

The campaign for real farming: Why we need a people's takeover of the world's food supply

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If we seriously want to ensure that everyone in the world is well fed, now and forever, and that we achieve this without driving our fellow creatures to extinction, then we need to design agriculture specifically for that purpose. I call this 'Enlightened agriculture' – which for ease of communication has been shortened to 'Real farming'. Enlightened agriculture is nothing more nor less than agriculture that is designed to feed people without wrecking the rest of the world.

Technically it should be fairly straightforward to feed everyone who is ever liable to be born on to this Earth to the highest standards of nutrition and of gastronomy, and to go on doing this in effect forever. There seems to be no good biological reason why our species should not persist for another million years, and then take breath and contemplate the next million; or why our descendants, far into the future, should not continue to enjoy the company of other creatures – at least the majority of those that are with us now.

Yet in practice, an estimated one billion out of almost seven billion who are already with us are chronically undernourished; another one billion are obese, and/or diabetic, and so on; and – a different kind of statistic, but nonetheless related – an estimated billion now live in urban slums, and the number grows by the hour. By 2050, the UN tells us, the world population will reach nine billion – and then the position will be even worse. Present market trends apparently suggest that the food supply will need to double by then to meet 'demand'.

Yet the agriculture that fails so conspicuously to feed us all well also contributes significantly to all the world's environmental disasters – pollution of seas and land, soil erosion, deforestation, loss of fresh water (70 per cent of it is used for agricultural irrigation) and global warming. Meanwhile, oil is running out and global finances are in crisis, with all the vaunted 'recovery' clearly temporary. All these disasters sow the seeds of conflict, which is to say of war. Indeed we have reached the point where the most sober of commentators from the former President of Britain's Royal Society, Lord Rees, to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, have suggested of late that humanity will be lucky to survive intact and in a tolerable

form even through the present century. Agriculture is at the heart of all this: directly affected by the plight of the world and of the world's economies; and a significant cause of much of it.

Thus there is a huge gap between the long and agreeable future that seems eminently achievable and the present parlousness – between possibility and reality. So how can we close this gap?

We have to begin again from first principles.

First principles and basic questions

The most basic question is one of morality: what is it *right* to do? In this context, is it right to try to feed all of humanity? Should we really be trying to prevent the extinction of our fellow species? Most of us would surely answer – of course! Yet there is a case – deeply flawed, but it is still a case – for *not* trying to feed people. The point was made initially by Thomas Robert Malthus about two centuries ago: that human beings are bound to out-breed resources, so some are bound to starve, and if we strive officiously to prevent this we will merely prolong the agony and waste resources along the way. So, the Malthusians say, we must be cruel to be kind. Darwin is also dragged in: if humanity at large is displacing other species, then that is natural selection – with the emphasis on the 'natural'. All this may seem harsh, but it is 'realistic'; and it is morally better to be a realist than to indulge in high-sounding fantasy that in the end does more harm than good.

All this leads us to two closely-linked questions of a material and practical kind, and more specifically of biology. First, what is possible – how much human food can the world produce, and go on producing? Secondly, what is necessary – how much food do we really need, and how much space do our fellow creatures need? Putting the two together – can we in practice produce enough?

The answer to this last, essentially biological question is a resounding 'Yes'. Or at least, even if the 'yes' does not quite resound, it is convincing enough to leave us with no moral excuse for not trying. We can feed everyone without wrecking everything else and therefore – according to the tenets of what might be called common morality – we should surely make the attempt.

If we agree the morality, then we can focus on the how, which is to say on the biology. First, a preliminary:

Malthus was wrong

Malthusian pessimism came conspicuously to the fore in the 1960s. Then, the world population was about four billion and was rising by nearly two per cent per year. At this rate the total population would double every 40 years. This meant it would reach eight billion by 2000, 16 billion by 2040, 32 billion by 2080, and 64 billion by 2120. Even the most optimistic technophiles would balk at such numbers.

But the population did not reach 8 billion by 2000, and it won't get to 16 billion by 2040. For after the 1960s, although the absolute rate of increase continued to grow for a time, the *percentage* rate of increase slowed down. On present trends, by 2050, the percentage rate of increase should be down to zero – which means (apart from increasing longevity) that total numbers are on course to stabilize. The projected population for 2050 is not 20 billion-plus, but nine billion. After that,

numbers should fall. So nine billion is as many as will ever need feeding – and as the centuries pass and numbers continue to fall the task should become easier.

There is a further serendipity. Populations start to fall when people choose to have fewer babies – *not* when more babies die. People choose to have fewer babies when times get better: when they know their children will live, and they don't need to produce a lot to ensure that a few get through; when they have pensions, and don't need offspring to look after them in their old age; and when women have more opportunities – some status in life apart from motherhood. So the means that produce a permanent restraint in population growth are all benign. In short, human beings (and other animals!) are far more flexible than Malthus supposed. All this is excellently expounded in Fred Pearce's *Peoplequake* (Eden Project Books 2010).

So the question is *not*, 'Can we go on increasing our food supply indefinitely?' (to which the obvious answer is 'no'). It is, 'Can we provide enough for 9 billion people – and go on doing that?' Of course we can, is the answer. In fact, if we didn't waste so much of what we produce now, by feeding half the world's grain to livestock, in post-harvest spoilage, and in sheer profligacy, we would already be doing so. The current notion from on high that we need to double food output by 2050 is just a commercial ploy. The only possible reason for it is that it would be profitable to be seen to attempt to double the output, and in the present economy, the most immediately profitable strategy is always preferred.

So how do we feed nine billion, and go on doing so?

The basic biology of 'Enlightened agriculture'

The task can be summarized in one sentence: if we seriously want to ensure that everyone in the world is well fed, now and forever, and that we achieve this without driving our fellow creatures to extinction, then we need to design agriculture specifically for that purpose. I call this 'Enlightened agriculture' – which for ease of communication has been shortened to 'Real farming'. Enlightened agriculture, aka Real farming, is nothing more nor less than agriculture that is designed to feed people without wrecking the rest of the world.

So we need to farm in ways that produce enough food to feed us all; and can go on doing this, in effect forever; and can continue to operate – at least to producing enough to get by on – if and when conditions change. The key words, in short, are 'productive, sustainable, and resilient'.

How do we do achieve this? Although agriculture is of course an artifice, the general approach must be to emulate nature. Nature, after all, has remained wonderfully productive through 3.8 billion years of extreme turmoil, in which the environment has veered from that of a 'snowball world' to near tropical warmth from pole to pole.

How does nature achieve such resilience? By deploying two principles: maximum diversity, and minimum input. Natural ecosystems are extraordinarily diverse, often with many thousands of macro-creatures operating above the surface, plus an endless variety of microbes absolutely everywhere which in an endless variety of ways keep the whole thing stable. To be sure, research in the 1980s suggested that diversity and stability are not closely linked, but plenty of work since has confirmed the commonsense observation that they very definitely are: the more diverse the system, the more able it is to cope with change.

Inputs to natural ecosystems are of course minimal. Each ecosystem makes do with whatever water comes its way – although tropical trees in particular can also enhance their own rainfall to a significant extent. They produce complex hydrocarbons called terpenes (components of resin) and isoprenes which float off into the atmosphere and provide foci for condensation within clouds – ‘cloud seeding’. Tropical trees, too, are festooned with bromeliad epiphytes: plants of the family Bromeliaceae which grow on their own branches. Bromeliads have spirals of thick leaves (pineapples are in the same family) which trap water. Bacteria within this water release dimethylsulphoniopropionate, aka DMSP. They do this, apparently, to help them to preserve their own water balance by osmosis. But DMSP, escaping in the atmosphere, also helps to seed clouds. Natural ecosystems of all kinds rely for soluble nitrogen on fixation by lightning and bacteria, either free-living or lodged in the roots of leguminous (and some rosaceous) plants, or (as in paddy fields) in the leaves of the floating fern *Azolla*.

In agriculture, diversity becomes ‘polyculture’; farms that are not only mixed, but tightly integrated, so that the farm itself becomes an ecosystem. Minimal use of inputs does not necessarily imply organic farming, but it does suggest that organic methods should be seen as the default position. Various economists and other experts have been queuing up on television and in newspapers to tell us that organic farming is just another muddle-headed scam – that organic produce is no different from the standard industrial kind. The real point, though, is that organic farming as a whole is very much in line with the principles of sound biology, and industrial farming – high input monoculture – is not. The world should be grateful to the organic farmers for keeping the flag of sound biology-based farming flying while ‘conventional’ commercial farmers were taking the commercial shilling.

If farming is polycultural, then it is of course complex. So it needs complex husbandry. So it needs a lot of expert farmers. So it must be labour-intensive. The fundamentally organic nature of the farm further increases the complexity of husbandry – requiring, for example, that crops (and livestock) should be rotated, and pests controlled primarily by juxtaposition of species and controlled use of predators. If farms are complex and labour-intensive then there is no particular advantage in scale-up – though there are many disadvantages. It follows that farms that are productive, and sustainable, and resilient, in line with nature itself, are likely to be small to medium-sized.

In short, I suggest that the future of world agriculture – if we seriously want to feed everybody well without wrecking the rest – lies with small to medium-sized, mixed, labour-intensive, quasi-organic farms. But such a suggestion, as I know well from experience, invites scorn from the defenders of the status quo. For, they say, the small mixed farm is simply ‘old-fashioned’; ‘inefficient’; a formula for poverty and drudgery. Defenders of the status quo consider themselves to be ‘realists’, and those who suggest such a radical alternative are written off as ideologues and woolly-headed romantics, dreaming of a golden past that never really existed, and elitist to boot. Only a middle-class townie could possibly suppose that it was pleasant to spend one’s days (and sometimes nights) in a cold wet northern field. Or as they say in China: ‘A peasant works with his back to the sun and his face to the earth’.

But this knee-jerk response misses the point. Agrarian life can indeed be ghastly

and when the climate is harsh and the technology is inadequate the hardship can be unavoidable. At its best, though, farming can be the most satisfying job there is, and agrarian life can be the most agreeable. When it is not, then, 99 times out of a 100, this is because the overall economy, or the social system, militates against it. This has been the case through most of history. Farmers, particularly small farmers, have often been undervalued; and peasants have commonly been treated badly simply because they are not usually in a position to fight back. This has nothing to do with the job itself, and everything to do with society. The present-day globalized economy could hardly be more antipathetic to the small mixed farm, and hence to the kind of units that agriculture needs if it is truly to feed people reliably and in the long term. The agricultural strategy of the British government (if 'strategy' is the appropriate word) is to put our own farmers into direct competition with those of Brazil or New Zealand or Africa. If someone else, somewhere else, *by whatever means*, can do the job cheaper, then that is what our government goes for. Western farmers are able to compete with people elsewhere who have endless sunshine and are obliged to work for next to nothing and are prepared to cut their forests down to make room for plantations only through economies of scale – huge farms of 1000 hectares or more – and by cashing in on whatever is going. 'Whatever is going' includes the EU or USDA subsidies (which of course flout the whole principle of the free market – but needs must) and vast quantities of oil which is still far cheaper than it should be; and in general to disregard the costs of collateral damage.

If we want small mixed farms to work – and we need them to work – then we have to be prepared, as a society and as a species, to pay the farmers properly. We also have to use our wondrous scientific ingenuity to devise technologies expressly for small farms – whereas, for the past half century or so, the bulk of all our endeavours, including vast caches of taxpayers' money, has been used to provide technologies for the largest possible scale (and indeed have largely been spent on solving the problems of scale-up). In short, in general, we need technology of a kind that Ivan Illich in the 1960s called 'tools for conviviality'; and I like to add the idea of 'science-assisted craft'. In short, the world does indeed need again to take agrarianism seriously. But the point is not to 'turn the clock back'. It is to create 'the new agrarianism'.

In truth, the plea for small mixed labour intensive quasi-organic farms is *not* an exercise in ideology. The idea of such farms emerges logically, step by step, from first biological principles – asking what sort of agriculture we need if it is truly to be productive, sustainable, and resilient. It is the dedication to the free market that is ideological. That is nothing more nor less than dogma.

Finally, we might point out that although such wealth and effort has been put this past 50 years into large-scale industrial farming, 70 per cent of the world's food still comes from small farms. Simple arithmetic suggests that this is where we should be putting our weight.

But what should the farms of the new agrarian age be growing?

Enlightened farms in more detail

Sir Kenneth Mellanby spelled out the most basic principles of all farming in the early 1970s in *Can Britain Feed Itself?* We should, he said, conceptually and in practice,

divide farming into its three constituent components: arable, horticulture, and livestock.

Arable means cultivating on the scale of the field – which in practice usually means preparing a seed bed with plough and harrow. Arable is the prime source of staple foods, the chief source of ‘macronutrients’ – carbohydrate for energy, and basic protein. In practice the principal staples by far are the cereals: just three cereals – wheat, rice, and maize (‘corn’) – provide humanity with half of our energy and (astonishing though it may seem) two thirds of our protein. Pulses (beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas) are also important, especially as sources of lysine-rich protein (cereals tend to be low in lysine) but numerically are not in the class of the big cereals. Tubers, notably potatoes, are also a big source of macronutrients, and are grown principally on the arable scale. So too are many oil-seed crops such as rape and sunflower, and some more general horticultural crops such as carrots and cabbage – but still, the main point of arable is for staples.

The term ‘horticulture’ derives from the Latin for garden and in general, though not necessarily in practice, implies that the crops may be grown virtually plant by plant. Horticulture in general implies fruit and vegetables these in turn are valuable primarily as sources of flavour, texture, essential fats, vitamins, minerals, and what might be called ‘paravitamins’ (the miscellaneous micro-ingredients that the food industry tends to class as ‘nutraceuticals’, such as plant sterols and many antioxidants). But more could be done with horticulture. Many staples can be and are grown as horticultural crops too – including pulses and tubers; and there is a case for horticultural-scale cereals, too. Horticulture for macro-nutrients as well as for micro-nutrients is one of many urgent topics for research. Horticulture lends itself wonderfully to local production, as arable generally does not.

Livestock in practice divides into two classes. The committed herbivores, notably but not exclusively the ruminants such as cattle and sheep, naturally live exclusively on herbage: both grass (grazing) and the leaves of trees and shrubs (browse). Both cattle and sheep love browse, and clearly benefit from the variety it offers. (The vet bill in 2009 for a farmer of my acquaintance who keeps a medium-sized herd dairy cattle and allows them to browse freely on whatever is around, was £13 – and that was for a test). The herbivores, said Mellanby, can be raised in areas where arable farming is impossible and horticulture too difficult – on hills, in forests, in semi-desert and in marshes. At present such livestock consume a huge proportion of the world's cereals and well over 90 per cent of the soya, the world's principal pulse. It is perfectly legitimate to feed small amounts of such ‘concentrate’ for special purposes – to help the animals through difficult winters or to boost milk yield – but when grains form a significant part of their diet, they compete with human beings for food. If they are raised primarily or exclusively on grass or browse, they do not.

Of course, fears have been raised of late that grass-fed cattle excrete more methane than grain-fed cattle, and so contribute more to global warming. This may be true for individual animals considered in isolation. But as Graham Harvey has recently argued in his excellent, seminal, *The Carbon Fields* (GrassRoots 2008) well-managed grazing as a whole is a net carbon sink. We might observe in passing that grassland first became extensive in the Miocene epoch and the population of big herbivores grew steadily and finally from then until well into the Pleistocene until it

could be numbered in many billions. But through all that time the world grew cooler, culminating in the Pleistocene Ice Ages. Everyone who cares about food knows, too, that pasture-fed animals raised at a proper pace taste far better than those that are raised from birth to abattoir, as is the industrial way. Growing evidence tells us too that such pasture-fed meat is far healthier – with a far better profile of essential fatty acids, and a far better ratio of polyunsaturates to saturates; and a broader profile of micronutrients. In short: properly raised meat is delectable and does us good; and the industrially raised livestock by which governments and corporates place such store, can be all but flavourless which means it is more or less pointless; and, as the coup de grace, it is positively harmful.

Omnivores form the second main class of livestock – pigs and poultry. They can be and should be fed primarily on human left-overs (swill) and crop surpluses (and it is prudent in general to produce some surplus). Thus traditionally they were kept in small units, but overall in large numbers, in and around towns. The omnivores also operate comfortably in concert with horticulture, to form the traditional ‘smallholding’.

Forty years on (nearly) we can refine Mellanby’s basic points. Professor Martin Wolfe, who is pioneering ways of integrating trees on to farms, opines that ‘All agriculture should be seen as an exercise in agroforestry’. This sounds like a wild exaggeration but the more you think about it, and the more you travel the world and look, the more his point seems true – and indeed obvious. Even arable crops in the end grow better between rows of trees, and livestock benefit in a hundred ways. Aquaculture too needs taking more seriously, especially as the patterns of rainfall change – and should include marine and brackish environments as sea-levels rise and flood coastal plains. Mixed land use should also be a priority – farming with forestry (as in agroforestry); farming with wildlife; farming alongside around and within cities. To a huge extent, indeed, we need primarily to reverse the commercial-industrial excesses of the past half century, that have led us to compartmentalized living and monoculture. But while we need again to learn from the past we also need to re-think it. This time round, with good science, we should be able to do the job better.

If we farmed in the Mellanby way – focusing the best available land on arable and horticulture, and raising livestock *only* on areas where conventional crops cannot be grown, or on leftovers and surpluses – then, clearly, we would produce a great many plants, with a much smaller proportion of livestock. But if we stuck to the fundamental principle of biology – integrated polyculture – then we would also produce enormous variety. In short, Mellanby-style Enlightened Agriculture produces plenty of plants, not much meat, and maximum variety.

This leads us into two wondrous serendipities. For these nine words – ‘plenty of plants, not much meat, and maximum variety’ – summarize all the most worthwhile nutritional theory of the past 40 years. But also – the icing on the cake – they also encapsulate the basic recipes from all the world’s greatest cuisines. For all the truly great cuisines are firmly rooted in the staples, with a huge variety of other plants. Provence, southern Italy, Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, India, China – all of them explore the wonderful range of cereals, nuts, leaves, tubers, herbs and spices. All of them use meat too of course – but only for flavour and texture: for garnish and for stocks – and just the occasional feast. We do not need to be austere in the future. We merely need to re-learn how to cook. In truth – a most serendipitous irony – ‘the future belongs to the gourmet’.

Finally, Kenneth Mellanby specifically addressed the issue, 'Can Britain feed itself?' – and he concluded that we could. Others since have confirmed this. I have concluded on the basis of simple nutritional theory that we could do so easily – leaving plenty of room for pasture-fed livestock, and local pigs and poultry. What Britain could do, *most* other countries could do too – some of them quite easily; including most of those in Africa that are conventionally seen these days as basket-cases. I know many African or African-based agriculturalists who agree with this. The proper aim of most countries should not be to achieve absolute self-sufficiency but *self-reliance*. Britain should not be seeking to grow coffee or bananas, for example – but simply to raise enough of its own food to get by on if and when the chips are down, so that it does not need to depend on others for basic subsistence. The shortfalls are then made good by fair trade. If every country in the world that could possibly do so contrived to be self-reliant in food, and all took part in fair trade, then the world would be far more secure, biologically and politically, and far more agreeable and better fed than it is now.

All this is eminently possible – the traditional examples and the new ideas are all out there. It is also eminently sensible – following as night follows day from the most fundamental principles of morality and biology. So why don't we do the things that so obviously need doing?

Why have we screwed things up so badly?

A complete thesis on the perversity of human behaviour in general and of government in particular would require a million words and then some – indeed it would embrace all literature. But in a nutshell: the world as a whole has become hooked on an economic theory that is absolutely at odds with all the principles and ideas that are needed to underpin farming that truly could serve the needs of humanity and of the world. The enemy is not capitalism per se, as many suppose. Capitalism properly construed and deployed (and constrained) could serve us very well – and it is hard in practice to see what else could do so. The trouble lies with the particular form of capitalism – historically an aberrant form – that began with Milton Friedman in Chicago in the late 1960s and was taken up with zeal first by Mrs Thatcher's government in Britain and then by Reagan's government in the US in the 1980s. Friedman was the arch advocate of the global free market – although, crucially, unlike Adam Smith, who first formally promoted free markets in the 18th century, he was not against corporates. Smith regarded corporates as the enemy of the free market (he had the East India Company in mind). But the modern 'free market' is dominated by transnational corporates that in some cases are more powerful than nations.

In modern form the 'neoliberal', allegedly free, market places every producer in the world in direct competition with every other. All are urged to produce whatever they produce more cheaply than anyone else. In reality the market is rigged by the big players (big corporates, powerful nations, and banks) so it is not really 'free'. But that is how it is presented. Alongside, and complementary to this 'free' market, we have seen the rise of 'finance capitalism'. In this, money is seen not simply as the means of keeping score and of easing transactions, but as the end in itself – the point of all endeavour. Thus modern governments seek above all to achieve 'economic

growth', meaning increase in GDP, meaning increase in the total money generated in any given year (albeit only on paper) – even though it has been obvious for many decades that GDP has very little to do with human wellbeing. Indeed, money is regarded not as oil for the wheels of commerce, which in turn oils the wheels of industry, but as the principle commodity: the *reason* for the commerce and industry; and the trade in money (interest and exchange rates and so on) becomes a principal generator of more money. In short: the modern, global economy is an all-out, to-the-death competition to produce as much money as possible in the shortest time. It isn't enough simply to be good at this. In an ultra-competitive environment the players have to be better at generating wealth than anybody else.

Arguably, possibly, this global exercise in competitive finance capitalism is good for some purposes. But for agriculture, the most fundamental and in the end the most vital of all human activities, it is a disaster.

What really matters is profit – the difference between money invested and money earned by sales. If you want to maximize profit, then, logically, you must maximize turnover – which means having have plenty to sell. Then you must add value – increase the monetary value as much as possible between production and sale. But above all, you must reduce costs. All of these requirements make sense up to a point. But when applied obsessively to farming – and the modern competitiveness requires obsessiveness – it becomes the antithesis of all the tenets of Enlightened Agriculture, the kind that can actually feed people. Thus:

- Maximizing turnover in farming terms means maximizing yield and/or the area farmed. If we are interested in the long term – the next million years, or even the next few decades – then maximizing yield in the short term can be the worst thing to do. Demonstrably, it can lead in short order to soil exhaustion, pollution (for example though insouciant irrigation) and erosion. It also can mean permanent loss of non-replaceable fresh water and excess use of oil, exacerbating global warming and hence increasing the damage that farming does. Maximizing the area farmed has meant deforestation, which alone could kill a large slice of humanity and of our fellow creatures because of its effect on climate. (Meanwhile good farmland is eaten away by speculative building. It is cheaper to build on green sites).
- Adding value in practice means gratuitous packaging and vegetables raised with huge collateral damage in Africa and South America and jetted to Britain to be sold year-round – and all the rest of the nonsense. Worst of all, though, it means feeding half the world's grain to livestock to turn cheap grains that are the basis of the world's great cuisines into meat of a kind that is a prime cause of nutritional disorder. On present trends by 2050 the world's livestock will be consuming enough grain to feed four billion people – the world population in the 1960s when the Malthusian spectre raised its head in modern form. Value adding will push the effective world population from nine billion which should be easily manageable to 13 billion which would be very difficult indeed. But value adding is part of what the dogma requires and so is called 'realistic'.

Cost cutting is the biggest disaster, however. Cost-cutting means cut-price husbandry which means risk. Britain's livestock have been suffering epidemic after epidemic almost without interruption, and sometimes overlapping, since the 1970s: foot and mouth disease, swine fever, swine flu, BSE, and the constant threat of bird flu, while TB is a continuing menace. All may be ascribed to cut-price husbandry.

Even worse: the easiest way to cut costs is to cut labour. This is the prime excuse for modern industrial farming. Industrial farming is designed to use as little labour as possible so it must be as simple as possible – not polyculture, but monoculture. The work is done not by husbandry but by industrial chemistry and big machines – indeed the whole operation is an exercise in industrial chemistry; and GM, by which governments set such store, is really just industrial chemistry with bells and whistles. A disgrace.

Worse still: despite everything, agriculture is still the world's biggest employer by far. If the 'less developed' countries followed the lead of the most industrialized countries, as they are urged and virtually forced to do, then at least two billion would be out of work. The rich countries recently conducted a noisy 'War on Poverty' while promoting an agricultural strategy worldwide that is the royal road to poverty. In India, 60 per cent of the people work on the land. If India followed Britain's lead – with fewer than one per cent on the land – a half billion would be out of work. Agriculture is the *only* industry that can employ so many; and if we are seriously interested in feeding the world (are we?) then that vast population could not only be kept busy, but could be employed with advantage. This is another, key aspect of 'the new agrarianism'.

All this is excused, of course, by the perceived necessity to produce 'cheap food'. In truth there is no such thing as cheap food. If food is ever sold cheaply this is either a simple scam – a loss leader – or else, we can be sure, some farmer, or society, or animal, or landscape, or the environment at large, somewhere along the line, is being screwed. Human misery and collateral damage in general are not being costed. We should ask, too, in a country like Britain whose Prime Minister and former Chancellor – at the time of writing – boasts such economic success, why there are apparently so many people who cannot afford to buy good food. Britain's Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, Hilary Benn, recently announced with enormous pride that Britons now need to spend only 11 per cent of their income on food. Why is that such a virtue? What are we supposed to spend the other 89 per cent on? Actually, the answer is all too simple – and all too grim. Those people who can afford a house at all commonly spend half of all that they earn on mortgage – not on the capital cost of the house but simply on the interest on the loan. In other words, we are supposed to cut our spending on food so that we can give more to banks. Is there justice in this? Is there any sense in it at all? Yet Hilary Benn represents a party that peculiarly calls itself 'New Labour'. Traditional Labour was conceived by trade unions as a socialist party but in the most important matters it is now as neoliberal as the right wing of the US Republicans. How very odd.

So what's to be done?

The campaign for real farming

Radical change is needed: a complete re-think from first principles – agricultural, scientific, economic. But the changes needed are precisely opposite in kind from any

'official' policy produced by the British or US governments over the past 30 years. The entire might of the global economy, and the bedrock of neoliberal dogma on which it rests, are against the necessary changes. To be sure, Hilary Benn has been saying of late (not least at the annual Oxford Food Conference) that Britain must produce more of its own food, which sounds like a shift back to self-reliance. But he is also keen to stress that our farmers should produce our food more cheaply than the Brazilians could do it – or of course we would buy from Brazil instead. Mr Benn is a socialist by inclination but in practice, which in the end is what affects the rest of us, he is a neoliberal through and through.

So as things are it is inconceivable that powerful Western governments, and the corporates and banks with whom they work so closely, will do the things that need doing. It is beyond their conception. Such thoughts for them, and for their carefully chosen expert advisers, are truly 'unrealistic'. There are good ideas out there that truly could solve the world's food problems, but for modern politicians, bound to the dogma of the free market and the treadmill of 'economic growth', they would spell political suicide.

So what should we do, we ordinary Joes who are not politicians, or bankers, or captains of industry? We could just go along with the status quo, perhaps lobbying for the odd tweak in the labelling laws or some such – but if we just do this then we will all be dead; or at least, our grandchildren will die well before their time. So if we really give a damn, we have to take matters into our own hands. How?

In general, there are three practical routes to long-term, radical, social, political, and economic change. They are: Reform, Revolution, and Renaissance.

Reform, in practice, means going cap in hand to governments and corporate bosses and asking them, ever so nicely, if they would kindly change their ways. Many spend their lives on this but it cannot work. The big supermarkets, for example, grow rich by playing the neoliberal game – playing farmers off against each other on the global scale. This is precisely what the world doesn't need. But if they stopped doing it, they would lose their *raison d'être* (and their shareholders).

Revolution means having a fight. All political action is uncertain but revolution is the most uncertain. It is wasteful, destructive, and we don't know where it will lead. It is hardly worth thinking about.

Renaissance is the way. Renaissance implies that people who give a damn simply start doing things differently. In fact we need an 'Agrarian Renaissance'. We – people at large – need to create a new network of farms of the enlightened kind, beginning in our own country but rapidly acquiring global links (because we are all in the same boat). In parallel, we also need to create a new network of retail to serve those farms (because the big supermarkets that dominate the scene are most unsuited to the small mixed farms that the world needs). Finally, we need to do all we can to encourage and re-create food culture – to ensure that the great cuisines and the peasant skills that gave rise to them are reinstated. The fast-food, burger-pizza-coke approach to food, and the ultra-pretentious restaurant serving food from here there and everywhere, just will not do.

All around, the world over, we find people already on the case: landowners, farmers, micro-brewers, artisanal bakers, specialist butchers, cooks and restaurateurs, shop-keepers and stall-holders, and a growing band of consumers who care enough

to seek out the good stuff. One outstanding farmer with whom I have been privileged to work is Tim Waygood, in Hertfordshire – who has a company already called ‘Agrarian Renaissance’. Another is Nick Snelgar, based in Wiltshire, who has established a small farm on a neighbouring estate that is run entirely by the villagers. I am sometimes asked, ‘How are you going to persuade people to change their ways?’ – but the answer is that no persuasion is necessary. We merely need to identify all the millions (probably billions) worldwide who already agree. They are easily enough to form a critical mass. Dialogue and a modicum of coordination are the names of the game.

With all this in mind my wife and I and friends in 2009 established what I wanted to call ‘The Campaign for Enlightened Agriculture’ which we have shortened to ‘The Campaign for Real Farming’. The core of the campaign so far is a website – www.campaignforrealfarming.org; but as a campaign we have already helped to organize various meetings, including the Oxford Real Farming Conference (the alternative to the Oxford Farming Conference) in January 2010, with more to follow, and various other such initiatives.

In the longer term, I hope to establish a Trust for Enlightened Agriculture (or Real Farming) which, like the National Trust, the Woodland Trust, or the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, would be a central fund, with money from people at large, but dedicated in perpetuity to real farming. It would be good to work on this in collaboration with the National Trust and the rest (and others) – since farming and forestry and conservation of all kinds should be working together.

In the longer term, too, I would like the website to metamorphose into a virtual college – the College for Enlightened Agriculture – where ‘college’ is conceived not simply as a school, where facts and ideas are passed on ‘de haut en bas’, but in its proper sense, as a forum where like-minded people exchange ideas. If generous people care to put money in, it could emerge as a real bricks-and-mortar establishment. Its scholars would address the host of issues that are raised by the new agrarianism – social, political, scientific, technical – that have been so sadly neglected this past 30 years, and at least initiate research in institutions that are equipped to carry it out. Ideally the college would have its own model farm (or several) – very probably organized along the lines of Martin Wolfe’s place in Suffolk. In the fullness of time it would be good to help to create the new generation of farmers that Britain so desperately needs. We need at least five times and probably nearer ten times as many farmers as we have now. We need them fast, too, because the average age of Britain’s farmers is now around 60 and according to Reading University, almost a third are over 65.

So where is the money to come from? This is where, in addition to rescuing agriculture, we need to rescue capitalism. For capitalism need not mean neoliberalism. Indeed, many a traditional business person, and many a traditional British Tory and US Republican, is appalled by the excesses of the past 30 years. Business people traditionally had a sense of social responsibility – it was not their job simply to maximize profit for shareholders by whatever means they could get away with. Both Tory and Republican governments (and of course Labour and Democrat) once took it for granted that whatever the advantages of free enterprise, private ownership, and the marketplace, the whole economy needs to be restrained and directed for the

benefit of the society and of humanity as a whole. That indeed was, and remains, the principal task of government. If they did not do this – well: we would see precisely the horrors that we see today, as the rich grow richer while the poor grow poorer and the fabric of the world falls apart.

But capitalism is a broad church. Within that church, sound business, common sense, and true morality may still be combined. The general means is by ‘ethical investment’: people at large putting their money specifically into enterprises they believe are operating for the common good. One problem at present is that many existing enterprises that are doing good things are not of a kind that can readily be invested in. There is no infrastructure, no medium, by which people at large can support the endeavours of small farmers or markets or related enterprise and expect any kind of return. But again, the Campaign is working on this: talking to ethical investment specialists and to bankers, with a view to getting things moving.

So there is hope. Not much, to be sure, the way things are going. But if we give a damn, we have to go with what there is.

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