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Fantasy Farming

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Bucolic fairytales are a threat to life on Earth.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 26th May 2023

No issue is more important, and none so shrouded in myth and wishful thinking. The way we feed ourselves is the key determinant of whether we survive this century, as [no other sector is as damaging](#). Yet we can scarcely begin to discuss it objectively, thanks to the power of comforting illusions.

Food has the extraordinary property of turning even the most progressive people into reactionaries. People who might accept any number of social and political changes can respond with fury if you propose our diets should shift. Stranger still, there's a gulf between ultraconservative beliefs about how we should eat and the behaviour of people who hold such beliefs. I have heard people cite a rule formulated by the food writer Michael Pollan – "[Don't eat anything your great-great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognise as food](#)" – while eating a diet (Thai one day, Mexican the next, Mediterranean the day after) whose range of ingredients no one's great-great-great-grandmother would recognise, and living much the better for it.

Something is blocking us, a deep repression that stands in the way of honest conversation. It pushes food writers, celebrity chefs and some [environmentalists](#) to propose answers to the planetary crisis that are even more damaging than the problems they claim to address. Their solutions, such as pasture-fed meat, with its [massive land demand](#), are impossible to scale without destroying remaining wild ecosystems: there is simply not enough planet. What is this inhibition and how does it arise?

It's now a year since I published [Regenesis](#), a book that has incited levels of fury shocking even to me. I've spent much of this time trying to work out what makes people so angry. I think it's because the book challenges what the cognitive historian [Jeremy Lent](#) calls a "root metaphor": an idea so deeply embedded in our minds that it affects our preferences

without our conscious knowledge.

The root metaphor in this case is exemplified by King Charles III's love affair with Transylvania, explored recently in the [New Statesman](#). What he found there “was a perfectly bottled model of life before modernity”. “It's the timelessness which is so important,” the king is reported to have said. “The landscape is almost out of some of those stories you used to read as a child.”

Farming in Transylvania looks (or did until recently) just as it “ought” to look: tiny villages where cows with their calves, ducks with their ducklings and cats with their kittens share the dirt road with ruddy-cheeked farmers driving horses and carts; alpine pastures where sheep graze and people scythe the grass and build conical haystacks. In other words, as the king remarked, it looks like a children's book.

A remarkable number of books for pre-literate children are about livestock farms. The farms they imagine look nothing like the industries that produce the meat, dairy and eggs we eat, which are generally places of horror. The stories they tell are a version of an ancient idyll of herders with their animals, built across thousands of years in pastoral poetry and religious traditions. Livestock farming in this idyll is a place of safety, harmony and comfort, into which we subconsciously burrow at times of unease.

Much of the discussion of food and farming in public life looks like an effort to recreate that happy place. As a result, many of the proposed solutions to the global food crisis seek, in effect, to revive medieval production systems – to feed a 21st-century population. It cannot end well.

For instance, there's now a foodie obsession with [hyper-free range chicken farming](#). Chickens, the new romantics propose, should follow grazing cattle, eating the insects that feed on their dung. As in the children's books, farm animals of different species interact. But the chicken is a non-native, omnivorous bird of the pheasant family. Just as we begin to recognise the [damage caused](#) by the release of pheasants into the countryside – they work through [baby snakes](#), frogs, caterpillars, spiders, seedlings – the nostalgists seek to do the same with chickens. To the extent that chickens feed themselves in such systems, they mop up wildlife. In reality, they can't survive this way, so they continue to be fed on soy, often produced on former rainforest and [Cerrado savanna](#) in Brazil.

This is what happens when people see the pictures and not the numbers. A scene that reminds us of our place of safety at the dawning of consciousness is used as the model for

how we should be fed, regardless of whether it can scale. Bucolic romanticism might seem harmless. But it leads, if enacted, to hunger, ecological destruction or both, on a vast scale. Our arcadian fantasies devour the planet.

Storybook farming never worked as the romantics claim. Widespread meat-eating in the 19th century became possible only through the colonisation and clearance of Australia and the Americas and the creation, largely by the British empire, of a [global system](#) sucking meat into rich nations. The cattle and sheep ranching that supplied our supposedly traditional diet drove the dispossession of Indigenous people and destruction of ecosystems on a massive scale, a process that [continues](#) to this day. When you challenge the story that masks these grim realities, it's perceived as an attack on our very identity.

Real solutions to our global food crises are neither beautiful nor comforting. They inevitably involve factories, and we all hate factories, don't we? In reality, almost everything we eat has passed through at least one factory (probably several) on its way to our plates. We are in deep denial about this, which is why, in the US, where [95% of the population eats meat](#), a survey found that [47% wanted to ban slaughterhouses](#).

The answer is not more fields, which means destroying even more wild ecosystems. It is partly better, more compact, cruelty-free and pollution-free factories. Among the best options, horror of horrors, is a shift from farming multicellular organisms (plants and animals) to farming unicellular creatures (microbes), which allows us to [do far more with far less](#).

King Charles would doubtless hate this. But there are 8 billion people to feed and a planet to restore, and neither can be achieved with retentive fantasies. I've found myself contesting a cruel, polluting and self-destructive mainstream farming model on one hand and, on the other, an idyllic reverie that would lead us to the twin disaster of agricultural sprawl and world hunger. It's hard to decide which is worse.

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