

**John McNeill - *Bison Hide and Elephant Ivory: Global Environmental History of the Industrial Revolution*, (Thursday 21 January 2021, Oxford University History Society)**

**Daniel Hubbard**

The Society's first lecture of term was provided by Professor John McNeil of Georgetown University who spoke about his upcoming book on the environmental effects of the industrial revolution.

McNeil's central thesis was that while the local effects of industrialisation on cities like Manchester and New York are well known, the industries of northern Europe and the US remade vast tracts of the planet's environment across what he described as "ecological teleconnections". McNeil defined this term as describing the connection between areas which produced the "ingredients" of industrialisation such as South America and the industrial centers themselves. At the center of this thesis is the "incontrovertible fact" that rise in cheap and abundant energy during the 19th century both created new "teleconnections" and intensified those already existing.

His inspiration for this work came from a line in Andrew Isenberg's book *The Destruction of the Bison* which stated the main reason for the near-extinction of the North American bison was the demand in Europe for its high quality leather to be used in the belts of machines in cotton mills. This is opposed to the common idea that it was from overhunting or attempts by the US government to deprive Native Americans of their main food source. McNeil's research has gone on to reveal a network of "teleconnections" which spanned the surface of the earth, with his talk focused on a series of different "ingredients" which defined the era. He described how prior to settlement, the Canterbury Plains area of New Zealand was 80% forested, but between 1840-1890 it was almost completely deforested to provide grazing land for sheep whose wool was shipped to Europe. Also he noted how between 1890-1940 10 million hectares of forest in Argentina were cleared to exploit the Quebracho tree, the heartwood of which was the most sought after dye for luxury leather goods. As industrialisation produced new wealth, pianos became a must-have status symbol for the middle class with elephant ivory needed to provide the veneer for piano keys. Much of the world's pianos were made in Ivoryton, Connecticut, where the Cheney Company consumed the tusks of up to 150,000 poached elephants between 1870-1900 for its pianos.

It is therefore clear that the industrial revolution shaped the landscape far beyond the hills of Yorkshire or Rhine Valley, but McNeil ended the talk with some questions which he still has unanswered. He plans to stop his work at 1900, having already written two books on environmental history in the 20th century, but confessed that he cannot come up with a more intellectual justification for this standpoint. Furthermore, he wondered if the "spatial" idea of teleconnections could be stretched to a chronological one, taking into account the carbon dioxide emitted in the 19th century which still impacts our world today.

**Marzia Casolari - *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism* (Tuesday 22 February 2021, Oxford University History Society)**

**Aoife Miralles**

The Society welcomed Dr Marzia Casolari from the University of Torino for its sixth online lecture of the term, which focused on Casolari's most recent publication: *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism* (London, 2020). The work was originally published in 2011; Casolari decided to produce an updated edition in 2020.

In the lecture, Casolari sought to highlight the connections between Italian fascism and Hindu nationalism that developed within the context of the anti-British foreign policy pursued by Italy in the twentieth century. She argued that contact with fascist political literature and Mussolini left a deep impression upon Marathi nationalists, particularly with regard to the organisational practicalities of fascism. This, Casolari noted, influenced the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindutva ideology, both of which continue to inform Indian politics today.

Research for the book commenced in the 1990s. At that time, many Indian intellectuals and activists were criticising the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a leading right-wing party whose policies have historically reflected Hindu nationalist positions and had close links with the RSS. Casolari noticed that criticism was often couched in terms of the similarities between the uniform of RSS militants and those of fascist paramilitary organisations; this was the main evidence cited for links between Italian fascism and Hindu right-wing organisations. She became curious about whether there might be more substantial, ideological connections between the Indian Hindu right-wing organisations and fascism. Pursuing this subject in her research, Casolari drew upon unpublished archival records identified by her former supervisor, Professor Partha Sarathi Gupta of Delhi University. In doing so, she found ideological similarities and active contact between adherents of fascism and Indian organisations.

Casolari's decision to modify and republish her work was strongly grounded in the context of India's current political climate. In the lecture, Casolari spoke of her concern with the influential role played by the BJP and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By way of example, she cited the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill in December 2019. Although this measure allowed any Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, or Parsi immigrant who came into India from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Afghanistan before 2015 to legally become a citizen, it excluded Muslims. This discrimination was striking, given Islam's position as the second largest religion in India today.

In such policies, according to Casolari, one can find substantial evidence of the "cultural nationalism" of India's past – a "nationalism" based upon the negation of cultural differences. To conclude the

lecture, Casolari emphasised the importance of further investigation into this previously historiographically-neglected, but ever-relevant topic.

**Report on Brenda Stevenson - *Personal Geographies of Upper South Enslaved Females: Body, Family, Forest and Imagination* (Thursday, 25 February 2021, Oxford University History Society)**

**Zachary Handler**

On 25 February 2021 the Oxford University History Society hosted a lecture by Brenda Stevenson entitled: “Personal Geographies of Upper South Enslaved Females: Body, Family, Forest and Imagination.” The lecture was special because, while Stevenson is currently a professor at UCLA, in the fall she will be coming to Oxford as the first Hillary Rodham Clinton Chair of Women’s History. This was thus her introduction to interacting with Oxford students. She seemed to be engaged by the questions that students posed to her, and hopefully this will prove to be a very fruitful partnership.

The lecture focused upon a particular enslaved woman named Fanny Berry. Berry was interviewed about her experiences as a slave in the 1930s as part of the Works Project Administration’s collection of interviews with formerly enslaved people. This interview was the main source that Stevenson used to reconstruct Berry’s life and mind. Berry was born and lived as a slave in Appomattox County, Virginia (the famous site of Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses S. Grant). Berry did not know the exact date of her birth, and gave contradictory accounts of when it might be.

Stevenson is particularly interested in using Berry’s account to explore the mindset and imagination of enslaved women, as opposed to just the material facts of their lives. Much of the lecture focused upon the role of the forest in Berry’s life. It was a place of familial nurture, and also of resistance. One example from the talk highlights both roles: Fanny’s mistress would have her dog bite the toes of Fanny’s brother to amuse dinner guests. So Fanny lured the dog into the wood and hanged it. In this way she both protected her brother and resisted her slaver.

Berry showed a particular interest in heroic women resisters. She recounted the story of Sukie, who managed to fend off an attempted rape by her master by putting his butt in boiling water. Stevenson talked about how black women fended off these assaults in part due to wanting to preserve their reputation as they could in their conditions.

The stories that Stevenson shared are only a part of a longer paper, which she unfortunately did not have the time to go through fully. Stevenson wanted to impress upon the attendees how perceptive

Berry was, and that she had a real methodology to her observations. In the q and a section she discussed how the first book specifically about enslaved women was only published in the 1970s, and that even for a while after that not much attention was paid to their stories. Stevenson really wants to engage the intellect and skills of enslaved women, and so this lecture forms a part of that larger project.