

'Mad Cow' Disease Again Scares Europe

by Andrew Spannaus

The public health and political crisis prompted by the spread of "Mad Cow disease" (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE) is once again exploding across Europe. In mid-November, the government of France announced wide-ranging measures to block the consumption of potentially contaminated beef, including testing of all full-grown cows in the nation. Immediately, several European nations, including Italy, blocked all beef imports from France, touching off a round of panic over the safety of beef in general, and leading to high-level finger-pointing over the inability of European nations to block the spread of Mad Cow disease since it first shook England in the mid-1990s.

The public brawl which has erupted around BSE has the potential to provoke the long-overdue death of British free-trade economic policies, which were responsible for the spread of the disease in the first place.

BSE is a disease which causes a progressive and invariably fatal destruction of brain tissue. The disease is linked (although not conclusively) to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a degenerative brain disease in humans with a normally very low incidence rate. In humans, the incubation period for the disease can be very long (four to 30 years), and consequently, it is difficult to identify the patterns of transmission in the population until much after the fact.

Currently, the increase in the number of cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease has touched off a panic about just how widespread the disease may be, given the lack of serious measures taken to control its spread over the past 15 years since it was discovered in England. The result is that meat consumption is plummeting in Europe again — as it did during the first "Mad Cow crisis" — and large sectors of European agriculture are threatened with bankruptcy.

Maggie Thatcher's Free Trade

The key point to be made about the spread of BSE, is how clearly it demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of free-market economics. What Italian press are now calling "speculative motives," have been behind the spread of the disease from the beginning, demonstrating once again what American economist Lyndon LaRouche has warned public health officials of for decades: that the spread of old and new diseases does not depend on bad luck or the "ferocity of nature." Rather, it is directly linked to economic policies which create the conditions for such diseases to spread, threatening entire populations.

BSE was first observed in Britain in 1986, and was imme-



The epidemic striking European cattle is a direct result of Margaret Thatcher's "free trade" economics.

diately recognized as a disease with striking similarities to scrapie, a widespread spongiform encephalopathy present in sheep herds in Europe from at least the mid-1700s. The relevant facts about scrapie, were its extraordinary resistance, and the possibility of oral transmission through the ingestion by other animals of various parts of the infected animals. Despite this, Britain continued to permit the use of dead animal parts in feed for other animals. Thus, a cow with BSE could be eliminated, but its brain, highly infected with the disease, could be used in feed for other, healthy cows!

In addition, with the spread of an even worse disease — former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's free-market economics — the potential for spread of BSE was greatly increased. Thatcher, in league with the British oligarchy's food cartels, not only failed to stop the re-use of infected animal parts, she also opened the door for major "cost-cutting" measures by the cartels, despite public reports suggesting that such measures would actually aggravate the situation. In particular, the Thatcher government lowered the hygiene standards for British livestock. The required temperatures and pressures at which animal products were to be processed were drastically lowered, thus stripping such measures of their efficacy in blocking the infective agents in sheep scrapie or similar diseases.

The rationale behind these measures throughout the 1980s was that of not "over-regulating" business, and thus allowing the free market to work its magic and create efficiency in the economy. The feed industry was left to "self-regulate," and "market forces" rather than government intervention determined the safety level of the agricultural industry. The result of such policies was a breakdown in public health and infrastructure, in which cartels were able to gain control over the economy, but the economy itself was being destroyed.

Today, the legacy of the "free market" is once again rearing its ugly head. Now, it is to be hoped that European nations will finally take measures to eliminate this Thatcherite disease once and for all.