	FDF, grassroots movements	Limited concessions	Economic impacts of nitrogen regulations; loss of subsidies	Broader coalitions formed; external pressures increase	Some concessions on environmental regulations	Strikes, protests
Mar-23	Germany	Large demonstrations	LsV, support from FDF	Offers of dialogue, concessions made	Similar economic concerns regarding sustainability and regulations	Increased collaboration; unified messaging on key issues	Government agrees to a meeting with farmer leaders	Rallies, coalition building
Jun-23	Netherlands	Ongoing protests	FDF, grassroots coalitions	Increased dialogue and negotiation	Demand for more reasonable nitrogen targets and support measures	Adaptation of protest strategies based on outcomes	Formal negotiations begin; some policies start to shift	Negotiation, coalition forming
Dec-23	Germany	Farmers' demands escalate	LsV, new coalitions	National policy adjustments proposed	Demand for sustainable practices amidst economic hardship	Enhanced coordination; learning from Dutch experiences	Recognition of farmers' contributions to sustainability	Negotiation, lobbying
Apr-24	Netherlands	Protest for sustainable practices	FDF, environmental groups	New policy frameworks introduced	Seeking balance between environmental goals and agricultural viability	Leveraging cross-border solidarity for impactful change	Significant policy proposals presented; broader public support	Negotiation, campaigns
Oct-24	Germany	Major protest event	LsV, international farmers' support	Major policy shifts anticipated	Continuing concerns over nitrogen and sustainability policies	Continued influence from Dutch tactics; shared goals	Comprehensive agricultural policy reform discussions initiated	Rallies, alliances with environmental groups

Appendix II Codebook for Dutch protest

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 10 articles)	References
Compliance & Solutions	2	7
Cross pollination	4	13
Europe	1	2
Famers should be able to do whatever they want	1	1
Farmers contribute to recovery	1	3
Farmers' practices are beneficial for Natue & Society	6	8
Farmers' practices are not harmful	2	3
Gender	2	3
Germany	1	1
Industry financial support	4	7
Industry support - other	3	4
International exchange and cooperation	1	1
Intimidation	3	8
Media Commentary	10	23
Nostalgia & Glorification of past protest	2	2
Political alliances	4	8
Political frustration	3	8

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 10 articles)	References
Protest	0	0
Accessibility of protest for the public	6	13
Farmers' perception of relat. with the public	3	4
Loosing public support	3	6
Demands	8	16
Local and provincial demands	3	9
Effects of protest	11	16
Government response to protest	12	44
Performative aspects	10	26
Phases	5	18
Protest as a necessary evil	7	7
Protest is pointless	1	3
Protest not happening	2	2
Protest unknown by FDF or AA	2	3
Protest within legal boundaries	13	46
Repertoire	18	68
borrowed from others	2	2

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 10 articles)	References
Sneakiness	5	8
Triggers for Protest	4	8
Activists	1	6
Animal rights activism	3	6
Conflict with Agrarian Union	3	3
Conflict with Dairy Multinationals	1	2
Disagreement on environmental matters	4	8
Excluded from making plans	4	7
Future Fears	3	5
Hopelessness	9	18
Injustice	2	2
Legal disputes	4	10
Media disagreements	1	3
Mistrust in government	8	15
Science & RIVM	3	11
Supermarkets	5	13
Right wing extremism	5	7
Solidarity between agricultural sectors	4	6
Total		516

Appendix III Codebook for German protest

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 5 articles)	References
Compliance & Solutions	1	1
Cross pollination	1	4
Europe	2	2
Famers should be able to do whatever they want	0	0
Farmers contribute to recovery	0	0
Farmers' practices are beneficial for Natue & Society	1	3
Farmers' practices are not harmful	2	3
Gender	2	2
Industry financial support	0	0
Industry support - other	0	0
International exchange and cooperation.	0	0
Intimidation	3	3
Media Commentary	4	4
Nostalgia & Glorification of past protest	0	0
Political alliances	2	2
Political frustration	4	4
Protest	0	0
Accesibility of protest for the public	5	6

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 5 articles)	References
Farmers' perception of relat. with the public	2	2
Loosing public support	3	4
Demands	8	11
Local and provincial demands	0	0
Effects of protest	2	6
Government response to protest	1	1
Performative aspects	8	11
Phases	6	13
Protest as a necessary evil	2	4
Protest is pointless	0	0
Protest not happening	0	0
Protest unknown by FDF or AA	0	0
Protest within legal boundaries	4	4
Repertoire	12	41
borrowed from others	4	6
Sneakiness	1	1
Right-wing extremism	3	6
Solidarity	3	4
Triggers for Protest	2	2

Theme / Code	Files (containing up to 5 articles)	References
Activists	1	3
Conflict with Agrarian Union	0	0
Conflict with Dairy Multinationals	0	0
Disagreement on environmental matters	8	13
Excluded from making plans	5	5
Financial reasons	1	1
Future Fears	3	3
Hopelessness	4	7
Injustice	2	3
Legal disputes	1	1
LSV	1	1
Media disagreements	0	0
Mistrust in government	2	5
Science & RIVM	1	1
Supermarkets	4	7
Total		201