

'A "No" to utopia' from the Corriere della Sera (25 March 1971)

Caption: The day after the violent farmers' demonstration in Brussels, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera describes the causes of the European rural sector's anger at the Mansholt Plan for Community agricultural reform.

Source: Corriere della Sera. dir. de publ. SPADOLINI, Giovanni. 25.03.1971, n° 71; anno 96. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Un «no» all'utopia", auteur:Sansa, Giorgio , p. 22.

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A 'No' to Utopia

Common Market plans come up against the new reality of the countryside — 'Ten million heads of household must not be reduced to despair'

from our correspondent

Paris, 24 March.

The dramatic events of 23 March in Brussels have made a deep impression on the French. While only 15 % of the French population earns a living from agriculture, compared with 23 % in Italy, French rural mentality is more deeply entrenched and intractable, because France has fewer large cities. The press and radio have reacted cautiously, but also with genuine sympathy; they claim to understand the rural population's anger with the Common Market 'Eurocrats', which has resulted in the first violent demonstration at European level — the first international 'Jacquerie'. For the first time, 'European' blood has been spilt in the Belgian capital.

Perhaps 'Jacquerie' is going too far, but the term is symbolically and psychologically justified. The Community farmers' demonstration is the same type of popular revolt as the historic peasant uprising that anticipated the French Revolution by 450 years; once again, the motives are social and economic. The cause of the insurrection in the Middle Ages was the unbearable misery brought about by the taxes ruthlessly exacted by the nobility, devastating wars and enemy invasions. Today's revolt is caused by the squeezing of farmers as a class between the stable prices they are paid for products that require exhausting labour and the galloping cost of industrial products that farmers, like everyone else, need. Promises have not been kept. The Mansholt Plan is a masterpiece of economic foresight — an effort of the 'futuristic' imagination. Its application is theoretically an unavoidable necessity, but it looks as if it will be painful.

The Eurocrats, a Parisian commentator writes, have shown considerable imagination in dealing with agriculture; they have acted in good, and sometimes in bad, faith, bearing in mind the complicated electoral situations in their own countries, and have piled up mountains of regulations. But a fair European agricultural policy must be morally, socially and humanly more acceptable. European solidarity must rise above purely economic considerations. 'Ten million heads of household,' writes *L'Aurore*, 'cannot be allowed to sink into despair. Europe cannot be built on the ruins of a largely rural civilisation.' Commissioner Sicco Mansholt's ideas make sense; but just think what it means to set about eliminating one farmer in two within ten years, and rapidly industrialising an activity with centuries-old traditions. What is best for a multinational community as a whole may be worst for one of its components.

The anger of the 20th century 'Jacques' who demonstrated in Brussels yesterday, chanting the same slogans in the four languages of the Community — French, German, Italian and Dutch/Flemish — has been provoked by overproduction, which depresses sales, by taxation, and by growing indebtedness. Their slogans represented the lowest common denominator of their grievances, those that the farmers of the six countries have in common. In practice, their interests are not always the same. The French, for example, think that their counterparts in other countries enjoy better conditions at their expense, even though the reverse is true, and they suspect that when Britain joins the Community it will not stop importing cheap grain and meat from its Commonwealth partners, despite its promises and obligations to the contrary. They simply do not trust the British, and that mistrust is by no means confined to the French. The agricultural policy will therefore have to be preceded by an intensive campaign of information and persuasion.

Jean Deleau, vice-chairman of the European Community farmers' organisation and chairman of the General Association of French Grain Producers (AGPB), has said in Brussels: 'Today the whole future of Europe is at stake. While income from certain products is rising, producers' income is falling. When Mr Mansholt proposes reducing the cultivated area in our continent, one wonders whether he isn't doing it to allow the Americans to sell us more soya. Agriculture is being forced into a ghetto. Common Market policy is immobile. The Commission's proposals on farm price increases are insufficient, incomplete and ultimately

provocative. The crisis of confidence within the rural community is threatening to cause a political crisis.' Deleau does not reject the Common Market as such; he wants it to be different. He spoke from the heart rather than the head, but emotion and impulse may carry as much, if not greater, weight than rational arguments.

Writing under the immediate impression of events, a French special correspondent warns of serious consequences: among other things, the Brussels manifestation expressed the resentment in the poor rural community of the wealth of the cities. While the Common Market creates new forms of solidarity among its member countries, it is also spreading class solidarity across national frontiers, encouraging trade unionism on a larger scale. This in itself is a positive development, but at the same time it is sowing the seeds of enormous future conflicts. Another commentator observes that the Community ministers will have to sit up and take notice: they will look up from their maps and statistics, beyond the walls of their ivory towers, and concern themselves a little with what is going on in people's minds. In other words, the Eurocrats will have to become more human.

The slogan that summed it all up yesterday was: 'The farmers milk the cows; the Community ministers milk the farmers.'

Giorgio Sansa