LIVE LIKE A RIVER Civilization and Schismogenesis by Brian Holmes



On a particularly intriguing page of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, David Graeber and David Wengrow describe the aesthetics of interior living spaces in the ruins of Çatalhöyük - a Neolithic city that arose on a wetland plain in southern Anatolia (contemporary Turkey) some nine thousand years ago. These interiors, they explain, were characterized by "central living rooms, no more than sixteen feet across, with the skulls and horns of cattle and other creatures projecting inwards from the walls, and sometimes outwards from the fittings and furnishings." Archaeologists initially assumed that their inhabitants had domesticated cattle, just as they had done with sheep and goats. However, later research showed that what first appeared to be cattle were really wild aurochs, suggesting that a choice had been made - a choice in

 David Graeber and David Wengrow, The Dawn of Everything (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), p. 212. favor of the hunt, and against domestication. What was the "element of cultural refusal" embodied in the auroch hunt? Did these early urbanites find some benefit in maintaining a relation with wild beasts, or, as we might say today, with an 'animal other'? Could the refusal to domesticate have been a positive bid for the creation of a particular kind of society? What sort of history were the Neolithic hunters trying to make?

Graeber and Wengrow insist on something crucial: History is always made in the present, and it ought to be told that way, not as though it obeyed some preordained scheme. In this and many other things they have drawn inspiration from a French anthropologist, Pierre Clastres, who showed that the thought of so-called primitive peoples could be situated within its own historical arc of development. In Society Against the State, Clastres discusses the gradual emergence of a form of sovereignty - and therefore, of coercive violence - among the Tupi-Guarani Indians of South America. In response to this emergent threat of sovereign violence, he charts the rise of a countervailing cultural form; a prophetic call to migration in search of the mythical "Land without Evil." For Clastres, the call to migration was a way of resisting the formation of a state, by dissolving it in the very process of its emergence - even if this meant the self-dissolution of Guarani society,2

Clastres had a tremendous impact on the counter-cultures of the 1970s. Cultural revolutionaries raised the banners of subversion, chaos and exodus, in hopes of a release from the state.³ Today, however, I have the impression that the work of the two Davids allows for a somewhat different take on the kinds of relations that a resistant society might have, not toward "the" state, but toward more singular configurations of power. Because in the analysis they have developed, there is no fixed proportion or necessary balance between the raw coercive violence that a sovereign state can wield, the organizational structure

- Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State (New York: Zone, 1987/1st French edition 1974), trans. Robert Hurley, pp. 189-218.
- For the culminating text in this vein, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine," in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia vol. II (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987/1st French edition 1980).

that it can impose, and the charismatic attraction that its leaders can generate. Even less is there a preexisting limit to the transformative capacities that society can exert through cooperation. Which leads to a directly political question, framed for the ecological revolutionaries of today: Can we smash only certain aspects of the state, while reworking others for a difficult future?

I'm interested in an arc of natural history that includes everything humans do, and particularly their cultural forms in the present era of political polarization and high-stakes conflict. So in this text I'm going to leave the Neolithic hunters and their beguiling aurochs behind, and only return to the Guarani people for the essential. In place of philosophical argument, I want to talk about the emergence and potential dissolution of a hydrological state in North and South America, right now. For drama's sake, I'll start this story with a bang.



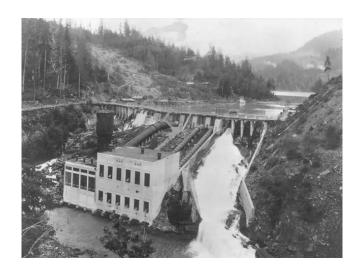
TAKE 'EM DOWN

On August 26, 2014, a final blast shook the valley. Glines Canyon Dam was no more. Its removal followed that of the lower dam, which had been dismantled gradually in 2011-12. At last the Elwha River ran free again, from its origins in the snowfields of Olympic National Park in Washington State, USA, to its delta and estuary along the Strait of San Juan de Fuca.

 Thomas Aldwell, Conquering the Last Frontier (Seattle: Artcraft Engraving and Electrotype Company, 1950). Just over a century had passed since the installation of the lower dam - a project spearheaded by a settler named Thomas Aldwell, who envisaged himself as "conquering the last frontier."4 With the dam, Aldwell brought hydropower to the region, ultimately to the benefit of the Crown-Zellerbach corporation that ran a paper mill in the nearby city of Port Angeles. For the sake of that paper - and the bureaucratic organization it enabled - the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe were denied access to one of the sites of their creation myth, located in the river valley. At the same time, and with devastating consequences for the same tribe, all five species of anadromous salmonids (Chinook, Coho, Chum, Sockeye and Pink salmon) were denied access to their spawning grounds above the lower dam, to which they had returned for millennia, following their uncanny homing instincts. The love of those fish - or the persuasive force of their animal charisma - is what brought the dams down. At the next summer run in 2015, even as some thirty million tons of formerly impounded sediment were still rebuilding the river delta, thousands of salmon could be seen spawning in the free-flowing waters.

The Elwha River dam removal and ongoing restoration is a model for the 21st century, when tens of thousands of irrigation and hydropoower dams that currently choke river valleys and starve delta regions of sediment will exceed their useful lifespan and become dangerously obsolescent. The so-called "rewilding" of river valleys offers an important chance for the preservation of biodiversity on a dying planet. The dream of taking down those dams was made real by a broad coalition of scientists, environmental NGOs, national park officials, sport fishers and nature

- Cf. American Rivers. "Free Rivers: The State of Dam Removal in the U.S." available at: https://www.americanrivers.org/2022/02/new-report-alert-free-riversthe-state-of-dam-removal-in-the-u-s.
- See Julia Guarino, "Tribal Advocacy and the Art of Dam Removal: The Lower Elwha Klallam and the Elwha Dams," American Indian Law Journal 2/1 (Fall 2013). For a general account including the political controversies, see Peter Brewitt, Same River Twice (Corvalis: Oregon State University Press, 2019), pp. 37-92.
- Gregory Bateson, "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis," Man 35 (1935), pp. 178-83.
- 8. Graeber and Wengrow, op. cit., pp. 175-209.



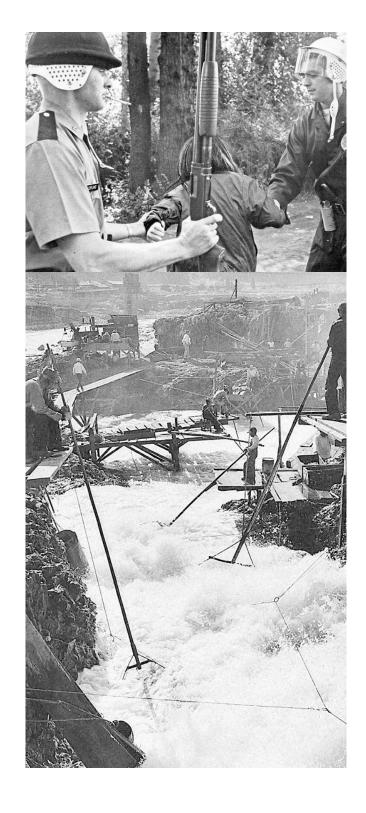
enthusiasts under the leadership of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, which due to its treaty status could engage in government-to-government negotiations with the United States.⁶ Only such a broad coalition could accomplish the goal, which involved undoing some of the cherished accomplishments of the twentieth century. It took almost thirty years to get there, but the final blast at Glines Canyon Dam marked a choice of civilization – a first step toward a possible future development path in what some people call the Bioregion of Cascadia. This is a transnational dream, still alive today, of a society with an ecological state.

As you might guess, the 350-million-dollar dam removal project faced paralyzing resistance from other groups of people: local residents, industrialists, conspiracy theorists, right-wing politicians. Coming hard on the heels of the controversies surrounding the EPA's protection of the spotted owl, and the consequent decline of the timber industry in many areas, the project sparked violent passions. The undamming of the Elwha followed the pattern of practical and aesthetic polarization that the anthropologist Gregory Bateson long ago described as "schismogenesis,"7 This process generates new desires, identities, forms of material culture and ways of living, as the Davids observe throughout The Dawn, particularly in their account of the cultural rivalries between the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest and the Yurok of present-day California,8 However, it can also set off a spiraling pattern of conflict escalation resulting in bitter rivalry and murder - as anyone can see with their own eyes in the Pacific Northwest today.

In Cascadia, schismogenesis began with the "fish wars" of the 1960s, when the tribes began to reassert their treaty rights to fish in all the "usual and accustomed grounds and stations." The reappearance of an active human presence that the entire colonization process had tried to suppress did not fail to raise the ire of many white sport fishers, who saw the indigenous dipnets as a breach of the law. The archetypal scene of those years featured a native guy being led off in handcuffs by a game warden, to the sound of jeers from angry whites. Thankfully, the conflict was laid to rest in 1974 with a federal court decision allocating fifty percent of harvestable fish to the tribes. 9 During the same period, the US Environmental Protection Agency was founded. A new generation entered the government agencies, and contemporary environmental policy began to be applied by state administrations. Not by chance, it was in the late Seventies that the idea of bioregionalism emerged, followed a decade later by the first map of Cascadia ("a dream image of a real place," according to mapmaker David McCloskey).10 Let's have a look back over this cultural history, and see how a charismatic species plays a role in a new schismogenic transformation of the Pacific Northwest region.

During the 1980s and up to today, a deep identification with the salmon has taken hold among many coastal inhabitants, in memory and admiration of these sparkling fish that formerly made their way in such large numbers from the deep ocean to the distant mountains.¹¹

- For the legal history, see Brian Ott, "Indian Fishing Rights in the Pacific Northwest," Boston College Environmental Law Review 14/2 (1987). For the cultural conflict, see American Friends Service Committee, eds., Uncommon Controversy (University of Washington Press, 1970), pp. 107-146.
- Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, "Reinhabiting California," The Ecologist 7/10 (1977); David McCloskey, Cascadia: a great green land on the northeast Pacific Rim (Seattle: Cascadia Institute, 1988) and "Cascadia," in Doug Aberly, ed., Futures by Design: The Practice of Ecological Planning (Gabriola Island, BC, and Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1994), p. 98.
- Edward Wolf and Seth Zuckerman, eds., Salmon Nation: People, Fish, and our Common Home (Portland: Ecotrust, 2003).



Because the fish were both sacred to the indigenous peoples, and a major source of sustenance for them, this identification was also a way to express the aspiration to racial justice. Yet the seasonal migration of the salmon had already gone into radical remission, verging on extinction for many river runs. More stringent limits were placed on the commercial and sportfishing catch, but to no avail. It was in the context of looming extinction that a new culprit was identified; the huge hydropower dams that had been installed across the region. 12 The dams first appeared as state-led programs to encourage the settlement of arid zones. Then they morphed into hydroelectric powerhouses for both aluminum and plutonium production during the Second World War, It was obvious at the time that they would block the annual salmon runs; and perhaps somewhat less obvious that the new reservoirs would warm the river waters beyond temperatures tolerable to the fish. But it didn't matter: this was the heroic age of American power, production and consumerism, and the dams remain some of that era's greatest symbols, despite the fact that their economic contributions have significantly declined.

The soaring dams are exemplars of what historian David Nye calls the "technological sublime." ¹³ They are still admired with a gasp by passing tourists. On a more intimate level, the reservoirs created by the dams are cherished for memories of beautiful sunny days by the lake, with a boat, a beer and a swim-mate. The iconoclastic environmentalism of coastal urbanites is experienced as a slap in the face by those who love what they have built, and who glorify the conquerors of the last frontier. This love of an extractive past has given us the rebel yell of Trumpism. Across the world, such processes of cultural metamorphosis are pitting the older beneficiaries of industrial modernism against younger and more precarious generations, who are losing all futurity to the fire and melting ice of climate

- See Brian Holmes, Learning from Cascadia, online map, "Watershed/Dams" section, available at: https:// cascadia.ecotopia.today/#/watershed/dams.
- David E. Nye, American Technological Sublime (Boston: MIT Press, 1994).
- 14. Jacques Leslie, "On the Northwest's Snake River, the Case for Dam Removal Grows," YaleEnvironment360 (October 10, 2019), available at: https://e360.yale.edu/features/on-the-northwests-snake-river-the-case-for-dam-removal-grows

change. And in Cascadia, this schismogenesis shows no sign of abating. In recent years even more charismatic animals, the Orcas of the Salish Sea, have begun to die in full view of the TV cameras - presumably for lack of their primary food, Chinook salmon. Under the orange skies of the great fires, public pressure has risen for the takedown of four large dams on the Lower Snake River. 14 Yet despite the Elwha victory, this call for the dissolution of the hydrological state is hitting the stone wall of polarized America. Even as smaller dams come down by the dozens, the grand symbolic barriers of industrial modernism still hold.

Maybe you're surprised about people who identify with fish. But ask yourself: With whom do I identify? Is it a place, an animal, an institution, a machine, a human being? What kind of aesthetics do I embody? What kind of cosmos do I inhabit? What kind of future will I fight for? These are the existential sticking-points of the civilization question: the choices that each individual confronts on the collective path toward a new social form. No doubt I'm a crazy ecologist, but it seems to me that a taste for rivers, rather than lakes – or for swamps, rather than dry land – could turn out to be the hinge of planetary development in the 21st century.

BIOCULTURES

Let's look at a project for social-ecological change that's currently unfolding in the Southern Cone of Latin America. Its actors are the members of the transnational network Humedales sin fronteras, or Wetlands without Borders. These people do not identify with a specific animal, but instead, with a particular type of place. They are swamp lovers. They like river valleys and wetlands and deltas and salt marshes. They have special affinities for traditional island dwellers and Guarani land defenders. They strive to protect riverine environments, while creating novel social-ecological systems and imagining new relations between humans and water. They are found in NGOs scattered across Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and Bolivia. 15 I came into this project through an artist and activist named Alejandro Meitin, the organizer of a small NGO named Casa Río. In 2014 he worked with a number of different organizations to put together a traveling seminar called "Watersheds as Laboratories of Governance," which I was able to attend at the generous invitation of the group Critical Art Ensemble, 16 Alejandro was asking three crucial



questions, as he continues to do today: "Who designs the territory? For whom is it designed? And what would a participatory design of the territory look like?"

What the activists of Wetlands without Borders face is a clearly delineated plan for the imposition of a hydrological state. The latest version of this plan was drawn up in the year 2000 by the "Initiative for the Integration" of Regional Infrastructure for South America." IIRSA is a transborder forum or "soft conditioning framework" for the coordinated development of transportation, energy and telecommunications networks, integrated since 2010 to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), 17 Where rivers are concerned, it aims to dredge a hidrovía or "hydro-highway" to permit barge transportation from Buenos Aires to Puerto Cáceres in southern Brazil, following which, in its original and most ambitious formulation, it would create an interconnection to the Amazon and Orinoco Basins by digging canals over the continental divides.¹⁸ This is territorial design on a massive scale. What the IIRSA plan reveals is that the same river can be two very different things under two very different gazes. It can be a lateral pulse that seasonally overflows its banks into a vast system of wetlands; or it can be a heavily dredged and engineered channel carrying industrial commodities to the sea. It can be a transportation corridor for export products, or it can be a continental-scale survival corridor for wildlife reproduction and biocultural solidarity initiatives.

Consider the La Plata watershed map that Casa Rio is creating for Wetlands without Borders (https://map.casariolab.art). What it shows is the Central Valley of the



- Las cuencas como laboratorios de gobernanza, website at: https://cuencaslab.wordpress.com.
- J. Miguel Kanai, "The pervasiveness of neoliberal territorial design: Cross-border infrastructure planning in South America since the introduction of IIRSA," Geoforum 69 (2016).
- Jorge Perea Borda, Los ríos nos unen: Integración fluvial suramericana (Bogotá: Corporación Andina de Fomento, 1998); see the map of "fluvial integration," p. 233. Available at: https://scioteca.caf.com/ handle/123456789/868.

Paraguay-Paraná river system. The rivers are delineated in a muddy organic brown, surrounded by lush green wetlands. The principal north-south axis remains free of dams and large-scale levees. The delta at the end of the river is an extraordinary environment of islands and braided channels, sixty kilometers wide at some points, and over three hundred kilometers long. It's a labyrinth of land and water, a vibrant corridor of ecological memory flowing through the surrounding desert of industrialized GMO soybeans. This is what the Mississippi Delta used to look like - and by that I mean, not the emaciated Bird Foot delta where the Mississippi empties into the sea, but instead the vast cotton-growing region of rich alluvial soils, where the Delta Blues was born, Before its so-called "reclamation," the Mississippi Delta was also a wetland world of swamps and braided rivers. Today it's a flat, dusty, industrialized landscape - just what the Paraná Delta could become, under the pressure of agriculture for export. 19 We're not there yet, far from it. The tributaries and floodplains of the Paraguay-Paraná remain alive to the river's seasonal pulse at almost every point, all the way to the Pantanal or "Great Swamp" at the headwaters, which is one of the largest extant wetlands on earth.

Now consider the same landscape seen through extractivist eyes. The La Plata watershed appears in charcoal black, while the *hidrovía* is marked in conventional blue and dotted with ports - mostly deepwater ports for ocean-going vessels that can already travel as far as the grain-exporting capital of Rosario. Small hydropower and irrigation dams ring the northern edges of the Pantanal, slowly robbing its water. The La Plata watershed has been the epicenter of the GMO soybean boom since the 1990s. From the viewpoint of extractivist culture, the river represents nothing more than a transport corridor linking spatially dispersed nodes of the "global factory." Artistically we represent the entire watershed as a desiccated cinder,

- Brian Holmes, "Check My Pulse: The Anthropocene River in Reverse," Anthropocene Curriculum (2020), available at: https://www.anthropocene-curriculum. org/contribution/check-my-pulse.
- Raúl Zibechi, "IIRSA: la integración a la medida de los mercados," Programa de las Américas Informe Especial (June 13, 2006), available at: https:// www.alternative-regionalisms.org/wp-content/ uploads/2009/07/zibechi-iirsa.pdf



due to the fires that are deliberately set to clear forest environments for soybeans and cattle. But the charred map is not just a metaphor. The Paraguay-Paraná river is drying up before our eyes, this year, last year, the year before that. Fires rage in the Pantanal and throughout the La Plata watershed. These are not local or regional phenomena, which would be bad enough. Similar processes of land conversion in Amazonas are drying up the tropical forest and reducing the tremendous quantities of water that the forest transfers to the air through evapotranspiration. The "atmospheric river" that formerly sustained the Pampa húmeda, or Wet Pampa, is starting to fail. 21 Its failure has earth-system consequences. As the Amazonian "lungs of the planet" are cleared by fire and by bulldozer, the great prairies of Latin America's Southern Cone are threatened with desertification. Gigatons of carbon go up into the atmosphere. The global climate is at stake. Like black, brown and red people at the hands of US police forces, we are all approaching an "I can't breathe" moment - the endgame of colonization.

 Antonio Donato Nobre, "The Future Climate of Amazonia: Scientific Assessment Report," Sao Jose dos Campos - SP Edition, ARA, CCST-INPE/ INPA (2014). Available at: http://www.ccst.inpe.br/ wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Future_Climate_of_ Amazonia_Report.pdf. Wetlands without Borders turns the extractive transportation system inside-out like a glove, to reveal the emergent practices of biocultural corridors. The name echoes "biological corridors," a conservation planning device that seeks to offset the confinement of charismatic wildlife in small reserves. But a biocultural corridor is not a planning device, and it doesn't only have to do with wildlife. It's understood as a connective space filled with neo-ecosystems created through symbiotic relations between people and the rest of nature. This is where a cosmovision takes hold. Biocultures are about a relation of "mutual upbringing" or "mutual fostering": crianza mutua in Spanish, uywaña in the Ayamara language of the Andean Altiplano. As the introductory text of our map explains, the practice of mutual fostering "involves not only the cultivation of plants and animal husbandry, but also the care that circulates among humans, and between humans and non-human others,"22 What becomes obvious in the era of techno-economic destruction is that humanized environments can only be sustained by mutual care.

A biocultural corridor is an intricate relational mesh, differing from place to place. It's understood as a multi-local sacred space – an organizing figure without center or hierarchy. The idea is to express the principle of interdependence at many different levels. Indigenous lifeways provide a primary guide, which can be accessed, at least in part, by those outsiders who engage in active solidarity. In the daily life of industrial societies it can be experienced through the recovery of low-impact artisanal production, agro-ecological farming, land defence and ecological restoration work, among others. Biocultural festivals are now being organized to raise awareness of these practices.

- 22. Casa Río/Wetlands Without Borders, Corredores, online map, available at: https://map.casariolab.art. Also see Verónica Lema, "Crianza mutua: una gramática de la sociabilidad andina," Actas de la X Reunión de Antropología del Mercosur publication on CD-Rom, (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 2013), available at: https://www.academia.edu/5552668/Crianza_mutua_una_gram%C3%Altica_de_la_sociabilidad_andina.
- 23. For background and updates, see the websites of Wetlands Without Borders member organizations, Taller Ecologista and CAUCE: https://tallerecologista. org.ar and https://cauceecologico.org.



As in the case of Cascadia, the aim is to create a practical imaginary that follows the water across national boundaries, into the pores of human beings and the earth. Yet this imaginary or spiritual aspect doesn't preclude involvement with existing institutions, to the contrary. One of the biggest struggles in Argentina right now is over the renewal of the contract for the dredging of the Paraná River, which remains suspended at the time of writing, due to civil-society opposition.²³ Meanwhile there is a growing movement to bring a wetlands law to the legislative chambers (the slogan is *¡Ley de Humedales Ya!*). Now more than ever, these activists conceive watersheds as laboratories of governance.

Concrete changes in contemporary governance require a different cosmovision, emerging within and against the extractivist one. Addressing the inhabitants of Abya Yala (formerly known as Latin America), the introductory text of the map evokes the Guarani notion of a Land Without Evil: "This mythical Guarani belief, the Land Without Evil - a place where everything flowers and gives fruit, where there is no malice, suffering, harm or murder, a place like the Biblical paradise - is not somewhere else, but right here in this land as reality and dream, as pro-



jection and prophecy, as gnoseological and ontological possibility. The Land Without Evil remains latent in similar myths among many indigenous peoples and campesinos of Abya Yala, and among all of us who make this dream our own,"²⁴

FUTURES

In this text I've presented two choices of civilization, each involving an identification with non-human others as well as an increasingly prominent role for indigenous peoples. In both cases I've situated the conflicts using bioregional maps which overflow national boundaries. Because these are grassroots struggles against an established socio-technical order, one could assume they recapitulate a strictly dualistic schema of "society against the state." Yet the narratives don't fit that binary schema. The opponents of the Elwha dams found allies among administrative officials, and achieved their goal through the intermediary of federal agencies. The defenders of the Paraguay-Paraná river seek not only a law governing the uses and ecological needs of wetlands, but also, a transformation of the current dredging regime, and ultimately, an international treaty ensuring the viability of the entire river system. Although both these coalitions seek to take apart or literally smash the dominant forms of watershed governance (what I've been calling "the hydrological state"), they do not call for the self-dissolution of society or any return to an imagined "primitvism." Instead, they are unusually gentle forms of revolution. They suggest that our understanding of government, or of what it means to be civilized, has to be reworked from a charismatic inside that includes non-white peoples and the non-human world. Transformation without damaging backlash is the crucial question for these movements. Nothing guarantees it.

Today, schismogenesis is both welcome and threatening. It's welcome because it encourages the formation of an ecological cosmovision, in which humans are not simply free to become different, but instead, are bound in interdependence by relational ties. But it's threatening because it reinforces the modernist vision, in which humans are free, equal, competitive and fiercely independent. In the US where this cosmovision is dominant, progressive insurgency followed by reactionary backlash has fueled a rising curve of cultural polarization, especially since the great protest wave following the police assassination of George Floyd in 2020. In the public media and among count-

less right-wing groups, the trending topic is civil war. As Gregory Bateson remarked, "If there be any basic human characteristic which makes man prone to struggle, it would seem to be this hope of release from tension through total involvement."²⁵ Schismogenic violence, whether domestic or international, may be inevitable in the short term; but the coming ecological breakdowns could encourage a different and perhaps more cooperative form of release. Storm, drought and fire may well be the dawn of something new.

So let me ask the crucial questions once again: With whom do you identify? What kind of aesthetics do you embody? What kind of cosmos do you inhabit? What kind of future will you fight for? And how exactly to do it? The stories I've told, about salmon and swamps and indigenous peoples, no doubt seem very distant from the dominant Eurocentric imagineries of modern nation-states. Yet schismogenesis, undeniably, is the burning issue of the present.

Here's my conclusion. Stand with the swamp. Break the dam. Overflow yourself. Live like a river.

- 24. Corredores, op. cit.
- Bateson, "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis," op. cit.

"How do cultures change? This text, written for the Zivilisationsfrage conference at HKW in 2022, is about indigenous peoples, environmental movements and totemic animals in the present-day Americas. Jumping off from a detail in David Graeber and David Wengrow's Dawn of Everything, I explore two cases where modern societies begin to be transformed by indigenous cosmovisions. And these are not isolated cases. Under the shadow of ecological collapse, don't be surprised if you, too, suddenly start perceiving an entire world of non-human others."

- Brian Holmes



www.cascadia.ecotopia.today