

Society for Social Studies of Science's annual meeting on *(In)sensibilities*, Boston 30 Aug. - 2 Sept. 2017
Panel "The call of communism or How to handle frail political capacities with care?" (John Nève, François Thoreau, Alexis Zimmer and Benedikte Zitouni). Paper by Benedikte Zitouni:

The meaning of commonly-cared for nature according to struggling farmers

Introduction

For forty years, from 1974 onwards¹, inhabitants and farmers of the Schelde's left-bank [PP map] have been struggling against the Port of Antwerp, the development projects of which either expropriated them or left them in limbo i.e. in the uncertainty as to whether or not they could stay. The main activist group has recently nicknamed itself "the Third Generation" in order to underscore the duration but also the ongoingness of the struggle: children and grandchildren are taking the lead [PP web]. Officially, the group is called after one of the phantom villages of the area: Doel (pronounced as "tool" but with a D). This village, Doel, has lived under such menace of expulsion and administrative pestering, with ensuing material squalor and dereliction, that most of its inhabitants have left. In the last four decades, numbers went down from 1.300 to a mere 100².

But Doel is not the only village living in the shadows of the Port. The struggle concerns a wider region in which much smaller villages, often just clustering a few farms, are disappearing. They are literally vanishing from the face of the Earth. Farming land and history are being erased, put under water, to give way to the Port and its so-called "ecological" surroundings. Indeed, the left bank will host Europe's grand new wetland park *Groot Saeftinghe* [PP web]. To the already protected land extending over an area of 3600 hectares [*Drowned Land of Saeftinghe* PP web], 465 hectares of previous farming land are being added with the support of the Port³; and for safety reasons, an extra bufferzone will be depopulated [PP map]. In sum, the equivalent of 1/4 of Manhattan is being expropriated.⁴ [PP visit:] It all looks peaceful, trivial perhaps, but really, it's a disaster. The left bank has reached a turning point.

Farmers are being driven out in the name of Nature. Perhaps it's the lesser of all evils but, from the farmers' point of view, it's an evil nevertheless. They are losing their long-standing environmentalist ally in the region and they are now facing something they call "new nature". [PP] I quote: "Farmers' nature, awe-inspiring for so many of our generations must now give way to new nature."⁵ Farmers' *versus* environmentalists' nature. Old *versus* new nature. A turning point indeed. But how did we get there? What exactly *is* happening? And why should we listen to farmers whose engagement with agroindustrial ways has had disastrous effects on the environment, after all? These are the question I'd like to answer in the next fifteen minutes.

Alliance

Let's go back in time. In 2001, for the first time, the Port of Antwerp was defeated by farmers, environmentalists and inhabitants who went to court to put a case against the construction of a bassin [*Deurganckdok* PP map] and the ways in which that construction was allowed for in the first place. They were

proven right in the name of the European bird-habitat protection and construction had to stop immediately⁶. The interruption lasted for over a year, was finally circumvented by legalising manoeuvring on the part of the Flemish Region and the bassin was inaugurated in 2005 (without the court's approval)⁷. But in the meantime, the Port had lost billions over this case.⁸ The interruption of construction had been expensive. Birds had become an issue. Henceforth, almost immediately in fact, right after the interruption (in 2002), Flemish and Port authorities called the environmentalists at the negotiation table.

This is what they agreed to: the Port hands over 5% of its inner surfaces to “ecological infrastructure”⁹ — pools are currently being dug for the preservation of a rare frog — and each expansion will be compensated by the construction of *new* nature. Furthermore, the region's main environmental association is now part of the Port's Council of Administration and three of its full-time employees are paid for by the Port in order to follow up environmental matters¹⁰. So, when in 2005 the Port announced the construction of yet another bassin, it now had the environmentalists on its side. [PP] Here we reach today's ordeal, as described at the beginning of the paper, for it is *that* bassin which will run along Doel (phantom city anyhow!) and through a natural reserve that is now being moved onto (phantom?) farming land so as to contribute to an already existing natural wetland park¹¹. It's the so-called “win-win” situation or as an environmentalist puts it [PP]: “Ten years of collaboration with the Port has yielded better results than thirty years of struggle. The new approach is much more efficient.”¹²

Is it? Really? The creation of such efficiency i.e. of a new alliance can indeed explain how the turning point was reached, how we got to this situation in which farmers are driven out, yet again, for the construction of a bassin but this time in the name of Nature and compensation. Beware of ecological infrastructure, it's the next Trojan horse. It's the notion that allows for expansionist and capital-driven installations such as the Port to claim environmental concern¹³. This, now, we understand. Still, it leaves us looking for answers as to what exactly *is* happening here. Of course, one could easily explain all this away by mentioning Green Capitalism or *realpolitik* or the disembodied conception of space which the new alliance is built upon. How else can one consider *moving* and *replacing* nature? Let's not forget that some environmentalists did *not* go to the negotiation table! But I would like to push the investigation into a different direction. For I've come to understand that the alliance is driven by a dream, an ambiguous one, an academic one, a dangerous one for this dream which might well continue to divide oppositional powers. *That* is why we should listen to farmers. They are warning us.

Rewilding

This is my courtyard my farm [*Dit is mijn hof* PP] is non-fiction prose written by a journalist born and raised on the Schelde's left-bank which takes up the farmers' position. [PP] It came out in 2015 and triggered some public debate in Flanders and in the Netherlands (the debate is now moving to Germany where the book's just been translated). Two territorial conceptions are at war: which one should we choose? New or old nature? The author doesn't say *that* much about new nature — his engagement lies with the old one — but he says enough for readers such as I and others, at University, with time and

money on our hands, to carry forth the investigation and to start taking an interest in particular conservationist theories, research labs and a spreading revolutionary movement called *Rewilding Europe*¹⁴.

It appears that over the years the University of Antwerp's biology department and particularly professor Meire has succeeded in opening up the Port's officials to new environmental considerations: nature is of recreational use; it can bring development and jobs to a region that yields little plus-value otherwise; it can introduce ecological value into a farmers' region that has become an "ecological wasteland"¹⁵. These ideas were tentatively put into practice in the late nineties on the Schelde's left-bank¹⁶. [PP] Compensatory natural reserves were built in order to bring recreation and tourism, fauna and flora and, last but not least, protection from the rising sea level. In the new wetlands, everything becomes an ecosystemic service, some metric space, integrated into a brand-new calculated win-win formula.

But one commodity is systematically taken *out* of the formula: the farmers' crops. This is where we need to pay attention. The farmers of the Schelde's left-bank are not facing *any* green capitalism, they're facing one of the *wilderness* type. Environmentalists who agreed to sit at the negotiation table, Meire included, are inspired by the work of Frans Vera and his likes [PP] who claim we must reactivate natural processes of wilderness i.e. processes that diversified landscapes, carried forth all kinds of fauna and flora *including* big mammals such as wild horses and boars *before* the agricultural revolution 10.000 years ago. In short, according to these conservationist theories, in Europe, agriculture did not diversify an initially monotone forest landscape but it impoverished the already existing biotopes which we must now recreate. And the wetland is one of these primary biotopes. As Vera concludes in his PhD [PP]:

"With regard to agricultural and natural conservation policies, the biggest priority must be given to the development of wilderness. [...] This means that natural parks must have big surfaces which may not be used, under no circumstance, for forestry or agriculture for these are the practices which led to the disappearance of wilderness in the first place."¹⁷

No wonder farming is left out of the equation! Farming must intensify and concentrate on smaller surfaces in order to leave way to wilderness parks such as the ones *Rewilding Europe* is working on [PP]. This movement is of the progressive trans-species kind, arguing we must and can give back to nature some of what we've taken which in return will allow us to connect to primal robust nature of which we'd become the caretakers rather than the exploiters; i.e. we'd become guides, observers, hosts, visitors, willing to partake *in* the biotope. But because of its progressiveness and hubris, *Rewilding Europe* is potentially a very destructive movement. In the name of feasibility — nature can be made, moved and reactivated — old-style or so-called "impoverished" landscapes of co-evolution and care taking, including secular farming lands, are mercilessly liquidated.

Let's put it another way. One: from an evolutionary perspective, farming has signalled the beginning of the end of wilderness and can therefore never become part of the solution when bringing back wilderness. Notwithstanding current efforts made by farmers to get away from the industrial agro-business! Incidentally, one may ask in the name of what history, what evolution, tourism can suddenly become

part of the solution? Close the brackets. Two, and that perhaps is my main point: bringing back wilderness is foregrounded on the notion of the powers and processes of nature *itself*, on the notion of letting these powers play out and not on the notion of co-evolution and carefully crafted landscapes that would include men and woman as secular caretakers of the land. Mercilessness is part of the deal.

Interweaving

That is why we must listen to these farmers [PP]. For I'm not sure I would have grasped the dangers of re-wilding i.e. of letting the sea and rivers play out again on the low lands, had it not been for them. Farmers of the Schelde's left bank are pointing at the rising danger of a new kind of trans-specific hubris, a revolutionary eco-dream, *and* they are pointing at destruction, at what's getting lost, at what must be defended at all costs. They call it "old" nature when debating. They call it "country" or "landscape" when telling of their land. Their country, they say, is one of interwoven-ness [*verwevenheid*]¹⁸. It's a nicely suggestive word that connects well to our own academic STS claims of hybridity and interdependency. Too well perhaps. So, in this last section of the paper, let's quickly point out what *they* have to say about interwoven-ness and what sets it apart from the eco-dream.

The farmers' country is a god-fearing one. Not all farmers are religious but their testimonies abound with popular biblical proverbs and, more crucially, their connexion to the land is imbued with disquiet. The elements might at any moment turn against them. Bountifulness can never be taken for granted. One's farm is one's castle to be taken care of. God is watching. The elements are. Knowing this, I reconsider the ritual that initially attracted my attention and made me visit Doel. Since 1974, every summer, at the time of Holy Mary's Assumption, the resisting inhabitants and farmers go to church and ask for the river's protection. A procession leads to the Schelde's banks for benedictions [PP]. Other activists and radicals might laugh at so much so-called superstition. Well, I wonder... What if these are in fact very situated and therefore durable ways of keeping to the land? This is the third generation after all.

The farmers' country is a storied one. Places carry names, tales and memories which farmers gladly talk about. Co-evolution indeed. Most stories are set in recent times and involve smugglers, fishers, swallows, cows, creeks, geese, storms, winters as well as the odd burning clearing practice. Some stories are set in a remote past and involve Catholics, Protestants, wars, or a troubadour hailing the region¹⁹. The point is sedimentation. Landscapes are loaded. Everything is tell-tale. What sadness, then, when trees are cut down and soil is scraped off for wetlands, I quote [PP]: "It feels like a voyage to the end of the world." "Books are being burned." "We have fallen out of time."²⁰ Recently, inhabitants have started a museum in order to take stock of what's being lost [PP]. We visited. Someone said it wasn't critical enough. Well, I wonder... They are telling us of interwoven-ness and perhaps we should care to listen.

Epilogue

It's time for an epilogue. A happy one, perhaps. Two months ago, the Port's been defeated for the second time. The court has decided against the construction of the new bassin, the necessity of which has not been sufficiently been proven in the light of the protected bird-nesting habitat it was about to de-

stroy. So said the judges. Compensation may only occur in the name of a greater societal good. Hence, all construction, of the bassin, of new nature, of buffer zones, must stop immediately. It is unclear as to what will happen to the already inundated and scraped-off land but it's a victory nevertheless. [PP] Late June, architecture professors and students of the Leuven University camped their "Arch of Doel-country"²¹ at the margins of the phantom city: research for reconstruction must start now. The third generation agrees. The challenge is huge. How can we rebuild the country while not surfing on our usual, revolutionary, hubris?

- ¹ The expropriation of houses and farms in Kallo, effectively started in 1975, for both the Port's and the industry's infrastructure (a lock, deepening of waterbed, canalisations for gas and other), are often mentioned as the departure point for the ongoing struggle. See online *Waaskrant* and the book by Chris De Stoop (references below).
- ² Wikipedia, on Doel. Source: National Institute for Statistics; municipality Beveren (of which Doel is part since 1977).
- ³ For added surface, see official video for European funded Interreg projects: <http://www.grensregio.eu/projecten/grenspark-groot-saeftinghe>. For total surface of the already existing wetlands park, see: <http://saeftinghe.eu/nl/>
- ⁴ The newly planned for bassin is called *Saeftinghedok*. The natural reserve is called *Putten* and when "moved" *Putten-West*. In total 1500 hectares or 15km² are being expropriated, half of which for the bassin itself, the other half for compensation. Most of it, if not all, on farming land. 15km² equals a fourth of Manhattan's surface.
- ⁵ Chris De Stoop, 2015, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, p. 269.
- ⁶ Sources for description of this episode surrounding the *Deurganckdok*: Chris De Stoop, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-53; the website of *Doel2020*; and wikipedia.
- ⁷ Without the court's approval means that in the end, in 2012, the court annulled the original plan which the *Deurganckdok* was part of but in the meantime, the Flemish Government had, as already stated, found a way to go ahead with construction anyway (see *nooddecreet* of 2002) and consolidated the basin's legal existence, on a regional level, in 2005 (see *ruimtelijk uitvoeringsplan* in 2005). Sources: see previous notes.
- ⁸ See documentary by Manu Riche, 2016, *Oratorium zonder doel*. See also wikipedia on *deurganckdok*, referring to press article, itself referring to parliament circles.
- ⁹ Chris De Stoop, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, p. 214. For a more exhaustive list of target species, see the Port of Antwerp's own site: <http://www.portofantwerp.com/nl/natuur>
- ¹⁰ For the 5%, see the Port of Antwerp's own site, referenced above. For the rest, see Chris De Stoop's *Dit is mijn hof*, p. 52 (testimony of the ecological association's own collaborators).
- ¹¹ The newly planned for bassin is called *Saeftinghedok*. The natural reserve is called *Putten* and when "moved" *Putten-West*. In total 1500 hectares or 15km² are being expropriated, half of which for the bassin itself, the other half for compensation. Most of it, if not all, on farming land. 15km² equals a fourth of Manhattan's surface.
- ¹² Chris De Stoop, 2015, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, p. 211.
- ¹³ See Natasha Meyers "From Edenic Apocalypse to Gardens Against Eden" in forthcoming book: *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*, edited by Gregg Hetherington, Duke University Press.
- ¹⁴ I'm not the only one relaying this struggle, involved in the investigation concerning the different territorial conceptions at stake in and around the Port of Antwerp. See also the PhD and committed written work by the philosopher of ethics Glenn Deliège, currently working at the University of Leuven.

- ¹⁵ I can't locate the exact word but the notion of farming land being of zero ecological value is being discussed, amongst farmers and members of Doel2020, in a scene described on page 179.
- ¹⁶ The natural reservation of Kruibeke seems to have been pre-emptively created, in view of the construction of the *Deurganckdok*. Source : the official website of Kruibeke itself hints at it; wikipedia on the Deurganckdok tells of it; and see also Chris De Stoop, 2015, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, pp. 220-222.
- ¹⁷ Frans Vera, 1997, *Metaforen voor de wildernis. Eik hazelaar, rund en paard*, Wageningen Universiteit, p. 320. Freely available and downloadable online.
- ¹⁸ Chris De Stoop, 2015, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, p. 149.
- ¹⁹ I'm referring the medieval tale *Reinaerd de vos* about a fox or trickster which is part the Flemish high schools' curriculum.
- ²⁰ Chris De Stoop, 2015, *Dit is mijn hof*, De Bezige Bij, p. 104 (end of the world), p. 228 (burning books), p. 281 (falling out of time).
- ²¹ The students put up a website: www.doelland.be