

'The brick and sickle' from Le Monde (25 March 1971)

Caption: Two days after the violent demonstration by European farmers on the streets of Brussels, the French daily newspaper Le Monde criticises the philosophy of the Mansholt Plan and considers the way in which the Six manage the agricultural question.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 25.03.1971, n° 8 148; 28e année. Paris: Le Monde. "La faucille et le pavé", p. 1.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016

The brick and sickle

Three years ago, some two thousand farmers from across the Common Market marched through the streets of Brussels to demand an increase in milk prices. At the time, attention focused on the event's positive elements: surely it proved that the European Community was no longer the preserve of experts? European farmers, realising that they faced a common future, demonstrated, albeit in a boisterous and chaotic way, the birth of European public opinion, without which there could be no prospect of a political union.

Because of its scale and violence, last Tuesday's demonstration generates less optimism: could Europe be in the process of disintegration, with a hundred thousand farmers, some from the wine regions of southern France and Calabria, disregarding national borders and organising mass rallies to put pressure on the Council of the Six as it deliberated from a prudent distance on the sixth floor of the Charlemagne building?

The farmers' unions had certainly taken a considerable risk in organising this huge gathering. They are well placed to know that you cannot play around with the discontent of country people in the current situation. For about two years now, they have been dogged by misfortune, so the worst was to be expected, an expectation sadly borne out by events. The show of force by the farmers of the Old World cost a young Belgian farmer his life.

It is as though governments, and the French Government in particular, had been counting on the customary acquiescence of those who work the soil, to avoid getting to grips with one of the trickiest problems posed by economic change. In May 1968, the rural population had stood on the sidelines during the strikes and protests that engulfed much of France at the time. It was doubtless a mistake to conclude that respect for order was an immutable fact of rural life. There was again a time, in the already fast receding past, when the powers-that-be thought they could rely on civil servants' sense of 'duty'. But here, as in many other areas, the widespread disorder that inflation has introduced into society, has come to undermine the most ingrained traditions.

While Sicco Mansholt's very name is being vilified by farmers and his effigy strung up, it is only fair to recall that the European Commission can be credited with having realised in advance of events the importance of the agricultural issue and stressed the need for a joint programme to accompany the necessary changes. However, the 'Mansholt Plan' in many respects aggravated the policy hitherto applied by Brussels by taking agriculture in the New World as its model and borrowing the intervention mechanisms that had been applied in the United States for 30 years, often with little success.

In the face of farmers protesting against the 'technocratic' ideas of Brussels, the Member States, unable to come up with alternatives, have let the situation deteriorate. It is a fact that, for two years, the Council of Ministers of the Six has adopted no measures of any significance. It was in this context that, a few weeks ago, the German Minister, Josef Ertl, threatened to go his own way. If a new agricultural policy is not defined together, are we in for a period in which each country withdraws dangerously behind its own lines?