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Even the Dead Will Not be Safe:

Memory and Political Struggle in the Anthropocene

A lecture by Etienne Turpin (Artist, Writer & Editor, Ann Arbor, USA)

Part of the event series MUST-HAVE, which accompanies the international group exhibition

TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT

4.5.–7.7.2013

Drawing on both the book and exhibition *Stainlessness*, the lecture begins by recalling the malicious attempt made by industrialists Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick to annihilate, once and for all, the U.S. labor movement during the 1892 Homestead lockout. This brutal attack, and the explosive retaliation by the union – which led anarchist militants Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to plot their failed assassination of Frick – demonstrates the need to reframe the erasure of militant labor history in America. How can the lessons of militant labor reach us today when organized labor is facing such extreme attacks? What continuities of struggle can be found in the narratives of the 99%? As the neoliberal capitalist machine and its attendant processes of urbanization continue to erase these struggles from our cities and our histories, leaving only ambivalent monuments and vague appraisals, the lecture recuperates a militant historical itinerary that reminds us, as Walter Benjamin warned, that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

HALLE 14 intern Westrey Page interviewed Etienne Turpin in forefront of his lecture

(1) How did your interdisciplinary research begin?

I was trained in the theoretical humanities and philosophy, but I also worked doing renovations and building repairs throughout my education. I like to theorize and I like to build things. In either case, there is a productive dynamic between forms of inquiry and modes of assembly. The logic of figuring things out, determining possibilities, learning through composition, and working with logics of assembly are all important aspects of my practice. Of course, the higher education industry is not designed to

support the realistic entanglements of concern, collaboration, and proficiency about real struggle that define practices such as my own, but that could also be why the higher education industry, the academy, becomes increasingly irrelevant to real people who struggle in the world precisely as it becomes more and more enamored with efficiency and profit.

(2) You attend conferences among geologists, writers, and architects, and form your research alongside the theories and work of atmospheric chemists and philosophers. It must be difficult to span these various disciplines. How do you do this? And, do you think this interdisciplinary work is somehow necessary given the state of scholarly research today, and given the state of contemporary society?

There is no reason that intellectuals in different fields should remain isolated from each other, especially when their work is of urgent political significance. The higher education industry keeps academics focused on a small piece of the puzzle, often awarding mediocrity and irrelevance as a managerial strategy. In order to make lasting links across various fields of inquiry, and in order to mobilize research for meaningful social and political economic struggles, academics cannot work alone. Disciplining knowledge is a form of containment. When the State university appeared in Germany, there were three disciplines, which reflected the key aspects of knowledge production at that time – medicine, law, philosophy. But, in our contemporary state of endless emergency, what does it mean to approach a problem from only one discipline? Of course, like everyone else, I have learned so much from colleagues and allies who are located deep within a discipline, or who are “proper” philosophers or historians, etc. Nevertheless, my position would be that the contemporary challenges of environmental collapse and political economic coercion occasion a rethinking of disciplinary divisions. I’m not advocating for inter-, trans-, post-, or anti- disciplinarity, because the stakes of that new nomenclature are not important to me. The important thing is working to address urgent environmental questions by advocating for self-determination and mutual aid as a means to eliminate coercive political economic structures and the dangers they pose to human beings and the ecologies which sustain us. Obviously, I suppose, that is much more than an academic project.

(3) For the Stainlessness project, you chose the four cities of Pittsburgh, Sudbury, Chicago and Detroit. Pittsburgh, as you have described, was chosen due to the 1892 Homestead lockout. Were the other three cities also chosen primarily because of their historical labor movements? Can you briefly describe how and why the other three were chosen?

Yes, all of the cities were selected because they tell the story of mineralization and the relation of mineralization to labor struggles. Mineralization simply means the movement of mineral deposits from the subsurface to the surface of the earth. Look around, really look – every piece of metal, every fixture, frame, and power line, all of it was extracted from the earth. So, in my estimation, the process of mineralization is a key to understanding human impact, which we call the Anthropocene (more on that below).

Regarding the cities, Sudbury is located about 400km north of Toronto, Canada, and is the site where nickel is extracted and processed, thus allowing for the production of stainless steel in other locations. Sudbury’s bizarre topography is the result of a giant

asteroid which struck the earth about 2 billions years ago. The irruptive rim of the resulting crater is the site of the richest nickel deposits in the world; the United Steelworkers union have been a formidable force within the labor movement in North America.

Strangely, Copper Cliff, a key mine site in Sudbury, was opened on May 1, 1886. As is well known, this was a day that the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions unanimously decided should mark the implementation of the eight-hour work day. Following over two years of organizing for this event, on 1 May up to half a million workers across major cities throughout the United States collectively acted in a general strike to force a recognition of these necessary new standards. In Chicago, Albert Parsons, the anarchist founder of the International Working People's Association, along with his wife Lucy Parsons and their children, joined over 80,000 people on a march down Michigan Avenue to demand these labor reforms.

As labor unrest continued in Chicago on Monday, May 3, demonstrations outside the McCormick Company plant led to increasing support for workers who had been locked out for several months. This labor dispute had its origins in the militant advocacy of the Union molders for the eight hour work day, and their previous suppression by Pinkerton guards led to significant support from other militant workers during their lockout. As the crowds gathered in solidarity on May 3, they were attacked by police following a speech by August Spies and a confrontation between workers and scabs. The police opened fire on the crowd of workers and their supporters, killing at least two McCormick union members.

The ensuing outrage led to calls for a massive demonstration against police brutality at Haymarket Square, on 4 May, which saw violent clashes with police, including a dynamite bomb, allegedly thrown by anarchist conspirators, which led to the deaths of at least seven police officers and four civilians, although many experts claimed these deaths were the result of police 'friendly' fire and not the bomb. In what is widely acknowledged as a botched trial, Albert Parsons, along with four other pro-labor anarchist organizers, were sentenced to death by hanging for the incident.

It was precisely the Haymarket trial and publicity related to this struggle that galvanized the recent Russian immigrants Alexander "Sasha" Berkman and Emma Goldman. While Sasha and Emma began to attend meetings among the anarchist circles forming in New York, the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie invented the Bessemer Converter, which allowed him to convert pig iron to steel with relatively unskilled laborers in his Pennsylvania mills, including the Homestead Steel Works. By 1892, he launched the Carnegie Steel Company, which would confront the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers with an industrial lockout which began on June 30, 1892, and culminated in a major battle between strikers and Carnegie's private security agents on July 6, 1892.

Following the Amalgamated Association's heroic expulsion of Pinkerton guards from the site, Emma and Sasha planned a decisive "Attenant!" – Berkman would leave New York to murder Henry Clay Frick, the assistant to Carnegie who was in charge of the lock out, in his office in Pittsburgh as a means to mobilize the movement and galvanize the anarchist struggle.

Finally, I should mention Detroit as well. If the Haymarket Riot and the Battle for Homestead represent two key moments where militant labour condensed the struggle over the mineralization to a point of extreme intensity, first around the eight hour work day and solidarity with the locked out McCormick Harvester workers and then around the consolidated uprising to demand a collective bargaining agreement, the Ford Hunger March of 1932, suggests an exemplary case of the contingencies of a purportedly rational economic system. The violence that the Hunger Marchers faced was definitive – the demand for work, for food, was met with coercive force by the State and private security.

Needless to say, in the long struggle against the coercion of the State and the exploitation of labour and environment by private industry, many other battles, strikes, lockouts and marches must be studied and remembered. But, in my estimation, these particular events show the importance of mineralization, and the intense concentration of struggle around mineralization is a key aspect of understanding the material and political economic history of the Anthropocene.

(4) Can you explain the term Anthropocene and the state of this word in your field? Is this word somehow politically charged considering that it has not yet been formally adopted in the nomenclature for geology?

In my work, the Anthropocene is valuable both as a philosophical concept and a political construct. As a term, it comes from the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen, who was the first to suggest that we are no longer in the Holocene period, but, due to extensive human impact, we can now see human beings as geologically-scaled actors. The scientists who would evaluate such a claim – geologists and stratigraphers – are presently debating this scientific nomenclature, as you mentioned.

However, the legitimacy of scientific terminology is less significant for me than the philosophical concept and the political construct that the word “Anthropocene” affords us. Conceptually, we can see how the entire project of humanism, including the trajectory of Enlightenment reason which conceptually separated humans from nature, is entirely false. It is a false bottom of history, and I believe the Anthropocene beckons for new concepts of humanity and nature. I know Latour is writing about this, among many other thinkers, including myself. But, for me, this is also an important political construct. While all human actors will experience some effects of this geological shift – most notably through anthropogenic climate change – these will not be experienced equally by all human actors, nor are all human agents equally responsible for them. The greed of some produces the misery of others on a global scale. This is politically significant because the unequal exposure to environmental risks and benefits will shape many of the political struggles of the 21st century, and these struggles must make demands based on real experience *and* abstract political constructs. It seems to me the Anthropocene can frame some of these demands, including demands for climate justice. To say it another way, if the political economy of the Anthropocene evinces a rapacious consumption and exploitation of labor and resources, it also suggests a global commons, which, at least for me, is about how human collaboration and mutual aid can alleviate oppression and suffering when we work together in struggle.

(5) By reemphasizing the mark of labor on the earth, are you trying to raise awareness? Does it go beyond simply remembering a forgotten history? How can this awareness be used or applied to today?

Yes, this is the most important question of all. Of course, we must connect the history of political struggles to the present and to the future. I could summarize the project like this – by reasserting the centrality of political economic struggle, of anti-authoritarian organization, of a politics that challenges exploitation and coercion, we rediscover tactics and strategies, but we also give our own current struggles a place within a longer tradition of self-determination and mutual aid. Being aware that we are not the first, and that we will not be the last, to face the difficulties of organizing against coercive and exploitative structures is important. Struggle is an inter-generational project, but urbanization and popular culture work to erase this history and connection. Nevertheless, we can learn so much from these moments of concentration, despite the changes and challenges that have since come to pass in the global political economic order. So, we should always remember Walter Benjamin's warning that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious."

(6) Finally, my last question will return quite specifically to our exhibition in May and how "Stainlessness" fits with the program. A quote that you have referred to in your work comes from Antonio Stoppani, who refers to humans as being "geological agents" already in 1873. How do the systems that we, as humans, use to organize ourselves (namely political economic systems) influence our behavior with the earth? Additionally, how do behaviors like greed, avarice, and consumption, which some would argue are more innate, influence our interaction with the earth?

Antonio Stoppani is a very interesting figure for me. He was a 19th century Italian geologist and inventor who was well before his time in terms of thinking about the impact of human activity on the earth itself. Of course, Stoppani did not believe this impact was destructive; in his mind, it was a testimony to human ingenuity and progress. However, in the long century between us and Stoppani, the impact of the aggregate of all human activity has become intolerable at best and impossible at worst. It is, as Herman Brosh might have it, a form of mass insanity. But, still, "to have" in our contemporary consumer culture is completely naturalized. It is entirely normal to consume the way we do under global capitalism. Growth is – despite all reason or rational thought – still a measure and a goal of political economy. But "to have" in this mode of consumption is also "to take away." In the global North, we take away by living with absurd, disposable luxuries that work to convince us of their value. "Stainlessness" is a cultural value; it is desired, it is normalized. But our resource extraction practices that produce this quality, coupled with the consumer practices that deliver it as a value, are simultaneously and anonymously producing an inter-generational crime against humanity.

The human species is becoming a pure velocity, with an impact on the earth comparable to that of the asteroid that made the Sudbury Basin, which I mentioned above. Two billions years ago, when that asteroid deposited the nickel which we extract to make stainless steel, nothing lived on earth. If anything had been alive, the impact would have annihilated it! In our contemporary moment, I think we would agree that we have a lot more at stake among the beautiful and pleasurable effloresces of

life. This is about much more than mere survival; it is about struggling against that particular *form-of-life* called capitalism, which risks all the pleasure and joy of the world for more profit and more growth. To struggle for a world that can sustain passion, pleasure, and conviction—for a world where *forms-of-life* come together through mutual aid and solidarity to make domination and coercion unnecessary—might seem somewhat idealistic, if not completely mad, in our current historical moment; I would suggest, on the contrary, that the real idealists are those who think we won't have to struggle for the world, and the real madmen are those who think we can carry on as we are.

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