

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS AND ISSUES IN BRITISH CULTURE

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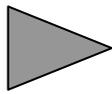
Introduction

The present article stems from my preoccupations related to British cultural studies, a direct consequence of my optional course on **British Culture and Civilization** delivered for the students of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. The students' interest in some acute problems of today's world has prompted my concern with such topics, as well as with the way they are regarded in cultures different from ours. One of these topics is the issue of the global environment and its preservation. The way in which its different aspects have been approached, the reactions which they have produced in Great Britain over the years and, sometimes, even over centuries, are worth paying attention to, representing a source of reflection and a direction to be considered.

A lot of useful knowledge regarding the topic of the environment as part of the British culture comes from the valuable study by Linda Merricks, *Green Politics: Animal Rights, Vegetarianism and Naturism* (2000).

In mid 20th century, topics such as *vegetarianism*, or *animal rights* were considered, in Great Britain, no more than concerns of a minority, while notions such as *environmental damage* and *nature preservation* were restricted to *protecting* the countryside areas from urban expansion and large-scale

industrialization. However, a few years later, starting with the late '60s, such topics turned into movements which have come to represent, besides a major socio-cultural phenomenon, the basis of a *new type of politics*, known as *green politics*.



The British attitude towards the environment – a historical overview

In order to explain and understand the present way of regarding the issue of the environment, it may be of interest to consider the way in which the attitude of the British society towards this topic changed over the centuries, together with its different implications.

Thus, as regards the relationship of humans to non-humans, it has represented a preoccupation of philosophers and writers since the Tudor age or even before. Since, at that time, all education came from the church, the attitude of the ecclesiastical scholars concerned with the story of Creation (as represented in Genesis) had an impact on the society's everyday life.

Keith Thomas (1983) presents the accepted version on this topic during the respective period. Thus, it was considered that before the biblical Fall, humans had lived in perfect harmony with animals, and, without any doubt, they did not eat any meat. After the Fall, with the fight for existence becoming more difficult and the plants no longer being sufficiently provided, animals were subdued and the human ascendancy over them followed. By the time of the Old Testament, humans had already become carnivorous and the Bible does not include any behaviour rules regarding meat eating. Hence, no mercy was shown to animals.

However, as **Joan Thirsk** (1997) writes, some cases of vegetarianism were known in Britain dating from the end of the 17th century. It was only in the 18th century that the matter regarding the morality of using animals as food was raised, with signs of concern for cooking *well done* food, but with little impact on the large majority of the population.

A real preoccupation for a healthy, non-meat diet is attested only in the 19th century with the foundation of the *Vegetarian Society* (1847), their beliefs turning into a real popular movement in the period 1880-1890. At that moment, important actions

in this direction were taken, such as giving lectures, issuing books and opening vegetarian restaurants (29 restaurants were opened only in London).

According to **Hilda Kean** (1995), similar organizations were set up during the same period, like the *Humanitarian League*. It is important to point out that, for the first time, its members linked vegetarianism and diet with the issue of animal welfare. This movement will get a considerable significance in the late 20th century. Therefore, as Kean shows, the first attitudes taken on the matter, although without a real or lasting effect on the British diet of the time, have three main areas in common with the late 20th century outlook:

1. Vegetarianism is mainly found in the large cities; here, after World War II the immigrants (especially from South and Eastern Europe) brought new diet patterns mainly based on salads and fruits, which started to compete with *the British ideal* of the roast beef.
2. The ecological imperatives of vegetarianism are finally admitted, and vegetarian diets are seen as “*a possibility of feeding large numbers of people on less land, of providing work and reducing imports*” (Thirsk, 1997: 35).
3. Vegetarianism is especially accepted by women, both in its early days and in the 20th century.

Therefore, side by side with vegetarianism, a parallel concern for animals' welfare started to develop, and it has grown in importance since the 19th century. It has to be mentioned that, at its beginning England was seen as “*the hell of dumb animals*”. In 1868, even Queen Victoria gave her opinion on the matter saying that “*the English are inclined to be more cruel to animals than some other civilized nations are*” (Ritvo, 1987: 147).

In time, throughout the 19th century many organizations were set up to provide support for animals, the first one being the *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*, founded in 1824, while, by the turn of the century, there were eight national organizations of this kind. This movement can be interpreted, on the one hand, as the Victorian sentimentality extended to kittens, birds as well as to children, and, on the other hand, as “*man's duty*” to protect the weak, increasingly including the animals, an attitude thought as an important moral obligation. However, this attitude should – by no means – be seen in the sense that the animals could be considered as equal to humans; consequently, meat eating was accepted

but only within the limits of animal protection, as long as no excess cruelty was accepted in farming or slaughtering the animals.

In the 20th century, the already well-established organizations evolved, becoming able to cope with both animal welfare and diet issues. In connection with the diet problem special mentioning is due to the *Soil Association*, founded in 1946, an organization whose members' belief was that only natural products should be used to fertilize the soil. In the period between the 60's and the 80's a lot of other environmental organizations were set up, in many cases by local groups, their number increasing to over 300 by the early 1990s.

It is difficult to quantify the support coming to them from the general public who could have shared their specific aims; however, such support was revealed by the strength of the consumer pressure showed in the case of the *Body Shop* environmental campaign, with its slogan *No Testing on Animals* and the fight for preserving the rain forests and the environment in general. Due to this support, the Body Shop resulted in a major supermarket chain.

Thus, if the 19th century movement started within a wider attempt at moral reform, its subsequent development and growth in the 20th century reflects the people's growing environmental consciousness. According to **David Pepper** (1996), the Green Movement has reformulated the conventional opinion that humans are separated from nature and consequently, nature can be exploited and dominated for the human benefit by using scientific laws in doing it, in favour of the idea that humans are part of nature which has to be respected and protected for itself.

From here, philosophers, social scientists and environmentalists developed several theories which led to arguments about *animals' rights* as opposed to *animal welfare*. **Garner** (1993) offers a presentation of different points of view existing in this respect: thus, **Peter Singer** (1975) has a key text, arguing that the degree of sentience in animals must be considered and the avoidance of pain and hunger in their case should count as much as in the case of humans. To deny the animals' right in this respect is similar to denying the rights of women or blacks, and he calls it "*speciesism*". However, he admits that under some circumstances the animals' rights are to be subordinated to the humans' rights.

Tom Regan (1982; 1988) goes farther, arguing that “*if a creature has a life of its own, then that creature possesses rights similar to “civil” rights; such a creature has also intrinsic value and it is worth dignity and deserves respect*” (1982: 89). Regan does not deny that the end of animal husbandry, in any recognizable form, should be considered.

It should be pointed out that such theories did not develop accidentally, resulting from the first signs of serious and provable disturbances noticed in the natural world. The impact of the environment poor management had already been felt outside the minority culture of vegetarianists and organic farming advocates, by much larger categories of people. Thus, two works published in the 1960s spread concern regarding the food we eat; they were **Rachel Carson**’s *Silent Spring* (1963) raising unease about the effects of the largely used DDT pesticide, on the food chain and the humans’ health, and **Ruth Harrison**’s *Animal Machines* (1964) revealing the realities of the new methods used in producing meat.

The 1960s also witnessed the first link between a *natural* style of life and the youth counter-culture active in Great Britain; in this respect, the number of vegetarians which already existed and which grew throughout the second half of the 20th century is an example. If in the immediate post-war-period (1945), vegetarians represented only an insignificant minority in the total amount of the population, registering 100,000 persons, in the 1970s they were already one million, a figure which doubled in the next decades, reaching 2.5 million by the end of the millennium (4.3 p.c. of Britain’s population). It is interesting to note that vegetarians seem to be mainly representatives of the young British middle-class; for this category, a different choice of food represented both a sort of rebellion against the middle-class families in which they had grown up and an assertion of a new, more *spiritual* life, associated with somehow naive notions of a more natural and harmonious world and life. In this way, vegetarianism started to represent a mass movement, at least among the young people. Nevertheless, it would be too much to say that *vegetarianism* has real *mass support* in Great Britain, but – at any rate – it represents a personal alternative for those people who are in search of discovery/self-discovery.

In this respect, a similar but even *more radical* trend should be mentioned. This is the trend represented by those who decided for the *organic family*, those who left their jobs in cities and towns, choosing a new life-style in the country-side. The

reason for taking this decision was simple: they wanted to escape the pressure and pollution of the 20th century urban life, preferring the rural environment. In this way, they could grow their own crops, vegetables and fruits in healthy conditions, in their own farms. There, they could develop an organic type of agriculture. Moreover, away from the attractions/distractions of TV and town culture, the family could rediscover its own values, all its members working together for the benefit of all. Yet for many, such an ideal, attractive as it may have seemed, was nothing but a dream, in the tough economic conditions of the 20th century.

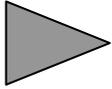
Besides some people who could afford retreating in an idyllic and healthy environment and took this chance, there were others who preferred taking open action, by which they understood opposing the state of harmful treatment of nature. They became members of different organizations acting for a change of attitude towards nature and the environment.

What seems to have happened in Britain in the last few decades is a growth in the number of alternative life-styles, generating a wider awareness of the arguments raised by ecologists regarding the relationships between people and the *natural* world. However, what one should understand is that what is generally known under the name of *naturism* represents a combination of personal politics, green ideas, and youth counter-culture. One more interesting thing, important to be revealed, refers to the direct action taken by some groups of people in order to protest against different decisions which could jeopardize the natural environment.

This action developed into what is known as the *community of resistance*, endowed with its own codes, cultures and ways of life, but having as its centre the *new naturism*. As Linda Merricks (2000) shows, although these groups' actions started initially as being non-violent, there were situations when they turned into real confrontations with the authorities, an example being the free festival movement of the 1970s. They witnessed an increasing opposition from the authorities, including the police, which culminated in the *Battle of the Beaufield* (1985) where the police drove the group of New Age Travellers off the road around Stonehenge, arresting some and disabling their vehicles, an attitude considered by the public as completely unacceptable.

But the free festival movement gave to the new naturism not only the key element of community resistance but also its link to a *cultural* side with music and *fun*. For example, the news-sheet *SchNew* gives a weekly listing of illegal free festivals,

progressive gigs, as well as appeals for support, and announcements of meetings and demonstrations; or the *Fairs of Albion* with a profoundly romantic view of the country-side, a mixture of Tolkien, Blake, English folk music and vaguely mystical thoughts about nature.

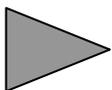


Recent developments

According to Merricks, along with the growth in notions of “*cultural and community resistance*” and even with the politization of the festivals, there are some other important changes which have taken place, and which have given considerable significance to the emergence of *naturism* in the 1990s; they are centred around animal rights and the growth of much more politically active and violent groups, around opposition to hunting and the use of animals for scientific experiments (*the Animal Liberation Front, the League against Cruel Sports, different anti-vivisection groups and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals – RSPCA*).

But an example of what really brought these groups together was the issue of road constructions, especially the campaign to prevent the building of a road extension near Winchester (1992) or of another one in East London. The campaigns were started by the local groups, the organization *Friends of the Earth* and continued by the Dongas, a group whose beliefs were rooted in deep ecology, animal rights and vegetarianism.

In spite of their failure in preventing the road extensions at that particular moment, the impact of such protests on the large public was huge and, in time, they yielded results. Such examples are the successful campaigns against live animal exports taking place in 1994-95; although the government did not ban shipments, all major ferry companies stopped carrying live animals.



Conclusions

The present *naturism* could be considered a rather limited phenomenon in Great Britain, represented by an active minority, a sort of *hard core*. On the other hand, if the general shifts which have taken place in the society’s mentality are considered, it could be said that this *hard core* is only the *advance guard*.

Thus, the question of food has become a major political/cultural issue: there are serious doubts about factory farming, centred for the beginning around *battery eggs* and *broiler chickens*, food producing methods which combine inhumane living conditions for these creatures with an increased risk of the human body poisoning. With the cattle disease BSE (discovered in 1995) the debates have intensified, and they continue with the worries showed in connection with the genetic modification of plants, questioning the safety of food products extended to fruits and vegetables.

As clearly noticed, the general patterns of consumption have changed, being directed to the so-called *menu pluralism*, with even larger groups preferring vegetarian dishes as part of a normal diet.

There is also wide public support, both locally and nationally, regarding animal rights, as seen in the demonstrations and campaigns against fox hunting and live animal exports. There is also a serious concern with the land and, generally, the *natural* world. Thus, the new naturism is seen in the British culture as a mixture of animal rights, defence of landscape and simple healthy life.

This attitude has marked a distinctive shift in the field of mentality, bringing in new interests and new issues.

To conclude, I shall quote the words of Linda Merricks: “*The representatives of this new politics rallying thousands of people, with posters and costumes in support of an issue, could create the image of an underground politics. Anyway, these groups of people brought together through the Web and which form a mixture of technology and “Albion”, of tribalism and Internet suggest a trend which should be taken into consideration*” (2000: 441).

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