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Stiefmoeder Aarde [Stepmother Earth] by Theun de Vries (1936)

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ABSTRACT


This article presents and discusses 'Stepmother Earth', a novel written by the Frisian author Theun de Vries and published, for the first time, in 1936. This novel is a classic work in the tradition of agrarian studies. It stands out in linking critical theory with people's everyday experiences and language. The text also reflects the political struggles that reigned the countryside at the time of writing. The book still is remarkably relevant and, in a way, up to date.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian classic; peasants; social logic; social struggles; anarchism

In this article, I will introduce and discuss *Stiefmoeder Aarde* [Stepmother Earth] by Theun de Vries. This historical novel, first published in 1936, is a classic in the tradition of critical agrarian studies (De Vries 1936). It is a monumental and moving representation of the agrarian history of the province of Frisia in the north of the Netherlands – comparable I think to the representation, many decades later, of twentieth century's class struggles in the Northern Italian countryside in *Novecento*, the epic movie of Bernardo Bertolucci. It does feel, at first instance, a bit speculative to discuss a novel as a classic within the framework of critical agrarian studies. However, I will argue that *Stepmother Earth* adds (as do several other novels, movies, paintings and poems) strategic elements that are not provided by the more orthodox approaches but which expand our perception and critical understanding of peasants, peasant struggles and peasant agriculture. A particularly important aspect of de Vries' work is his ability to link 'critical theory' (*avant la lettre*) with people's everyday experiences and language. He also discusses the relations between populism and fascism which, sadly, has once again recently become a pressing theme. Above all, Theun de Vries shows the link between the struggles for socialism and peasant agriculture and peasants.

In the 1930s *Stepmother Earth* was considered to be the most widely read book in the Netherlands (Overdiep 1938, 171–172; Het Vrije Volk 1967)¹ and it became an important point of reference in socio-political debates of the time. For many it was like 'a bible' (Friese Koerier

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This review forms part of JPS's 'Agrarian Classics' review series, in which leading scholars revisit classic works in agrarian studies to examine their legacy and contemporary relevance. These reviews bring older works – both well-known and underappreciated – into dialogue with current theoretical debates, political struggles, transformations in global capitalism, and trajectories of agrarian change.

¹In 1972 *Stepmother Earth* was integrated into a trilogy entitled 'Het Geslacht Wiarda' [The Wiarda Lineage]. It reached again a wide audience.

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1963). It was translated many times, but intriguingly only into German, Polish and other Eastern European languages.² There is no English translation available and this probably reflects, among other things, the specificity of agricultural development trajectories in the north west of Europe (the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, and parts of France and Germany) – trajectories that strongly differ from the British one, which was highlighted in the works of Karl Marx and which are, therefore, difficult to understand for an Anglo-Saxon audience.

'Stepmother Earth presents a comprehensive view of Frisian peasant agriculture in the nineteenth Century and how it relates, on the one hand, to capitalism as it developed at that time and to the labour movement on the other' (de Maere 1980). 'Using family episodes it shows the big social and economic changes, the revolt against the poverty of the workers [...], the crisis, labour movements, feminism and the threat of the looming World War 1' (ter Braak [1936] 1956).

The rift

Before entering into the storylines that are developed in *Stepmother Earth*, there are some pertinent questions that should be asked. The first one centres on the relations between Marxist intellectuals in the Netherlands and the specificity of Dutch peasant agriculture. The second regards the title of the book.

At the time that *Stepmother Earth* was written, the Netherlands had a rich and well-articulated Marxist tradition in which people like Henriette Roland Holst, Jan and Annie Romein, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, Jo Valkhoff, Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter stood out. They communicated directly with Karl Marx (as did Domela Nieuwenhuis), Friedrich Engels and, somewhat later, with Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg (among others). They also related, albeit in different ways, to the social movements of the time. At the same time, Dutch agriculture stood out as remarkable, in several respects: there was, e.g., a notable process of re-peasantization in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries and agricultural production as a whole kept growing considerably. However, the two – the Marxist intellectuals and the strong, vivid and contradictory story of Dutch agriculture – never really met, let alone exchanged ideas or mutually enriched each other intellectually. The specificity of Dutch agriculture was not grasped, nor reflected and explained by the Marxist theorists of that time. It took, instead, a *novelist* to do so. It was only in, through and by means of a *novel* that Theun de Vries (who was himself a convinced Marxist, a historian and a fiction writer [Perry 2010]) created an understanding of peasant life that expanded the limits of Marxist orthodoxy.

In retrospect the rift between the theorists with a Marxist background and the strengths and tragedies of peasant life is easy to explain. It was clearly due to the hegemony of the then prevailing Leninist view. By insisting on the inevitable class differentiation of peasant agriculture into a small pocket of rich, capitalist farmers and a huge mass of down-trodden landless rural workers (a perspective that may have been valid in some specific situations), this view was myopic in contrasting developmental trends and class configurations. The rigid organizations, 'democratic centralism' and true or presumed 'solidarity' did the rest. Deviations from the prescribed and dominant view triggered denunciations of 'revisionism', 'divisionism' and the like.

²The book was translated in 1994 into Frisian and entitled '*Styfmem Ierde*' (De Vries 1994).

Within this panorama it was only within, and from, the interstices that the germs of different views and representations could develop and be communicated. Exile,³ armed struggle,⁴ being located in a faraway periphery,⁵ and the arts happened to be such interstices. And as long as the veil of the hegemonic view was respected (or, at least, not torn to pieces),⁶ the new, alternative ways of seeing and doing could have a considerable outreach.

Theun de Vries and the way he used literature is emblematic for the case of arts. *Stepmother Earth* implicitly raises – and responds to – questions that definitely fell outside the horizon of relevance of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Why are landless workers longing for and, if possible, constructing their own small peasant farm? Why are peasants working as hard as the devil and defending their farm at whatever cost? Why are they experiencing their life and work as a ‘struggle’. Why are large farms not the self-evident ‘winners’ in processes of differentiation? Why is being a peasant not considered to be a shame, at least by peasants themselves? How can peasants and workers relate? Does the suffering in the cold and wet fields make sense? And why was the anarchist clergyman Domela Nieuwenhuis welcomed by rural workers as ‘Our Saviour’?

The responses contained in *Stepmother Earth* were apparently recognized by many readers who were comforted by them. This probably explains the huge readership that the book attracted. *Stepmother Earth* was indeed one of the ‘books of the people’ (De Waarheid 1956). It resonated with what people experienced in everyday life and it helped them to understand it a bit better. In more theoretical terms: *Stepmother Earth* describes the ‘social logic’ as identified, many decades later, by Teodor Shanin (1972, 76). Together with the better known ‘economic logic’, this ‘social logic’ governs, through complex interactions, developments in the countryside. Knowing this ‘social logic’ is to be an indispensable ingredient of critical agrarian studies.

The responses uncovered by Theun de Vries also address, indirectly, two theoretical issues that have been central in all debates about the agrarian question. First, how does peasant agriculture relate to capitalism generally? And second, how should socialist politics understand and deal with the specific (class) position of peasants? I will come back to these issues and the specific contribution of *Stepmother Earth* at the end of this article.

The title

For readers of the twenty-first century who probably are familiar with ‘Mother Earth’, ‘Pacha Mamma’ and similar references, the representation of the Earth as a stepmother – cruel, miserly, hard, and biting – will, for sure, be somewhat enigmatic. Such a title

³Here Emilio Sereni (a prominent Marxist intellectual and Communist leader in Italy) is the typical example. He was in exile (in Nice, France, from where he supported the armed struggle in Italy) where he developed the contours and programme of what later became the *Alleanza dei Contadini*, the first Peasant Confederation in the Communist sphere of influence (see e.g. Sereni 2000). After the war Sereni became Minister of Agriculture and later leader of the Italian Peasant Federation. He had a very difficult relation with Stalin (eventually the Pope had to rescue him from Moscow).

⁴Here Mao Tse Tung stands out as example. In the end the socialist struggle in China was a peasant struggle, and the People’s Liberation Army was a peasants’ army.

⁵José Carlos Mariátegui and, in a way, Hildebrando Castro Pozo (both from Peru) developed a view on the countryside, the agrarian question (and the associated question of the indigenous people) that deviated in many respects from orthodoxy (see Mariátegui 1928; Castro Pozo 1936). The distance from Moscow was probably an advantage here.

⁶At the level of ideology Mao Tse Tung, for instance, kept talking about a proletarian revolution, the vanguard position of the workers, etc. all of which was at odds with the real situation. All this was unavoidable. Mao Tse Tung depended on Stalin for the delivery of weapons and, later on, economic help.

refers to hardship and suffering and, more generally, to an antagonistic relation between man and nature. However, such a notion is far from uncommon in Frisian literature. Later on Hylke Speerstra (a gifted novelist and highly familiar with peasant life in the second half of the twentieth Century) will write about the '*Wrede Paradijs*' [The Cruel Paradise]⁷ and characterize farming in '*De Oerpolder*' [The Ancient Polder] as 'ongoing struggle' (*wrakseljen*) (Speerstra 1999, 2006). And yes, nature and the land are, indeed, sometimes extremely cruel in Frisia, but so they are in the Andes mountains as well where the *chaccli* is needed to 'break' the soil as the literal expression goes.

Theun de Vries explains his position well. Indeed, the land often is a 'stepmother' to people. It hurts and exhausts them. It damages people, as the narrative in the book amply demonstrates. This raises at many points raucous outcries: why is the earth lacking generosity, why doesn't she bring warmth and happiness? It is true: 'people trust the favours the land will render them, the land on which they build their houses, and on which their herds are flourishing; the land that renders them the money they need' (De Vries 1980, 199).⁸ Therefore 'the farmer might pray to God, thanking and fearing him simultaneously. But in the earth he trusts, even without demands; the earth is a mother to him, she feeds everybody and rejects nobody' (200). Nonetheless, as the narrative amply demonstrates, the same mother brings in reality tragedies, disasters and despair to many. Later on in the book one of the key characters in the book (*Karel*, a socialist worker and a kind of organic intellectual as we would say nowadays) explains this contradiction. During a strike and after an intervention of a preacher who aims to break the strike *Karel* shouts, to the hesitant people: 'Now it's enough. The land does not belong to God. That is the excuse they always use to suppress the people. No, I tell you that the land belongs to us, to all of us. The land gives enough, she is generous to everybody, she brings ample richness. But you, the church and the money, you have stolen the love of mother earth from us. You made a stepmother out of her. A stepmother earth! That is why we cannot share in the fruits of the earth, that's why we remain with nothing but hunger' (404).

The author

Theun de Vries (1907–2005) was born in the Northern Frisian Woodlands, in the village of Veenwouden. He knew peasant life from his infancy (ter Braak [1936] 1956, 174). Menno ter Braak, a famous novelist of that time and highly critical of *Stepmother Earth*, declared anyway that '[this] author knows very well what he is writing about, he is thoroughly familiar with the object that he knows from direct observation' ([1936] 1956, 172–176). Beyond that, he diligently grounded his writing enterprise on extended documentation (Mak 2003). Theun de Vries himself explained to his contemporaries that his novel is non-fiction, 'it is grounded in facts' (Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad 1938). He stated as well, in an interview at the occasion of his 80th birthday that *Stepmother Earth* was his 'truly socialist novel' (De Waarheid 1987)

⁷This book carefully documents the life of Frisian farmers and rural workers who migrated to Canada, Australia, the USA, Paraguay, South Africa, etc. and hoped to encounter more favourable conditions to gain a decent living and develop a beautiful farm. For many the new destination turned out to be adverse and cruel. The farmers' women particularly suffered in the new 'paradise' (see Speerstra 1999).

⁸This and all following quotes are my translations. The page numbers refer to the 1980 edition of 'Het geslacht Wiarda', published by Querido's Uitgeverij in Amsterdam.

De Vries became well-known with a much lauded publication entitled 'Rembrandt'. In neighbouring Nazi Germany the translated edition of 'Rembrandt' was prohibited and burnt. Soon afterwards he wrote *Stepmother Earth*. In the meantime he gained a living by working as librarian in the public library of Sneek, a modest city in Frisia, and later on as journalist for the communist daily '*Volksdagblad*' and a contributor to the 'Tribune'. In World War 2 that followed soon he engaged in the resistance, was arrested by the occupying German Forces, confined for 10 months in the Amersfoort *Lager* after which he was liberated by the resistance and continued with his underground activities. After the war he returned to writing; this resulted in an impressive *oeuvre*. In 1963 he was awarded the P.C. Hooft prize (the highest award in the Netherlands for literature) and was nominated (in 1974), by the Dutch PEN, for the Nobel prize for literature (which he did not get). His public role was much disputed, especially during the Cold War period. This made him into a lonely man, especially after 1971 when he quit the Communist Party. In 1979 he was honoured, by the University of Groningen, as *doctor honoris causa* 'for having served in a professional and honest way the science of history'. According to the document that justified the nomination, Theun de Vries successfully provided the 'skeleton of Marxist theory with the flesh and blood [of real life]' (Perry 2010).

The story

The starting point of the book is the Wiarda farm (in Dutch: '*de Wiarda Zate*'). It is one of those 'farms that are lying as waiting animals in the fields' (127). Waiting for labour, that is. The farm is the outcome of labour,

of hands that fought the hostile land, of hands that made dykes between the seas, swamps and the land [...] Hands that build stables, barns for the hay and sheds. Hands that caressed the flanks of the horses [...] and slaughtered animals. Hands that digged, ploughed and entrusted seed to the furrows. (127)

The farm clearly figures here as being man-made. It is the outcome of co-production: the ongoing interaction, and mutual transformation, of man and nature. The farm, the fields and the animals are all made by, and through labour. They are materialized labour. 'Unknown ancestors who died long ago have been sweating and toiling here in order to make the farm prosper, free of debts and as independent as possible' (129). In as far as the farm represents a 'capital' (a valuable whole that allows for production), it is the materialization of the labour dedicated to it. This 'capital' (or 'patrimony') belongs to those who provided the labour. And, as much as the farm resulted from the work done by generations, it now requires labour for its continuity and development. That is why they are lying there 'as waiting animals'. They await the work of those that belong to them.

The Wiarda farm is a typical *domus* (as described by Le Roy Ladurie 1984). The land, the fields and the animals belong to the Wiarda family, just as the family belongs to the farm. The family feels duty bound to work, protect, and develop the farm: to dig, plough and entrust the seeds to the furrow. That is why the farm is dimensioned according to the available workforce: Father *Wyhman*, mother *Swobk*, and their two sons *Jarig* and *Tjalling* (there is a sister as well, *Tet*, but she is married out to another *domus*) provide labour to the farm and the size of the farm fits this labour supply. It is only when one or more of the family

members are unable to do the work that salaried workers are contracted.⁹ They then replace the missing family member. The rule is that the ‘farm stands on its own’ and that the farmer is a ‘sovereign’ (131). The yearly exception, of course, is the harvest of the hay (and especially the mowing of the grass) when part-time workers are needed.

The Wiarda farm is a prosperous farm and it harbours proud people. More precisely: it is a rich farm that houses rich people. Nonetheless, the same farm brings downfall and disaster. Father *Wychman* hangs himself; *Jarig*, the eldest son ends up, after a terrible episode in which horses and gender play an important role, in prison – for 15 years. *Tjalling*, the younger brother, finds himself at the end working as salaried worker in a poor small farm on the sandy soils in the Frisian Woodlands, where he replaces the farmer who became cripple. Finally the Wiarda farm is, after an intermezzo, to be sold. The *domus* is destroyed: a poignant tragedy.

It is a well-told story, but not that fictitious. The tragedy of the large farm is a recurrent theme in Frisian and Dutch literature. To avoid it, the farming families sometimes had to make a deal with the devil (as in de Jong 1979).¹⁰ People who read *Stepmother Earth* recognized it, it resonated with their own observations. During my own youth, one could point, all around the countryside, to once ‘well-established farms’ (of *gezeten boeren* [well-off farmers]) that were surpassed, in the meantime, by small farmers who did whatever they could to develop their farms. These latter peasants were referred to, in Frisian language, as *wrotters* [rooters and also people who are working very hard]. In *Stepmother Earth* the tragedy of the large farms (probably inspired by the fall of capitalist farms during the 1880 crisis)¹¹ comes to the fore as a kind of fate. ‘Pride goes before a fall’, as the proverbial saying goes. It is a destiny difficult to escape from. Just as is it sure that ‘after two deaths there will soon come a third one’ (196), it seems hard to escape from this tragedy of the large farms. Scrutinizing *Stepmother Earth* makes it clear that such tragedies are largely rooted in the temptations of the surrounding capitalist world (and especially in the intertwining of such temptations and gender relations). Horses are key here.¹² Not the working horses of the farm, but the elegant trotters used when going out (to impress others), or the swift Arabian stallions used for racing. Such horses are associated with high spending, gambling, speculation and drinking. Large parts of *Stepmother Earth* (for instance 167–198 and 273–291) are dedicated to such horse-bound temptations: time and again the storyline turns into a tragedy. ‘Horses bring calamity as an old saying states [...] Whomever starts with horses will be unable to stop with them. Only very strong legs can bear such wealth’ (285). Here horses clearly are the metaphor for boundary-crossing behaviour. Instead of dedicating their labour and other resources (notably their savings) to the

⁹The phenomenon of wage workers was omnipresent in arable farming (especially in the North East and South West of the country). Many arable farms (specializing in grains, potatoes and sugar beets) were structured as capitalist enterprises. In dairy farming the situation was diametrically the opposite: there were hardly any capitalist dairy farms. The explanation of this divide resides in the different natures of the labour processes: dairy farming is critically dependent on skills and craftsmanship (and also the seasonal rhythms of labour requirements).

¹⁰*Het geslacht Verhagen*, a beautiful novel by A.M. de Jong is also based on the making and subsequent downfall of a large farm in Brabant, the south of the Netherlands. The author was a socialist, engaged in the Resistance during the war and killed by the Nazis.

¹¹As documented by Jan Luiten van Zanden, a Dutch agrarian historian (van Zanden 1985).

¹²Of course there are many other forms. *Stepmother Earth* also refers to farmers ‘for whom earning money should proceed as quick as possible. They do not hesitate to stop caring well and working cleanly when preparing butter. Thus they ruin the product. The stupid!’ (210). Fraud with butter and invading the market with inferior products was, at that time, a very widely spread phenomenon. It was only countered effectively through the construction of cooperative dairy factories, strict government controls and obligatory brands.

farm ('the waiting animal'), they dedicate their time and money to other, probably more promising and urban activities hoping that these will render them 'the golden whip' – the highest possible premium provided by the King. It is through, and by means of, such luxury horses that rich farmers cross the normative boundary associated with the 'embarrassment of riches' (Schama 1987) which is meant to keep richness invisible. It should remain in the farm (and be used to develop it further); it should not pass elsewhere in order to try to make more money – let alone in an ostentatious way.

The *wrotters* mentioned before are the antithesis of the well-established farmers. They also figure quite prominently in *Stepmother Earth*. 'Rooting and saving' (437). Working as hard and as long as possible, both man and woman (and children) live a life as sober as possible and make some savings that may allow them to move forward. *Foarút wrotte* [root ahead], that is the life of *wrotters*. 'Three poor dairy cows, four sheep, a shed with chickens, some ducks in the canal, a pig to be slaughtered and if possible earning here or there a daily wage' (436). And of course the dream, the aspiration that, through their hard work, things might get better – if not for themselves then for their children. Here labour is central as well. By working hard the poor peasants (the *wrotters*) build a little patrimony that might form a starting point for their children. It is dire need that pushes them forwards – just as it is temptation that makes the large farmers deviate.

The two main storylines in *Stepmother Earth* (represented by Jarig and Tjalling respectively) come down to the interaction of economic and social logic. Pride and horses on the one hand, and the economic crisis of the 1880s on the other, make for the collapse of the *Wiarda domus* (more about this crisis and how it affected farming later on). *Jarig*, the eldest son and outspoken 'horseman' goes to jail, then lives in the dark side of the city and finally, when completely broke, becomes a labourer in the peat industry and as a result becomes familiar with labour movements and socialism. *Tjalling*, his younger brother, becomes a rural worker, but through marriage acquires a small farm that he is able to develop¹³ – making true the dream of the *wrotter*.

Here we are at the heart of the work of Theun de Vries. Against all orthodoxy it is the large farmer who disappears and the rural worker, originally completely landless, who is, against all odds, able to develop a small farm into a more prosperous one.¹⁴ Both are embodied in one and the same person. In *Tjalling*, the large farmer to lose his farm and then the proletarian dreaming of, and able to construct – as a *wrotter* – a new farm. It is precisely the unity of these two contrasting identities in one and the same person that gives *Stepmother Earth* its narrative splendour.¹⁵

The same unity of contrasting, if not conflicting, elements can also be found in *Jarig*, the elder brother of *Tjalling*. After jail there is a period that he spends in the dark corners of the

¹³The frequent shifts from the condition of a poor rural worker to one of (small) peasant, and the other way around, from peasant to worker, as well as the combination of the two conditions (being simultaneously peasant and rural worker) often tied those involved together in one 'class-for-itself' that defined itself as 'we the poor people of the land'. This occurred in many countries. I lived it myself in the 1970s in Peru where people spoke of '*nosotros los pobres del campo*' (van der Ploeg 1977).

¹⁴This movement, from being landless to having and developing a small farm, has frequently reoccurred in Dutch social history. Former wage workers from arable farms in the North East became horticultural producers around the city of The Hague (in what is known as the Westland). Poor urban workers from the South became the driving force for intensive pig breeding in the South.

¹⁵But again, in the empirical reality that De Vries experienced in his youth, such a combination (the unity of contrasting elements in one person) was frequently found in the countryside. Canonical Marxism has found it extremely difficult to deal with such 'hybridity' and ambiguity.

city, during which he burns whatever possibilities he has to rebuild his life. The only way out that remains to him is to sell his labour on short term contracts, moving from one place to the other. *Jarig* moves from threshing barley, breaking flax, via all kinds of other jobs, to delving turf in the peat industry. During his wanderings he meets *Karel* and the two become friends. *Karel* is a tough and experienced worker, who cares for others. He is well acquainted with socialist thought and reads the socialist weeklies of the time (such as '*Justice for All*'). The two talk and discuss a lot but

there ain't no need for *Karel* to explain the writings of Marx. Surplus value: that is the horse in the stable of the boss [of the peat industry], his fat belly, his daughter in lace dresses and his son spending his leisure hunting in the woods of the noblemen. (331)

This sentence is a key to *Stepmother Earth* as a whole. The book develops a sharp analysis of class relations and how they evolve over time; it also entails a bright (and theoretically underpinned) description of politico-economic relations and processes. But this is done without any jargon. It is as if Theun de Vries elaborates a wry but colourful painting¹⁶ of capitalism and the fate of the different people involved in it. It is a painting that makes the observer feel, by him or herself, that things need to be changed and that life cannot continue in this way. The painting hits the observer in the stomach. It makes the observer feel that the needed changes will be difficult and very painful. The painting makes those who are observing it realize, by themselves, that unity and organization are needed. That, I think, is the genius of Theun de Vries. It is a mastery that resides in the capacity to *not* prescribe to the readers what to think or do – instead De Vries invokes his readers to develop their own opinions and positions. No need to talk explicitly about 'surplus value'. Just trigger the needed introspection and reflection. People know by themselves what 'surplus value' and 'exploitation' are. He just helped them to make the right connections between the bits and pieces they know and to unite these in a more or less coherent whole. Thus, 'thanks to *Karel*, *Jarig* began to see the cruel reality around him' (304). If one triggers the people to see the 'flesh and blood', they will understand 'the skeleton' by themselves. That is what happens in *Stepmother Earth*. What *Karel* does is to help *Jarig* to see the interconnections of the different real-life experiences he was and is experiencing. In *Stepmother Earth* Theun de Vries does the same: he weaves different parts of visible social history together in such a way that it becomes a compelling politico-economic and class analysis.

Even if they become good friends, some distance remains between *Karel* and *Jarig*. At one point *Karel* says to *Jarig* that he is not sure whether he can trust him as, after all, he is 'the son of a rich farmer'. Will the other workers ever understand him? And the other way around? There remain doubts. Beyond that, it turns out that both men love the same woman, always fertile territory for tensions between 'friends'.

When it comes to strikes¹⁷ (as happens when *Karel* and *Jarig* are working, with thousands of others, in the peat industry where conditions for working and living were terrible,

¹⁶It is, in this respect, very telling that Geert Mak, a contemporary Dutch writer who established his fame with a novel about the decay of a rural village (*Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*) characterizes Theun de Vries as 'a writer who simultaneously is a painter, with the same evocative capacity as Flaubert and Paustovski' (Mak in the introduction to 'De vertellingen of Wilt Tjaarda', 2003).

¹⁷Although *Stepmother Earth* was written in the Dutch language, Theun de Vries uses the Frisian word '*bollejeije*' (slightly changed into '*bollejagen*' which is a kind of Dutch version of the Frisian original) instead of the Dutch word '*staken*'. The latter word (*staken*) is identical to 'stop' (with something). In this case: stop working. As simple as that. The Frisian word

as is well described in *Stepmother Earth*), *Karel* emerges as natural leader, well accepted by the rank and file (although there are sharp conflicts with other leaders, some of whom betray the cause). As during all strikes there is, each and every morning, a call. All the people on strike turn up and discuss tactics together, the position to take in ongoing negotiations, etc. *Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis*, the anarchist clergyman (or 'Our Saviour' as Frisians call him), is invited to one of these calls.¹⁸ It is a touching part of *Stepmother Earth*.

The strike fails. It is broken by the army. Internal divisions also play a role. Meanwhile the big economic crisis is looming. 'The strike was dead. The revolt is dead' (412–413). 'Revolution is entering low tide' (374). *Jarig* escapes and is able to restart his life, together with his wife and their son, but under very difficult conditions: *Jarig* becomes a *wrotter*, a peasant-worker who builds, step-by-step and through bloody hard work, his own resource base. It is the proverbial 'return to the land' (303). But before he comes close to his dream, he tragically dies. It is New Year's Eve and it is bitter cold, the streets are slippery and a gale flogs the land. *Jarig*, now 60 years old and physically worn out, is returning with his waggon and horse from a round of collecting milk from the surrounding farmers to deliver to the dairy factory (a paid job that small farmers liked to combine with farming). Tired and confused *Jarig* believes that *Karel* is riding a waggon in front of him. *Jarig* wants to catch up with him, in order to ride together. He speeds up but fails. His waggon turns over and *Jarig* dies. Does this suggest that that socialism and peasants cannot really go together? Or was *Jarig* just pursuing a ghost? *Stepmother Earth* leaves the question open.

So far two main storylines, in which *Jarig* and *Tjalling* are the exponents. Both lines start with the collapse of a large farm. They evolve, albeit with different points of departure and different rhythms, as the making and developing of a small farm. In one storyline this is done successfully, while it tragically fails in the other one. This also reflects realities of the time. There is far more in *Stepmother Earth*, but instead of continuing with this summary I will turn to briefly discuss some stylistic elements and then shift to two underlying theoretical issues. How is, according to *Stepmother Earth*, farming articulating with the capitalist society in which it is embedded? And secondly: what does this mean in programmatic terms? That is: what should a socialist policy for agriculture look like? In other words: what would *Karel* argue, if he were asked to outline the next steps forward?

The style

The Frisian language is very rich in metaphors. This is related to it being very much the language of peasants and fishermen. The frequent use of metaphor is reflected in *Stepmother Earth*. Let me give an example. It is related to *Herre*, the son of *Tjalling*. *Herre* is building a network of, initially small, food processing enterprises and trading companies. In doing so he capitalizes, as it were, on his detailed knowledge of the peasants of the sandy soils of the East of Frisia. Thus he is able to accumulate considerable wealth and to impose his imprint on the way peasant farms develop. In *Stepmother Earth* this reads

bollejeije literally means 'to rush the bull', it is closely related to the Spanish '*corrida*' (bullfight). When strikes were going on at that time there was a lot of police intervention, and sometimes by the army as well. I am not knowledgeable about the origin of this strange word '*bollejeije*', but the fighting that often resulted from the strikes and interventions might have looked like a bullfight. See the description of such a scene on pages 379–412.

¹⁸For more about the life and work of Domela Nieuwenhuis, see the excellent biography written by Stutje (2012). It is, by the way, a salient feature of *Stepmother Earth*. Fiction and non-fiction are mixed and interwoven in an imaginative and thought provoking way.

as follows: ‘Slowly he lays his nets over the region’ (419). This refers to the Frisian way of bird hunting, *wylsterflappe*, that used large nets that cover a field in order to catch birds. One reads that ‘the birds flew unsuspecting into the nets; and now they are awaiting defenceless the hand that will pluck them and clip their wings [...] and then tell them the trajectory they have to follow’ (423).¹⁹ Again, this is not a language structured around concepts as ‘surplus value’, ‘accumulation by expropriation’, etc. But it did, I imagine, communicate far more effectively and powerfully with the many readers of *Stepmother Earth*. That is the strength of metaphor, it relates everyday life experience with something more general that we all know, feel, and experience. Instead of moving everyday life to the category of the already known, or even worse: to the category of the irrelevant, the metaphor puts it centre stage. ‘Slowly laying his nets over the region’. The ‘slowly’ sounds like sneaky and the change from field to ‘region’ highlights the imminent danger. This is what everybody understood. This is why *Stepmother Earth* ‘could be found in nearly every household’ and why it became a ‘sort of Bible’ (Friese Koerier 1963). Theun de Vries understood the language of common people and made powerful use of it.

Another feature that I like to mention here is the abundant use of images of nature. Each episode is embedded, as it were, in a season, in particular weather conditions. Each major event comes with the smells and sounds of fauna and flora. ‘Nature and social history intertwine, they come together’ as Theun de Vries explained far later in an interview:

I am a son of a peasant family, nature plays a considerable role in my work [...]. The dynamics of a season, the mighty power of a thunderstorm or the misery it brings, a cold day in winter, all this is important. (Leeuwarder Courant 1976)

Nature puts its imprint on the way events develop and interlink and how people perceive them. This applies even more since farming is understood and represented, in *Stepmother Earth*, as co-production. ‘The earth provides the germs [of the grass] and the sky brings the rains; but it is the farmer who converts it into meadows’ (149).²⁰ Nature is, together with labour, at the heart of farming. Understanding and dealing with it is strategic – at least in the realm of peasant agriculture. In *Stepmother Earth* this is self-evident. In retrospect it reads as a kind of early warning. For critical agrarian studies became only far later aware of the need to ‘slot in nature’.

Agriculture and capitalism

Stepmother Earth is rich in describing the many connections that tie, and subordinate, farming to capitalism. I have already mentioned the temptations. The associated ‘luxury consumption’ (in horses, women, alcohol, or whatever) implies a transfer of

¹⁹‘Tell them the trajectory they have to follow’. This sounds like an anticipation of the TATE (Technological-Administrative Task Environment) theory, developed far later by the Italian rural sociologist Bruno Benvenuti (1982). TATE theory describes how the behaviour of formally independent farmers is externally prescribed and sanctioned and by whom.

²⁰Making a meadow is definitely not a one-off project or operation. These meadows are the fruits of building, maintaining and improving the polders, of draining and making ditches during hundreds of years. Well-bred manure has been distributed over these fields, and mud, and liquid manure, time and again. There has been mowing and pasturing, they [i.e. the meadows] have been cleared from thistles and bad herbs, the grass was kept short in early spring by sheep and irrigated afterwards with the rains of the summer [...] Thus the meadow was made into a thick fur, green velvet, springy and as precious as tapestries in urban dwellings’ (149).

wealth from the countryside towards the cities and an impoverishment of the farming families whose patriarchs or sons are attracted to these temptations. In this context austerity easily emerges as a virtue – the more so when it interacts with Protestantism.

Then there are the farmers who want to go beyond their own capacity (beyond the limits of their own resource-base) because they ‘got bewitched by the money’ (254). They become ‘money-devils’ (270) who go for the ‘easy money’ and this can take various forms. They might start with fraud with butter (210), or by putting cruel pressure on their wife, children and/or workers, squeezing the maximum of labour out of their bodies. Another approach is to enlarge the farm beyond its boundaries. That implies engaging in debts (in peasant agriculture often understood as making a deal with the devil)²¹ in order to buy more resources. It implies enlarging the herd beyond the carrying capacity of their own meadows (also strongly taboo in peasant culture) so that buying feed and fodder (instead of producing it on the farm itself) becomes a permanent feature. It might also mean that more labour is required than can be provided by the farming family: then salaried workers enter and become structurally embedded. Whatever the specific form, the farm is increasingly commoditized and farming becomes an operation governed and driven by the laws of money and market.²²

Another linkage are farmers or farmers’ sons (daughters apparently did not do so), who become themselves capitalist and try to make ‘out of every 10 guilders at least 15 new guilders’ (359). ‘Entrapping others in their net’ (254) is a key strategy for doing so.

Misfortune might equally trigger relations of dependency and exploitation. Diseases in the herd, a failed harvest, or trouble in the family may bring the need to engage in credit relations. Debts will bring financial costs and vulnerability. This might also occur when solidarity (or family relations) has brought people to support others (320). Then the misfortune of the latter easily backfires on the former.

Evidently there is the price-squeeze as well. Prices that are slowly going down and cost levels that keep increasing make ‘for a world where everybody believes he can live on behalf of the farmers’ (202). ‘High expenses, high wages, long working days and yet the farm is not moving forward. Yes, the farm renders a lot, but she consumes as well the biggest part of it’ (201). Thus, the value produced within the farm flows elsewhere. It translates into others’ richness.

The squeeze on agriculture relates with the slow but persistent generalization of capital relations.

In the past the world was smaller and it moved with modest rhythms; the world was well delineated: the farm, the village, the neighbouring city [...] One could count with slow steps ahead, it was possible to create some buffers [...]. But the metabolism of the world changed. (201–203)

And then, just as Chayanov (1986) writing that ‘literally before our eyes’ the world was changing, Theun de Vries signals that

the world is not small anymore and living became dangerous. Life became a game of chance, the independence of peasants got threatened, their wellbeing or downfall became dependent on the mercy of those who governed the markets, nationally as well as internationally. Those

²¹This is beautifully spelled out in the ‘folkstories’ gathered in Jaarsma (2016).

²²Later on this theme is dramatized by Brolsma ([1940] 1979).

people moved quickly in order to conquer markets that were laying barren. First one hundred small markets, then five medium ones, and finally one market that usurps everything, one final centre of decision that establishes the prices to be paid on the markets of Hoorn [in Holland], Harlingen [Frisia], Delfzijl [Groningen], Esbjerg and Ringkøbing [Denmark]. That there are people who frenetically work on the conquest of all these markets – no, the peasants were not aware of that. They only received partial and confusing bits of information; they did not perceive the underlying patterns. They do not see that those who increasingly govern the markets have spread their nets – like spiders in a warm summer evening [...] in order to quickly catch as much as they can. (203)²³

In times of crisis the squeeze on agriculture is abruptly tightened: ‘In January ‘79 the [prices of] farms fall, in March the butter price goes down’ (294). Such a crisis becomes a many sided attack on farms and farmers.

Farms go broke and are sold at public auctions. What started as a snowball now is an avalanche. Mortgages that are to be repaid, lease payments, the bill for bought feed and feed, merchants that insist that the purchased clothes are now to be paid [for] as soon as possible. Everybody is urging the farmers, under all roofs there is despair. Peasants who previously calculated with the hundreds and the thousands are suddenly poor. They try to engage in second jobs in order to raise some money. Some commit suicide [...] Others suffer hunger. (322)

The crisis greatly threatened the ‘patrimony’ and the independence of farmers (as does today’s ongoing crisis). It triggered a wave of what we now call ‘landgrabbing’: ‘In the years of crisis more than half of the province has been bought by absentee landowners, Dutchmen, whose estate agents collect the lease payments’ (418).

The position of socialists towards peasants

Although it is not spelled out in a systematic and explicit way, *Stepmother Earth* clearly entails a kind of programme – a socio-political programme. It centres around four points that pop up repeatedly in the book. Together they constitute, I think, the backbone of what could have constituted a socialist agricultural policy – provided that the straight-jacket of the then dominant Leninist/Stalinist orthodoxy could have been loosened.

First, there is the need to disclose the mechanics of market control and capital accumulation and the way they affect farming. Throughout *Stepmother Earth*, Theun de Vries refers to the ignorance of farmers when it comes to the new, global ‘metabolism’ that was draining them. Hence, explaining the many interdependencies and their underlying logic, is the primary task. Remember: ‘It was only thanks to Karel [the socialist] that Jarig began to see the cruel reality’ (304). We are living in ‘a world of lies’ (334) and have to shout, as Domela Nieuwenhuis did from his pulpit, ‘the truth’ (334). Second comes the organization of cooperatives (423) in order to resist those who were spreading their ‘nets’ over agriculture and food provisioning.²⁴ Third comes organization. Peasants need their own strong organizations – just as rural workers have their labour unions.²⁵ They need adequate forms for action and protest – just as the workers go ‘rushing the bull’. Fourth, and this is intriguing

²³It is theoretically interesting that De Vries elaborates here an analysis that is close to the approach developed later on by Braudel (1989). It centres on capital being located first and foremost in the sphere of circulation.

²⁴Theun de Vries clearly refers here to so-called vertical cooperatives.

²⁵Interestingly, de Vries takes here the same position as Sereni did (see note 3).

(especially at the time *Stepmother Earth* was written), peasant agriculture, peasants farms and the land possessed by peasants were to be defended. The three previously mentioned points are all essential for this fourth point to be realized. 'The right of people to the earth and the right of the farmers to the free possession of his land' (Volksdagblad 1938a) are to be defended, especially in times of crisis when these rights come under multiple attack. The struggles that embody and consolidate such a defence will ensure 'that the earth stops being a stepmother, and becomes the origin and unlimited source of prosperous labour, progress and well-being' (Volksdagblad 1938a).

All this is clearly present, albeit implicit in *Stepmother Earth*. However, it will soon be made explicit. That is when the Nazis in the Netherlands tried to appropriate this epic and much read novel.

With shameless impudence the Nazis grasp this work [i.e. *Stepmother Earth*]. They declare it to be 'a good farmers' book' full of 'populist features' [...], a true contribution to the "*Blut und Boden*" art [the fascist style art that puts 'Blood and Soil' centre stage]. (Volksdagblad 1938a)

This 'impudence' compelled the socialists (i.e. the Communist Party Holland, CPH) of that time to react and to sharply define their own position. They did so through a rejoinder in the *Volksdagblad* [People's Daily]. It is not unlikely that the response was written by Theun de Vries himself.²⁶ *Stepmother Earth*, it is said,

has shown that the individualism of farmers is untenable [...]. The only way forward is through organized resistance and unified action. This is the only way for farmers to protect themselves from exploitation and suppression. And this way has been blocked, in Italy and Germany, by the totalitarian combination [...] of capitalism and terror, called fascism. (Volksdagblad 1938a)

Moreover,

the right of farmers to freely access and possess land [...], one of the cornerstones of *Stepmother Earth*, implies that it is absolutely impossible that there will be anything than enmity between the author [of *Stepmother Earth*] and the Nazis [...]. For fascism reduces the farmer to a serf and a wageworker for large landowners, as we see in Germany, where the new succession laws imply that land is being transferred to *Junkers* and large landowners who, due to fascism, have a stronger position than ever. (Volksdagblad 1938a)

'Free men on free land' was the battle cry of Volksdagblad (1938a) . Or as we would say today: 'Free men and women on free land'. It sought to defend the rights of peasants, including the right to possess land. This was the same lesson that was drawn, in *Stepmother Earth*, during the tremendous crisis of the 1880s – a lesson that was articulated again in the 1930s and '40s, with much insistence, in order to draw a clear line of demarcation vis-a-vis fascism. In an epoch such as ours, in which neo-liberal policies have induced a permanent crisis in agriculture, land-grabbing is widespread again, and (proto-)fascist movements are trying again to incorporate rural movements, so it is, to say the least, still a very relevant and timely message.

²⁶Ironically, this rejoinder is published in the same issue, and on the same page, where the death of Karl Kautsky was announced: 'He died in exile in Amsterdam as a socialist persecuted by the fascists' (Volksdagblad 1938b). However, the obituary repeats the standard denunciations of revisionism, etc. The contradiction between defending the 'right to land' on the one hand and the rejection of Kautsky as revisionist on the other evidently escaped the attention of the editor of the Volksdagblad.

By way of conclusion

It is evident that *Stepmother Earth* reflects a specific, time-and-space bounded reality. The insights elaborated by Theun de Vries cannot be generalized towards other times or other places. The *method*, however, that is applied in *Stepmother Earth*, the careful inquiry into the social logic of farming and how it interacts with the economic logic, is applicable everywhere. The same applies to the *tools* used for the exploration (and subsequent representation) of the social logic. One of these tools is putting the way that the involved actors experience their situation and translate it into a course of action centre stage. It is what Norman Long (1985) will elaborate many decades later as the ‘actor-oriented approach’. Systematically integrating ‘folk concepts’ into a more comprehensive politico-economic analysis is a second tool. The third one is paying the required attention to heterogeneity (see e.g. the difference between large farmers and *wrotters*) and elaborate fine-tuned comparative analyses. A fourth tool is using cultural repertoire as an important source for understanding the rural.

The merit of Theun de Vries is that he convincingly demonstrates – in *Stepmother Earth* – that a thorough knowledge of social logic and the way it interacts with economic logic is strategic for understanding the rural. It is also indispensable when it comes to the formulation of political positions and appropriate agrarian policies. The merit of De Vries also resides in highlighting the dynamics of *peasant* agriculture – long before the convincing empirical studies of Bernhard Slicher van Bath (1960), Jan Bieleman (1987), Jan Luiten van Zanden (1985) and many others were published. It resides especially in his explanation of such dynamics: the centrality of labour and the longing for a better life. Finally I want to refer to another merit: showing that processes of differentiation can take many different and mutually contrasting forms and outcomes.

Potentially, all this was a great, albeit probably unintended, contribution to what we now define as critical agrarian studies (Edelman and Wolford 2017). What a pity that so many politicians of the radical left as well as Marxist theorists studying agriculture, missed the insights elaborated in *Stepmother Earth* (and similar works). What a pity that this radical left became, consequently, a stepmother to rural people who were and are fighting for their emancipation.

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