

## ***SYMPOSIUM***

### **On the Metabolism between Society and Nature in the U.K.**

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#### **Introduction**

This symposium on the metabolic relationship between human society and non-human nature in the U.K. has been edited and largely written by members of the Red Green Study Group, formed in London in 1992. The Group's objective is to contribute to the development of a green socialist movement as the only effective legitimate response to the twin challenges of social injustice and ecological crisis. It meets bi-monthly and has previously published the modestly influential *What On Earth Is To Be Done?* The Group recently assumed the role of *CNS* editorial collective in the U.K.

The focus of the papers in the symposium is on the forces that have shaped the present conjuncture in the different areas of social life and the different localities and regions analyzed, together with the possibilities that now exist for interventions to move in a more ecologically sustainable and socially just direction. The analyses are within the historical materialist tradition in that they locate society-nature metabolisms in their historical contexts. Central to the substantive analysis are the relationships between rural and urban and the changing character of the countryside, agriculture and food production, and the pattern of urban development. In each area discussed, the impact of capital accumulation and the associated movements of resistance and hope are analyzed.

The U.K. was not only the first country to industrialize, but it was also the first country, at least in Europe, to be given the neoliberal treatment, initially by the Thatcher government elected in 1979 and continued by New Labour since 1997. This process of deregulation, privatization and commodification forms an important part of the context of the papers in the symposium in their analyses of the changing character of the metabolism between society and nature. In particular, the industrialization and (global) commodification of nature have thrown up contradictions which have manifested themselves in a variety of dysfunctional ways, from BSE and other food scares to the current obesity epidemic in the U.K. At the same time, these developments are linked to the European and global rise of agri-industrial corporations and point to possible shared problems and possibilities across countries.

The first paper, by Ted Benton, traces the changing conceptions of the countryside and its relationship to the town in the U.K. as a background to analyzing the reasons for the recent rise of the contradictory Countryside Alliance and the possibilities for progressive change presented by the real problems that have developed in agriculture in the U.K. that gave the Alliance its impetus. Judith Watson's paper then traces the changing pattern of land use and metabolic interaction in the flood plain of the river Thames east of London that has come to be called the Thames Gateway. This is followed by Richard Kuper's analysis of the history of the European Common Agricultural Policy and a sketch of an alternative approach to agriculture to that which is emerging from present negotiations, based on movements of resistance in France.

Dan Rigby and Sophie Bown's paper continues the analysis with a discussion of the ways in which the concept of "organic" has been socially constructed and is now

characterized by two very different approaches: organic as a movement involving fundamental changes in the food chain, as well as reliance on non-artificial inputs; and organic as a product defined only by the latter (itself socially negotiated) and in the process of being taken over by the global corporations. Changing paradigms for agricultural production are also analyzed by Graham Sharp as a background for tracing the ways in which the provision of school meals in England has been increasingly captured by global corporations, but also identifying signs of a reaction against this.

The final three papers comprise Part 2 of this symposium and will be published in the December 2007 issue of *CNS*. They move the focus towards visions of urban living that are both convivial and sustainable. Bill Hopwood and Mary Mellor trace the history of cities, drawing a distinction between urbanization and civilization, and offering a vision of a civilized, convivial and sustainable city, illustrated by examples from Newcastle. Michael Cahill analyzes the abject failure of the U.K.'s New Labour government to deliver on its rhetoric of moving towards a sustainable transport system and discusses ways in which such a system could be introduced with beneficial effects on the environment and the quality of life. The symposium ends with a micro case study by Jane Hindley of the process of creating "a park for everybody" in the Mile End area of London as an example of the possibility of pre-figurative movements today.

Throughout the symposium, emphasis is placed on the role of capital accumulation in shaping and deepening the metabolic rift. At the same time, possibilities for intervention to check the imperatives of accumulation and provide pointers to alternative socially just and environmentally sustainable ways of developing the relationships between human society and non-human nature are identified. Of course, in the longer run this will involve movement towards participatory socialism on a global scale.