PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES: NITROGEN 2000: THE DUTCH FARMERS' STRUGGLE

March 19, 2024

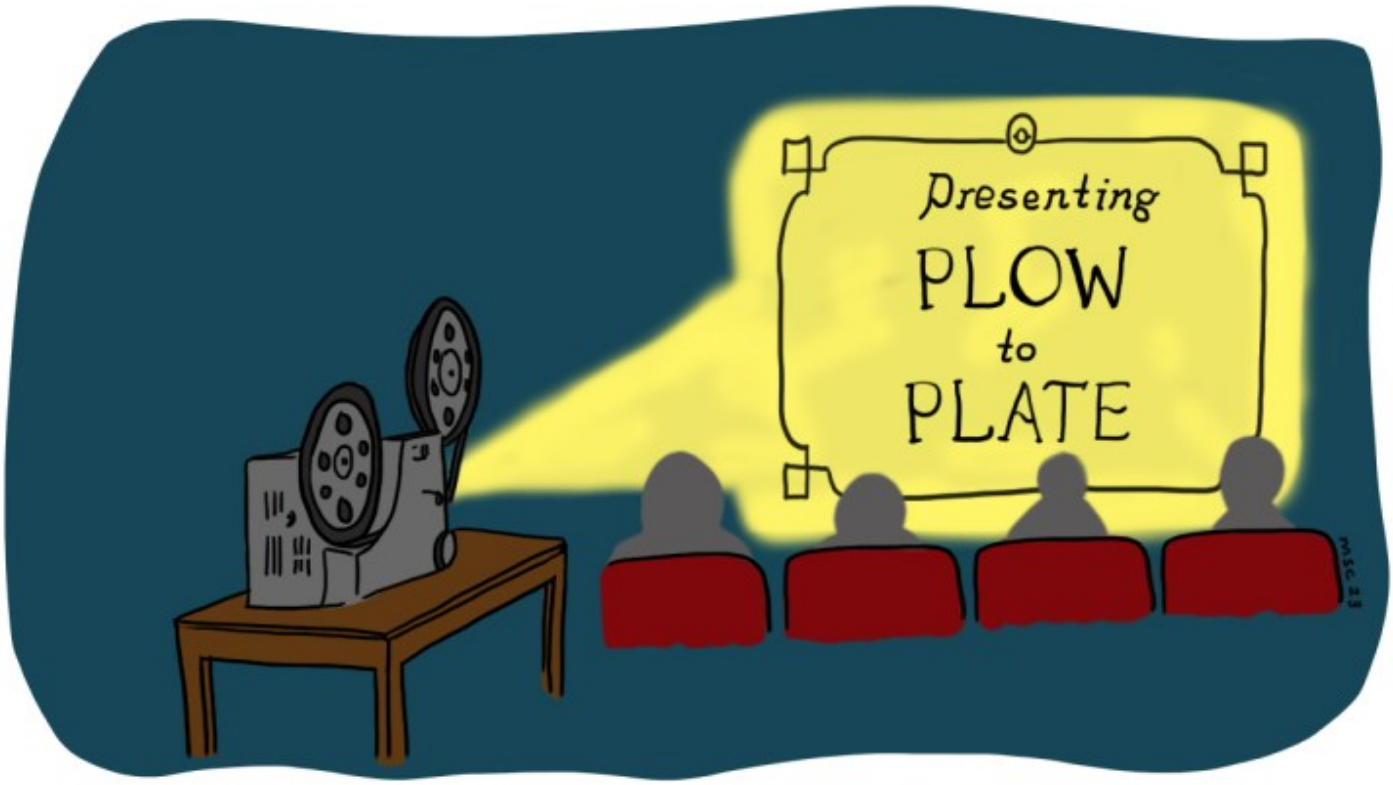


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

Most Coop shoppers are educated enough consumers to know that industrial farming is a major producer of gasses that contribute to climate change. Indeed, this connection has been a theme of many of the documentaries we have screened over the years. The solution proffered by these films has usually been the halcyon vision of an alternative system grounded in local, organic, sustainable aand small-scale agriculture. But *Nitrogen 2000* goes deeper and explores a specific solution pursued by many in the the Netherlands. What the film shows is that policy solutions can engender their own sets of conflicts, costs and benefits and winners and losers.

Surprising facts: About 60,000 Dutch cattle farmers own 70% of the land in Holland, some of which can be found immediately outside of the major cities like Amsterdam or Rotterdam. Farms have been in families for generations and many Dutch have

friends or relatives who are farmers. The country is known for its cheese and milk production which forms part of its national identity. But Holland is also part of the European Union, and the nation has made promises, as did other EU members, to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. To keep its promises and climate mandates, the government pledged in 2019 to purchase 50% of the farms, cut the number of animals living on them in half and restore the farms' nature. To facilitate these actions, the government set up a 25 billion Euro fund to compensate the farmers and help them transition to other fields.

Compensation, however, has not allayed all the related concerns. Many fear the consequences will be abject poverty, a destroyed middle class, growing societal inequality, less opportunity for the next generation and higher food costs. Opponents view this as government overreach, anti-cow propaganda, and a blatant land grab to build houses, highways and factories. Some farmers agreed to give up their cows to keep their land but were told they still had to sell. At least six have hanged themselves in protest. As many political commentators, politicians and even scientists, echoed these concerns, farmers blocked bridges and highways with long convoys of tractors in mass protest and civil disobedience.

> HOW BIG A PROBLEM IS NITROGEN REALLY? CAN OTHER TECHNIQUES TO LESSEN THE IMPACT OF AMMONIA (THROUGH COW PEE, POOP AND BURPS) BE EMPLOYED WHICH WOULD BE FAIRER SUCH AS COW TOILETS, MASKS AND CHANGES IN THEIR DIET?

Nitrogen 2000 presents views from both the farmers and their supporters, and those who advocate for the nitrogen plans. The film uses black and white newsreel clips equating the Soviet land collectivization between 1928 and 1940 and Holland's current nationalization plans. It's no mystery where the film's sympathies lie. The audience will likely also take the side of the hard-working farmers whose livelihoods are at risk and who had little direct say in these decisions.

Some of the questions, to which I do not have the answers, but am glad were raised are: How big a problem is nitrogen really? Can other techniques to lessen the impact of ammonia (through cow pee, poop and burps) be employed which would be fairer such as cow toilets, masks and changes in their diet? Or are the scientific studies upon which these major policy decisions are based valid? The viewer may also come to better understand why some believe that international alliances and climate treaties compromise national and individual sovereignty.

Nitrogen 2000 inverts some of the common tropes we have come to expect from the *Plow to Plate* film series. We expect to hear from filmmakers that Monsanto is evil. It is completely surprising, and a little bit alarming, to learn that many Dutch farmers and other commentators believe the environmentalists, a Dutch government pursuing green environmental policies, and the non-government organizations (NGOs) who will take over the relinquished farmlands are the villains.

This film, like our last two films, *From Food to Freedom* and *Plant Pure Nation,* emphasizes a populist impulse to control our own destinies free from strictures or distortions. *Nitrogen 2000* sometimes feels like it leans too heavily against the views and opinions of environmentalists. But it also challenges viewers to debate and question assumptions and beliefs that many films take for granted. It is easy to agree with the critiques of large-scale commercial agricultural interests and to take the side of the small-scale farmer. But what if that small-scale farmer is pitted against the Green Party or Green Peace?

Nitrogen 2000, *April 9, 2024 @ 7:00 p.m.*

Screening link: http://www.plowtoplatefilms.com/events/

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@mail.com.

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