

Reactions to BSE in Germany:
Wurst Case Scenario or Ecochondria?

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In the course of today's conference, we heard about various developments in Europe, many of which concerned aspects of modern life such as traffic, urban structures, or financial markets which take similar forms and cause similar concerns across the industrialized West. In this paper, I would like to focus on another side effect of modern life, one which has spared North America so far, but has ravaged parts of Europe: BSE (also known as Mad Cow Disease) and its consequences for public and private life. BSE has hit the UK especially hard, but it is in Germany that the public's reaction to the disease has been most fundamental and intense. This paper proposes that this is connected to a highly developed, some would even say excessive, public sensitivity to environmental threats and a tendency to react rather strongly to those perceived threats.

I will argue that food safety has become the No. 1 environmental concern of German citizens over the last few years, relegating concerns over nuclear energy, acid rain, ozone depletion, and climate change to the back burner of public attention. I will further argue that this represents a shift in environmental risk perception away from large-scale, technological hazards which were perceived mainly at the societal scale, and towards everyday threats to the health of the individual person.

What I will not attempt to do in this paper is to analyse the risk posed (or not posed) by BSE, or theorize the social construction and assessment of risk, particularly through the media. Neither will I detail the extent and intensity of media coverage on BSE in Germany. Suffice it to say that while it has not reached the crescendo which we saw in connection with the events of September 11, it sometimes approaches comparable levels of emotional intensity.

For the latter endeavours in particular, I would refer you to the large body of literature on risk. In German, these would be for example the works by Ulrich Beck und Peter Wiedemann, while in English you might want to turn to Bill Leiss, for example.

BSE stands for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, a degenerative, fatal brain disease of cattle. It has a long incubation period of several years, but kills afflicted cattle within weeks after manifesting itself in the animal. BSE became widely known in 1986 when it began to infect ever-larger numbers of cows in the UK. To date, 180,000 animals in the UK have been infected, with thousands of new infections continuing to occur year after year.

BSE is a mysterious disease which is not yet fully understood. It is assumed that a transmissible agent called prion damages the brain and spinal cord of cattle by causing sponge-like lesions. The subsequent wasting of the brain causes the characteristic mad behaviour of the afflicted animal and ultimately its death. The prion is believed to be a self-replicating protein. It is further assumed that the agent is passed on through cattle feed prepared from the carcasses of infected cows. Beginning in 1988, measures were taken to stop the spread of BSE in the UK by ending the recycling of infectious animal parts into animal feed. As a consequence, the number of new cases in the UK began to drop after 1992 on a year-to-year basis.

Meanwhile, the first cases of BSE began to appear outside of the UK in 1989. As a consequence of the spread of BSE to the continent, the EU banned the sale of beef products from the UK, starting in 1996. This ban was partly lifted in 1999, at which time testing programs for the diagnosis of BSE in slaughtered cattle were established across Europe.

Despite these efforts, infections are on the rise on the continent. In 1989, 15 cases were found. By 2000, the annual number of new cases had risen to 482. During the first 8 months of 2001, there were 512 new cases. In addition to the overall increase in infections, several countries have also reported their first native BSE cases, meaning that the infected animal never had any contact with animals or infectious materials which can be traced back to the UK.

As mentioned, the number of new BSE cases in Britain is declining. At the same time, with 370 new cases in the first 8 months of 2001, the UK continues to be the hardest-hit country. By comparison, all of Europe recorded 512 cases during the same time, of which 94 were in Germany.

Unfortunately, the death of the afflicted animal is not the end of the story. The agent located in the brain and spinal cord is highly stable, resisting freezing, drying and heating at normal cooking temperatures, even those used for pasteurization and sterilization. That means that the agent can enter the human food chain, where it can cause vCJD or Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. Essentially, the symptoms of this disease in humans are the same as those of BSE in cattle, and the disease is equally fatal.

To date, 102 cases of vCJD have been reported in the UK, three in France, and one in Ireland. All have led to the death of the patient. In November 2000, the Blair government estimated that more than 100,000 people could die from vCJD in the UK before the disease is under control. By contrast, no case has been reported in Germany so far.

And yet, despite the very low numbers of cases of both BSE and vCJD in Germany, the reaction by the public and the government has been much stronger than in Britain. This is all the more surprising as Germany for many years blocked any common actions on the EU level. When the first case of BSE occurred in Germany in November of 2000, however, that changed. Overnight, Germany became one of the strongest proponents of immediate action.

This change was precipitated by intense public reaction to BSE, in both emotional and economic terms. Fears of infection led to a collapse of the beef market which threatened to ruin farmers and the agricultural industry within a very short time. To rule out any danger of humans contracting the disease by eating contaminated beef, more than 3 million cattle were killed across Europe because they were in some ways connected to herds in which a BSE case had occurred.

Further, to protect the beef market from collapse, another 400,000 healthy cows were slated for removal from the German market alone. Only 85,000 were actually killed, mainly because of a public outcry against killing such a large number of animals for purely economic reasons. One way in which the German government tried to stabilize the market while not wasting the meat was to pledge 18,000 tons of beef (the equivalent of 45,000 cows) to the people of North Korea.

It was not just the beef market, however, which was in decline. Immediately after the discovery of the first German BSE case, consumers began to boycott any number of products which might in some way contain infected material from cows. The list is long: milk products suffered sales decline after it became known that in Bavaria calves which had never been fed anything but milk products tested positive. Consumers became suspicious of products containing gelatine, such as yoghurt and gummi bears. Much more difficult to avoid were medications which come coated in gelatine. And what about insulin? Or anti-wrinkle creams and body lotions?

German consumers began to lose trust in a great number of products, which was affecting not only the producers of beef, but also the entire food processing industry and other branches of the economy such as transportation and retail. Politicians were under intense pressure to act to allay the emotional and economic fears of the public. And act they did. The first German case of BSE had been reported on Nov 24, 2000. Within a mere week, the federal minister of agriculture announced the establishment of a new department devoted to food safety. Within four weeks of the first case, BSE had advanced to what is called a *Chefsache* in German. Chancellor Schröder went over the heads of his ministers of health and agriculture and appointed the federal auditor general as his own point woman to deal with the crisis.

Meanwhile, those ministers refused to acknowledge the severity of the situation or the need for fundamental changes in agriculture and food processing. By early January 2001, both ministers were finally forced to resign as the true dimensions of the BSE crisis were beginning to become clear. Now the path was clear for a concerted political response by the government. The first immediate political action was the reorganization of the ministry responsible for food, agriculture and forestry. The new name Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food, and Agriculture suggests the new importance of consumer protection in the production of food.

In its Agriculture Report for 2001, the Federal Government announced that:

The BSE scandal marks the end of the old type of agriculture policy. In the future, consumer protection in these sensitive areas of agri-food policy will take priority over economic interests. (<<http://www.verbraucherministerium.de/englisch/ab-2001-english/ab01-e1.htm>>)

For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, the minister responsible for agriculture was neither a farmer, nor a member of the big parties: the new minister Renate Künast is a lawyer from the Green Party. Chancellor Schröder obviously thought that only a complete break with the farming lobby influence would give the new minister enough elbow room to see through the necessary changes against the resistance of the farming lobby.

Other measures taken: within the reorganized ministry, a whole department is devoted to the handling of the BSE crisis. Parallel to the restructuring of the ministry, a new Federal Agency for Consumer Protection and Food Safety has been established. Moreover, despite budget cutbacks in all other areas, 27 million DEM in new federal research money was earmarked for BSE research in the spring of 2001. Some of that money went towards the establishment of a new Institute at the Federal Research Institute for Animal Viruses which will focus on BSE research.

Equally large sums of money are coming forward from the individual Länder. For example, Bavaria has committed 20 million DEM for basic research on BSE. And there is more and more: within 4 months of the first BSE case, Bavaria announced a special program called "safe foods and healthy farms" which is funded with a staggering 600 million DEM, representing one of the greatest funding initiatives ever conceived by a Land.

The fact that Bavaria dashed forward is not surprising: it has a large agricultural sector and must be very interested in keeping farms healthy. The initiative by Bavaria reflects a greater concern which should be analysed separately: the desire to use this opportunity to fundamentally reform German agriculture. Such a reform has the potential to become the most important result of the handling of the current BSE crisis.

The new minister Ms. Künast has made the restructuring of German agriculture her primary goal. The new view in the ministry is that the BSE crisis is a sign of our unsustainable and unethical treatment of nature. As a consequence, she wants to see German agriculture to follow more sustainable and ecologically sound practices.

Foremost among the new agricultural policy aims are the following:

- preventive consumer protection (a first for the agriculture ministry)
- organic land management
- species-specific animal husbandry

Künast insists that the change has to be driven by the consumers themselves. Building on the momentum represented by the current disenchantment of Germans with food production methods, the minister hopes that it will be the consumers who will continue to demand better quality foods and are willing to pay a premium for that. To help consumers make the right decisions, new labels will be introduced which certify foods which have been produced according to the new "eco" standards. Eventually, the minister wants to see a 20% market share of such organic foods (up from the current 3%).

To put some political pressure on the supply side as well, the minister plans to increase regional subsidies to those regions where farmers comply with the new agenda. By contrast, those regions where farmers insist on maintaining the old industrial style production methods will see net losses in structural subsidies.

Finally, to give the policy goal of preventive consumer protection some teeth, a new Consumer-Information Law will be drafted in the fall of 2001. Currently, only acute danger justifies the publication of names of products and producers violating food safety regulations. In the future, names could be made public in all cases of non-compliance with the regulations concerning food safety and they will be published on the Internet for maximum exposure.

Despite these numerous policy changes, legislative initiatives, and funding decisions, the German public is not convinced of the effectiveness of the government's measures. According to a poll conducted this summer, only 50% of Germans believe that the BSE crisis is under control (Die

Zeit 35/2001). This is echoed by scientists who believe that the real explosion of BSE and vCJD cases will not come until the end of this decade.

We can conclude this review of the measures taken by the German government by acknowledging that they were unusually swift, fundamental, and far-reaching. This leaves us with the question why the German media and public reacted so vehemently that the government felt it necessary to take the described actions.

I propose that the reason is the constant barrage of catastrophic news about the safety of their food supply to which Germans have been exposed. I only mentioned BSE so far, but there are other ongoing concerns:

- Dioxins in animal feeds
- PAHs in olive oils
- Hormones in poultry meat
- and then there is the recent outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, which strictly speaking is not so much an issue of food safety as of the continued economic viability of animal husbandry. Nonetheless, Foot and Mouth Disease is seen by the public in the framework of misdirected food production methods.

As a result, food safety has become the most pressing environmental problem on the minds of the German public. As such, it has replaced previous concerns which the hazards of technology (such as nuclear energy) or The Environment as a whole (e.g., acid rain, ozone depletion, or global climate change).

For the individual consumer, environmental threat is no longer something removed from her or his daily life, something that goes on behind the walls of an industrial complex or high up in the atmosphere. Instead, the most pressing environmental problems now stare us in the face three times a day as we sit down for a meal.

But why did the German public react so much stronger than the British or French? Several possible reasons come to mind, all of which require further enquiry for a firm answer:

1. maybe there is cultural tradition of concern for the environment? (consider the example of *Waldgesinnung* or forest mindedness)
2. maybe there is a greater tendency to become alarmed over environmental issues? (variously called *Ecochondria*, *Umweltangst*, etc.)
3. maybe the public is successfully co-opted by political interests? Let's not forget that the Green Party rose to prominence over previous environmental concerns, particularly nuclear energy and acid rain.
4. maybe the environmental platform offers Germany a safe way to exercise some clout on the European and global stages without being reminded of its sinister past?

What all of those possible explanations have in common, though, is that there is a higher level of environmental awareness among the German public than in other nations of Europe or North America.

I would like to close with an example which shows some of the intriguing cultural differences in environmental perception. At the same time, the example also shows that there are clearly other factors at work which can override cultural factors. For a number of years now, German nuclear waste has been transported for reprocessing to the French facility at La Hague. Only a few years ago, such transports necessitated the biggest and most costly police deployments in the history of the Federal Republic, with 10,000 police officers guarding the transport every inch of the way up to the French border. Beyond the Rhine, it proceeded without much public attention or opposition.

Last week [in September of 2001], three such transports of spent fuel rods snaked their way through Germany this time without major disruption or opposition: concerns over nuclear safety were not high on the public's agenda. Beyond the French border, it was just as it had been with all previous transports: no opposition. It seems that environmental perception and the social construction of risk change radically at the border. Unfortunately, the actual risk does not.

Annotated Bibliography:

All of the documents listed below are available in English.

For an up-to-date account of the debate on food quality and safety in the European Union, see the web site of the European Commission on Health and Consumer Protection:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/debate/index_en.html

The official web site of the Food and Consumer Safety Directorate-General of the European Commission can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm

Within that web site, the official BSE page is located at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/bse/index_en.html

The World Health Organisation provides current and archival information on the spread and characteristics of BSE and its human form vCJD (variant Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease) at:

<http://www.who.int/emc/diseases/bse/>

The following site contains the October 2000 Report of the BSE Inquiry in the United Kingdom:

<http://www.bse.org.uk/>

For extensive statistics on the BSE outbreak, countermeasures, and economic impacts in the UK, see the web site of the Department of Environment, Food, & Rural Affairs at:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/>

For 11 national reports on the interactions between scientific expertise and decision making concerning BSE policy, see the web site of the BASES project at the University of Grenoble:

<http://www.upmf-grenoble.fr/inra/serd/BASES/>

For a non-partisan assessment of research on BSE and prions, see the web site of the biologist Roland Heynkes at:

<http://www.heynkes.de/index.html>

For an exhaustive English-language review of government and NGO documents on BSE, see the web site of Torsten Brinch at:

<http://inet.uni2.dk/~iaotb/bse.htm>

The web site of the official UK Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit at the University of Edinburgh is at:

<http://www.cjd.ed.ac.uk/index.htm>

For the Official German Plan Towards Achieving Sustainable Agriculture, see the web site of the new Federal Ministry for Consumer Protection:

<http://www.verbraucherministerium.de/>