

**Bert Theunissen \***

## **The ‘Holsteinisation’ of the Dutch dairy cattle breeds in the 1970s and 1980s**

UNTIL THE 1960s, Dutch cattle breeders and dairy farmers prided themselves on their dairy cattle as being the best milk producers in the world. Since the late nineteenth century Dutch Friesians (known as Holsteins in the United States) had provided the principal breeding stock for the dairy herds in Europe and beyond, particularly the U.S. Around 1970, however, Dutch breeders had to face serious competition from their American colleagues. The latter had, since the early twentieth century, concentrated their selection efforts on the production of milk, whereas the Dutch had bred their Friesians as a ‘double-purpose’ breed, producing meat as well as milk. As a result, Friesian and Holstein cattle had become clearly distinct breeds. The competition between the breeds started when economic pressures in the late 1960s induced more and more breeders, in Europe and elsewhere, to question whether the Dutch Friesians were the most economic. Comparative research on this problem was undertaken by the Dutch Agricultural University at Wageningen, and at the same time Dutch breeders began to experiment on their own with Holstein sires. A heated and at times highly emotional debate flared up between Dutch breeders, farmers, the herdbooks and scientists on which breed qualities were required to meet the economic circumstances. Meanwhile however, long before the final results of the comparative experiments were available, the ‘Holsteinisation’ of the Dutch dairy herds began, and it would continue, head over heels, until the Dutch double-purpose breeds (including, surprisingly, the Dutch red and white cattle, bred for milk and quality meat production) had been completely replaced by the Holstein pure milk breed.

There is no simple explanation for this process and its outcome. Economic, scientific, practical, professional and social factors all played their part in what was a highly complicated and at times seemingly chaotic process. I hope to show that a better insight can be obtained by studying the process from the perspective of the circulation of knowledge and practices.

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