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Introduction: Another Green World

By Benedict Seymour

Welcome to the Thames Gateway, an 80,000 hectare development to the east of London on which the Government has proposed the construction of a city the size of Leeds. 100,000 new residents, a wealth of new homes, new megastores, and new call centres on a wide and flood-prone plain.

After a day at *Mute* researching the proposed mega-development, I bump into an old friend on the way home. A keen bird watcher now training as a biologist, he knows Rainham Marshes and other nature reserves in the western part of the Thames Gateway well. We talk about the forthcoming Olympics (launch pad for the larger Thames Gateway project) and he assures me that the Lea Valley at least is not going to be turned into a vast expanse of Bovis housing; the 'water city' proposed for the area will preserve the canals and the marshes. In short, the Olympics is not necessarily a natural disaster in the making. As a bit of webcrawling reveals, the area is already a complex mix of reclaimed and incorrigible land, a product of centuries of human settlement and industry. Today artificially maintained and nurtured resources offer respite from, or in the case of the Lea Valley, a beautiful discord with industrial decay

Panoramic

Images: All images in the Thames Gateway section, apart from those credited, by John Wollaston, taken between Purfleet and East Tilbury, Thames Gateway, July 2006

But what about those who live in the mouth of the Thames Gateway, dwellers in the marsh of deindustrialisation and workfare? How is the ecological sustainability sustaining or renewing them? My friend says it used to be unsafe to wander 'round the marshes, loitering 'chavs' were a menace to the nature-lover. But even this, supposedly, is getting better. Now, he says, potential marauders are mostly engaged in voluntary work schemes, kept busy in that very ecological labour which makes the marshes such a haven for birds and fish and creeping things. Unpaid work as the key to urban renewal? Voles not dole?

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The Thames Gateway's propagandists propose the creation of a balance between man and nature, industry and recreation, dwelling and working. The healing of social antagonisms (if not of economic differences), like the harnessing of entropic natural forces, is accomplished through new, humanised forms of exploitation. Putting the 'chavs' to work is analogous to the plans for a d'Ã©tente with the potentially annihilating forces of the tidal river. Learning to accept and to harness the persistence of the working class after their ostensible obsolescence corresponds to the notion of a compromise with the redundant and rising waters of the Thames (maps of the new development incorporate the flood plain into their plans rather than imagining new barriers and defences, water is seen as a source of economic vitality - if properly managed). The surplus waters, surplus humanity and surplus credit flooding the global market are all accepted and granted their place in the new synergies of this former backwater.

In the projected future of the region we see the profit imperatives of the logistics industry happily married to the need for jobs and shopping; as industry is restructured - and older, dirtier industries finally demolished - the threat of social unrest is absorbed by the 24-hour flexibility of service sector work.

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As my friend remarks on the taming of the *âchavsâ*, I wince and think of the plans for putting convicts to work, unpaid, on the construction of the Olympic site. [cf.

<http://www.metamute.org/?q=en/node/7254>]. The government are selling this as a tough alternative to prison time. Community NGOs criticize it as over-lenient and a drain on potential jobs for *âlegitimateâ* local workers. But one can see a compromise is possible that would appease both those who position the Olympics as a great opportunity to create jobs for local people and those who see incarcerated proletarians as a cheap labour supply. The utopian renewal of the Gateway seems to involve an acceptance of the permanence of social inequality and of voluntary (or involuntary) servitude.

region map

For capital, the Thames Gateway presents a chance not only to partially resolve the housing crisis in London, as the following articles discuss, but also to reassimilate the ASBOtic excess created by the neoliberal enclosure of London, a meta-stable balance between middle class comfort and safely occupied underclasses. Meanwhile, cutting-edge plans for new ecological food and fuel sources rehearse the not so much disavowed as preempted deluge when the Thames floods *â* or, to invert the hydraulic metaphor, when the housing market and the wider speculative bubble on which all this floats, subsides. So artists such as Nils Norman have leant to the regeneration plans an aura of radicalism and creative re-thinking. His contribution to the *âThurrock: A Visionary Brief in the Thames Gatewayâ* website [<http://www.visionarythurrock.org.uk/>] stages a (ironic?) futurological vignette for the repurposing of the defunct Bluewater and Lakeside mega-shopping centres as green algae farms. Norman seems to believe that increasingly popular organic markets could be a mass, rather than an elite, lifestyle option. After shopping centres fall out of favour and global warming jacks up the seas, why not transform the Thames Gatewayâs consumer dynamos into a source of food? Again, the *âradicalâ* alternatives competing with the expensive but bottom-line driven visions of the Wimpeys and Bovises assume the extension of the credit-and-austerity capitalism of the present some 10, or even 25 years into the future. They build the assumption of scarcity into the putative opportunity offered by the development project just as the government builds in unpaid labour. The idea that further economies must be made seems to be pervasive, an underlying Malthusianism colouring the most *âprogressiveâ* projects.Â

If a lack of historical imagination is implicit in all this (must we all tighten our belts in the name of ecological sustainability? Is it impossible to imagine a mode of social reproduction at once less wasteful and more profligate?), displacement and gentrification are also treated as givens, the background and context of the project. Indeed, as Penny Koutrolikou suggests, the new Thames Gateway may well amount to no more than a suburban solution to the need of the increasingly elite inner-city-population for a convenient, orderly and separate, low wage service workforce.

Are there other, less sustainable and constructive visions on offer? Angry comments in the online forums provided on the Visionary Thurrock site suggest there is plenty of critical thinking about the Thames Gateway going on *â* at least among those already living in the area. As well as objections to the basic premise that the gateway should succumb to Prescottsâ bulldozers and third-rate housing, legitimate enquiries into the subtext of the promise of new jobs that accompanies this, like most otherÂ regeneration programmes, are being made. A critic of the future labour relations of Thames Gateway, Dave Amis, has laid out a more likely scenario than Nils Normanâs in which Bluewater and Lakeside hang in there, flourishing on continuing (albeit tightening) flows of consumer credit for the time being, to employ, alongside the burgeoning UK logistics industry for which Thames Gateway (in particular, Thurrock) is a key node, an expanding army of flexible and low paid high-intensity labour. [*âThames Gateway.... Welcome to the Future?â*, <http://www.iwca.info/cutedge/ce0005a.htm>]. Rather than assuming increasingly badly paid or unpaid labour as the price of a *âmixed and balancedâ*, *âsustainableâ* *âcommunityâ* it might be worth indulging in some alternative blue- (or rather, grey-) sky

thinking. For example, given the current state of the UK and global economy, it could be worth considering how many of the financial underpinnings of this project will still be in place come 2012, let alone 2025. As Michael Edwards points out, the Thames Gateway as conceived by the Government and developers will be built on fictitious capital, one more layer in a global pyramid scheme with a great vulnerability to changes in the world market. It is primarily a way of extenuating a bubble rather than, promises of rejuvenated industry aside, the foundations for a new era of productivity.

If renewal means shit work and Olympic chain gangs, what would a dysfunctioning industrial renaissance look like? Do we really want to present more progressive versions of the Thames Gateway or should we not be talking to those on the receiving end of middle class reveries about resisting this latest regeneration onslaught? If there is a recession and restructuring of the economy it will be predicated on shifting the crisis onto the poor to an even greater degree.

One thing's for sure, as long as unpaid labour is part of the visionary plans for a new city, the Thames Gateway project stinks worse than marsh gas.

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