

The expedition of Captain Franklin: A premonitory story of self-destruction.

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SUMMARY

Throughout the times mankind has constantly repeated the same mistakes, even at the risk of self-destruction. The terrible story of Captain Franklin expedition that ended in disaster for self-poisoning two centuries ago metaphorically exemplifies one of those serious and recurrent faults: our conception of progress founded often in destructive technologies.

In the early nineteenth century the world was in a process of unprecedented expansion of trade when team power multiplied exponentially industrial production that required more raw materials and new markets to place production. A relations scheme conceived globally where a large part of the world supplied primary products for a small number of countries that monopolized their transformation into high value-added goods to be marketed worldwide.

An intense transit of goods across the globe framed in commercial purposes and in the belief in the infinity of natural resources was then generated. We know which was the path followed by this conception of the world over the

following centuries: colonization, wars, plunder, unbridled production of non-renewable and contaminant energy, etc., all based on a ferocious exploitation based on economic purposes only.

In recent decades the planet desperately calls a re-channeling of modes of production, trade and energy in front of the environmental emergency. That led to a healthy reaction crystallized in the series of Climate Change Conventions, the last held in Paris in December 2015, although its implantation seems not to reach the necessary rhythm.

THE EXPEDITION

Within this scenario is presented as revealing the unfortunate story of Captain John Franklin expedition,

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commissioned by the British Admiralty in 1845 with the aim of finding a suitable trade sea route through the Arctic between Britain and Russia. This project was one of many that were carried out by that time when it was imperative to reduce transportation costs to satisfy insatiable commercial appetites.



Sir John Franklin¹

An expedition was formed with the best crew, experienced on cruises of this kind, and with the most advanced technology of the time: steamships with sanitary water installation among many other technical advances.

The two boats, called Erebus and Terror, sailed on May 19 and after a couple months at sea nothing was heard from them.

There were sent rescue ships without success until three graves with the names of crew members and some rests of the expedition were found in 1850 on an island in northern Canada. Later, in 1859 was found a letter confirming the terrible misfortune. Many had become ill and eventually all died. Years later other traces appeared. In 1984 analysis were performed on the bodies to clarify the causes of the deaths. The result was surprising: in addition to various diseases they were found to have a very high amount of lead.

The existence of this metal in such quantities was considered one of the most likely causes of the deaths. The question was then where would it come from, and the answer was not difficult to obtain: At first from the pipes of water installation of the ships, built with this material. That's how tragically and paradoxically the most modern technology led them to failure and death.

In addition lead also came from another surprising source: the cans of packaged food for the journey. Canning was another avant-garde technique at the time, and lead was used as closing and sealing material, ignoring the lethal danger it entailed.

But it not only was the use of this hazardous to health technique what led to disaster. By thoroughly

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researching everything related to this tragedy it was found that for reasons not established the contract

The predominance above every other consideration, of economic ambition was what apparently led to



Map of probable routes followed by Erebus and Terror ships during the expedition of Captain Franklin²

for the provision of the necessary cans was signed just a few weeks before sailing. That was how the rush, or perhaps finding some savings, produced a faulty work that ended up mixing liquid lead with food. This apparently sickened all the crew with the terrible end as we know it was.

save on something as essential as food on board, and finally to disaster.

No less decisive it seems to have been the pride of blind faith in the the new chniques without having experienced enough and having evaluated the risks, attitude so

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related to many of the disasters of mankind of today.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE FRANKLIN EXPEDITION

Let us now direct metaphor to which we referred at the beginning. Comparing the tragedy of Captain Franklin with the way we used natural resources in the past 250 years we find the same motivations and the same mistakes:

The false belief that forests, minerals, water, fertile land, clean oceans and fresh air are inexhaustible was the driving force behind the development and production model in whose first steps the failed Franklin expedition must be framed.

An absolute confidence in wrong and poisonous technologies, putting them at the service of devouring of non-renewable raw materials and waste of clean energy lifestyles for the sake of fierce commercial appetites led us to the current chaotic state of the environment.

Our civilization embarked on an expedition guided only by ambition and supported in the wrong technology, as Captain Franklin and his unfortunate crew, paradigm of the most modern of its time.

They were not aware of what they were doing. Humanity today does

and that's why it's unforgivable not to act as urgency demands.

Fortunately, unlike those unlucky men, it seems we realized the error, we turned the tide halfway and we understood that we must get rid of what destroys us and stop the poisoning.

It's a beginning, but firm. The Paris Agreement must be the guide that will save humankind of self-destruction avoiding we left caught in the ice of our own ambition and poisoned by our technologies and our food.

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NOTAS AL PIE

¹ By Artist: William Derby (1786-1847), Engraver: James Thomson

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