Introduction: Placing Farmers' Protests in Historical Perspective

Michael Woods

Introduction

In early February 2024, farmers and their tractors filled the streets of central Brussels around the European Parliament. Haybales and dirt were dumped in the Place du Luxembourg and bonfires lit. Smoke swirled around the central statue, which had been adorned with placards, banners and flags attacking a proposed EU trade deal with Mercosur (the South American common market), denouncing neoliberalism, and asserting the sovereignty of farmers. The demonstration in Brussels was the culmination of a winter of protests by farmers in many European countries, from Portugal to Latvia, and Cyprus to Ireland.[1] Although the specific triggers for the protests varied between countries, the protests shared not only a common sense of grievance, but also common elements of dramaturgy and discursive framing that are in turn both deeply rooted and resonant with historical references.

This article traces some of these threads and examines some of the shared features. The next section presents an historical overview of rural protests, from the earliest recorded rebellions over two millennia ago to the present day. As it documents, the form of protests, the central issues, and the nature and politics of the participants have varied over time and between places, but there are recurrent themes. These are examined in the subsequent sections. The second section discusses the motivating factors for rural protests, highlighting the significance of taxes, tariffs and technology. The third section focuses on the dramaturgy of protests and the strategies adopted, particularly their territorialisation and transgression of rural and urban space. Finally, the last section explores the framing of rural protests through populist and nationalist discourses and how these have been deployed to connect contemporary protests with historical precedents.

[1] R. Finger, A. Fabry, M. Kammer et al. , 'Farmer protests in Europe 2023-2024', *EuroChoices* 23.3 (2024) 59-63.

A Brief History of Rural Protests

The history of rural protest is founded on a paradox. Cities have long been regarded as the locus of politics, not only as seats of power and governance, but also as sites of both coffee-house debates and street agitation. The countryside, in contrast, was conventionally considered to be less affected by the whims and fractures of politics. Yet, the remoteness of rural areas also limited the imposition of kingly or state power, leaving liminal spaces from which opposition could emerge. For much of history, challenges to political authority were signalled by news of a rebellion in some rural district or another, or worse, of peasant armies advancing on the city. Revolts by farmers or peasants are recorded in Qin dynasty China, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Roman Empire, and periodically erupted throughout Mediaeval Europe. The Jacquerie rebellion by farmers in Northern France (1358) gave French the term *jacquerie* to describe a rebellious farmer, which continued to be applied to protesters into the twentieth century.

In later centuries, the political turbulence of seventeenth century England saw the Levellers, a radical anti-monarchist faction, and proto-agrarian-socialists the Diggers, who advocated land reform, rally rural followers. In settler colonies, rural frontiers that had attracted independently-minded pioneers – some fleeing political or religious persecution – turned against attempts by colonial powers or nascent independent states to impose centralised authority. Power relations between farmers and government in colonial North America and the emergent United States were tested by a series of local revolts over land rights, taxation, prices, or debt enforcement, including Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia (1676), Shay's Rebellion in Massachusetts (1786-87) and the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania (1791-94).[2] The Eureka Rebellion (1851-54) pitted miners in rural Victoria against colonial forces, quashed only through a pitched battle at Eureka Stockade, but has since become venerated in the annals of Australian nationalism.[3]

Rural areas also gave rise to early struggles around industrialisation. The Swing Riots in nineteenth-century England attacked new threshing machines that threatened the position of agricultural labourers, copying the tactics of earlier Luddites who had smashed machinery in rural and urban

[2] F.A. Shannon, *American Farmers' Movements* (Princeton, NJ 1957) 23-26, 30-34, 34-39; C.M. Stock, *Rural Radicals* (New York, NY 1996) 38-43, 48-56, 113-115.

[3] R.D. Walshe, 'The significance of Eureka in Australian history', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 6 (1953) 62–80.

textile mills. As agricultural employment became more precarious, some farmworkers attempted to organise amongst themselves, and faced repercussions from landowners and governments. In 1834, six farm labourers who had formed a trade union in Dorset, England, were punished with transportation to Australia, earning commemoration in the labour movement as the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The Australian labour movement itself traces its origins to a strike by sheep shearers in 1891. Industrial action could spill over into wider protests and confrontations. During Communist-led strikes by farmworkers in France in the 1930s, reports recount how in Pernes-en-Artois, in Northern France, 'housewives led by a red flag paraded through the streets of the village demanding a freeze on the prices of butter and milk' and describe 'several inhabitants preparing to repel the demonstrators with pitch-forks and other weapons' at a strikers' march through a village in the neighbouring Nord department.[4] As these examples illustrate, rural protests through this period were frequently left-leaning in orientation, forming part of an international workers' struggle.

The modernisation of agriculture and consequential displacement of farmworkers eroded the capacity for rural working class mobilisation in much of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Outside highly industrialised countries, however, the rural peasantry continued to form a large proportion of the population and increasingly started to mobilise in social movements as the twentieth century progressed, challenging inequalities stimulated by colonialism. In some territories peasant mobilisation took the form of armed insurrection, including the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952-56) and the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico (1994); in other contexts it has focused on land occupations, as in Brazil, the Philippines and South Africa, or on sporadic farmers' demonstrations, as in India.

In Europe, the break-up of aristocratic estates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed many former tenant farmers to become property owners and employers, parallelling the independent colonist farmers of North America, Australia and New Zealand. Such farmers had status in rural communities and in an age of democratisation they sought to further their interests through non-confrontational means. Efforts by mid-western farmers in the United States to fight elections on a distinctively rural platform through vehicles such as the Populist Party and the Non-Partisan League

[4] Farmer's letter and police report respectively, quoted by J. Bulatis, *Communism in Rural France* (London 2008) 96.

ultimately failed.[5] However, successful agrarian parties were established in parts of Scandinavia and Central Europe, as well as in Australia, where the Country Party (later the National Party) controlled the agriculture ministry for much of the mid-twentieth century. Elsewhere, farmers aligned with mainstream centre-right parties, including notably the Conservative Party in Britain and the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP, People's Party) in Austria. Around the same time, farmers' unions that had often originated as protest groups reinvented themselves as mass-membership industry associations and entered into corporatist arrangements with state agencies concerned about food security that gave them direct influence in shaping agricultural policy.[6]

The outcome of this settlement was a long period of relative stability and prosperity for farmers, with state-sponsored investment in the modernisation and expansion of agriculture and regulated markets. This approach, known as 'productivism', largely removed any impetus for farmers to protest, yet it rested on the conceit that farmers shared common interests that were being met through such policies. In practice, the trajectory of productivist policies favoured larger farmers and agribusiness, and the period of relative calm was punctuated by occasional protests by dissenting groups of farmers in countries such as France and the Netherlands who felt marginalised.[7] The limitations of productivism were more seriously exposed in the United States in the 1970s, when mounting farm debts and uncertain markets drove many small farmers out of business. This 'farm crisis' prompted the explosion of localised protests that coalesced into the American Agricultural Movement, which organised a farm strike and demonstrations in Washington, D.C.

The instability transferred to Europe in the 1980s as the European Community's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) came under scrutiny for its cost and environmental impact, leading to several waves of reforms to its objectives, regulations and delivery mechanisms that reduced subsidies paid to farmers and shifted the emphasis of schemes away from food production

[5] M.J. Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago, IL 2015); A. Selz, *The Making of the Populist Movement* (New York, NY 2020).
[6] A.D. Sheingate, *The Rise of the Agricultural Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ 2001).
[7] L. Jalabert and C. Patilion ed., *Mouvements paysans: face à la politique agricole commune et à la mondialisation (1957-2011)* (Rennes 2013); D. Strijker and I.J. Terluin, 'Rural protest groups in the Netherlands' in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I.J. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties* (Wageningen 2015) 63-78.

to environmental protection and recovery.[8] These reforms have been contested by farmers' protests in many European countries as farmers have lost confidence in their traditional representatives in farming unions and political parties and embraced more militant action groups[9] – forming a direct line to the protests of the winter of 2023-24.

More broadly, the diversification of the rural economy over the second half of the twentieth century and, in some countries, counter-urban migration of new residents into rural areas have produced a new 'politics of the rural' in which the central issue is not the economics of farming but the meaning and regulation of rurality.[10] The politics of the rural is contested across a multitude of fronts, with diverse protests involving different sets of actors around the defence of rural traditions such as hunting; access to land and housing; the loss of rural services; and the appearance of the rural landscape, including opposition to new roads, railways, airports, housing developments, windfarms and solar parks. Some of these campaigns have involved farmers, for example in opposing attempts to ban or restrict hunting. Other campaigns, however, have directly challenged farming practices and their environmental impacts, or have questioned the primacy historically afforded to farming in rural policy and planning. These challenges have put farmers on the defensive and added to their sense of beleaguerment.

The evolution of rural protests is complex, with divergences between territories and oscillations between periods of protest and periods of stability, yet there are threads that still connect historical protests with contemporary farmers' demonstrations. The remainder of this essay will discuss these in more detail around the three perspectives of motivation, strategy and ideology.

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[8] I. Garzon, *Reforming the Common Agricultural Policy: History of a Paradigm Change* (London 2006).

[9] M. Woods, J. Anderson, S. Guilbert and S. Watkin, 'Rhizomic radicalism and arborescent advocacy: a Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of rural protest', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31.3 (2013) 434-450; M. Woods, 'Explaining rural protest: a comparative analysis', in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I.J. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties,* 35-62.

[10] M. Woods, 'Deconstructing rural protest: the emergence of a new social movement', *Journal of Rural Studies* 19.3 (2003) 309-325.

Tax, Tariffs and Technology

Money has often been at the root of farmers' protests. Farming is an inherently risky business, requiring up-front expenditure and uncertain returns, subject to the vagaries of the weather and volatile markets. Throughout history, margins for farmers have frequently been slim, breeding resentment from farmers towards government policies that increase costs, reduce income or destabilise cashflow. Taxation has repeatedly drawn ire, especially from farmers who may feel that they see less of the benefits of public expenditure on services and infrastructure than urban residents. Few rural protests have a single cause, but taxation was a major factor in the Peasants' Rebellion in England in 1361 and the Rebecca Riots by farmers and agricultural workers in nineteenth-century Wales, as well as in Shay's Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion in the United States. In recent decades, farmers joined hauliers in several European countries to protest against high fuel prices, attributed to high taxation, in 2000-01, involving blockades of ports and oil depots.[11]

The influence of the farming lobby in mid-twentieth century Europe won concessions for farmers on taxation, reflecting a wider spirit of agricultural exceptionalism. The ending of such preferential treatment for farmers has been a trigger for recent farmer protests. Proposals by the British government to partially remove exemptions from inheritance tax for farmland prompted protests by farmers in the winter of 2024 and spring of 2025, while protests by German farmers in 2023 and 2024 were provoked in part by the removal of tax subsidies on agricultural diesel.

If farmers are no fans of taxation, they have tended to be more supportive of tariffs and trade quotas, as long as they are designed to protect their domestic markets from exports. The hostility towards trade liberalisation demonstrated at the Brussels protest in 2024 by banners against an EU trade deal with Mercosur goes back to nineteenth-century debates in Britain and other countries between protectionist farmers and landowners and the rising class of manufacturers who advocated free trade. Books such as *The Foreigner in the Farmyard* (1897), portrayed British farming as under threat from imports from continental Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina. Put simply, it argued food production abroad was cheaper than production in Britain: 'the Foreigner (in a good currency

[11] J.V. Mitchell and M. Dolun, *The Fuel Tax Protests in Europe, 2000-2001* (London 2001).

country) had a nett advantage of 40 [shillings] an acre over the Englishman'.[12] Such arguments did not immediately find favour in the industrialising states of Europe and North America, stoking tensions between farmers and government.

Food security concerns after the First World War and the growing political influence of the farming lobby as the old aristocracy waned checked the ascendency of free trade in the 1920s and 1930s. The Smoot-Hawley Act in 1930 raised tariffs on agricultural imports to the USA, followed closely by similar actions by the British Empire and other European states. Among the consequences was the restriction of access to European and North American markets for farmers in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, contributing to deepening economic crises and decades of political instability, in which farmers' protests regularly featured.

In Europe, the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC, a predecessor of the European Union) in 1957, and the later adoption of the Common Agricultural Policy, worked both ways. In creating a Common Market, the EEC erased barriers to trade in agricultural products within its borders, to a mixed reception from farmers. Many welcomed the expanded market, but others resented competition from EEC partners, especially at times when local conditions were poor, with discontent expressed through protests. In France, for example, attacks by farmers on lorries carrying imported food or livestock were a frequent occurrence during the 1970s and 1980s.[13] They were reciprocated in Britain at the end of the 1990s when farmers – frustrated at continuing imports whilst British exports of beef to Europe were still restricted by precautions over BSE ('mad cow disease') and the prices received by farmers for their produce ('farmgate prices') were plummeting – mounted blockades of ports. In one instance, farmers seized a lorry arriving on a ferry from Ireland and dumped its cargo of beefburgers into the dock.[14]

At the same time, agricultural imports from outside the EEC faced tariffs and quotas. A consequence of Britain joining the EEC in 1973 was to drastically restrict imports from its traditional Commonwealth trading partners in Australia and New Zealand. In response, the Australian and New

[12] E.E. Williams, *The Foreigner in the Farmyard* (London 1897) 15. Forty shillings in 1897 is equivalent to approximately 300 euro today. An acre is 0.4 hectares.

[13] E. Naylor, 'Unionism, peasant protest and the reform of French agriculture', *Journal of Rural Studies* 10.3 (1994) 263-274.

[14] M. Woods, *Contesting Rurality: Politics in the British Countryside* (Aldershot 2005) 146.

Zealand governments became early adopters of neoliberalism, proactively advocating global trade liberalisation for agricultural commodities, introducing radical deregulation of agriculture, and slashing farm subsidies at home. As thousands of farms disappeared, both countries experienced mass protests by farmers: 40,000 demonstrated in Canberra in July 1985 and 10,000 in Wellington in 1986.[15]

The global propagation of neoliberalism has continued to provoke farmers' protests. The North American Free Trade Agreement between the USA, Canada and Mexico was the catalyst for the Zapatista uprising in 1994, while the reopening of the South Korean market to U.S. beef imports in 2008, to facilitate a Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, brought hundreds of thousands of protesters on to the streets of Seoul.[16] In Central and Eastern Europe, the shock therapy of the transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s left many farmers struggling and indebted, leading Polish farmers to form a Committee for the Self-Defence of Farmers that later evolved into a political party, Samoobrona Rolników (Farmers' Self-Defence).[17] More recently, widespread farmers' protests were mobilised in India in reaction to government plans to deregulate agricultural price controls.[18] The antipathy of European farmers to the Mercosur trade deal, and the banners attacking neoliberalism at the Brussels protest, are therefore part of a long-standing protectionist tendency shared by many farmers in much of the world – though not all, farmers producing commodities for export, notably in North and South America, Australia and New Zealand, are understandably advocates of free trade.

Alongside trade liberalisation, neoliberal globalisation has also been characterised by the consolidation and increasing power of corporations in the agrifood sector. Supermarkets and food processing companies have been targeted by protesting farmers, who have accused them of profiteering and squeezing farmgate prices, with demonstrations outside distribution depots and processing plants. Occasional strikes have involved farmers withholding

[15] Woods, 'Explaining rural protests', 40.
[16] S-O. Lee, S-J. Kim, and J. Wainwright, 'Mad cow militancy: neoliberal hegemony and social resistance in South Korea', *Political Geography* 29.7 (2010) 359.
[17] B. Stanley, 'The Polish Self-Defence party: from agrarian protest to the politics of populism, 1991-2007' in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I.J. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties* (Wageningen 2015) 191-216.
[18] P. Jha, 'Growing restiveness of the peasantry in contemporary India: context and challenges', *Agrarian South* 13.1 (2024) 41-61.

key commodities from processers, such as milk strikes in 2008 and 2009 by the IG Milch group that represented one in ten dairy farmers in Austria.[19] In other cases the selection of targeted corporations has been more symbolic. When smallholder producers of Roquefort cheese in southern France were caught in a trade war between the EU and USA in the late 1990s, they reacted by dismantling a McDonald's restaurant under construction in the town of Millau. As their leader, José Bové, explained:

> We thought McDonalds appropriate for several reasons: the type of food at McDo, which is industrial food requiring industrial agriculture (meat as cheap as possible, one type of potato for all McDonalds worldwide, and three or four varieties of salad). Everything is standardised. It is a multinational firm with a wish of hegemony.[20]

Yet, again, farmer antagonism towards corporate power is not new. The farmer-led populist movement in the late-nineteenth-century United States was motivated in part by anger at the monopoly of railroad companies who determined the cost of transporting agricultural produce from the prairies to urban markets.[21] Slightly later, violence flared among tobacco farmers in Kentucky protesting at price-fixing by the American Tobacco Company in 1907 and 1908. A contemporary newspaper report proclaimed that 'There is war in Kentucky. In a score of towns what is virtually a state of martial law exists. In the farming districts cellars have been fortified and loaded arms stacked within reach. The "Night Riders" are abroad (…).'[22] Groups of 200 to 500 men launched nighttime attacks burning barns and company property, causing damage worth $50 million and costing the lives of several farmers and bystanders.

Farmers' opposition to trade agreements and corporate power might have forged some alliances with left-wing anti-neoliberal activists, but generally such connections have not been made. One exception is the previously mentioned José Bové, a former Greenpeace campaigner whose

[19] F. Seifert, 'Austrian pastoral: rural protest at the margins of a hegemonic policy landscape' in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I.J. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties*, (Wageningen 2015) 127-144.

[20] P. Ariés and C. Terras, *José Bové: la révolte d'un paysan* (Villeurbanne 2000) 74. Translated by the author.

[21] Selz, *The Making of the Populist Movement*, 23-24.

[22] C.V. Tevis, 'A Ku-Klux Klan of Today', *Harpers Weekly*, 8 February 1908, 14-16, quoted by Shannon, *American Farmers' Movements,* 161.

Confedération Paysanne occupied a more radical, left-leaning space than mainstream French farming unions. Bové consciously drew on his progressive networks in the wake of the Millau protest described above. Put on trial for his part in the demonstration, Bové called as witnesses peasant leaders, trade unionists, land rights campaigners and indigenous activists from around the world to subvert the process into a trial of globalisation.[23] Farmers' Days of Action were similarly routinely held at WTO and G8 summits during the early 2000s, including at Cancun in 2003, marked by the public suicide of Korean farmers' leader Lee Kyoung-hae. Yet, most farmer participants in these protests were from the Global South, notably groups affiliated with the transnational peasant movement La Via Campesina, with relatively few farmers from Europe or North America present.

The farmers taking part in contemporary protests in Europe, North America, or Australia, are generally the descendants of the medium- and large-scale farmers who battled against rural working-class militancy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They do not perceive themselves to be 'peasants', and their political instincts are conservative. Indeed, the innate conservatism of farmers has not only limited potential for solidarity with left-wing campaigners, but has also acted as a brake on some of their own actions. When it appeared that blockades of fuel depots in Britain in 2000 could bring down the government, farmer protesters stepped back. One of their leaders explained: 'We weren't there to topple a government. We were there to demonstrate our problems. And we walked away. We walked away as businessmen. Not as bloody hooligans.'[24] Farm protests are consequently regarded within the farming community to be acts of desperation and achieving widespread mobilisation can still be challenging.

The conservatism of farmers also frequently manifested in suspicion of new technologies and changing industrial practices. The machine-breaking antics of the Luddites and Swing Riots in nineteenth-century England have a modern counterpart in opposition to genetically modified crops, including the 'Cremate Monsanto' campaign of the Karantaka Rajya Raitha Sangha (Karnataka State Farmers' Union, KRRS) in India, which burned fields planted with GM crops to resist attempts by Cargill and Monsanto to market

[23] Woods, 'Deconstructing rural protest', 319.

[24] A. Treneman, 'The maverick who rattled Tony Blair', *The Times*, Section 2, 26 September 2000, 3-5, quoted by Woods, *Contesting Rurality,* 151.

hybrid corn and cotton seed in the country.[25] For farmers who did embrace science and technology in the productivist era, however, motivation for protest has come from proposals to reduce use due to environmental concerns, most notably in the Netherlands, with protests in 2018 and 2019 against new controls on nitrate use.[26] In either case, resistance to change is a recurrent motivation for farmers' activism.

Dramaturgy and Spatial Strategies

Whatever the motivations of farmer protests, their form and staging tend to follow certain conventions that have been acquired over time. These include strategies in the use of space, where there are three tendencies. The first is to retreat into rural territory and hold out against state forces, a common tactic in Mediaeval and Early Modern rural rebellions that resonates in some contemporary protests. In 2016, armed anti-government protesters occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Reserve in Oregon, USA, to oppose conservation and land management policies that they regarded as federal colonialism. The 'standoff' took 40 days to resolve.[27] Resistance by peasants and indigenous communities to eviction for 'land grabs'; farmers defying cull orders during livestock epidemics; and land occupations to obstruct new roads, airports or military bases all stand in this tradition. In a similar vein, the positioning of signs, banners and graffiti with farm protest slogans around rural areas are a marking of territory.

The second spatial strategy is blockading and disrupting transport and other infrastructure crossing rural territory, which has been part of the repertoire of farmers' protests for at least 60 years. In 1961, farmers in Brittany – angered by the arrest of organisers of an earlier demonstration against falling potato prices – launched a ten-day insurrection. During this insurrection, 'railways and roads were blocked, towns invaded by tractor-borne demonstrators, telephone lines sabotaged, the Premier repeatedly

[25] I. Scoones, 'Mobilizing against GM crops in India, South Africa and Brazil', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8.2/3 (2008) 315-344.
[26] E. Engelen, *Boze burgers en boeren* (Leiden 2023); J.D. van der Ploeg, 'Farmers' upheaval, climate crisis and populism', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 47.3 (2020) 589-605.
[27] J. Inwood and A. Bondis, 'Property and whiteness: the Oregon standoff and the contradictions of the U.S. Settler State', *Space and Polity* (2017) 253-268.

hanged in effigy'.[28] Such tactics have repeatedly been used by French farmers over the subsequent decades – including *opération escargot* in the 1990s that blocked roads to Paris and Disneyland[29] – up to the 2024 protests, and have routinely been adopted by farm protesters in other countries.

The third approach is to occupy urban space. The protests in Brussels in 2025 were accompanied by demonstrations in the same wave of protests in Amsterdam, Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris and Rome, among other cities, echoing earlier occupations. In France, for example, farm protesters had occupied the Paris Stock Exchange in 1992 in protest against proposed modifications to the GATT global framework for trade that ended exceptions permitting import quotas and export subsidies to be applied to agricultural goods.[30] Three mass demonstrations in London opposing legislation to ban the hunting of wild mammals with hounds in 1997, 1998 and 2004, were described in some commentaries as a 'new Peasants' Revolt', referencing the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381, when rural insurgents marched on and invaded London.[31]

By occupying city centres, farm protesters not only make their grievances visible to urban residents and cause irritating disruption, but they also often include elements that subvert rural-urban order and the historic sanitisation of the city: spraying slurry, dumping vegetables, spilling milk, piling haybales and herding sheep or cattle. These farmyard familiars are out of place in the city, but evoke a time when they were present, reminding the city of its rural roots.

The most potent tool of farm protesters, practically and symbolically, is the tractor. It can be a platform, a billboard, an obstacle, and a mode of transport. Convoys of tractors are a leitmotif of farm protests connecting the Brittany unrest of 1961 to their contemporaries in 2025 and protesting Dutch farmers in 1990 to the nitrate demonstrations of 2018 and 2019.[32] At the height of the American farm crisis, a first 'tractorcade' attracted 3,000 farmers to Washington, D.C. in 1978, while during a second tractorcade in 1979, 'a line of tractors twenty-five miles long snarled traffic coming into the city (…) Farmers rammed police cars with their tractors [and]

[28] G. Wright, *Rural Revolution in France* (Stanford, CA 1964) 168.
[29] Naylor, 'Unionism, peasant protest and the reform of French agriculture', 268.
[30] Ibidem.
[31] D. Hart-Davis, *When the Country Went to Town* (Ludlow 1997) 2.
[32] Naylor, 'Unionism, peasant protest and the reform of French agriculture'; Strijker and Terluin, 'Rural protest groups in the Netherlands', 69.

delayed commuters for hours'.[33] In spite of being a relatively modern invention, the tractor has replaced the pitchfork as the iconic symbol of rural rebellion, becoming an essential prop in the staging and dramaturgy of farm demonstrations, but also the key technology enabling protests to take the form that they do.

Populism, Nationalism and Rural Spatial Justice

A further thread between protests, over time and across motivations, is the articulation of a sense of spatial injustice, of rural communities being marginalised, ignored, or treated unfairly by urban central power. This framing is itself a strategic choice to translate the individual fears and grievances of farmers not into class solidarity, but into a threat to the entire countryside posed by urban misgovernment. The trick was exemplified by the countryside protests in turn-of-the-century Britain, which linked a minority concern around hunting to other issues, including falling farmgate prices, to manufacture a rural crisis and portray the demonstrations as mass mobilisations of 'the countryside'. Placards carried in the rallies included slogans such as 'Say No to the Urban Jackboot' and 'Leave the Country to Country People' that positioned the urban as intrusive and menacing.[34] Farm protests have similarly often achieved greater prominence than their numbers might merit, because a threat to farming is widely perceived to be a threat to the countryside.

It is a short step from the antagonistic framing of urban-rural relations embodied in the British countryside marches to populism, with its central trope of speaking for the people against aloof elites. A distinctive rural populism was forged in nineteenth-century America, based on ideas of farmer sovereignty, but the explicit counterposing of 'rural people' and 'urban elites' is a later development, becoming a feature of contemporary rural protests. Publicity around the British countryside protests placed them in the tradition of historic populist revolts and radical struggles, suggesting that 'the country' had to come to London to speak up for freedom – arguably normalising populist discourses that were revived in the Brexit debates a

[33] Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 159.
[34] Woods, *Contesting Rurality*, 115.

decade later.[35] Protesting farmers in Berlin in January 2024 wore high-viz jackets emblazoned with the slogan '*Wir sind das volk*' ('We are the People').[36] Even if the populism has ersatz qualities, with a hidden elite leadership, there are historical precedents, such as so-called English 'Peasant's Revolt' that was in practice largely comprised by minor nobles and petit bourgeois.

In making populist assertions, rural protests also tap into deeply engrained cultural associations between national identity and rurality, with rural land prized as the territory of the nation, farmers venerated for feeding the nation, and rural populations celebrated as embodying authentic national traits lost in urban populations affected by foreign influences.[37] French farm protesters have repeatedly used the slogan '*Pas de pays sans paysans'* ('No country without peasants/farmers') over several decades, and farm protests across Europe and beyond routinely incorporate nationalistic iconography, most notably national flags (albeit in recent Dutch protests flown upside down to mimic the historic maritime distress signal to convey a sense of peril and emergency). Flag-waving is intended to convey to the public that the protesters are acting for them, but also serves to reassure conservative farmers that they are not rabble-rousers but patriots representing the national interest.

The adoption of populist and nationalist discourses and icons, however, has made contemporary farm protests susceptible to capture by the far-right, which is a departure from the past. The American populist movement of the nineteenth century was left-leaning economically and is sometimes characterised as agrarian socialism. Agrarian parties in twentieth-century Europe tended to be centrist and non-populist in orientation, including the Boerenpartij (Farmers' Party) that emerged from farm protests in the Netherlands in 1958.[38] Yet, in the 2023-24 protests in France, Rassemblement National leader Jordan Bardella and Marion Maréchal of the

[35] M. Woods, 'Revisiting the politics of the rural and the Brexit vote' in: P. Pospěch, E.M. Fuglestad, E. Figuiredo ed., *Politics and Policies of Rural Authenticity* (Abingdon 2022) 27-41.

[36] T. Escritt, 'There's no more money, German minister tells rowdy farmers', *Reuters*, 15 January 2024. Https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-farmers-kick-off-protest-over-higher-taxes-berlin-2024-01-15/, accessed 1 October 2025.

[37] J.R. Short, *Imagined Country* (London 1991), 19-20.

[38] Strijker and Terluin, 'Rural protest groups in the Netherlands', 68; K. Vassen, 'Agrarian parties in the Netherlands: the Plattelandersbond and the Boerenpartij' in: D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I.J. Terluin ed., *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties* (Wageningen 2015) 291-302.

rival far-right Reconquête party, toured farmers' demonstrations and meetings touting to be the front-person for the protests.[39] Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) similarly infiltrated farmers' protests in Germany, while the leader of the radical right Vox party in Spain drove a tractor decorated with the party logo at a farmers' protest in Murcia in 2022.[40] Meanwhile, the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB, Farmer-Citizen Movement), established to promote the cause of farmer protesters in the Netherlands in 2019 and compared to the earlier Boerenpartij, has moved to the right on issues such as immigration and geopolitics since forming a coalition government with the far-right PVV in 2024.[41]

Conclusion

The farmers' protests that have spread through Europe in recent years contain within them memories and echoes of rural protests dating back centuries around the world. The immediate motivations of protesters may be provoked by contemporary politics, but there are recurrent themes around tax, trade and resistance to change. Modern farm protests have embraced social media and digital technology, but their dramaturgy has elements that recall historic uprisings, not least in their spatial strategies. Direct references to historical rebellions and revolts are part of populist and nationalistic coding of protests that serve to build alliances and reassure participating conservative-minded farmers.

In many of these respects, European farm protests resemble protests in other parts of the world. Farmers in New Zealand have demonstrated against regulations intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, just as Dutch farmers have. Indian farmers protesting against the removal of price controls were fighting the weakening of agricultural

[39] P. Laubacher, 'Maréchal tente rattraper Bardella dans le conquête du vote agricole', *Le Figaro*, 25 January 2024.

[40] J. Parker and A. Robinson, 'Germany's far-right seek revolution in farmers' protests', *BBC News*, 15 January 2024. Https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67976889, accessed 1 October 2025; M. González, 'Vox, a la caza del voto conservador del "partido agrario español"', *El Pais*, 28 August 2023.

[41] S. van Kessel, 'The enduring relevance of the Far Right ahead of the Dutch National Election on 29th October', Op-Ed for *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 22 October 2025. Https://fpc.org.uk/op-ed-the-enduring-relevance-of-the-far-right-ahead-of-the-dutch-national-election-on-29th-october/, accessed 26 October 2025.

exceptionalism in policymaking in the same way as British farmers opposing the removal of Inheritance Tax exemptions. Participants in the Argentinian agrarian strike in 2008 blocked roads with tractors as protesting French farmers repeatedly have. If the scope is extended to all types of rural protest, there are even more parallels: there are protests against pylons in Australia, over school closures in Brazil, and opposing new roads in China, as well as in Europe.

Simultaneously, there are ways in which European farm protests are historically and geographically distinctive. Compared with historical rural rebellions, modern farm demonstrations are not part of class conflicts or political power struggles. They tend to eschew violence. Technologies from tractors to social media have reshaped the dynamics of protests. Neither do most European farmers consider themselves to be 'peasants'. This marks a difference with self-described peasant movements in the Global South, whose concerns, such as land rights, and tactics, including land occupations and sometimes armed insurrection, arguably represent an even stronger line of continuity with past revolts.

Putting farm protests in historical context and tracing these points of continuity and change elevates analysis of contemporary protests, understanding them not as isolated events but as part of a long tradition, providing valuable insights into their significance and potency.