

BSE: A 'Chernobyl' For Europe's Agriculture

by Rosa Tennenbaum

Three letters have changed central aspects of the European agricultural situation overnight: BSE, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, better known as "Mad Cow" disease. BSE is a disease of the nervous system in cows, which was diagnosed for the first time in England in 1985. There have been about 180,000 animals since then infected, in England. In continental Europe, there were only isolated cases, which were noticed only after the disease had broken out fully. Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in human beings, appears to be related to BSE, as it shows similar destructive processes in the brain. Whether BSE is communicable to human beings, is not known, and very little can be said at all about the two diseases.

Since Jan. 1, every cow slaughtered in the European Union (EU), has had to be tested for BSE; France and Germany started testing even earlier. As a result, BSE-infected animals have been discovered in all 15 EU member countries. Although the pathogen was found in only 0.02% of tested animals—and therefore, one could not speak of an epidemic—and although it is not known whether BSE can be transmitted to human beings, a panic broke out in the population, and governments began bustling in such a way as to increase public mistrust.

Overnight, the consumption and export of beef collapsed; while consumption in the EU dropped 23%, exports fell by 53%. In some countries, the situation is even worse: In Germany, for example, sales were halved, and numerous slaughterhouses stopped operations completely. Of the 75,000 people employed in the meat industry, 10,000 have already lost their jobs, and the rest are on short work. Some 30,000 more jobs are in danger.

In the last two months, producer prices have fallen 40%, and older cows are no longer sellable. The stalls are full, the farmers are stuck with their mature cows, which they still have to feed. At the same time, feed has become more expensive. Feed with animal remains has very high protein content (47%), which was much cheaper than plant protein. But now, every form of animal protein in feed has been banned because it is the suspected vector of contagion; even fat, which is used normally for human consumption, is not allowed to be mixed with animal feed.

For farmers, the situation is extremely threatening. Not only do they have stalls filled with cows they cannot sell,

but they are also stuck with the costs of tests, elimination of slaughtered remains considered infectious, and must continue milking cows that should have been sold for slaughter. This means that they will exceed their milk quotas, for which they will have to pay a high fine. Since farmers already work at near-subsistence levels, now, because of a totally bankrupt agricultural policy among EU governments, many farms are threatened with ruin. Although prompt government assistance is urgently required, it is not to be expected. The losses are in the range of billions of dollars, but governments have no money. Some want to exploit the crisis, in order to force through fundamental changes in agricultural policy.

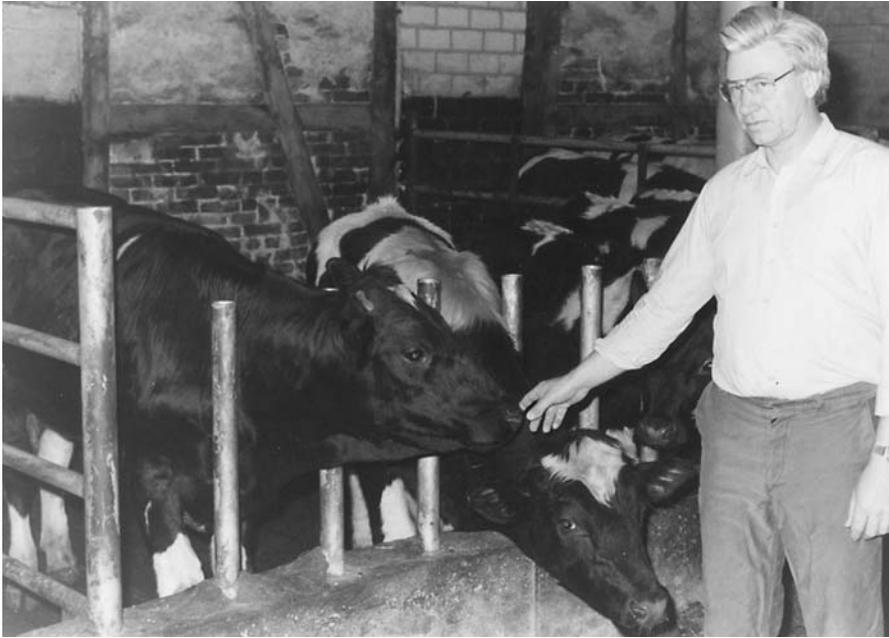
The Example of Germany

This is the case in Germany, for example, where Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has been an advocate of ruthless globalization of agriculture, shifted suddenly to radical ecologism. He fired his Agriculture Minister, renamed the ministry the Ministry for Consumer Protection, Nutrition, and Agriculture, and put a representative of the Green party in the post. Renate Künast is a jurist and social worker, who belongs to the left wing of her party, and has shown to date not the slightest interest in agricultural or consumer-protection issues. It is precisely her lack of qualifications that has been emphasized, as a "great opportunity for fundamental changes." Künast, in short, will be making farm policy purely according to ideological criteria, and the fact that she has no knowledge of the field, will make it all the easier.

BSE is to be for agriculture, what Chernobyl was for nuclear energy, the Greens demand, when, in 1986, the horror of the nuclear reactor accident in Chernobyl was used, to force a halting of peaceful use of nuclear energy. Not much will be left of Germany's agriculture, if the Greens are allowed to implement their plans.

The Greens brand modern conventional farming as "industrial," and normal family farms are disparaged as "agricultural factories." These "agricultural factories" are allegedly responsible for BSE, they say, although the BSE pathogen does not take notice of the size of a farm. (In fact, it appears more frequently in small herds than in larger ones, probably as a result of the fact that in Europe, the majority of beef cows are kept in small herds.) But, facts do not matter, now that political goals can be reached so easily through opinions.

Agricultural policy is henceforth supposed to be oriented more to ecological criteria, and the portion of ecologically organized farms are to be increased from 2.5% to 20% by the year 2010. The government in Berlin, however, does not want to allocate more funds for agriculture, so the existing farm-support programs will be redistributed. The government now wants to stimulate consumers, through large-scale advertisement campaigns, to purchase "ecological" food. Such ecological products are not any better, in fact, the contrary, and they are a lot more expensive. At the same time, the federal



German farmers are being driven into bankruptcy by the government's support for Green ideology and globalization.

government will put the screws on the food industry and trade. They will be forced to start marketing ecological products, because otherwise, the entire project would be doomed to failure.

A Turn for the Worse

With this ecological shift, the process introduced by globalization will be completed. Through the continuing reduction of producer prices, which was massively implemented following the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1991, the migration out of agriculture will be enormously accelerated. Between 1990 and 1997 alone, 22% of Germany's farms, mainly medium-sized ones, were abandoned. The average size of the remaining farms increased, while the number of farmers with second jobs, grew.

Ecological cultivation reduced income by half. Many tasks, which will now shift, for example, to more targeted plant protection and use of fertilizer, will have to be carried out again manually. This means that more workers will have to be deployed to perform dull, back-breaking work, and at the same time, income will fall significantly. These extra costs will never be passed on to the consumer, so farmers' income will sink further. Especially family farms, which work with little or no outside workforce, will be forced to start hiring. The polarization into huge farms and very small farms, will increase enormously.

The same holds for the consumer. The very rich will enjoy their "organic" food, while the general population will be fed cheaper food, imported from around the world.

The European Union Commission has enthusiastically welcomed Künast and the ecological shift. For years, the EC has aimed at an ecological orientation, but its plans were blocked by France and Germany. With the shift in Germany, the balance is tipped in the EU in favor of a Green policy.

Through ecological farming, Brussels achieves two goals: First, the EU's costs for agricultural policy can be reduced, before the entry of countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Second, the United States has for years demanded the opening of the lucrative European market, an aim which now will be easier to achieve in the World Trade Organization negotiations, if Europe's self-sufficiency sinks as a result of ecological farming.

Radical ecologists, such as Lester Brown, the head of the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, have been waiting a long time for an "ecological Pearl Harbor," which mankind needs, he says, to change its fundamental behavior in this neo-Malthusian direction. Thus, the unconcealed jubilation over the outbreak of Mad Cow disease in continental Europe. Jeremy Rifkind, a well-known ecologist and author, expressed his pleasure recently in the German daily *Die Welt*, over the fact that, thanks to BSE, "the end of beef culture" had been rung in. "It is a blessing, which has only been disguised as a curse," he said. Teddy Goldsmith, brother and successor of the megaspeculator and financier of the ecology movement, Sir James Goldsmith, called Chancellor Schröder's move "the only positive result" in politics, because he decided "to end industrial agriculture." They find themselves in the best of company with the British Prince of Wales, organic farmer Prince Charles, and his father, Prince Philip, who explicitly welcomed the outbreak of dangerous epidemics such as AIDS, on the grounds that they help to drastically reduce world population.

The dimensions of this new cattle disease and its—perhaps already worldwide—spread, are the result of a completely failed agricultural and economic policy, which have considered their sole criterion to be short-term, purely financial profits. Under the slogan of "ecologization," this policy will be pushed forward unhindered. Fertile soil will be offered for new animal diseases like BSE—as well as new plant diseases. Since they go hand in hand with a fall in the population's living standard, unless the global economy is put back on its feet, combatting such diseases will become hopeless.