

Agribusiness Spreads Disease

By E.G. Vallianatos

First England suffered the agonies of the so-called mad cow disease, killing and burning thousands of cattle. The British countryside resembled a huge cemetery. But England broke the dirty secret: Cattle had to be exterminated on a huge scale in order to put a break in the brain disease of cattle, which was also killing people who ate the diseased cows' meat.

Mad cow disease was a symptom of industrialized agriculture, especially animal farms. These animal farms, however, are factories designed for domesticated animals (primarily cattle, chicken and pigs) where scientists, engineers and businessmen have been striving to convert animals into industrial products.

The results of such hubris have been catastrophic.

The animal farm technicians and businessmen assumed, wrongly, that living beings like animals could adapt to perpetual darkness and absolute confinement, artificiality administered by science-based violence. The owners of these farms knew their animal factories would stink, so unless they found powerless communities like the black people of rural North Carolina where they built several animal farms in their midst, they chose isolated places in the countryside for them. The less that urban people knew about these factories, the better.

However, agribusinessmen expected their handiwork would have no consequence of note to either the life of the animals or to the health of those who ate those animals. As for the endless pollution of the farms, state and federal authorities decided nature would be a sacrificial zone. Economists called the huge wastes of factory farms externalities that ought to bother no one. Rivers became the sewage pipes of these animal factories.

But the mad cow disease, brought about by feeding cattle animal flesh, exposed the madness of animal farms, which stand like monuments of an age of darkness. The animals in that system of agriculture are placed next to each other like sardines in a can. They only eat, becoming obsessed with food, often cannibalizing each other while gaining weight fast. They also get sick fast from a variety of diseases, chicken in particular developing the deadly H5N1 or "bird flu" virus.

In countries like England and the US, agribusinessmen try to control these diseases by feeding drugs to the animals, especially tons of antibiotics, thus making the meat of these animals potentially hazardous to humans.

However, in countries like China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Turkey, Thailand and Vietnam, where H5N1 has killed about 70 persons and thousands of chickens, agribusinessmen have created the worst possible version of the animal farms. These include large and small cages where they cram chickens in without, in many instances, feeding them antibiotics. In addition, these cages, full to the brim with chickens, are often festering in the midst of incredible poverty where humans are not much better off than the caged animals.

That incendiary environment gave birth to the H5N1 avian flu. Inevitably, H5N1 moved to wild birds, which have the potential of spreading it beyond Asia. However, sick birds don't fly very far.

Now China is vaccinating billions of birds, a strategy of desperation rather than disease prevention. Asian governments attack the virulent H5N1 by culling all birds in the infected area and quarantining the poultry in regions next to the killing fields. This process follows the palliatives of the mad cow disaster in Europe, except in the bird flu threat European and North American governments stockpile vaccines for poultry and drugs for people while spreading propaganda that wild birds alone are likely to bring about an apocalyptic avian flu pandemic killing millions of people. Yet these governments, including the World Health Organization and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, say nothing about the agribusiness origins of this emerging global disaster.

The H5N1 bird-flu virus does have a chance to kill millions of people, but only if we ignore the agribusiness conditions that make it possible, sustaining it into becoming a lethal disease in the crowded and inhumane environment of the chicken factories around the world.

The dreadful conditions of World War I manufactured the influenza pandemic of 1918. The virus was born and spread in the trenches of the Western front. Another pandemic like that is unlikely. Yet intermingling the slums of Asia with billions of disease-ridden chickens is a formula for a bird-flu pandemic.

It is also possible that the high-tech chicken factories of the West are manufacturing their own version of a lethal virus, which could mutate to an influenza epidemic.

The only safe alternative to industrialized agriculture -- a vector of worldwide social and ecological upheavals, including mad cow disease and the avian flu -- is peasant and family farming with traditions of respect for domesticated animals. These are sentient beings, not pieces of machinery. Undoing factory farms eliminates H5N1. In addition, such a policy would be an affirmation of the values of Western civilization.

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