

The EU's war on farmers

“European farming: which way now?”

by Thomas Fazi*



Thomas Fazi. (Bild
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“Green” policies are simply the latest cover to pursue a specific agri-food model: an increasingly centralised, concentrated, globalised model centred around a few mega-farms.

Yesterday I participated in a great event organised by MCC Brussels on “European farming: which way now?”.

Here’s the text of the speech that I gave:

I’ll start with the good news. In some respects it’s clear that the farmers’ protests have had a very significant impact on policymaking, with farmers obtaining several concessions from governments and European institutions: most obviously the effective blockage, for now, of the Nature Restoration Law, the scrapping of specific reductions in agricultural emissions from the EU’s 2040 climate target plan, and the withdrawal of the law on pesticides.

These are important concessions – and they are a reminder that even in this day and age in which democracy has largely become a hollow word, and in which one can often get the impression that it’s close to impossible for ordinary people and workers to actually make an impact, this is still possible, for the age-old rule that we are many and they are few. So the farmers should be praised for reminding us of the power of the people, of collective action.

That said, we also have to be honest: my reading is that while these concessions may temporarily alleviate the problems faced by farmers – and when I say farmers, I mean small and mid-sized farms – the reality is that, in and of themselves, these concessions are unlikely the reverse the long-term secular trends in European agriculture.

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And the main trend is the EU’s decades-long attack on Europe’s small-farming model, to the benefit of large agri-food conglomerates, which has resulted in the massive loss of farms, mostly small-sized, across Europe: over the past decade alone, around three million farms (around a quarter of all pre-existing farms) have been lost across the EU – that’s a rate of about 800 farms closing per day – resulting in the growing concentration and consolidation of farmland in Europe.

It’s important to acknowledge that this is by design: as much as governments and EU technocrats may pretend, now, to be concerned with the plight of small farmers, the reality is that for a very long time the EU’s entire agricultural policy (which isn’t just the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) but also extends to the EU’s approach to trade and other sectors) has been geared against small farmers and producers – and deliberately so.

We need to understand how these people, the Brussels bureaucrats, think: for them it’s all about efficiency, productivity, output, yield per unit – and costs, ultimately. This is the classic neoliberal approach to economics. And from this perspective, just like in other sectors, such as manufacturing, large hyper-industrialised farms have a clear advantage over small and mid-sized farms: they tend to be more capital-intensive, more automatised, more productive, etc. And, as in other sectors, this comes with certain benefits but it also comes with costs, which in the case of agriculture are exacerbated by the fact that we’re not talking about a product like any other here, we’re talking about food, the building block of life, which can’t be treated on a par with shoes or cars, as important as those things are.

But that’s exactly how they’ve been treating food for quite some time. I really do think that their ideal model of farming is one where a few big corporate farms control and own everything (which is very much the model that exists in North America, for example): from their narrow, small-minded, neoliberal, bureaucratic perspect-

ive that would be the most efficient model. For them, for production to be dispersed among millions of small producers is just a hindrance. They don't care that this will destroy – indeed, is destroying – the livelihoods of millions of European farmers, they don't care that this will destroy rural life, they don't care that this means moving towards an increasingly standardised and corporate approach to the production of food. Indeed, they don't even care that they're destroying small and mid-sized farms that tend to have a more sustainable approach to farming.

And this is one of the greatest paradoxes of the EU's approach to agriculture: that, for all of the EU's talk of the environment and sustainability, it has in fact consistently been putting out of business precisely those small and medium farms that tend to have a smaller ecological footprint, and tend to employ more sustainable farming practice, than large corporate farming and agri-food conglomerates.

This is the case even when it comes to measures that are allegedly explicitly geared to the protection of the environment and the climate, such as *carbon farming*, which is the topic of a recent report that I wrote.

The idea is that farmers should progressively move greater and greater chunks of their land away from the farming of foodstuff towards the "farming", or capturing, of carbon, by transforming their land into so-called "carbon sinks". Well, when you consider the financial and technical-administrative burdens that this will place on small farmers, it's obvious that this will dramatically accelerate the ongoing process of farmland consolidation in Europe, to the benefit of those large agri-food enterprises that also tend to emit more greenhouse gases on a per hectare basis than small farms.

So, in general, I'm always very wary of taking their talk of sustainability at face value, because not only do these "green" policies have a whole series of unintended (or intended, in some cases) negative consequences in terms of farmers' incomes, production, etc., but they often also tend to be completely self-defeating on their own "green" terms. So it's important to underline the hypocrisy of a lot of these policies.

This is particularly evident in another area of EU policy, which is trade, where we can see how the EU's approach to agriculture isn't just problematic for farmers, which are being squeezed out of the market, but it's also increasingly be-



"With their actions, farmers in many EU countries have reminded us of the power of the people and of collective action." (Picture ma)

coming a potential threat to food security as well. Currently, the EU is relatively self-sufficient when it comes to food, and this is something that we've inherited from the post-war approach to agriculture, which was then baked into the Common Agricultural Policy, which was very much geared towards the achievement of food sovereignty in Europe. Back then, it was all about *production*, because there was a heightened awareness of the importance of food, and the idea that guaranteeing food and food security is one of the basic obligations of governments and institutions.

In recent years, however, this awareness has been lost. Today we take food security for granted, but that would be a mistake, because the current approach to agriculture poses serious questions of food security, looking forward. Part of the problem is ideological, i.e., the growing "green" bias against agricultural production, to the point that in many quarters agricultural production is treated like a taboo – and something that has to be reduced (through measures such as carbon farming).

But it also has to do with what I mentioned earlier: the treatment of food as if it were a commodity like any other. And this is obvious in the EU's approach to trade, where again it's all about efficiency and cost optimisation: the model that the EU has been fostering, especially over the past two decades – which has seen the EU develop the largest free-trade regime in the world, with 45 free-trade agreements covering 77 countries – is one which promotes the import of low-value primary foodstuff, which includes stuff that we can't grow here (and that makes sense) but also includes stuff that we *do* grow here – fruit and vegetables and nuts, etc. – or that we *could* grow here in much larger quantities, such as soy for animal feed and other plant-based proteins, while we export mainly high-value, high-end food products: beverages, wines, spirits, dairy products, processed foods, etc.

And again, from a neoliberal economic perspective this makes sense, because you're transferring value from other countries to Europe. But it also means that you're adding pressure to local producers of primary foodstuff (who have to abide by much more stringent social and environmental regulations than foreign producers) to the benefit of – again – big agri-food enterprises, who often import primary products to then process them and re-export them. And again, this isn't just a problem for European farmers, but potentially for all of us, because as we've learned in recent years these far-flung supply chains are exposed to all kinds of threats, from geopolitical tensions to war to pandemics. And so, paradoxically, at a time when there's a lot of talk about the re-shoring of manufacturing, because of supply-chain risks, the EU continues to promote a growing dependence on imports of basic foodstuff, via new trade deals such as Mercosur.

And then of course there's the utter hypocrisy of constantly increasing the pressure on European farmers to abide by stricter and stricter environmental regulations, while being perfectly happy to import that same product from the other side of the world, with a huge impact in terms of emissions, of course, from countries that have much lower social and environmental standards. It makes absolutely no sense, unless you consider the possibility that "green" policies are simply the latest cover to pursue a specific agri-food model: an increas-



"For agriculture, the entire structure of the EU's neoliberal, centralised and globalised approach must be called into question." (Picture ma)

ingly centralised, concentrated, globalised model centred around a few mega-farms.

And I think this, ultimately, is their end, and therefore that if farmers really want to be successful, it's not enough to challenge the latest wave of pseudo-green policies. They have to challenge the entire structure of the EU's neoliberal, centralised, globalised approach to agriculture.

So, to conclude, I praise the farmers for the successes they've achieved so far, but I would urge them to be much more radical in their analysis and demands than they've been until now. Thank you.

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