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The angry farmers protests, which in recent years have spread across many European countries, paint a clear picture: The present agroindustrial model is experiencing a deep crisis.

The inciting incident for the demonstrations and road blockings in Germany was the government's announcement to refute the tax exemptions for fuel used in the agrarian sector, which most farmers thought was too much. That there was too much pressure put on them with bad prices, bureaucracy and too many obligations. That the government had to be replaced.

But what then? Almost none of the protesting farmers had constructive ideas about how agriculture should proceed throughout the 2020s – in times of climate crisis and the mass extinction of species, with water polluted by fertilizers, microplastics in the soil and multiresistant germs within the intensive meat and dairy industry, which could, in the long term, make antibiotics useless. With an agrarian sector which is dependent on global resource chains like the rest of the economy and vulnerable in times of war, animal epidemics and a completely unpredictable American tariff policy.

In the meantime re-elections have taken place in Germany, and the new government will be led by the conservative CDU/CSU, which already announced to reintroduce the tax exemption for agrarian fuel. As if that would be an answer to the many crises of the agrarian sector.

But the climate- and biodiversity crisis has other demands: Those who work the land know how unpredictable the weather has become nowadays. How important resilience and perseverance now have become, how important experimentation what in the future will still be possible on the field, when tempests as well as droughts increase. When water can no longer be pumped out of the land, but has to be kept there – while at the same time the fields shouldn't be drowned when it rains for months, like in the last autumn and winter.

Under the slogan „regenerative agriculture“ many farmers search for a way of farming viable for the future. At the same time many small startups – especially in the vicinity of large cities – begin working their vegetable fields with horses.

Oxen before a plough I have yet only seen in a museum, in the open air museum of Detmold, not far from the village where I grew up. There, ploughing championships are held – staged for museum visitors as a flashback into a preindustrial past. A canvas for nostalgic romanticism in the eyes of many visitors – only farmers might think with horror of the hard labour their ancestors had endured, while they themselves listen to podcasts in air-conditioned drivers cabins and supervise satellite data.

I suspect only a few of them realize that they have also lost something in the process. That many of them are now removed from the earth – their work subject. That they forgot how to read the landscape around them and see themselves as part of nature, integrated into the



Picture: Georg Schweisfurth

all connecting web of life, like taught by Donna Haraway and experienced by many people who have roots in indigenous cultures.

I wish that researching and publicly conveying old agricultural methods would not be smiled upon as a curious hobby, but that we – in the light of the coming challenges – study the agriculture of the past with scientific curiosity.

Tanja Busse  
Author, Journalist

I'm honoured to have been invited to help introduce this conference. My guess is that a lot of people would think its theme is pretty 'niche' in the modern world, but I believe draft cattle are set to make a resurgence that will be needed to help us tackle many present crises. The issues being discussed at this conference today therefore couldn't be more important.

I don't have personal experience of working with draft cattle – in another life, I hope I will! – but I've long been an advocate of low energy input, renewable, local food systems, and that's where I think draft cattle fit so well.

Modern, industrial agriculture energized by cheap and abundant but polluting and unsustainable fossil fuels has broken up local mixed agroecosystems and pushed farming down monocultural routes where each area produces only the few crops that are most economically advantageous in wider markets. This leads to ecological inefficiencies and social dislocations that we can only paper over for so long through the continued use of cheap energy.

In the longer term, but starting right now, I'm convinced that most places will need to rebuild more robust and resilient, functional, low input and low energy, local agroecosystems. We cannot keep relying on fossil fuel enabled global markets to meet local needs for food and fibre and to protect and maintain local agroecosystems.

These agroecosystems will usually involve mixed husbandry of grassland, cropland and woodland, with domesticated livestock acting as critical intermediaries of nutrient flows and labour, and as critical suppliers for meeting human food and non-food needs. Rather than optimising on one product or input, such agroecosystems involve complex and multifunctional optimisation across the whole ecosystem.

Draft cattle fit beautifully into such systems as low-energy optimisers of traction, transport and other needs. So it's important to retain, build and share knowledge about the necessary skills, technologies and farming methods they involve – which is why I'm delighted that this conference is happening.

One of the problems we face in promoting the resurgence of draft cattle is the image problem of public perceptions that to use draft animals is somehow backward-looking, romantic or nostalgic for past ways of farming. I'm not sure how best to counter this myth, but it seems to me that the more people who are experimenting with draft animals, finding ways to make them work in contemporary agrarian settings, and using the tools of modern ecological and other sciences to show their effectiveness, the more we can build a movement on the ground that will circumvent these objections and carry people with it by demonstrating the practical benefits of draft cattle. So, once again, this is why it's so important to have a conference like this to help build such a movement.

We need to change the narrative about food and farming systems. In the richer countries, and increasingly worldwide, the emphasis has been on removing people from contact with nature, the land and food production



as part of their livelihoods, cutting jobs in the sector and emphasising high-energy input non-local food systems. I believe that climate change, energy and water scarcities, nature loss and economic/political crisis will dramatically change this in the years to come, whether we like it or not. The more that we can build alternative, job-rich, low-input local models in the meantime, the less traumatic this transition is likely to be. This conference is part of that wider and urgent task.

Chris Smaje

Small-scale farmer, writer, social scientist



For almost five decades now, my organisation 'Local Futures' has been promoting more localised food economies, in reaction to the disastrous effects of a globalised food system, shaped by the need for profits for giant transnational corporations and banks.

We have worked with farmers and farm organisations and with consumer groups around the world to encourage local food movements that help to raise respect for and protect small farmers linked to markets closer to the farm. Structurally, connecting farmers and consumers in this way encourages diversification on the farm, which is absolutely essential in order for the human population to feed itself without destroying ecosystems or destroying their own health. Animals are a central part of healthy, diversified farms, and have been throughout centuries.

In our work, we have seen the multiple benefits that come from draft animals. They have included a beautiful, close relationship between humans and animals. We've seen farmers singing to the bulls that were pulling their plough, asking them: "Please work hard just now for the planting. Then you can go and enjoy delicious grass and flowers in the high pastures".

We've come to consider these intimate relationships between human beings and their working animals essential for humanity, for developing respect for life beyond the human. We cannot and should not seek to develop such relationships with wild animals. But when it comes to meeting our basic needs, this symbiosis is a gift.

These farm animals give birth, they do not, like tractors and other machinery, rust and have to be bought new again and again. Generally, they have been adapted to local ecosystems and they become part of the ongoing cycle of life. And unlike the machinery, which causes pollution, they also provide fertiliser, necessary for healthy soil and sustainable productivity. In this regard, it is vital that we distinguish between smaller-scale, diversified farming and the corporate-led, giant factory farms, which are hideously polluting and destructive.

Raising awareness about draft animals is today particularly needed in the so-called 'less-developed' world, where hundreds of millions of people are being pulled away from the land. Media and advertising romanticize the urban consumer culture, and those who farm, particularly with animals, are made to feel backward and stupid.



I'm extremely pleased to support this symposium, and want to encourage the dissemination of a bigger picture that spells out the need to feed the world through more diversified, localised food economies if there is to be any hope of maintaining biological and cultural diversity.

Helena Norberg-Hodge

Linguist, Author, Filmmaker, Founder of Local Futures



I want to begin with a precaution. The proper use of working animals calls for sympathy, kindness, skill, and talent. That is because we are appealing to the animals' willingness to help us. This cannot be accomplished by ineptitude and force.

The primary reason to use draft animals – oxen or horses or mules – on the farm or in the woods is economic. Draft animals belong to the land, the land community, and the land economy. This means that they are affordable and they work cheap, unlike the alien machines and chemicals, which belong to industrialism, put the rural economy at the mercy of the urban economy, and are destructive of land and people.

The use of draft animals reduces the scale and speed of work, and it keeps the humans who use them close to the ground. They thus enable the attention and care required by good work.



I once heard an old-timer say of a team of draft horses, "The more you use them the better they work, the better they work the more you use them." That is true, and it assumes that the teamster has good sense. It does not advise overworking your team.

Wendell Berry

Writer, farmer, environmental activist

