Foreign Trade Zone – A People’s Consultancy

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https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/foreign-trade-zone-a-peoples-consultancy/

Since April 25, Rozalinda Borcila and I have been developing a research device called “Foreign Trade Zone: A People’s Consultancy,” in the metropolitan region of Chicago. It consists of a map room in ThreeWalls Gallery, a program of workshops and learning walks, and an extensive website designed to last beyond the month-long gallery show: http://southwestcorridornorthwestpassage.org

The project grew out of a shared interest in Chicago’s ballooning logistics industry, the people who work for it, and its crucial but often forgotten role in constituting the daily life of neoliberal society. It also grew out of a shared desire to develop a more capacious and useful kind of cultural practice, not subordinated to the imperatives of the specialized art circuit, but instead, able to engage with global issues and also with local communities directly affected by them. The title, “Foreign Trade Zone,” refers to a legal device dating back to the 1930s that treats designated areas, in or adjacent to ports, as foreign territory for customs purposes. Over time, “in or adjacent to” has come to mean with a sixty-mile radius or a ninety-minute drives from a grantor authority that may not be anywhere near water! FTZs bring the free trade of the open seas onto dry land, thereby contributing to the relentless dismantling of all laws that aim to safeguard social and ecological reproduction on a particular territory. We wanted to ask questions about this process, beyond the Foreign Trade Zones themselves, and to consult with whoever would get involved or care to answer. For that we needed our own device, not legal and entrepreneurial, but cultural and social.

To put this thing together we assembled the different kinds of research that each of us had been doing separately, myself into just-in-time production and distribution, Rozalinda into the FTZs and logistics districts of Chicagoland and the conditions of life
for often undocumented warehouse workers. To better understand what we saw going on in our local area we extended our curiosity outward, to the railyards of Kansas City, to the Mexican port of Lázaro Cárdenas served by the Kansas City Southern line, and to the interoceanic link of the Panama Canal (where Kansas City Southern also has a stake, it turns out). All that lays the groundwork for an ongoing project that’s both analytic and perceptual, using the tools of cartography, documentary photography, interviews and direct experience along with open-source intelligence and academic research. It shows that distribution is not just incidental to the hard facts of production, as some dogmatic Marxist still insist. Instead, distribution sets many of the conditions for contemporary production, through the processes of distancing, standardization, anonymization and acceleration that are characteristic of container transport. In the context of global so-called “recovery” and fresh redeployment of capital, this research constitutes a prolongation of the inquiries carried out with the Technopolitics group (particularly Armin Medosch) and in the collaborative seminar “Three Crises: 30s-70s-Today,” held at Mess Hall in Chicago in Fall 2011, of which Rozalinda was a co-organizer.

The long-term work in Chicago, however, has let us go much more deeply into our subject than any professional speciality, whether or artistic or academic, would normally allow. What we’ve really been exploring are the colonial framings and historical transformations of an industrial development corridor that grew up around an indigenous portage route and a settler transportation project (the Illinois & Michigan Canal, completed in 1848). This route, which we call the Southwest Corridor, was initially marked off as a safe passage zone for early American fur traders by the Indian Boundary Lines traced in 1818-19, as a result of the Treaty of St. Louis that was forced militarily on the Ottawa, Ojibwe and Potawatomi peoples. The canal project was then funded by a federal land grant that set off the first surveyors’ campaigns in the area, providing the property for a speculative boom after Indian removal in 1832. The route has subsequently been overlaid by railroads, another canal, a superhighway and an airport, while at the same time aggregating major industries, refineries and power plants around its transportation networks. Its existence also underwrites the city’s emergence as a global financial center: the Chicago Board of Trade was founded in 1847 in anticipation of the grain that would be brought to this Great Lakes port city by the canal.

The notion of path dependency, borrowed from economic history, has helped us to understand this whole process of aggregation, where each preceeding phase of development tends to condition, channel, guide and limit the successive phases. Path dependency doesn’t just mean that “stuff goes where stuff is.” It means that the historical conditions under which technologies and organizational forms emerge will continue to exert an often decisive influence on their development going forward, even after fairly radical breaks like the shift from canal to railroad to highway. Such shifts are additive, with lots of carry-over, in terms of culture as well as technology. So it turns out that we’re all more or less patho-dependent: on colonialism, on large-scale agriculture, on industry, on finance, and on the relentless logistical drive to organize transport and
distribution for both commercial and political expansionism. You really get it when you study the Southwest Corridor.

Yet there was a world here before Chicago, before the canals and railroads, before the flow of the local rivers was reversed to carry both sewage and industrial waste away from the drinking water of Lake Michigan. And the interesting thing about a path is its difference from a rational concept, a dialectical logic, or any other sort of finalizing representation. A path unfolds in space as well as time, so you can always walk it again, from either end and in whatever direction, asking questions as you go, meeting the people that inhabit that pathway, sensing its distant pasts and its incipient transformations, picking through its ruins and imagining its futures. A path is a means to an end, but it’s also a set of abandoned destinations, possible bifurcations and potentials still open on the ground, where everything about the ways things are can be reiterated and replayed. A pathway is exactly the place where you can experience the map becoming the territory again.

To make this pathfinding experience into a social activity we sent out open calls for a number of learning walks, which are documented under the “events” tab of the website. Each time, a group comes together, sharing feelings, observations and knowledge as the walk unfolds. A walk is an experiment in perception, multiplied by interaction, conversation and the circulation of trans-generational memories. While actually moving through the land whose historical changes we’ve tried to map out and represent in the gallery and on the website, we often used the appearance or re-emergence of wetlands as a cue to the presence of worlds before Chicago and forces of nature that resist total instrumentalization. We called attention to the site of the former Continental Divide, where water once hesitated before running either toward the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean, or the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. And we asked about all the other divides called up by the inscription of the Southwest Corridor on the land over these last two centuries of industrialization. The response has been really enthusiastic. People want to engage with these kinds of questions.

Some of the most intense moments of the walks came, for me anyway, in the Calumet Basin far south of Chicago’s downtown Loop, where the steel industry emerged in the late nineteenth century to build ships, locomotives, skyscrapers and perhaps most importantly of all, the rails of the entire western train network. What we found in the South Chicago neighborhoods were huge piles of a toxic substance called pet coke, which is brought by railway and barge to urban staging grounds where it is readied for export, since it’s considered too dirty to burn in the US. Pet coke is a new industrial threat to people living the Calumet Basin. It is produced by all oil refineries, but especially by our local big three: Exxon, Citgo and BP, all located on the Southwest Corridor. The reason for the sudden surge in pet coke production is that all three of those sites rank high among the top ten US refineries processing carbon-heavy tar sands crude, which is slurried here via pipelines that leak and trains that catch fire and explode. Our cultural activity became political activism, as it should, when we rerouted
one of our walks to join a protest against BP in the East Chicago, just across the Indiana state line, where environmental regulations are even laxer than in Illinois and it’s even more profitable to pollute the lake, impregnate the ground with oil and generally burn up the planet.

Here’s the thing: the pathways we’ve been walking are clearly those of the Anthropocene, or as Peter Linebaugh prefers to say, the Capitalocene, since the last two centuries of industrial capitalism are clearly behind the the capacity of human beings to wreak havoc with the Earth’s ecology and reshape its very landforms. You can see that power at work in South Chicago, where today’s Arcelor-Mittal complex sits on top of a gigantic rationalized peninsula jutting out into the lake, built entirely from slag and traversed by a canal that ranks as one of the most polluted waterways in the country. Capitalism may develop in stages (Fordist, neoliberal, etc) but the industrial development corridor that built Chicago has a continuous history that’s still unfolding today, up to a point that has become uniquely threatening. We’ve been walking this pathway for two hundred years, but at the same time, as John Jordan insists, “we have never been here before.” We’ve never had to deal as a species with the consequences of the path that we’ve been walking. How to replay this story? How to open up more beneficial conversations about so-called “development” at local, national, continental and global scales? How to actually change the gears of industry? In short, what kind of politics, activism and/or “cultural activity” is adequate for the Anthropocene?

We don’t have the answers and we obviously can’t find them alone. Our month-long “show” is over on May 31. But we are still asking the questions — and hoping to cross paths with many others who are doing something similar.