NO MORE STRIKE ANYWHERE

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Translations from the Swedish by Jennifer Hayashida
i. History as distant, obscured, linear and privileged

ii. History as ceaseless negotiation, eternally subject to at least two sets of power relations:
   a. Now and Then
   b. The interwar period

The line above appears to begin on the left and end on the right, but actually continues beyond the edges of the photograph. This continuous line represents a stock price, and this price is then also an illustration of the evaluation of a corporation’s worth. The line charts a distance between hope and reality, the proximity between investment and return.

Georg Lukács, writing in 1919, two years after Ivar Kreuger began the work of consolidating Swedish matchstick production:

And because every society tends to ‘mythologise’ the structure of its own system of production, projecting it back into the past, this past—and even more the future—appear likewise to be determined and controlled by such laws. It is then forgotten that the birth and the triumph of this system of production is the fruit of the most barbaric, brutal and naked use of ‘extra-economic’ violence.
Peeling machines
for splint-and box-veneer.
Latest construction with automatic recoil.

Type SGC
with 2 feed spindles, universal scoring apparatus and pressure bar
for peeling an unbroken veneer for splints.
“There were others who had forced their way to the top from the lowest rung by the aid of their bootstraps.”
James Joyce, *Ulysses*

What does it mean to write about the once-powerful, the value of an object or idea when its precious assets have been liquidated? When what was once prominent now seems arcane and useless, entered into the realm of nostalgists and apologists? How, then, to describe a rise to power in reverse, from the vantage point of hindsight?

A fiction without national specificity: it encourages obsession with power, a dream of economic conquest and rituals of convenience and ease. We identify with those who make the most of their circumstances, but when they succeed and we do not, a line appears to chart the distance between us. In certain fictions, the state intervenes and distributes success equally amongst us.
Although an engineer by training, Kreuger's accomplishments lay in the distribution of the match, not its initial conception. Swedish chemist Gustaf Erik Pasch (1788 – 1962) was a grower of silkworms and also the inventor of waterproof concrete and the safety match (1844), made from red phosphorous instead of the poisonous yellow or white phosphorous. The match is safe when this less toxic phosphorous is moved from the match head to the striking surface. However, the prohibitive cost of red phosphorous and the difficulty of designing a functional striking surface prevented Pasch's design from succeeding. Ten years after Pasch's discovery, the Lundström brothers, Jan Edvard and Carl Frans, through engineering and business acumen, made it possible to produce the safety match inexpensively and rapidly. The brothers founded the first Swedish match factory, located in Jönköping, and quickly became wealthy industrialists. In 1917, the Lundström brothers’ factories had been incorporated into Kreuger's matchstick corporation, AB Svenska Tändsticksaktiebolaget, consisting of 170 Swedish match factories.
Poster, 1936
August, 2007

E writes that she has seen the Solstickan (“sun stick”) boy in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*. It’s a ubiquitous image – the child in simple silhouette against a blue background, a sun beaming from the top left-hand corner – seen as a sign of Swedish national tradition. The image was designed by Swedish artist Einar Neiman and is a hastily designed composite of Thumbelina and Neimar’s son, Tom. It decorates the Solstickan matchboxes, glimpsed in *Persona*. A tiny percentage – a few öre per box – of the proceeds from the sale of these matches go to the Solstickan Foundation, founded in 1936 with the mission to supplement gaps in social welfare for children and the elderly.
The mannequin illustrates an instance of early domestic piecework and match-stick production. Although her hands are beyond the frame of the photograph, we know that she is engaged in the packaging of safety matches. She sits in a museum in Jönköping, forever gazing into the wall, the stick-by-stick nature of her task neither a rags-to-riches fantasy nor a complete failure of the nation to care for its own. Situated as a break with the present, she is oppression written down as then: “What relief!” says the schoolchild upon being told, “only ghosts live like this.”
Troget arbete och sist en trogen bön gör dagen glad och gör kvällen skön

Loyal work and lastly a loyal prayer make the day a joy and the evening easy
The museum housed in the building located in the city heralded as the 19th century birthplace of the safety match quaintly leaves its discussion of labor politics, phossy jaw, and strikes behind glass and in vitrines. This image of a victorious match workers union after their first strike in 1890— is decorously affixed to a machine that dipped the tip of each stick in phosphorous. Phossy jaw— brought about by exposure to white and yellow phosphorous— caused the jaw bone to abscess, which in turn lead to severe facial disfigurement and the release of a foulsmelling drainage from the dying bone. The jaw bone rotted away and could glow in the dark with a greenish-white fluorescence. Since matchstick production depended upon child labor and domestic piecework— each without any worker safeguards— phossy jaw was particularly prevalent among women and children.
In the case of Krueger, as in general during the interwar period of colonial exploitation, rights and benefits at home for those in Northern Europe were accrued through exploitations elsewhere. Kreuger’s contribution to the times was a manipulation of corporate structures, lending agreements, and leased monopolies on publicly owned trusts – pulp, timber, matches and more – so that the scale of production by far exceeded the scale of political governance of any one state. The loan structures he pioneered offered cash-strapped states such as Germany, Poland, Romania, and Italy funds borrowed on the US bond market at rates better than any state government would offer. Bundled with these loans would be a match monopoly.
Vertical monopolies enabled Kreuger to unload Swedish aspen at his matchstick factories in India. Another element of Kreuger’s legacy lies in the majority ownership of his suppliers: lumber, pulp, steel – all bore the mark of Kreuger’s influence and remain in place today as supposed markers of Swedish entrepreneurial spirit and natural plenty. Consider Kreuger’s next aims, only partly realized if at all, which focused on telephony and petroleum. The seemingly contemporary nature of these two objectives suggests part of why Swedes who still revere Kreuger do so with the conviction that he, as a financial innovator, is responsible for carrying Sweden into a global economic modernity. What was assembled as Svenska Tändsticksaktiebolaget in 1917 became Swedish Match in 1980, with a period as International Match Corporation in-between. To this day, Swedish Match has a Swedish monopoly on cigars, and remains a major producer of tobacco products which ironically circumvent the match: butane lighters and snuff, or smokeless tobacco.
“Here in America, the discoveries regarding Kreuger’s business dealings have of course been shocking, but say what you will, it is true that many people in this country admire a man who can pull the wool over others’ eyes and get away with it. If the information that Kreuger had fled to the East Indies were true, many people in this country would have erupted in a new and heartfelt hero worship, but the suicide – Kreuger’s defeat – significantly mutes the praise. All other Americans have nothing to say about the matter. It is not fun for America’s financiers to admit that they have been fooled by a foreigner.”

“Yankee Romanticism Around Kreuger” *The Social Democrat*, 1932
Krueger & Toll Buy Phone Stock Abroad

Swedish Purchase Seen Move to Compete with I.T.&T.

Lee, Higgins & Co., bankers for Krueger & Toll, today were awaiting confirmation of overnight advices from Stockholm that their clients had acquired a large interest in the L. M. Ericsson Telephone Co., Swedish equipment concern.

Communications officials in Wall Street viewed the reported purchase as bringing Krueger & Toll into direct competition with the International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. for foreign telephone systems and the manufacture of equipment.

The Krueger interests, it is believed, will seek government monopolies in return for floating national loans, if their past policy as pursued in the match industry, is carried out. Already they have match monopolies in France, Jugoslawia, Hungary and Roumania.

The I. T. & T. operates on a large scale in France and Hungary, but it is not believed the company will adopt Krueger & Toll's methods even should active competition develop. It was reported, however, that I. T. & T. advertisers can do considerable harm to the Puhone for industrial and apartment systems.
No More Strike Anywhere

“Tänd en Solsticka och sprid glädje bland barn och gamla.”
Light a Sunstick and spread joy amongst children and the elderly.

Solsticksan Foundation slogan, circa 1936

This is an essay about neoliberalism’s prehistory, about the trajectory of Swedish social democracy, glimpsed here in the context of its beginnings in the early 1930s. This is also an essay about a man who portrayed himself as a modern-day Prometheus, the Greek god who stole fire from Zeus and brought this gift to mortals: the once-notorious Swedish entrepreneur, financier, and industrialist Ivar Kreuger (1880–1932).

In 1917, Kreuger founded Svenska Tändsticksaktiebolaget (The Swedish Matchstick Corporation). By 1931, he controlled an estimated 200 companies, both in Sweden and internationally. During the first third of the 20th century – and during the interwar years in particular – Kreuger capitalized on economic shifts in the global market, including the dawn of what we now term junk bonds and investment banking. At the height of his success, Ivar Kreuger was worth approximately 30 million Swedish kronor (the equivalent of 100 billion USD today) and had matchstick monopolies in at least 34 countries. He loaned money borrowed on the U.S. bond market at preferential rates to other nations in exchange for the aforementioned monopolies (actually long-term lease agreements on publicly held trusts). We follow other scholars who argue that this type of privatized crisis management was a precursor to the formation of the International Monetary Fund. Consequently, we hold that Kreuger’s international loan and monopoly leases of publicly held trusts are more brutishly contemporary than they are quaint.

“No More Strike Anywhere” is based on research we initiated in the summer of 2007, and is a component of Room of the Sun, a larger project dealing with Kreuger’s empire of matches. When we began, we were interested in learning more about the development and implementation of neoliberal economics outside the United States: could we trace a kind of play between capitalist expansion and nation-state which might confuse prevailing wisdom about our “globalized” present? Kreuger’s combination of megalomania, financial creativity, benevolent philanthropy, and historical obscurity made him a compelling figure through which to pursue these questions. The context of Swedish social democracy and the international impression of that country as a cradle-to-grave welfare state quickly generated a variety of questions concerning the relationship between national ideology and the idea of a national economic hero/scoundrel. From a story-telling standpoint, Kreuger’s narrative lends itself to alternately tragic and scandalous interpretations: in 1932, following the U.S. stock
market crash and the subsequent discovery that stocks issued by Kreuger were in fact without value, the Match King committed suicide in his Paris apartment. The circumstances surrounding his death remain disputed and this posthumous debate illustrates his continuing and contradictory significance as national traitor and/or saint.

Throughout our interviews and archival visits, we repeatedly returned to the question of what people saw in Ivar Kreuger that caused them to believe in his economic fictions, to – literally – buy into his stories. Consequently, we came to look more closely at not only the “facts” of his matchstick empire (banking statements, documentation of police investigations, courtroom testimonies) but also at its narrative texture and contradictions. In particular, what role did the media of the time play in promoting Kreuger’s agenda, and how do photographs from that same period reveal cracks in a narrative of economic and national stability? How does postcolonial hindsight and a “global” context challenge us to reinterpret interwar-era images of workers – in this instance, in Sweden and in India – as representations of an economic past, present, and future?

The visual vocabulary of “No More Strike Anywhere” is taken from archival materials that include newspaper clippings, 70-something shelf meters of documentation from criminal bankruptcy proceedings, visits to the matchstick museum in Jönköping, a book of photographs supposedly given to Kreuger by his Indian workers as a gesture of their gratitude on his 50th birthday, as well as interviews with a variety of Kreuger scholars and conspiracy theorists. We do not intend to tell a full story or answer questions regarding Kreuger’s persona or legacy: rather, the intention behind this project is to read the dialogue between images; to explore how our place in a U.S.-inflected economic and political present affects our understanding of another country’s economic history, and how that history in turn foreshadows contemporary narratives concerning economic successes and failures. A flowchart such as the one that begins this essay comprises the type of necessary fiction that economists and historians deal in, inherent with its implied relationships between facts, figures, dates, and events. “No More Strike Anywhere” is a flowchart of sorts, where images that bear a relationship to the subjective rearticulations of power hopefully point to the awkwardness and volatility of the relationship between image and story, as well as how identification with images has real economic and social consequences in the present.

In dialogue with each other, these structures of depicting and interpreting the world – charts, testimonies, and photographs alike – should be revealed as subjective, deliberate, and equally susceptible to attempts at ideological revision. Our utilization of a mode of documentary reference, where images might imply but also destabilize their historical contingency, offers an opportunity for complexity and confusion to have direct implications for our understanding (or confusion) in relation to the present. The idea is not to familiarize a reader with Ivar Kreuger the man, but rather to distance the reader from her/his relationship to abstract possibilities (or impossibilities) in the present, and in so doing to place the reader closer to questions having to do with national fiction-making and how we collectively can work to re-frame and re-articulate the present as we here seek to re-frame and re-articulate the past.