

THE OXFORD REAL FARMING CONFERENCE 2014.

Colin Tudge reflects on what went on and why.

(Graham Harvey will have his say later)

Someone has cheekily tweeted to ask, “What is the Oxford Real Farming Conference – ORFC – actually *for*?” After all, the official, Oxford Farming Conference (OFC) has been running every year for more than 60 years, is sponsored by agro-industry, and is addressed by the President of the NFU and the Secretary of State, and what more could anyone want? Of course the world can always do things better and some farmers are a little bit conservative and slow to up-date, but the people in charge are basically on the right lines. It is impossible, in principle, to improve on the present, neoliberal economy, the global market, the worldwide competition to maximize wealth. The ultra-competitive global market is the royal route to efficiency and surely should be seen (as many economists and politicians do see it) as one of the great creations of the 20th century. Modern agricultural technology is, quite simply, brilliant. It takes the breath away. Remote control and the zero-labour farm; industrial chemistry of unbelievable power that goes straight to the heart of all the farmer’s problems; and as for GMOs -- Wow! Self-evidently, too, the right people are in charge, for they have brought these good things into being. The task for all farmers everywhere – and indeed for all of humanity -- is to plug themselves in to the economic, technological, legal, and administrative status quo, and be grateful for those who preside over it. That is *realistic*. So – to repeat – what is the point of a conference that talks of alternatives? It just muddies the waters. We, who make the ORFC happen, should be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves.

There are a couple of caveats, though. First, the present world – the neoliberal global market with its focus on high tech – doesn’t seem to work to everyone’s advantage. Yes, that’s a bore, and only a churl would bring it up, and it’s all their fault, but it’s true. The UN tells us that a billion people out of the present seven billion are chronically undernourished while the global population of diabetics (who we must assume have eaten too much of the wrong things) is equal to twice the total population of Russia. We’re told, too, that a billion people worldwide live in urban slums – almost a third of all city-dwellers, although urbanization is still assumed to signify progress. Conservationists estimate – conservatively – that half our fellow species are in imminent danger of extinction and although some of the endangered ones are ugly and some of them sting, that doesn’t seem to bode well. Agriculture in its present form is a

prime cause of global warming which threatens everything. Indeed, some have suggested of late – including at least three archbishops and two popes and a former President of the Royal Society and a former US Presidential Candidate; not generally classed as loony lefties – that we may be heading for Armageddon. Can we really assume that the present ways of doing things are what the world really needs? Should we really put all our faith in people who tell us that there is no other way?

Then again, in all professions these days – except banking of course! -- the professionals take their orders from accountants and politicians. They have lost their autonomy, or their quasi-autonomy, even though it has commonly been assumed at least since the time of the guilds that the people who actually do things for a living, and dedicate their lives to what they do, are good at it. At least, though, in most areas, the professionals are consulted, however perfunctorily. Doctors do get some say in the various re-organizations of the health service. Teachers are allowed a voice in the perpetual re-construction of education. But no-one, in the high echelons of agriculture, ever seems to ask the farmers – or at least of the kind who, as George Ewart Evans put the matter, cut the hay. Expertise, insofar as it is deemed necessary, is presumed to lie with the agro-industrialists – the people who play the neoliberal, high-tech game most astutely; and with scientists, especially molecular biologists, who know how genes work. What else do we need to know?

At the ORFC we address both these areas. On the two theoretical days – “Big Picture Thinking” -- we look at new and different economic models, geared to the wellbeing of humanity and our fellow creatures; not directed, abstractly, to the simple accumulation of wealth for no specified purpose, except to make a few people rich. We reject the notion that zero-labour farming is good, because hands-on skill and know-how are indispensable, and because the wholesale purge of traditional farming is the prime cause of the poverty that governments recently pledged themselves to eliminate. Modern industrial farming too, demonstrably and obviously, is a prime cause of mass extinction (even if some high-paid scientists go to great lengths to prove that it is not). We also look at new ways of governance, because it is by no means clear that them-in-charge really do have our best interests at heart or know what they are doing.

But also, at the same time, at the ORFC, we really do ask the fellows who cut the hay, and milk the cows, and strive to bring their soil into good heart, in two farm days excellently overseen by Graham Harvey (who will add his own note to this one). Ruth Tudge (nee West) has made the ORFC happen these past five years (there is an amazing amount to it), assisted this year by a brilliant if underpaid team (Harry Greenfield, Maria-Paola Andreoni, Sophia Hill and Georgie Cass), but the whole idea of it was Graham's. Blame Graham. It's a pity as everyone recognizes that it's impossible to attend *both* the main

divisions of the ORFC -- the theoretical days and the farming days – but that would spread it over four days, which for most people is too much. This year almost 500 people came to the ORFC and nearly 150 of them were farmers, which is a lot of farmers to prise loose from the far-flung fields of Britain (which certainly compares well with the OFC, though that is a trivial point). Of course we would like many more but it's surprising how quickly the suitable rooms fill up. We're working on it.

The theoretical part of the ORFC is run more and more as a “fringe”: people with good things to say on the general theme of “real farming” (shorthand for “Enlightened Agriculture”) are invited to do their thing. Three strands run simultaneously: “Big Picture Thinking”; “New Generation, New Ideas”; and “Beyond the Fringe” – “pop-up” sessions on whatever people want to talk about. The strands split further into simultaneous sessions, each with up to five speakers, including the chairs. A full account would need a mega-volume and/or could fill You-tube for a week. The following can only be taster – and since this year I found myself embroiled in various sessions on economics, that's what it focuses on. There was a lot more besides but I'm afraid you'll have to take my word for it.

A few samplers

Vital to the whole discussion is the economy in general, and the governance into which it feeds. The neoliberal global market, geared to the maximization of wealth come what may, controlled from above (“top down”) and serving, all too obviously, primarily to make the rich richer, will not do; not if we care about justice, and democracy, and the future of the world. The “free” in “free market” means only that traders should not be subject to moral or to any other kind of non-commercial constraint; that the market should be free to make its own rules, and only commerce counts. But the word has got round, encouraged from on high, that the free market somehow implies freedom for all: that if we once question the right of Monsanto to take over the world's farms or Tesco's to command the high street (or trash the high street and move out of town) then we will open the doors to nanny state governance, not a whisker removed from Stalinism.

But this just isn't so. You don't have to be a commie or a loony greenie to question control by corporates. You don't have to be anti-capitalist or anti-money or anti-banking to despise the philosophy of neoliberalism, as many a traditional Tory including Macmillan and Heath made clear in the early days of Britain's first neoliberal, Margaret Thatcher. In fact we can and should use the basic financial mechanisms that we associate with capitalism – including private ownership, free enterprise, and borrowing with interest – to build ourselves a just and democratic society, and the kind of farming that goes with it.

But as Martin Large, author of *Common Wealth*, and Tim Crabtree of Schumacher College argued in the session titled *An Economy Fit for Farming*, the standard financial mechanisms do need tweaking. In particular, both stressed the absolute importance of communities both in framing grand strategies (in other words, in governance) and in deciding what happens on the ground. Communities in principle are by nature democratic. Clearly they represent society – they *are* society – and so they should serve the general good. But also, if appropriately organized, they give every individual a say – certainly much more of a say than we have now, as we wait cap in hand for a five minute interview with a politician who in practice has zero influence at Westminster. Martin Large – in line with the basic idea of social democracy – argues that we need a mixed economy. But whereas the standard model of the mixed economy sees a straight division between private and public ownership (with the Tories favouring the former and traditional Labour favouring the latter) Martin sees a three-way division – a clover leaf: with private, public, and *community* ownership. The private bit should not, as now, be predominantly corporate (five big supermarket chains now control 80% of Britain’s grocery, and the supermarkets as a whole now dominate the whole food chain). It should be based on small businesses – or small-to-medium-sized enterprises, known as SMEs. Farms and shops should both on the whole be SMEs. A nation of small farmers (Thomas Jefferson) and of small shopkeepers (Adam Smith) would suit us all very well; often, though not necessarily, owned or run by communities. All this is the stuff of what many are calling “economic democracy”.

There is nothing frightening about all this, except that some might find it boring. But there is no need to be bored in the modern world where IT puts everybody else in touch with everybody else (some high technologies are for the general good!). In any case, in the present state of the world, a little gentle boredom from a position of security could be seen as a luxury; infinitely to be preferred to the boredom-cum-chronic anxiety that for so many people, not least in Britain, the world’s sixth largest economy, is now the day to day reality. Tim Crabtree, not least through his work at Bridport has shown that community run schemes really can work. On the Pennines, Incredible Edible Todmorden provides another outstanding model – represented at the conference by Nick Green. But this year Nick was in *The European Farm Experience* session to talk about Rumania -- the wonders of their convivial rural communities, the excellence of their farming and their hospitality to strangers, all of it now being trashed hand over fist by the alleged modernity of the EU. There is a lot to be said for the EU, but the neoliberal technophilia that it brings to bear on agriculture is certainly not one of them.

The 2012 ORFC saw the launch of “Funding Enlightened Agriculture”, in the spirit of economic democracy, to support appropriate farms and related enterprises. Now FEA has a brilliant team of advisers (including bankers and

investment advisers) and has funding to employ a manager, Helen Melia. Helen described the appropriate income streams: grants, donations, loans, and investment; each of them with many variations, each with their strengths and weaknesses. FEA advises whoever cares to ask, which of the courses to adopt, and, where possible, assists directly with the funding. Enterprises we would and do support are all conceived as “social enterprises” (SEs); which means they should “wash their face” commercially but always are intended primarily to meet the needs of societies and the biosphere. Most are SMEs, although FEA might also help larger enterprises that are seeking to become more socially or environmentally friendly. Many though not all are community ventures, obviously including CSAs (exercises in community-supported agriculture). Hugely encouraging is that even within the present economy and with ever-increasing control from above, the mechanisms still exist and indeed are growing that enable true economic democracy to happen. Radical changes in the state of the world can be made by non-radical, non-violent means. These are early days, but FEA – and others! -- are already recording successes; enough to suggest that exponential growth of democratic economic models is possible and that agriculture might still be rescued, the power shifting back to the people who really care about it, and to people at large. Among FEA’s own projects, after just two years, are a micro-dairy, a people’s supermarket, a care farm, and R & D to create and market new lines of non-GM blight-resistant potatoes. We are committed under the terms of a grant that we have received to have up to ten projects up and running by January 2015.

Land is of course crucial – and there are many attempts worldwide to wrest control of it. In Britain, the great defender of democracy, 5000 families, one ten thousandth of the population, control 50% of the land. Prices of land in Britain like everything else are entirely determined by the headless and heartless “market” and have absolutely nothing to do with utility and everything to do with hedging against inflation and investment by rich foreigners and all the other devices that can make it look as if Britain is miraculously growing richer without actually doing anything. Britain needs many more farmers than it has now (I would say about eight times more) but the price of land has become prohibitive. In this vein Rachel Harries of the Soil Association chaired *Access to Land*. Among the speakers (apologies to the others) was Zoe Wangler, who runs the Ecological Land Cooperative; which buys parcels of land and subdivides them further to rent or sell to newcomers and to launch them on a career of smallholding. In other sessions ORFC speakers showed that smallholding really does have a future – indeed if we really are serious about the long term future, and the state of society and of the biosphere, then it must again become a key player. Watch this space.

The general idea that agriculture (and everything, in principle, in democracy) must be directly answerable to people at large and as far as possible controlled

by people at large implies that the role of central government should shrink. But we can't write off government all together. The founders of the United States agonized over this in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and concluded that for some purposes, government is necessary. It should not interfere more than minimally with people's lives, they thought; but it should control the economy, and particularly the biggest players, notably the corporates, so that the economy operates for the public good. These days those fundamental democratic principles have been reversed. Governments like Britain's interfere with our lives at every turn but they let the corporates rip.

But that does not mean that we can, or should, write off government all together. Some aspects of our life can and do benefit from central coordination. In general, if government was as Abraham Lincoln conceived it -- "of the people and for the people" -- it surely could operate for the general good. Even as things are, governments are capable of passing laws and tweaking the finance in ways that may often seem trivial and yet can have profound effects on our lives -- sometimes for the better. Tweaks in planning laws, for example (or more rational and humane application of the laws we have already) could hugely ease the essential return to the land. In this spirit, Pete Riley of the Agroecology Alliance (launched at the 2013 ORFC), chaired a session on the *Launch of the Agroecology (strategy) Bill*, to be proposed as a Private Members Bill at Westminster.

The general idea is at the very least to infiltrate the ideas behind agroecology into parliamentary consciousness. In hyper-urbanized Britain most of the votes lie with the cities and present-day British city-folk, it seems, do not empathize with farmers -- who, after all, account for only 1.6% of the workforce. It is all too easy for politicians to accept the modern mantra that "farming is just a business like any other", with the added, neoliberal twist which tells us that the function of all business is to make as much money as possible in the shortest time. They have also bought in to the fiction that industrialized farming, though designed to maximize wealth, delivers cheap food. So there's a general need now to get across idea that agriculture is more than a simple business. It is the *sine qua non*, for us and for the whole world. The idea must be re-stressed too that the economy as a whole cannot simply be guided by the urge to maximize wealth. It must take its lead from the real needs and aspirations of people at large -- moral and social dimensions; and must at the same time acknowledge the physical and biological limits of the Earth; and in metaphysical vein, must underpin the morality and biology with a true respect, indeed a reverence, for nature. All this is encompassed in the idea of agroecology: each farm is conceived as an ecosystem, and agriculture as a whole as a key player in the biosphere. Agroecology is the *method* of Enlightened Agriculture, the kind of farming that is truly intended to provide

good food for everyone, without wrecking the rest of the world. “Real Farming”, as in ORFC, is shorthand for Enlightened Agriculture.

The above reflects only about 5% of what went on in the theory days of the ORFC. Other people might have missed all of the above entirely, and could give a quite different account of what went on. Truly there is a very great deal to talk about. Agriculture needs re-thinking and re-structuring across the board. This, to answer the cheeky tweeter, is what the ORFC is for. We are already planning the ORFC for January 2015, and hope to see you there.

Meanwhile, over to Graham, to talk about the other grand division of this year’s ORFC: the farming bit, the sharp end, where people get their hands dirty.

Colin Tudge, January 24 2014.