

# On Possibility

Or, The Monkey Wrench

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The monkey wrench. Almost nobody uses one anymore, except as an aid to nostalgia: perhaps you've seen one hung on the wall of a country diner, a memento of the unremembered simplicity of pie-and-coffee times; or maybe you've seen them displayed proudly—three for five dollars—as knickknacks at a local flea market. Or, if you're of the activist persuasion, you might recognize the wrench as it crosses a stone club on the insignia of the direct-action, antimodern environmental group Earth First! But you almost certainly won't see a monkey wrench at work—they were replaced, in the waning decades of the twentieth century, by lighter, more precise wrenches, and today, if it is used at all, the monkey wrench is mostly a tool for assembling supposed histories made of air (plate 9).

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Perhaps this was all genetically predetermined: the tool has no birthdate, no clear nationality, no uncontested paternity. Though some credit Charles Moncky, a British emigrant to the United States, with conceiving the thing sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, others hold that the American machinist and factory owner Loring Coes delivered forth the tool—or appropriated the design from an employee named Monk . . . or bought the design from a man named Monckey. It is true that Coes held an 1841 patent for what he called the “screw wrench,” and it's also true that Coes's wrenches became the industry standard for what an adjustable wrench ought to be, though there's a debate among American tool enthusiasts, flushed with nationalist anxiety, whether Coes's patent makes the monkey wrench American, or whether the thing is simply an updated version of the

eighteenth-century English carriage wrench. The debate may be moot, because it also seems likely that the term “monkey wrench” predated Coes—collectors have turned up references to the tool as early as 1807, a date of which the Oxford English Dictionary is skeptical—and it seems that by the time the *Natchez Daily Courier* ran an advertisement in 1838 for a local hardware store, the tool was well known enough to need no explanation. Maybe the wrench is named for an inventor. Maybe not. Maybe it’s a bastardization of “moving wrench,” as some believe, or a tongue-slipped consonant away from its technical classification as a “non-key wrench.” Non-key; non-key; non-key: say it fast enough, frequently enough, and it’s possible that evolution occurred. Or maybe there’s an act of recursive instrumentalization at work: since the seventeenth century, manual laborers have been sneered at as monkeys—powder monkeys loaded cannons and grease monkeys maintain cars. A plumber with whom I once worked on a Rockefeller estate (I installed lawn sprinklers during breaks from college to help pay for school) referred to all of us with rough hands, bitterly, as “dumb wrenches.” Maybe monkey wrenches are the only tools simple enough for the least of us to wield.

Whatever its history might be, what a monkey wrench is is less important than what it does. I have one, now, on my desk, and I’ve come to think that historical mystification is the work of the stubborn tool itself. Once used everywhere lithe human muscle struggled against iron intransigence, the monkey wrench had a hand in building the entire towering, now tottering mechanical skeleton of the industrialized, modern world—of the Anthropocene. Perhaps the wrench’s latest act is to refashion history by twisting the historian’s linear, rational, absolute time into its own likeness: like its past, like our future, the monkey wrench is literally a question mark.

And so the wrench asks us: what is this Anthropocene—this age in which, the term’s inventors tell us, man makes everything anew; this age whose occluded dawn is pegged to the very years of the humble wrench’s unrecorded birth? An imprecise tool—its toothless jaws are only grossly adjustable—the monkey wrench nevertheless firmly catches the slippages of others: the casual sexism of defining an era as “man’s” and the injustice of assuming that humankind, Exxon-Mobil board member and migrant laborer alike, is equally responsible for the industrial revolution; for the proliferation of wealth’s byproduct, carbon dioxide; for the great die-off of flora and fauna marking this, the sixth age of extinction; for the poisoning of our atmosphere, our water, our soil, our bodies. The monkey wrench catches the slippage of how the name Anthropocene calls attention to what humans have done to the world while ignoring what we’ve done to each

other, and holds it still for a moment, still enough for us to puzzle over the oddity of our situation, of an accidental age named for human ineptitude.

And so the wrench allows us, if we pause in our work for a moment longer, to consider inequality—*whose* labor built the Anthropocene? *Whose* labor laid the rails, fitted the pipes, shoveled the coal, felled the trees, grew the grain, picked the cotton, slaughtered the cattle, sailed the ships, forged the iron, drilled the wells, trucked the oil, poured the concrete, assembled the engines, mined the ore, strung the wires giving light, motion, form, and strength to the Age of Man? *Whose* labor brought many millions of tool-handling workers into the world? *Where* did all this work happen? What parts of the world were looted for their wealth—their precious ores, soils, trees, and animals—and what parts of the world have become dumping grounds for the toxic effluvia of industry? Which parts of the world will be saved from the worst effects of the Anthropocene, and which derelict Atlantises will be left to slip beneath rising, acidified seas?

The monkey wrench reminds us that on the other side of every cost stands a profiteer, and when once again held in a warm human hand, the wrench confronts us: *who* profited from its work and *who* has paid the costs? I bought my first monkey wrench on eBay for \$15.00 (it now lives in the Deutsches Museum), and it was once owned by someone who stamped his initials—MAM—into it in two places. It was a valued instrument. No doubt the wrench also left its impression on MAM: monkey wrenches were notorious for slipping under high pressure, just when their users most needed their jaws to bite securely on a nut. When it slipped, workers got hurt—bloody knuckles and purple bruises, and I wonder: what was MAM paid, and was it compensation enough for his spilled blood? How much of the sweat from the monkey's brow went to sate the enormous appetite of another with cleaner, softer, probably whiter hands?

If, as Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer argue, the Anthropocene was born amid the atmosphere-altering exhaust coughing from the coal-fired steam engines powering the Industrial Revolution, engines that within a hundred years would start firing on refined petroleum, then it's also true that the Anthropocene's other parent was the exhausted worker toiling away at those same machines that devoured the countryside and, all too often, the humans who tended them. There was a third, of course: he who converted humans and nature into resources, merely assets awaiting conversion into capital.

This is, after all, how profit works in the Age of Man.

Words, like wrenches, are tools that help us get a grip on the world, and names are micro-narratives, stories that ascribe responsibility, advocate for morality, and seed possibility. So perhaps Anthropocene is the wrong term (or the right one

for deflecting too-pointed questions). Perhaps not all humans bear equal guilt, just as not all have reaped equal rewards. Perhaps Plutocracene, the Age of the Wealthy, is a better fit, or Kleptocracene, the Age of Thieves, the age when the productivity of the earth and all its living things was stolen away.

Of course, tools are only infrequently aids to past reflection. Most often, we use them to build, and they always anticipate future action. If the Anthropocene is the ironic result of a scientific, technological, economic, and political drive to control nature and humans alike, an age that was supposed to usher in great prosperity, but which paradoxically impoverishes everything, then the wrench asks us what we will do about it. Yet no tool, even one as uncomplicated as the monkey wrench, is simple.

If it seems built to turn a bolt, its hammerhead testifies that monkey wrenches were also used to bash a stuck bolt. Tools can demolish. By 1907 the monkey wrench found itself a comrade in industrial sabotage, followed shortly by a grammatical shift: the noun became an unspaced verb—to monkeywrench—with an activist connotation: if you don't like your master's world, tear it down. In 1975 the monkey wrench emerged as a potent symbol for environmental, antimodern direct-action when the American anarchist and environmentalist Edward Abbey set loose his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. The book—dedicated to the British loom-smashing critic of the Industrial Revolution, Ned Ludd—revolves around the dream of blowing up the Glen Canyon Dam, the five-million cubic-yard plug of cement impounding the Colorado River before it flows into the Grand Canyon, and it features a gang of malcontents who cut down telephone poles, burn highway billboards, and destroy bulldozers on their way to ridding the American West of its military-industrial complexes. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* helped to launch radical, direct-action deep ecology in the United States (which explains the Earth First! logo), and Abbey has long been an inspiration for all those wanting someone more militant than the lyrical John Muir, more uncompromising than the Big Green environmental organizations, like the Nature Conservancy, whose current president, Mark Tercek, worked at Goldman Sachs until the Great Recession of 2008. One of the Conservancy's slogans is “we pursue non-confrontational, pragmatic, market-based solutions to conservation challenges.” One of Abby's was “Oppose, resist, subvert, delay until the empire itself begins to fall apart. . . . We will outlive our enemies, and as my good old grandmother used to say, we will live to piss on their graves.” It's bracing stuff, and I'll admit to loving Abbey, though it's hard to miss the misogyny, the xenophobia, and the misanthropy that played an ever-increasing role in his writing.

And so the monkey wrench finally also asks us about the role that violence will, inevitably, play in the Anthropocene—the violence of species extinction, habitat

destruction, havoc-wreaking weather; the violence of an unchecked chemical assault on human bodies, or the resource scarcity driven by industry and the profit motive. It also asks us about the violence of resistant monkeywrenching, of smashing windows, spiking trees, burning Hummers, pouring corn syrup into the engines of construction equipment, liberating lab animals, blowing up dams. For whose benefit has, does, and will the monkey wrench do what kind of work?

I'm holding my monkey wrench right now, trying hard to hear what it has to say, amazed by the tool's blunt simplicity. What finally occurs to me is that for all its ability there is an awful lot that it cannot do: its reminds me, when I listen close, that the earth is emphatically not in our hands, no matter what the peddlers of Promethean narratives, those who would alter our atmosphere to manage solar radiation, or seed our oceans with iron carbon-absorbing filings, or promise to blast us all off to colonies on Mars, no matter what the technological utopians tell us. The Anthropocene may telegraph the end of Nature, the end of a force always independent from humans, the end of an endlessly exploitable bank of natural resources whose balance can never be overdrawn. The Anthropocene may also be the end of History, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the end of a distinctly human past plotted against a static, inert natural world. It may be the end of all the old master narratives that have given the modern age its distinctive shape—of the control of nature, of human progress, of a rising tide that lifts all boats—and also of the environmentalists' favored narrative of decline, the one where “man is everywhere a disturbing agent.” But perhaps this is a good thing, for the earth, it bears repeating, is not in our hands; only our tools are. And tools are nothing if not the possibilities of a new future made material.

I listen again, and realize that the monkey wrench's greatest strength—indeed, its intended purpose—is to turn the bolts connecting dissimilar things. Perhaps, in the Anthropocene, the wrench has a newfound purpose: securely bolting nature and society—whose separation has long signified the triumph of the modern, capital-hungry world—back together.

I don't particularly like the term “Anthropocene,” but perhaps with a little monkeywrenching it can be repurposed. It seems to me that, in the end, the Anthropocene is always a narrative of who “we” are and how we got “here,” which is to say that the Anthropocene is always a braided tale of history, people, and place. It also seems to me that wherever “here” is would be better if it was open to, and worked to the benefit of, and was cared for by all the “we” who historically built and continue to build it. There's no great knowledge needed to use a monkey wrench—it's nothing if not democratic—but neither is it capable of intricate work, and there's much beyond its control. It can't alter the past, for

instance, though it can fashion a future that finally meets its obligation to justice. And though it can shape the world, it can't control it. Whatever the monkey wrench builds will need to be constantly adjusted to local conditions, and therefore will remain easily manageable by anyone who can hold it.

Maybe this is a version of the Anthropocene that can work: a world—in the making, right now!—for *all* humans; a thoughtful world attuned to the past and to the durable presence of nature, both; a world built to honor that single obligation that Rachel Carson knew bound all living things together, the obligation to endure. Such work is good, whispers my monkey wrench. Such a world is good.

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