Chapter 6

Whose Re-Industrialization?
Greening the Pit or Taking Over the Means of Production?

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In *After London*, published in 1885, naturalist Richard Jeffries describes the city abandoned to nature after an unexplained catastrophe. Within a year everywhere has become overgrown: grasses are overwhelmed by docks and thistles in a pseudo-Darwinian scenario of survival of the strongest. Brambles hide the roads, railway embankments are overgrown by trees. A lake covers much of central England, and London is submerged under a swamp forty miles long into which its buildings have collapsed:

There exhales from this oozy mass so fatal a vapour that no animal can endure it. The black water bears a greenish-brown floating scum, which for ever bubbles up from the putrid mud of the bottom. When the wind collects the miasma … it becomes visible as a low cloud which hangs over the place. […] at such times when the vapour is thickest, the very wild-fowl leave the reeds, and fly from the poison. […] It is dead.¹

Blue flames shoot periodically from the depths of the mire. People say devils live there. The bodies of the dead have dissolved into black mud but their skeletal hands still clutch coins. Jeffries was brought up in rural Wiltshire but moved to Surbiton to earn a living. He became ill, blamed it on putrid black water and a lack of proper drains, and wrote *After London* as his revenge on
the city.\textsuperscript{2} But the swamp, and the skeletal hands clutching coins, might equally suggest an image of industrial capitalism, the effects of which are described by Friedrich Engels after visiting Manchester in 1844:

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Everything which here arouses horror and indignation is of recent origin, belongs to the *industrial epoch* … [which] has built up every spot … to win a covering for the masses whom it has conjured hither from the agricultural districts and from Ireland; the industrial epoch alone enables the owners of these cattle-sheds to rent them for high prices to human beings, to plunder the poverty of the workers, to undermine the health of thousands, to order that they alone, the owners, may grow rich.\textsuperscript{3}
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The movement to the towns began with the agricultural revolution in the eighteenth century (which was also the beginning of organized labor). As machines replaced workers on farms, so families were driven from their homes and from the land, first to seek work at annual hiring fairs or, if unsuccessful, to wander the roads destitute and malnourished, and later to the towns for other forms of deprivation for low and often seasonal wages in the vile living conditions described by Engels.

The scenario was well known among the educated middle class. Scenes of a lost rural life in the novels of Thomas Hardy, and Alfred Tennyson’s vision of a lost chivalric era, are both, in their different (realist and romanticized) ways, displacements. This oblique criticality appealed to the educated, reformist middle class but has become ingrained in English culture to the extent, today, that an idyllic countryside is constructed as a foil to a malodorous and corrupting city. Hence smoke-blackened terraces and smoking chimneys are the epitome of how indus-


trial towns are represented for a mass public, from the novels of Charles Dickens to nineteenth-century prints and the mid-twentieth-century paintings of L.S. Lowry. Since all that occurred, industry itself has been encapsulated in the past as material production has shifted to the global South to be replaced in the North by the immaterial production of culture, media, public relations and financial services.

This move has left new swathes of built and social dereliction. And just as a regression to an imagined rustic life was the displacing reaction of middle-class readers in the late nineteenth century, in the late twentieth century culture has again been central to the displacement of the concept of making (manufacturing) and to the histories of organized labor which occurred in locations such as London’s Docklands. Below the shiny towers of late capitalism in Docklands, the only visible reminder of a past of labor is a bronze likeness of three dockers; but this, far from celebrating the labor militancy for which the docks were known, depicts a foreman in a top hat standing over two workers in cloth caps grappling with a load — a social hierarchy maintained. But this time, from the 1980s to the financial services crisis of 2008, culture did not magic a past image but became the future: cool Britannia as the erasure of work and its organization, designer-beer in place of solidarity, and — crucially — a depoliticized culture in place of political contestation.

The standard response to urban deindustrialization, then, is to re-use redundant industrial sites for flagship cultural institutions aimed at attracting tourism and investment (sometimes called the Bilbao effect). In place of soot and disease, the clean post-industrial capitalism of the cultural turn re-appropriates culture’s claim in classical thought to universal value, to replace urban blight — a term misleadingly likening a range of linked policy failures to a crop disease — with the new consumer delights of Tate Modern, various Guggenheims, and so forth. Every city seems to seek a place on the globalized culture map by building or converting a new museum of contemporary art.

Meanwhile, urban villages — another nostalgic term adopted now by developers for inner-city gated enclaves — house a cul-
tural class whose lifestyle-consumption feeds malls and art gallery shops in support of the wider project of gentrification. Art, subsumed in entertainment, is an aspirational commodity, and Tate a market leader. Esther Leslie writes,

Tate is a brand that niche-markets art experience. Its galleries are showrooms. However, this is still art and not just business. The commodity must not show too glossy a face. The reclamation of an industrial space that provides the shell for Tate Modern lends the building a fashionably squatted aspect […]. At Tate Modern a former industrial site becomes home to the new-style ‘accessibility rules’ culture industry.4

Faced with the excesses of capitalism, George Monbiot advocates a selective return to a pre-industrial economy: re-wilding, introducing wild species such as the lynx in forest areas of Britain, thereby reproducing the nineteenth-century search for a lost rural idyll (which never existed) in a new, post-industrial form. This is not to argue against such re-wilding, which Monbiot sees as applicable only in some places; more to point out that it is a response which distances the proposed solution to urban ills—an over-productive society with excesses of waste as well as wealth divides, and so forth— to the few more or less pre-industrial sites which remain. In fact, in any case, most of those forest and moorland sites are as carefully managed and protected, as reserves, as urban parks are cultivated for leisure. It seems, then, that the industrialized city has become an icon of all that is negative, to be replaced, or mediated by far-away images of, a new kind of wildness. But was industry bad? Industry’s benefits were mismanaged and unevenly distributed; still, it produced work and many things which improved our lives. Factories polluted the atmosphere but were where a class seeking to overcome the abuses of capitalism became organized. As the workers of an iron-rolling shop said in Russia in 1917:

If Messrs Capitalists will not pay attention to our demands, then we … demand complete control of all branches of industry by the toiling people. Of you capitalists … we demand that you stop crying about devastation that you yourselves have created. Your cards are on the table. Your game is up.5

Something similar might be said now to bankers, commodity speculators and the political elite who have turned the nation-state into an out-sourced provider of governmental services for trans-national capital. What is to be done? Among responses to deindustrialization, apart from cultural colonization, are:

- rehabilitation of ex-industrial sites for community purposes;
- anti-capitalist protest and the evolution of second-hand or non-money economies;
- grass-roots, localized, DIY re-industrialization.

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In the remainder of this chapter I look briefly at each of these (which are not exclusive options).

**Rehabilitation**

The Duisburg Nord Landscape Park rehabilitates redundant industrial structures for leisure purposes for the benefit of local communities: abseiling on the exterior and diving in the interior of towers in an old iron works, dog-walking, rambling, simply passing time (since the end of industry produces a time-rich class). Landscaping lends these structures the appearance of the picturesque, but there are also environmental benefits. The nearby Emscher Park, for instance, involved decontaminating the river Emscher and the surrounding land, with new planting and areas left to natural (succession) growth. At Essen, the Zolverein combined mine, coke plant and power station — once the most modern facility in Germany, designed by a Bauhaus architect and opened by Adolf Hitler — houses a design museum, a museum of regional history, changing art exhibitions, a café, and a restaurant in the old turbine hall. This is closer to a cultural project, not least because most of the attractions are indoors, but retains a strong regional emphasis. Again there are large areas of succession growth and the return of bird and insect species. Zolverein does not seem to have caused gentrification, perhaps because the site is on the city’s outskirts. But nor have these projects rehabilitated the Ruhr’s economy.⁶

Taking a different approach, the German artist Herman Prigann worked in several brownfield sites in the Ruhr and ex-German Democratic Republic (East Germany in colloquial terms), again turning residual industrial sites into post-Romantic ruins but emphasizing the role of succession growth. To take another but subtly different example, at an open-cast brown coal mine near Cotbus, Prigann employed unemployed workers to

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build *Die Gelbe Rampe* (1993–94). On the edge of the vast excavation, which is being allowed to flood, Prigann constructed a sloping earthwork topped by a set of concrete slabs as a monument to industry. And by this he meant a monument to celebrate industry and remember it after its passing, not to regret it. The slope is planted with broom which will, in time, spread to cover the ramp. Prigann wrote,

> Nature is neither a thing nor an accumulation of things. It is neither external nor internal, it does not surround us, it is not at our disposition, it cannot be destroyed nor can it be loved.\(^7\)

He saw natural growth as a collaborating agent (an actor in Latour’s terms) and intended that it would overtake his work while, at the same time, his interventions would never be entirely obliterated, some trace remaining in drainage patterns or visible in aerial photographs. Prigann was emphatic that industry was not bad, and should not be dismissed; hence his use of discarded industrial material. Although his work is Romantic in a way (and he often cited German Romanticism in conversations), it refuses to be judgmental. I find this hopeful and important. Perhaps a similar attitude could be applied more widely, for instance to international modernism as an intellectual salvage project rather than as a mistake which produced little beyond failed social housing and ring roads, and should be written off.

Protest

As the welfare state is systematically dismantled and radical arts groups lose their funding, creative energy turns to refusal in a growth of artists’ collectives and practices which subvert the art world from within. For instance, Liberate Tate, a London-based group linked to the arts, environment and human rights organization Platform, undertakes projects which could be described

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as *re-industrializing* Tate. To remind Tate’s audiences of the link between oil—an industry characterized by human rights abuses and environmental degradation—and the arts through sponsorship, Liberate Tate organizes free events at Tate’s London branches. In 2010—the year of the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico—at a party celebrating 20 years of BP’s sponsorship, Toni and Bobbi, posing as guests, allowed an oil-like substance (molasses) to spill from under their expensive, flower-patterned skirts and leather handbags. In April 2011, also at Tate Britain, in *The Human Cost*, a figure rolled on the floor of Tate Britain covered again in molasses (perhaps reminiscent of the direct materiality fused with a conceptual critique which follows from the work of Joseph Beuys). More recently, Liberate Tate carried a wind turbine blade into the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern to request that it become part of Tate’s collection. The offer was refused despite support from many Tate members. Liberate Tate describes its work as ‘deliberately abject and sometimes foul … the shadow of an industry the reality of which arts organizations do not want to see on their doorstep.’

**DIY re-industrialization**

At Skinningrove, County Durham (a village written off in the County Plan in the 1960s), men have built pigeon lofts in what resembles an informal settlement on the hillside. They cannot now afford to keep pigeons—big money moved into the betting—but use the huts as extra living spaces and for black-economy production such as fish smoking. Skinningrove needs no art—an art project there failed to engage the community in the 1990s—because it already has a distinct culture. This suggests that local, tacit knowledge and skills can be used in a grassroots re-industrialization outside the regeneration industry and its ties to either regional bureaucracies or global capital. Such cases are always local and small-scale, hence easy to dismiss as

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8 Jo Clarke et al. (eds.), *Not If But When: Culture Beyond Oil* (London: Art Not Oil, Liberate Tate and Platform, 2011), 8.
irrelevant in the big picture, but they are diverse and numerous as well. At some point, when disillusionment with and anger at top-down improvement schemes reach a peak, grass-roots re-industrialization may produce a renewal of small, local and responsible industries meeting locally identified needs. This may fit in a wider scenario, too: asked about links between Occupy and workers’ campaigns, Noam Chomsky said — unexpectedly
perhaps—that he saw Occupy as an episode in a class war: a concentration of wealth had led to a concentration of political power and a vicious cycle of anger and frustration. While André Gorz argued in the 1980s that the working class had been co-opted to consumerism, Chomsky refers to worker-owned enterprises in de-industrialized zones as another kind of revolution, or taking over the residue of late capitalism by (literally) taking over the management and sites of production. This reminds me that French workers took over and occupied factories in May 1968, following a precedent from the anti-fascist campaigns of the 1930s, not simply to demand better conditions but to demonstrate in practical ways that they could run the factory and organize their own welfare services. In effect, this was an ephemeral taking over of the means of producing society.

Another possibility, also growing, is self-build housing. At Ashley Vale, Bristol, a disused scaffolding yard was used as a self-build site, in an area already an enclave of alternative living with allotments and an urban farm. When the yard closed in 2001 and a developer proposed housing on the site, the land was acquired instead by a local group. Mortgages were arranged for first-time buyers, and plots were sold either for complete self-build or as shells for self-completion. An office block was converted for communal and residential spaces. There are thirty-one houses in various styles using a timber-frame and cladding system like that developed by Walter Segal in the 1970s, and the refurbished office block won the South West Green Energy Award for housing in 2000. A ‘Vote Green’ sign at the allotment entrance suggests that green living translates into political intention here. Nearby in Stokes Croft, a supermarket was trashed in 2011 after local opposition to its opening. Nearby, a Free Shop denotes a non-money economy. This form of re-industrialization keeps resources in the local economy and creates a state

within the state in which the values of mutual aid and solidarity are reclaimed amid neoliberal anomie.

Conclusion

Geographer Erik Swyngedouw identifies an insurgent polis:

Rethinking [...] the ‘Right to the City’ as the ‘Right to the production of urbanisation’. Henri Lefebvre’s clarion call [...] urges us to think of the city as a process of collective codesign and coproduction.\(^\text{11}\)

Lefebvre’s theory of moments of liberation comes to mind — the idea that sudden, unannounced moments of clarity occur for anyone amid the dulling routines of capitalism — but Lefebvre wrote during the industrial period, when workers’ solidarity was a real presence. Today, new kinds of solidarity are needed, and — as the state is as abandoned to capital’s excesses as Jeffries’ London was abandoned to a swamp — a re-possession of the political and intellectual spaces of the state is necessary, as the protector of the commonwealth (a wealth produced commonly, for common use to meet common needs, rather than the wants manufactured by consumerism): a state of codesign and coproduction applied and adapted on a national scale. This may seem far-fetched, or as Romantic as, say, Tennyson’s Arthurian Britain; yet major changes in social values have occurred in modern history. Among them were the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in the 1830s, and women’s suffrage in Britain in the 1920s. Things do change, all the time. The problem is how to inflect history in the direction of a better world.

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