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NO NEW THING UNDER THE SUN

By COLIN TUDGE

Every argument that anyone might care to raise about food and farming and all that goes with them has been raised before, sometimes many centuries ago, and often beautifully expressed. As the preacher proclaims in *Ecclesiastes* (i:9),

“... there is no new thing under the sun”;

and as the Spanish American philosopher George Santayana observed in *The Life of Reason* in 1905,

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”

The modern world is dominated absolutely by “the economy” and the economy these days is crudely perceived just as an exercise in cash – but there is nothing new in this. In Antony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, published in 1875, the banker, Melmotte, tells his gullible and aristocratic would-be clients,

“These are great times and I am proud to be an Englishman in these times! What is the engine of this world? Profit. Gentlemen it is your duty to make yourself rich!”

In the novel, Melmotte is the arch-villain, truly unspeakable. Yet he encapsulates perfectly the driving economic and moral philosophy of the past few decades.

Of course, not all economists think like Melmotte and the moderns. One of the greatest of all, John Maynard Keynes, proclaimed:

“ ... the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs ... and the arena of heart and head will be occupied where it belongs, or reoccupied by our real problems, the problems of life and human relations, of creation, and of behaviour and religion.”

Furthermore, the neoliberal economy that has prevailed this past thirty years is ostensibly the champion of free trade, and free trade is presented to us as an essential component of freedom itself. Yet as Sir Karl Popper commented in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*:

“If we wish freedom to be safeguarded, then we must demand that the policy of unlimited economic freedom be replaced by the planned economic intervention of the state. We must demand that unrestrained capitalism give way to economic interventionism”.

In the neoliberalist frenzy of recent decades, agriculture has been perceived as “a business like any other”, obliged to compete head to head with everything from banking to hairdressing. Countries that have joined or are thinking of joining the EU, such as Poland, Rumania, and Turkey, are told that their farming, which in truth is their greatest asset by far and is in all cases wonderful, is “a drain on the economy”, and they are advised to run it down with all possible haste, just as Britain has done. But here is Keynes again, writing in the 1930s, when Britain yet again was neglecting its own agriculture on grounds of cost:

“To say that a country cannot afford agriculture is to delude oneself about the meaning of the word ‘afford’. A country which cannot afford art or agriculture, invention or tradition, is a country in which one cannot afford to live.”

Nowadays, too, the agriculture that is allowed to exist at all is intended to subscribe to the economic model of David Ricardo – of “comparative advantage”: which means in practice that instead of farming to feed themselves, all countries everywhere are encouraged to grow whatever grows best, and export it for cash. People brought up in the age of neoliberalism – anyone born after 1970 – tend to feel that this way of thinking is modern and therefore represents progress and is therefore good: a sentiment I have heard expressed many times from public platforms and have read in such modern tablets of wisdom as *The Economist* and *Prospect*. But here in the early 19th century is the incomparably great Alexander von Humboldt, whose travels inspired an entire generation of biologists and explorers including Darwin, on this very matter:

“How I detest this Politics that measures and evaluates the public good simply according to the value of Exports! A Nation’s wealth is just like an individual’s – only the accessory

to happiness. Before being free, we must be just, and without justice there can be no lasting prosperity”.

The main tenets of neoliberalism were first spelled out formally in the early 1960s by Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. By the time of Ronald Reagan and George W Bush anyone who deviated from its dogma -- the globalized, unregulated, “free” market -- was deemed to be “un-American”, not to say a border-line commie. But in truth neoliberalism is an historical aberration. The Founding Fathers conceived the United States as the world’s first, formal, republican democracy, firmly rooted in capitalism, as formally outlined in the 18th century by Adam Smith. Yet the Founding Fathers’ conception of capitalism was closer in spirit to Karl Marx, the greatest of all commies, than it was to George W Bush and Dick Cheney. Thus in the second and most famous paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and their fellow authors declared that

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Throughout the Declaration they refer constantly to justice. But at no time in this entire, wondrous document, the greatest political declaration ever, do they suggest that human beings have an inalienable right simply to make as much money as possible in the shortest possible time. Yet this, and this alone, is the driving spirit of neoliberalism. To be specific, insofar as successive British governments since Margaret Thatcher have had anything resembling a coherent policy for food and agriculture, it has been to invite Tesco and Monsanto, Cargill and Smithfield to go forth and fill their boots. But as St Paul warned in his epistle to the Galatians (vi:7),

“whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap”.

Tesco and the rest have been reaping enormous wealth, but the rest of the world is going to pot.

“The rest of the world” of course includes farmers. I have met many a farmer of late who in his or her time has been seriously stitched up by the supermarkets. More than anyone else these days the supermarkets control the entire food supply chain, and feel perfectly entitled to renege on contracts – either to offer rock-bottom prices for crops that they have commissioned to be grown, or simple refuse to buy them at all. But then,

as Sinclair Lewis recounts in *Main Street* (1920), things were much the same in early 20th century America:

“Then, on the corner below her husband’s office, she [*Carol; the book’s heroine*] heard a farmer holding forth:

‘Sure. Course I was beaten. The shipper and the grocers here wouldn’t pay us a decent price for our potatoes even though folks in the cities were howling for ‘em. So we says, well, we’ll get a truck and ship ‘em right down to Minneapolis. But the commission merchants there were in cahoots with the local shipper here; they said they wouldn’t pay us a cent more than he would, not even if they was nearer to the market. Well, we found we could get higher prices in Chicago, but when we tried to get freight cars to ship there, the railroads wouldn’t let us have ‘em -- even though they had cars standing empty right there in the yards. There you got it -- good market, and these towns keeping us from it. Gus, that’s the way these towns work all the time. They pay us what they want to for our wheat, but we pay what they want us to for their clothes. Stowbody and Dawson foreclose every mortgage they can, and put in tenant farmers ... the lawyers sting us, the machinery-dealers hate to carry us over the bad years, and then their daughters put on swell dresses and look at us as if we were a bunch of hoboes. Man, I’d like to burn this town!’

Kennicott [*Carol’s husband*] observed ‘... They ought to run that fellow out of town!’”

Behind much of the farmers’ misery and the extreme injustice lies the modern mania for cheap food. The real question is why there is such poverty in the world – and particularly in a country like Britain whose government claims that they have made us so prosperous. In reality, of course, there is no such thing as cheap food. If food is ever cheap it is because some farmer, or community, or wild creature, or landscape, is being screwed. Working farmers the world over are underappreciated and underpaid. But as John Ruskin commented in 1858 in ‘The Work of Iron, in Nature, Art, and Policy,

“ ... whenever we buy ... cheap goods -- goods offered at a price which we know cannot be remunerative for the labour involved in them ... remember we are stealing somebody’s labour. Don’t let us mince the matter. I say, in plain Saxon,

STEALING -- taking from him the proper reward of his work, and putting it into our own pocket.”

The upper case in the above is Ruskin’s own.

The world’s livestock are also suffering very badly from the industrialized food chain. Tracy Worchester’s excellent but chilling *Pig Business*, broadcast on prime-time television on June 30 2009 by More 4, has stirred enormous interest and appropriate horror. But what’s new? The following, from Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, on the Chicago meat-processing industry, was published in 1905. Jurgis, the book’s hero, a Lithuanian immigrant, is being shown around Durham’s meat-packing factory by Jokubas, an old hand. We are told:

“There were groups of cattle being driven to the chutes, which were roadways about fifteen feet wide, raised high above the pens. In these chutes the stream of animals was continuous; it was quite uncanny to watch them, pressing on to their fate, all unsuspecting, a very river of death. (p 48) ... every hour they turned four or five hundred cattle into meat ... there were fifteen or twenty lines, and the men moved from one to another of these. This made a scene of intensive activity, a picture of human power wonderful to watch ... like a circus amphitheatre ... the creatures were prisoned, each in a separate pen ... and while they stood bellowing and plunging, over the top there leaned one of the ‘knockers’, armed with a sledge hammer, and watching for a chance to deal a blow ... The instant the animal had fallen a second man raised a lever, and the side of the pen was raised, and the animal, still kicking and struggling, slid out to the ‘killing bed’. Here a man put shackles about one leg, and pressed another lever, and the body was jerked up into the air.”

Later we learn:

“Before the carcass was admitted ... it had to pass a government inspector, who sat in the doorway and felt of [*sic*] the glands in the neck for tuberculosis. This government inspector did not have the manner of a man who was worked to death ... he was quite willing to enter into conversation with you, and to explain to you the deadly nature of the ptomaines which are found in tubercular pork; and while he was talking with you you could hardly be so ungrateful as to notice that a dozen carcasses were passing him untouched. This inspector

wore an imposing silver badge, and he gave an air of authority to the scene ...”

But that was when the system was working well. Later in the book we begin to learn of fiddles:

“It seemed as if every time you met a person from a new department, you heard of new swindles and crimes... It seemed that they must have agencies all over the country, to hunt out old and crippled and diseased cattle to be canned. There were cattle which had been fed on ‘whisky-malt’, the refuse of the breweries, and had become what the men called ‘sterly’ -- which means covered with boils. It was a nasty job killing these, for when you plunged your knife into them they would burst and splash foul-smelling stuff into your face; and when a man’s sleeves were smeared wit blood, and his hands steeped in it, how was he ever to wipe his face, or to clear his eyes so that he could see?”

Swindling continues. The words on labels don’t always mean what they seem to say and besides, labels are often switched as meat and other goods wend their way along the Byzantine food chain. There is adulteration too of course – and some of this perfectly legal, which means that the law itself is up for sale and is no longer to be trusted. A sorry state indeed. So it is that water is added to industrialized chicken and pork to bring it up to weight, and foreign proteins may be added too. The problem springs in large part from urbanization, and the ever-increasing distance between consumer and producer, and the corresponding proliferation of middle-men. Yet in the early days of mega-cities and industrialized food, things if anything were even worse. John Burnett tells us in his excellent *Plenty and Want* that flour was routinely bulked out with chalk, and oat meal with less nutritious barley meal, and heavy metals from lead to copper and mercury were routinely used as what the modern food industry calls “colourants”. Nickel was commonly used to lend colour to green tea. Was it this that the innocent and saintly Miss Matty had in mind when in the early 1850s she warned her customers in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* to steer well clear of it?:

“Her sales of tea during the first two days had surpassed my most sanguine expectations. The whole country round seemed to be all out of tea at once. The only alteration I could have desired in Miss Matty’s way of doing business was, that she should not have so plaintively entreated some of her customers

not to buy green tea – running it down as slow poison, sure to destroy the nerves, and produce all manner of evil. Their pertinacity in taking it, in spite of all her warnings, distressed her so much that I really thought she would relinquish the sale of it, and so lose half her custom”.

The first person formally to expose the horrors of early industrial food pollution was the 18th century analytical chemist Frederick Accum (1769-1801). John Burnett does not quote Accum directly but he does quote a writer in the *Literary Gazette* of 1920 who had been reading his work:

“Does anything pure or unpoisoned come to our tables, except butchers’ meat? We must answer, hardly anything Bread turns out to be a crutch to help us onwards to the grave, instead of the staff of life; in porter there is no support, in cordials no consolation, in almost everything poison, and in scarcely any medicine cure”.

My own preferred solution to most of these problems is to promote “the new agrarianism” – which requires an economy that takes agriculture seriously, and an “enlightened agriculture” that is truly designed to feed people. Enlightened agriculture must be complex – an imitation of nature – which means that the husbandry too must be complex which means that it must be labour intensive, which means that countries like Britain that have systematically stripped farming to the bone, and then stripped it some more, need many more farmers than they have at present and they need them quick. This requires a movement that has often been crudely summarized as “back to the land” – which in turn has invited ridicule, of greater or less good humour, over many centuries. Thus, in one of my favourite passages from all literature, Jane Austen in *Emma* (1814) listens in on the local gentry and bourgeoisie as they attempt to re-engage with their own food supply by picking strawberries:

“ --- strawberries, and only strawberries, could now be thought or spoken of. – “The best fruit in England – every body’s favourite – always wholesome. – These the finest beds and finest sorts. – Delightful to gather for one’s self – the only way of really enjoying them, -- Morning decidedly the best time – never tired – every sort of good – hautboy definitely superior – no comparison – the others hardly eatable – hautboys very scarce – Chili preferred – white wood finest flavour of all – price of strawberries in London – abundance about Bristol –

Maple Grove – cultivation – beds when to be renewed --- gardeners thinking exactly different – no general rule – gardeners never to be put out of their way – delicious fruit – only too rich to be eaten much of – inferior to cherries – currants more refreshing – only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping – glaring sun – tired to death – could bear it no longer – must go and sit in the shade’.

Such, for half an hour, was the conversation”.

I am also struck by the connoisseurship evident in earlier times. Elsewhere, the characters in *Emma* discuss the merits of various breeds of lamb at different times of year – Welsh or Romney Marsh? – and the merits of boiled parsnips. Now we are promised “choice” but the refinements and nuances of food have been coarsened and lost.

In one of my favourite passages from *Anna Karenina*, too, the aristocratic hero Levin (who represents Tolstoy himself) decides to work alongside his peasants:

“Titus, who had taught Levin to scythe, a thin little peasant, [was] walking in front and cutting a wide swathe, wielding his scythe as though it were a toy ... As they finished their rows, the peasants, perspiring and good-humoured, came out into the road one after another and, laughing a little, greeted their master. They all stared at him but no-one made any remark, till a tall old man with a wrinkled, beardless face, wearing a sheepskin jacket, stepped out on to the road and addressed him. ‘Look’ ee now, master; once take hold of the rope there’s no letting go!’, he said, and Levin heard smothered laughter among the mowers. ‘I’ll try not to let go,’ he said, taking his place behind Titus and waiting for the signal to begin. ‘Mind’ee,’ repeated the old man.”

“He swung his scythe, using the last ounce of his strength, and was making up his mind to ask Titus to stop. But at that very moment Titus stopped of his own accord, bent down and picked up a handful of grass, wiped his scythe, and began whetting it. Levin straightened his back and looked round with a sigh of relief The same thing happened next time. Titus moved on with sweep after sweep of his scythe, not stopping and not tiring. Levin followed, trying to keep up, and finding it harder and harder, until the moment came when he felt he had

no strength left, but at that very moment Titus stopped and whetted the scythes ... The next rows were easier, but still Levin had to strain every nerve not to drop behind the peasants. He thought of nothing, wished for nothing, except not be left behind Levin lost all count of time and had no idea whether it was late or early. A change began to come over his work which gave him immense satisfaction. There were moments when he forgot what he was doing, he moved without effort ... But as soon as he began thinking what he was doing ... he would mow badly...The longer Levin mowed, the oftener he experienced those moments of oblivion when ... the scythe seemed to mow of itself, a body full of life and consciousness of its own, as though by magic These were the most blessed moments.”

But Levin’s more worldly brother, Kozynshev, predictably pours scorn:

“ ... tell me, how do the peasants look at it? They must laugh up their sleeves at their master’s being such a queer fish ... But Levin, how can you have your dinner with them? You could hardly have a turkey and a bottle of Lafitte brought to you in the field’.”

Nowadays, too, alongside the supermarkets and the processors, is a phalanx of experts to tell us what we *ought* to eat. Nutritionists are useful and necessary people, of course, and so are modern equivalents of scientists like Accum who endeavour to keep us safe. But sometimes these experts do rather get on our nerves – and sometimes they go rushing in where angels would venture cautiously. The following, from John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* of 1935, based around Monterey in California, is definitely two-edged:

“At about this time in California it became the stylish thing for school nurses to visit the classes and to catechize the children on intimate details of their home life. In the first grade, Alfredo was called to the principal’s office, for it was thought that he looked thin.

The visiting nurse, trained in child psychology, said kindly: “Freddie, do you get enough to eat?”

“Sure”, said Alfredo.

“Well, now. Tell me what you have had for breakfast.”

“Tortillas and beans”, said Alfredo.

The nurse nodded her head dismally to the principal. “What do you have when you go home for lunch?”

“I don’t go home.”

“Don’t you eat at noon?”

“Sure. I bring some beans wrapped up in a tortilla.”

Actual alarm showed in the nurse’s eyes, but she controlled herself. “At night, what do you have to eat?”

“Tortillas and beans.”

Her psychology deserted her. “Do you mean to stand there and tell me you eat nothing but tortillas and beans?”

Alfredo was astonished. “Jesus Christ”, he said, “what more do you want?”

There’s a long treatise to be written about all this – on the one hand about child malnutrition which of course was rampant among poor children the world over in the 1930s; and also about the growing focus from the 1930s onwards on the importance of protein – and the failure to realize, until the 1970s, that lysine-rich beans complement lysine-deficient cereal perfectly and that, for example, beans-and-tortillas is a wonderful combination (although of course it is sadly lacking in some micronutrients).

More broadly, though, this passage emphasizes the growing influence of science in particular and experts in general in controlling our lives. In this it is vital that the science is truly objective, as science is supposed to be, and as scientists claim is the case. In the science of food and agriculture, the stuff of life, objectivity becomes doubly important. There must be no vested interest, either political or commercial. In the words of Sir Kenneth Blaxter, then director of the Rowett Research Institute at Aberdeen:

“It seems wrong that ... the science related to producing food has to be used in a competitive fashion: the essence of science is

its universality, and freedom from hunger should be the birthright of all mankind”.

Sir Kenneth wrote these words in 1977 in an essay called “Options for British Farming”, published by the Royal Society in *Agricultural Efficiency*. He was himself an FRS, and one of the great agricultural scientists of the 20th century. Nowadays – or at least until the recent collapse of the banks – such a sentiment would be laughed out of court. As a London professor said to me recently (although I do not have his permission to offer a direct quote) it is difficult these days to find *any* research in nutrition that is not at some level sponsored by the food industry; and the same to a very significant extent is true of agriculture as a whole.

Indeed we are at the point that the British people reached in the mid 17th century when people at large felt impelled to ask what government is actually *for*: the question posed formally by Thomas Hobbes in particular in *Leviathan*. Whatever the answer, the authors of the American Declaration of Independence just over a hundred years later felt that the British government, dominated by George III, was no longer on their side and concluded, in line with Hobbes, that they had a perfect right to do something about it. They say in their very first paragraph:

“Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

It is clear to me, and to a great many other people, that our own government and indeed most governments in the world, have lost any sense that it is their prime duty to preserve our safety and happiness and indeed have in many respects become “destructive of those ends”. Exactly why they should have done so is up for debate but the following from Aldous Huxley is surely pertinent, taken from a letter he wrote to his brother Julian at the end of World War I:

“It really makes one gasp; one wonders which is the greatest, the stupidity or the wickedness of our rulers. I think their stupidity”.

Actually I am not sure it matters which of these is true. The result is the same either way. Agriculture is right in the firing line of government folly and, of all material pursuits, it is the one that has the greatest immediate effect on our lives and on the world at large. Either way, if we feel we are badly governed, then surely we have a right to resist. Henry David Thoreau in 1849 coined the expression “civil disobedience”. Mahatma Gandhi acted very effectively upon the theme in the 20th century although in his later years at least preferred the expression “civil resistance”. To be specific, if we feel that the world’s governments and the corporates with whom they work so closely are compromising our future, as is undeniably the case, then we have a right and indeed a duty to take matters into our own hands.

But the way to go about this is neither to have a fight -- which is revolution -- nor to persuade the powers-that-be to change their ways step by step -- which is reform. Revolutions are too messy and dangerous. Reform cannot succeed because it is too slow and because there is no plausible route whereby Tesco, say, could metamorphose incrementally into the kind of institution that the world actually needs. The philosophy and raison d’etre of such corporates are absolutely at odds with the requirements of farming that is truly designed to feed people. Besides, the powers-that-be are not listening. We may plead with them with the passion that Oliver Cromwell displayed when he wrote to the Church of Scotland in 1650:

“I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken”

– but all my experience so far suggests that such effort would be in vain.

Instead we need Renaissance – the principle of which was beautifully encapsulated by the American architect and visionary polymath Buckminster Fuller:

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

Exactly how we can bring this Renaissance about is the self-appointed mission of this blog.

Colin Tudge, Wolvercote, July 5 2009