

HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world

“What Will He Grow To” or the lessons of past pollution

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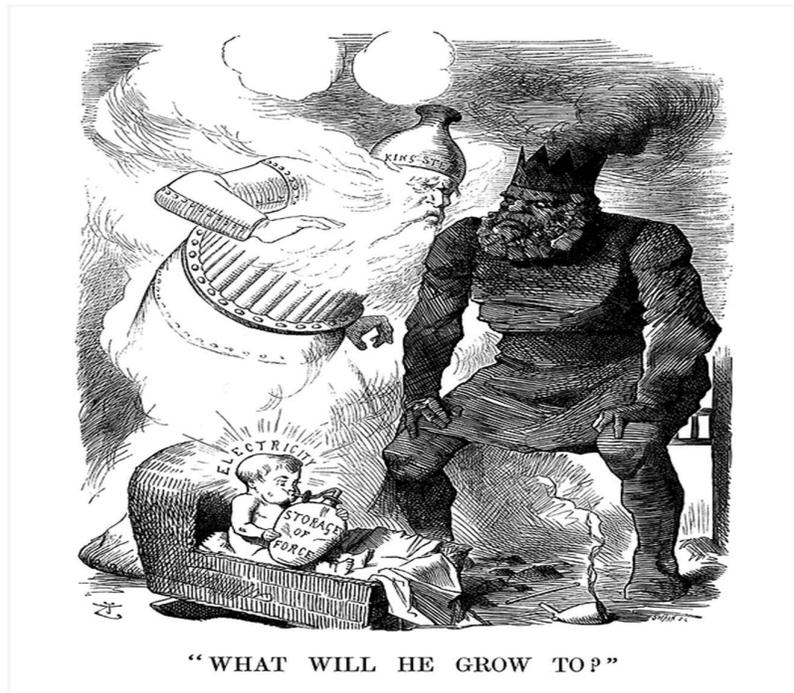


Figure 1 - *The steam king asks the coal king what the infant electricity will grow on.* Punch, June 25, 1881, p.295. Retrieved from *Punch cartoons on the Victorian era* <https://www.punch.co.uk/image/I0000QAudDYit5bo> on 12/06/2020

The excellence of Victorian cartoon offers some contributions to environmental historians to discover what society thought about its energy resources. “What Will He Grow To”, published in the magazine “Punch” on June 25, 1881, John Tenniel (1820-1914) stressed the uncertainties about the uses of electricity, in light of the weight that steam engine and coal maintained. The exercise of supplying entire communities under the growing sign of goods and commodities production concentrated the most diverse debates on the knowledge of energy sources. Likewise, if the knowledge of the harmful effects on human health (and the planet) from certain sources was indeed sparse, the fact

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is that we can attribute specific incursions in the fight against pollution to the Victorian era.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the increase in demand and the intensification of coal use, as well as the widespread use of steam engines, have increased the levels of pollution resulting from industrial activity. In addition, the eight hundred society faced this period with its own anxieties. John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896), for example, criticized the loss of the natural character of rural areas. Others addressed environment's degradation as the cause of the physical and moral degeneration of the British people. Smoking would be the protective mantle of crime and immorality. However, the same smoke allowed 19th century reformers to unite in an effort to isolating it from the human community (with the contributions of scientists, scholars, politicians and the first associations to combat environmental degradation). It was, therefore, the symbol of the need for change.

In terms of pollution, the current numbers show the effect of stopping industrial and commercial activity. An abrupt decline in greenhouse gas production is accompanied by an abrupt decline in coal consumption as well as oil barrel prices. A possibility to deepen the ambitious energy transition re-emerges in this panorama of global slowdown. More than a crucial moment of transition, the values in question show us a pause, which generates expectations, but whose causes do not arise from the application of the constitutive norms of international treaties, or from political training in favor of an energy agenda. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that the air or water pollution values will return to the average of recent years.

Revealing the willingness to act in the face of the immeasurable climatic phenomena's reality, the hope of changing daily habits for the general population is an attempt to appease or mitigate the anxieties inherent in the contexts of the emerging and global crisis. For environmental historians, the 21st century will, in this sense, be an endless laboratory for verifying the fragility of the human condition. Perhaps for the so-called Anthropocene - the new geological scale proposed by several scientists in which the effects of Man on the globe have become irreversible -, the multiplication of anxieties is a sociological condition to which it is impossible to escape.

In these times when we are celebrating a pyrrhic victory against the high levels of pollution that have been with us for tens and tens of years, it is useful to remember that we will need many efforts to bring about a change so ambitious and so difficult to achieve.

Further reading:

- Thorsheim, P. (2006). *Inventing Pollution. Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Pinto, L. (2020, July 14). EDP antecipa encerramento das centrais de carvão na Península Ibérica. Público. Retrieved from <https://www.publico.pt/2020/07/14/economia/noticia/edp-antecipa-encerramento-centrais-carvao-peninsula-iberica-1924314>, in 15 July, 2020.

How to cite: José Rafael Soares - «“What Will He Grow To” or the lessons of past pollution » [online]. Porto: Rede Portuguesa de História Ambiental, 2020. Available at <http://www.reportha.org/en/news/item/529-naturae-theatrum-et-mundum-the-theatre-of-nature-and-the-world-o-teatro-da-natureza-e-o-mundo>.