

Mad Cows and Market Forces¹

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"A whole mythology is deposited in our language" (Wittgenstein, 1979: p. 13e)

In fall of 1988, my wife and I were living in Camden Town, London. One of our neighbours told us that her sister, who worked in a government public health laboratory, had mentioned secret government research which revealed the possibility that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, could be contracted from eating British beef (see Bartelett, 1999: pp. 239-240). Consequently, our neighbor had stopped eating British beef, especially hamburger and sausage, and warned us to do the same. We knew about the affinity between BSE, kuru, and Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease (CJD), and we believed that the Thatcher government was quite capable of concealing public health risks. So, we stopped eating British beef, hamburger, and sausage. We continued, however, to consume milk, cheese, and foods containing gelatin.

In spring of 1988, the Thatcher Government set up a committee, chaired by the Oxford zoologist, Sir Richard Southwood, to recommend policy regarding BSE. The Southwood Committee immediately recommended imposing a ban on feeding ruminant-derived protein to ruminants, and in July, the Government did so. In August, 1988, farmers were barred from marketing cattle with obvious BSE symptoms. The Government paid 50% of market price for diseased animals. In December, 1988, milk from cows showing BSE symptoms was ordered destroyed. In August, 1989, "specified bovine offals" - that is, brain, spinal cord, spleen, thymus, intestines, and tonsils - were excluded from the human food supply (Rhodes, 1997: pp. 178-79).

Our neighbour's warning contradicted widely-publicized assurances by the Thatcher government that consumption of British beef and beef products posed no danger to public health. For example, in January, 1989, Keith Meldrum, Chief veterinary Officer at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAAF), said on BBC TV that "The evidence on BSE is derived mainly from our knowledge of scrapie,² and there

is no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that scrapie does transmit from sheep or goats to man. Using that as our model, we are fairly confident that BSE does not transmit to man" (quoted in Rhodes, 1997: p. 183). In February, 1989, the Southwood Committee issued its final report, concluding that there was no evidence that BSE could be spread from cows to calves, and that "...the risk of transmission of BSE to human appears to be remote" (quoted in Rhodes, 1997: p. 181). Despite the Southwood Committee's conclusions, the normally pro-Tory *Times* began to report that some prominent scientists rejected government claims that British beef was safe. For example, in *The Times* of 16 February 1989, Dr. Thomas Stuttaford wrote,

When the Prime Minister in her new role as chairman of the Cabinet Sub-committee on health and food, discusses *Listeria* in Camembert or *Salmonella* in eggs, she will be dealing with the application of well authenticated facts, but when she turns to discussing the hazards posed by the slow viruses, of which BSE is one, she will be venturing into uncharted scientific territory... An increasing number of scientists think that they may well be dealing with some slow virus that is capable of infecting a wide variety of animals... (p. 15).

It was widely believed that BSE spread after the Thatcher Government, in order to boost profits for the cattle industry, relaxed requirements for heat treatment of cattle offal in cattle feed.

The most prominent of the 'BSE dissidents' was Dr. Richard Lacey, Prof. of Clinical Microbiology at the University of Leeds. He called for the slaughter of six million British cattle and warned that nobody under the age of 50 should consume British bovine products (Lacey, 1994: p. 107, p. 112). Subsequently, Lacey's research funding was cut back, and he was characterized by MAAF as "politically suspect" (*Guardian Weekly*, 31 March 1996).

In November, 1989, the West German government demanded guarantees that imported

British beef come from safe herds. John Gummer, the Minister of Agriculture, characterized the West German demand as "wholly unacceptable," claiming that there was no scientific evidence that BSE could be transmitted from one animal to another. He said that the Government had taken the necessary measures to safeguard the British consumer, and that these ought to have sufficed for the West German consumer too. Bonn was "...simply using a health pretext to impose a trade restriction..." (*The Times*, 7 November 1989: p. 17).

Despite emergence of controversy regarding BSE into the mass media, large numbers of Britons continued to eat British beef and beef products. British friends of ours who were generally anti-Tory also continued to eat British beef, hamburger, and sausage.

It is now clear that the British Government measures for containing BSE during the late 1980s were inadequate. By 1995, half the British cattle herd was infected. In early 1996, the British government admitted that "ten new cases of Creutzfeld-Jakob disease (CJD) might be linked to the spread of BSE in cattle in the late 1980s" (Brookes, 1999: p. 250). To date, more than fifty people in Britain have died from BSE-type diseases. Scientific uncertainty regarding BSE persists. According to some scientists, people who ate British beef products during the 1980s will be at risk until 2015 (Rhodes, 1997: p. 229). According to others, the agent that causes BSE/CJD is still in the British food supply, and may be in the North American food supply as well (Rhodes, 1997: p. 228). Still others claim that BSE-infected beef never posed a threat to humans (<http://www.bse.org.uk>).

It is not intended here to deal with current scientific theories regarding BSE. Rather, this paper deals with the ideological predispositions that underlay responses to the public controversy about BSE that emerged in Britain during the late 1980s. Why did some people accept Government reassurances while others didn't? Why did some people, even though they were sceptical about Government claims that beef was safe, continue to consume beef and beef products? Recent scholarly approaches to the concept of ideology can help answer such questions.

Ideology can be characterized as a set of con-

tradictory narratives, metanarratives, and metaphors, some of which are, in different contexts, foregrounded in consciousness while others are background noise.³ Different narratives and metaphors pass on and off the centre stage of ideological consciousness according to a sort of unconscious, or latent, logic. According to this view, ideology does not constitute a set of views which make up a coherent theory. Nor does ideology consist exclusively of 'false consciousness,' as some interpreters of Marx would have it (see Woolard, 1998: pp. 6-8). Most thought and action, including that of scientists, is mediated by narratives and metaphors, some of which are quite archaic. As Gramsci put it, "The personality [presumably including ideology] is strangely composite," consisting of "...Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history ...and intuitions of a future philosophy" (1971 [ca. 1937]: p. 324). This view of ideology does not, however, imply truth "...is constituted only within discourses that sustain and are sustained by power" (Woolard, 1998: p. 7).

The narratives that underlay trends in public controversy in Britain regarding mad cow disease could not usually be inferred directly from newspaper stories, TV newscasts, public opinion polls, or the public statements of Government ministers.⁴ Nevertheless, it seems clear that these narratives included an authoritative voice of science. For example, many people believe that the superiority of the scientific method as a way of gaining knowledge lies in the subjection of scientific theories to critical analysis and experimental verification. There was an epic struggle between heroic proponents of science and anti-scientific - mainly theological - forces in Western culture (White, [1896] 1960). Historically, the widespread acceptance of the scientific method allowed advances in medicine and technology which improved public health, provided material abundance, and mitigated the necessity of dangerous and debilitating physical labour. This heroic story largely explains why the voice of science has become, in many respects, authoritative in our culture. It seems likely that Government assurances regarding mad cow disease were credible to some extent because they were linked to the heroic narrative of science. This may

partially explain why many Britons continued to eat beef after controversy regarding BSE emerged in the mass media. Although per capita consumption of beef and veal began to drop in 1987 from 192 grams per person per week, it was still 121 grams per person per week in 1995 (Lanska, 1998: p. 162).

But the heroic narrative is now paralleled by another: many people believe that harnessing science and technology to capital accumulation has resulted in a host of environmental problems which have necessitated struggles to apply the precautionary principle to an increasingly large number of issues. The precautionary principle also has an ancient provenance in our culture, including, for example, the Biblical story of Joseph warning the Egyptian Pharaoh to prepare for seven lean years.

Among our left-wing British friends, these narratives coexisted along with another: improved wages, working conditions, and living standards of working people largely resulted from the struggles and sacrifices of Communists, socialists, trade unionists, and feminists. Their main enemies were (and still are) pro-capitalist, misogynist Tories whose only concern was (and remains) protection and extension of private property and maximization of private profit irrespective of morality, public health, and public safety. Although this leftist narrative oversimplifies and obscures the complexities of ideology, it is often useful for predicting the behaviour of capitalists and pro-capitalist governments.

One would have thought that the leftist narrative implied (latently or otherwise) acceptance of the precautionary principle with regard to mad cow disease, especially when the precautionary principle was championed by scientific authorities such as Prof. Lacey who claimed that Government efforts to discredit BSE dissidents were aimed at protecting Britain's profitable beef industry (1994: p. 30). Nevertheless, many people who harboured the leftist narrative and who knew of the views of BSE dissidents continued to eat British beef, hamburger, and sausage. This may have been partially attributable to the inconvenience of altering long-established habits. But there may also have been other ideological factors besides the leftist and precautionary narratives that influenced their behaviour. One of these

may have been an ethnocentric or nationalistic metanarrative that goes something like this: England stood alone against the Spanish Armada and amassed the largest Empire in the history of the world; unlike much of Continental Europe, Britain achieved a stable, parliamentary democracy which survived the end of Empire; Britain stood alone against Hitler, and, despite its diminished status as a world power, continues to lead the world in the sciences, arts, and humanities. It is therefore inconceivable that a disaster such as mad cow disease could devastate this green and pleasant land. This ethnocentric/nationalistic metanarrative cuts across class, ethnic, racial and gender lines. Its protagonist is perhaps what Benedict Anderson has called an imagined community (1991). Its presence is indicated in the tabloid press by repeated use of pronouns such as "us" and "we" in stories which presuppose British moral and cultural superiority to other countries. Rod Brookes writes, "In the spring and summer of 1996 spectacular images of jingoism and xenophobia were splashed across the front pages of the British popular press. As the Sun proclaimed the beginning of the 'CATTLE OF BRITAIN' (22 May 1996), sustained anti-Europeanism permeated the tabloids following the European Union ban on British beef" (1999: p. 247).

While the ethnocentric/nationalistic metanarrative may have inclined Britons of all political stripes to accept Government reassurances regarding mad cow disease, right-wingers may have been even more inclined to do so than others because they also harboured various versions of Adam Smith's doctrine (or metanarrative) of the invisible hand. In this metanarrative there is a sort of Biblical Old Testament covenant between personified market forces and the personified nation. So long as the nation does not attempt to impede or constrain the operation of the market, then the market will provide the nation with prosperity. But if the nation violates the covenant - for example, by imposing exchange controls, nationalizing industry, taxing the rich, etc. - then the market will punish the nation by withdrawing prosperity. Communists, socialists, trade unionists, feminists, etc., who attempt to constrain the free market prevent the invisible hand from dispensing prosperity, and are thus immoral. This neoliberal narrative is, in many respects, the

opposite of the leftist narrative.

In the neoliberal metanarrative, causality is metaphorically equivalent to object transfer between persons, as illustrated in the following exchanges:

"Why does Jill have an apple?"

"Because Jack gave it to her."

Similarly, "Why is Britain prosperous?"

"Because the free market has given Britain prosperity."

In this case, prosperity is metaphorically equivalent to an object given to Britain by the market. The covenant between the nation and the market illustrates what George Lakoff has called the moral principles of positive action and debt-repayment: a moral action is giving something of positive value, such as prosperity (1996: p. 47). But, failure to pay one's debts is immoral. Thus, if the nation fails to 'pay' for prosperity by maintaining the free market, the market is morally justified in withdrawing prosperity. The market, like the God of the Old Testament, operates according to the principle of collective guilt.

According to the metanarrative of the invisible hand, the market, if left alone, would have solved the problem of mad cow disease, irrespective of the origins of BSE. This article of faith, along with the ethnocentric narrative described above, may have promoted acceptance of the Government's reassurances regarding mad cow disease. Faith in the benevolence of the market is perhaps reflected in John Gummer's claim that West German restrictions on imports of British beef were a pretext for a trade restriction. After all, trade must be free for the invisible hand of the market to spread prosperity.

Professor Lacey's attempt to persuade people to apply the precautionary principle with regard to mad cow disease was perhaps metaphorically equivalent to questioning the power of the market to solve the mad cow problem. Thus, Lacey was like an Old Testament heretic who urged to Hebrew people to forsake the covenant. The Old Testament is unequivocal about what is to be done with such a person: "... you shall kill him; ...you shall stone him to death with stones..." (Deuteronomy 13 (10)).

Like the market, God is a personified, moral, causal agent, granting or withholding quantities of Well-being from individuals or nations. Some

religious people probably saw the glowing representation of Britain in the ethnocentric narrative as evidence of God's favour. Mad cow disease could then be seen as God's punishment for growing secularism, or whatever else they saw as displeasing God.

In most cultures, including ours, explanation involving the supernatural often supplements naturalistic explanation. Supernatural explanation usually involves personal agency of supernatural forces. It is a radial category of an ideal case prototype which "defines a standard against which other subcategories are measured" (Lakoff, 1996: p. 9). Application of this standard usually occurs on an unconscious or latent level. Lakoff describes prototypical causation as follows:

1. There is an agent that does something.
2. There is a patient that undergoes a change to a new state.
3. Properties 1 and 2 constitute a single event; they overlap in time and space; the agent comes in contact with the patient.
4. Part of what the agent does (either the motion or the exercise of will) precedes the change in the patient.
5. The agent is the energy source; the patient is the energy goal; there is transfer of energy from agent to patient.
6. There is a single definite agent and a single definite patient.
7. The agent is human.
8.
 - a. The agent wills his action.
 - b. The agent is in control of his action.
 - c. The agent bears primary responsibility for both his action and the change.
9. The agent uses his hands, body, or some instrument.
10. The agent is looking at the patient. The change in the patient is perceptible, and the agent perceives the change. (1987: pp. 54-55)

Thus, causal accounts which include reference to personal motivation and agency are closer to the prototype than causal accounts which don't, even when the agent is non-human and supernatural, in violation of the prototypical criterion that the causal agent should be human (see 7 above). Supernatural explanations tell not only how something happened, but why, by reference to personal agency and motivation. For example, if a non-smoker dies at an early age of lung cancer

while a chronic smoker lives to a ripe old age, this can be explained in terms of God's will. Personal agency and motivation - that is, God's - are involved. This is similar to the classical British social anthropological view that explanations of events in terms of witchcraft are more compelling in some cultures than naturalistic explanations because witchcraft explanations tell not only how, but why something occurred by reference to personal agency and motivation (see Lewis, 1976: p. 74). Although the market is not usually seen as intervening directly into the lives of individuals as God or witches do, it is still a personified causal agent. Thus, explanations involving market forces are varieties of supernatural explanation that are approximately prototypical.⁵

Many Britons during the late 1980s were not religious, and they did not put much faith in market forces. Even though they may have been temporarily lulled by the ethnocentric/nationalistic narrative, this soon gave way to alarm when, despite Government measures, BSE continued to spread among British cattle and appeared in cats, zoo animals, and some humans. By 1996, after the British government admitted the possibility that BSE could jump species, and after much of the EC had banned British beef, government credibility regarding BSE was largely lost. Douglas Lanska writes, "The government's vehement denials of risk, frenzied calls for calm, combative dismissal of critics, and aggressive championing of the beef industry all contributed to the loss of public trust and the increase of panic" (1998: p. 173). The tabloid press, with the exception of the *Sun*, began to focus on BSE as a public health risk (Brookes, 1999: p. 251). The *Sun*, however, continued to interpret the BSE crisis as an artificial construction by the left and foreigners (Brookes, 1999: p. 257). On 26 March 1996, a *Sun* editorialist wrote,

The panic which has gripped the British public has been whipped up by those with an axe to grind....

But if we heed the clamour to destroy half our cattle we will scupper the economic recovery.

So hands off our cows. Eat British beef....

And stop talking bullocks.

The nationalistic and invisible hand metanarratives seemed to underlay this editorial stance. Rod Brookes writes that "A particular tar-

get [of the *Sun*] was shadow health minister Harriet Harman, who was accused of 'pushing the panic button' as opposed to the reasonable policy pursued by the government. This attack on Labour's position was to some extent gendered, stereotyping Harriet Harman as behaving hysterically" (1999: p. 257).

By 1995-96, many people, including our left-wing friends, had given up British beef or become vegetarians. For them, the precautionary and scientific narratives had begun to trump narratives of nationalism and the invisible hand. But those with deep faith in market forces and in the moral and cultural superiority of Britain continued to eat British beef, hamburger, and sausage. It will be interesting to see in the next decades whether ideology was a selective agent with regard to contraction of BSE in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s.

According to most current theories, BSE develops after the agent which causes it, whether it is a type of prion, a type of microbe,⁶ or something as yet unknown, is somehow ingested (see Ridley and Baker, 1998; Rhodes, 1997; Prussiner, 1995; <http://www.bse.org.uk>). This view was not shared by south Fore of New Guinea among whom kuru reached epidemic proportions during the 1950s and 1960s, presumably through cannibalism (Lindenbaum, 1979: p. 6). In the 1940s and 1950s, Australian colonial authorities tried to stop Fore cannibalism, but the Fore continued to eat human flesh in secret. In the late 1950s, a road to Fore territory was completed. This allowed colonial authorities and missionaries to maintain a permanent presence among the Fore, and to issue injunctions against cannibalism. After that, the incidence of cannibalism and kuru began to decline. By the late 1970s, it had largely disappeared (Lindenbaum, 1976: p. 6). Richard Sorenson suggests that the Fore "...recognized the abhorrence that westerners showed toward their method of handling the dead. Eager in those early days, to adopt European examples in the hopes of securing the kind of products, materials and wealth Europeans possessed, they soon abandoned cannibalistic practices" (1976: p. 32).

Probably because of kuru's long incubation period, the Fore did not believe that cannibalism was causally related to kuru. Instead, they attributed the death of kuru victims to malevolent

spirits harnessed by sorcerers. During the 1950s and 1960s, a new group of specialist-curers sought to identify and violently suppress the sorcerers who were thought to cause kuru (Lindenbaum, 1990: pp. 306-309).

Lindenbaum notes that the Fore recognized that "Europeans did not share Fore theories of causation," and that after "lengthy internal debates"⁷ throughout the 1960s, the Fore "...still retained their conviction that kuru was a form of sorcery" (1990: pp. 306-309). One wonders whether any Fore who opposed cannibalism during these debates were accused of kuru sorcery.

In some respects, Fore beliefs conformed to the heroic narrative of Western science. According to this story, a theory should be used to make predictions. If the predictions come true, this confirms the theory. According to Fore 'theory', sorcery caused kuru. It could thus be predicted that elimination of sorcerers would eliminate kuru. The disappearance of kuru may have confirmed Fore confidence in their causal scheme and in the effectiveness of their campaigns against kuru sorcerers.

While Fore beliefs in kuru sorcery may have been confirmed by the disappearance of kuru, the persistence of BSE in Britain led large numbers of Britons to conclude that Government measures to counter BSE were inadequate. It was thus clear that there was a criterion for rejecting the 'scientific' reassurances by the British Government that BSE did not pose a threat. In contrast, it appears that there was no criterion in Fore ideology for rejection of belief in sorcery or other supernatural explanations of kuru in favour of a naturalistic account. If cannibalism had not ceased, it seems likely that Fore witch hunts would have continued until kuru had largely eliminated the Fore. As Wittgenstein remarked, "Simple though it may sound, we can express the difference between science and magic if we say that in science there is progress, but not in magic. There is nothing in magic to show the direction of any development" (1979: p. 13e). It should be noted, however, that Wittgenstein's remark applies not only to Fore beliefs in projective sorcery, but to what former US President Ronald Reagan called "the magic of the market."

The ideological controversy over mad cow disease is not yet finished. Margaret Thatcher, in

her autobiography, *The Downing Street Years* (1993), chose not to mention mad cow disease at all. But excision of BSE from Thatcher's public discourse will not make the issue go away. It continues to be a major concern for those who may still be at risk. It is also a major concern of the Canadian Blood Agency which does not wish to accept donations from people who were living in Britain during the 1980s. In June, 1999, Baroness Thatcher submitted written testimony to the British Government public inquiry on mad cow disease.⁸ The conclusion of her testimony illustrates several of the ideological motifs discussed here: "Perhaps because of my own scientific training, or perhaps simply because it seemed the common sense way to proceed, I always believed that decisions in the whole area of food safety should be based on the best scientific information available." Not surprisingly, she omits all reference to her Government's attempts to suppress Prof. Lacey and other mad cow dissidents. She continues, "Of course, in most of that area [that is, food safety] other conditions too were extremely important - for example, the need to avoid over-burdening business with regulation, though never at the cost of food safety" (<http://www.bse.org.uk>). Thatcher's concern about over-burdening business with regulation strongly indicates an ideological presence of market forces and the invisible hand (see Bartlett, 1999: p. 252).

The 1980s British controversy regarding BSE is relevant to current controversy regarding global climate change (GCC). Just as the Thatcher government denied the possibility that BSE posed a threat to humans, so some conservative newspapers now deny the possibility that human-induced GCC is occurring. For example, a [Toronto] *National Post* editorial of 8 July 1999 referred to "the fiction of global warming." Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that because there is scientific uncertainty about GCC, costly programmes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions should not be undertaken. For example, according to a spokesman for the Cooler Heads Coalition, a US industry group, "global climate change is too much of a theory to take drastic and costly actions" (*The Star*, Ventura, CA, 9 May 1999). In contrast, the World Meteorological Association's Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), representing the world's leading climate

scientists, concluded in November 1997, that "...human activity (primarily burning of fossil fuels and changes in land use and land cover) is increasing the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, which ...tend to warm the atmosphere... [This brings]...the prospect for more extreme high temperature events, floods and droughts in some places... climate models project that the annual mean surface temperature will increase by 1 - 3.5 degrees centigrade by 2100... The average rate of warming probably would be greater than any seen in the past 10,000 years" (<http://www.ipcc.ch/pub/sr97.htm>). Syed Iqbal Hasnain of Nehru University in New Delhi claims that all Himalayan glaciers are now rapidly melting. This will unleash a series of torrential floods in the mountain valleys of northern India during the next 40 years. These floods will be followed by water shortages because the rivers will eventually dry up (*The Toronto Star*, 20 June 1999). It is now feared that GCC might well retard restoration of the stratospheric ozone layer (*The Toronto Star*, 25 November 1999).

Before we celebrate the superiority of the heroic and precautionary scientific narratives over the 'primitive', suicidal ideology of the Fore, let us see how ideology, particularly the doctrine of the invisible hand of market forces, shapes our approaches to global climate change.

NOTES

1. A paper with the same title was published earlier (Bartels, 1997-98). The present paper, however, is based on a completely different set of arguments.
2. Scrapie is a degenerative disease of the nervous system in sheep.
3. The role of metaphor and narrative in ideology has been treated by George Lakoff who analyzed liberal and conservative American ideologies in terms of the metaphor of government as parent and nation as family (1996).
4. Blummaert and Verschueren claim that the authors of newspaper texts "...leave out most of the implicit assumptions they expect their readers to share with them... a careful analysis of those implicit assumptions will reveal a common frame of reference, or ideology... isolated examples are never sufficient as evidence: coherence - manifested either as recurrence or as systematic absence - is necessary to warrant conclusions" (1998: p. 191).
5. Analysis based on proximity to prototypes was anticipated by R.K. Dentan in his study of West Semai animal taxonomy (1968).
6. Profs. Ebringer and Pirt suggest that BSE is caused by a microbe that is absent in products from BSE-infected cattle (<http://www.bse.org.uk>).

7. These debates included women (Rhodes, 1997: pp. 77-78).
8. I do not know whether witnesses as this inquiry could be cross-examined. In any case, because Baroness Thatcher was only required to submit written testimony, she was not subject to cross-examination.

KEY WORDS BSE. Madcow Disease. Ethnocentrism. Metanarrative. Ideology.

ABSTRACT It is argued that ideological predispositions underlay responses to the public controversy surrounding bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) that emerged in Britain during the late 1980s. The unconscious, often contradictory, interplay of scientific, precautionary, anti-capitalist, pro-capitalist, and ethnocentric/nationalist narratives led people to accept or reject government claims that British beef products were safe to consume.

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