Bringing together municipalism and bioregionalism

Marin Schaffner (9k words, translatd by Google, with MS permission)
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Increasingly frequently invoked in ecological debates and writings, the notions of municipalism and bioregionalism have been intertwined for over 50 years in the United States, where their respective main theorists have rubbed shoulders. In the following two-part essay, Marin Schaffner – translator of Murray Bookchin (but also of Vandana Shiva) and co-founder of the bioregionally inspired collective Hydromondes – traces the course of these ideas from their eco-anarchist and eco-feminist sources, to some of their estuaries such as the Cascadia bioregion, Australian permaculture initiatives, the Limousin mountain union, via many singular figures such as the American poet Gary Snyder, the French geographer Elisée Reclus, the Japanese oyster farmer Hatakeyama Shigeatsu, and the Indian activist Vandana Shiva. He questions them in the light of the words of the bioregionalist Peter Berg: "The place in which you live is alive, and you are part of its life. What are your obligations towards it, what is your responsibility towards the fact that this place welcomes you and nourishes you? What are you going to do concretely to return the favor?" Finally, for Marin Schaffner: "Where municipalism and bioregionalism particularly come together is in their desire to propose methods of collective organization (i.e. political) that are inspired by the methods of organizing life itself, with a view to taking care of it."

Currents of thought are probably like the currents of rivers and streams. They are constantly moving, mixing and meandering. In exactly the same way that we, modern Westerners, have a utilitarian and atomizing vision of water cycles (considered as inert, non-living resources, to be used without ever giving back), we obviously have a very simplistic and inorganic vision of the permanent interbreeding of thoughts with each other. We have learned to like things that fit neatly into boxes – that remain as wise as the previously wild waters behind a large dam. But life (and the emancipatory thoughts that are like a very particular type of bud) is clearly more metamorphic. Life is permanent evolution and symbiosis. It is made not of fixed borders, but of dividing lines.

We will therefore attempt here to stage part of the bubbling of this life: that of the links between bioregionalisms and municipalisms – which I deliberately put in the plural – as well as the density of the mixtures that are at the heart of these transnational thoughts. As a good bioregionalist, my remarks will meander in multiple undulations around four major parts: sources, upstreams, confluences and estuaries.

Sources From Coast to Coast From Coast to Coast: The Back and Forth of Eco-Anarchism

In 1962, while Rachel Carson was publishing Silent Spring [1], Our Synthetic Environment was

published, the first book by Murray Bookchin – a New York worker trained in the Young Communists and quickly became an eco-anarchist. Like Rachel Carson, Murray Bookchin tackled the issue of the ecological crisis from a health perspective: the increasing exposure of a society to chemicals or radioactive products can only lead to common health problems between living environments and humans. He wrote then: "Corporate interests now take precedence over human needs for clean air; the abandonment of industrial waste takes priority over the needs of the community for drinking water. The most pernicious laws of the market are privileged over the elementary laws of biology."

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Murray Bookchin In 1982, the publication of The Ecology of Freedom [2] gave him the opportunity to set down on paper the principles of social ecology, which he had been working on for twenty years – and which can be summed up in one sentence: "None of the ecological problems we face today can be solved without profound social change." He was laying the foundations for a radical reorganization of our societies, with a view to re-embedding them in the natural world – a reversal of the pyramid proposing to reorganize our lives around autonomous confederated ecological communes. A political movement based on popular assemblies in direct democracy, which he would call variously "libertarian municipalism" or "communalism." Such an imaginary world is directly inspired by the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917 or even Spain in 1936, adding to them an explicit – but nevertheless salutary – supplement of radical ecology. The whole thing is resolutely designed to be at the service of life, and against all hierarchies (political, financial, age, class, gender, color, etc.).

"None of the ecological problems we face today can be resolved without profound social change."
Murray Bookchin

Between these two dates, 1962 and 1982, the links between Murray Bookchin and bioregionalism were numerous. Here are a few threads to remind us all how thoughts are never born alone.

First of all, it is essential to remember that bioregionalism envisages rethinking our territories no longer from administrative and therefore artificial borders, but from the biological realities of forest massifs, mountain ranges and watersheds (the territory covered by a river and all its tributaries). The mode of organization that it has always defended is that of rehabitation, that is to say, the open and ecocentric relocation of inhabitant communities within the hinterlands. The eco-anarchist imagination shared by communalism and bioregionalism allows us to

consider bioregionalism as a more situated – more precisely geographical – version of communalism. But both have the same goals: to recreate cooperative local livelihoods in order to halt the ecological disaster wrought by modern Western industrial society.

To pick up this thread from another end, I would like to quote the tribute that Peter Berg, co-founder of bioregionalism (with Raymond Dasmann), offered to Murray Bookchin in 2006, following his death. In it, he traces their meeting in the early sixties in Manhattan, at a rally against the Vietnam War. Peter Berg writes: "What was unusual for a leftist at the time was his conviction that ecological questions offered a new basis for unity. (…) I left that meeting with the desire to begin reading about the origins and practice of contemporary anarchism. (…) In the late sixties, I had helped form the San Francisco Diggers, perhaps the best model of creative anarchist social alternatives that could be found at the time."

Peter Berg adds further: "When I was invited to help edit the Bioregions issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly* in the late 1970s, one of the first documents I sought out was Murray's *Ecology of Freedom*. Knowing that he accepted some of the general premises of bioregionalism as espoused by the Planet Drum Foundation, I asked his permission to edit a shortened version of the book's long first chapter in order to introduce readers to the ideas of anarchist ecology. (…) The resulting article was invaluable in helping to set the autonomous, self-directed tone of the bioregional discourse." »

Organizing like the living Organizing like the living: reinventing the politics of living spaces

At the heart of the first chapter of his *Ecology of Freedom* (entitled "The notion of social ecology"), Murray Bookchin had written these words: "The recent emphasis on bioregions as frameworks for diverse human communities provides strong arguments in favor of the necessary readaptation of techniques and styles of work to the conditions and possibilities of particular ecological zones. The requirements and possibilities of each bioregion impose a heavy constraint on humanity's claims to sovereignty over nature and autonomy from its needs."

What we see here is a regular and fruitful dialogue, across the decades, between one of the founders of communalism and one of the founders of bioregionalism. Despite certain disagreements, particularly around questions of deep ecology, these two movements appear in retrospect to be very sisterly: common references, a shared culture, and some differences, which are nevertheless not insurmountable if we seek to create confluences rather than divisions.

Where these two currents particularly come together is in their desire to propose modalities of collective (i.e. political) organization that are inspired by the modalities of organizing life itself,

with a view to taking care of it. In Bookchin, the imagination is more revolutionary than in the majority of bioregionalists, but the two currents align in their stated desire to create the conditions for truly ecological landings of our off-ground lifestyles. "Where these two currents particularly come together is in their desire to propose modalities of collective (i.e. political) organization that are inspired by the modalities of organizing life itself, with a view to taking care of it." Marin Schaffner

In 1985, in *The Art of Living on the Earth*, a great popular synthesis of bioregionalism, the journalist Kirkpatrick Sale[3] quotes from Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom* (in chapter 7, entitled "Political Regime"). A few pages later Kirkpatrick Sale writes:

"A political vision based on the self-evident laws and mechanisms of the biotic world would celebrate not centralized coordination, hierarchical efficiency, or monolithic force—the apparent virtues of the modern nation-state—but rather the exact opposite, namely decentralization, interdependence, and diversity. In any park, on any shore, in any wood, natural principles are realized essentially without coercion, without organized pressure, without recognized authority. They are, to choose the closest word in our inadequate vocabulary, 'libertarian.'" (…) A bioregional polity must seek to achieve the dispersion of power and the decentralization of institutions. (…) Therefore, the primary locus of decision-making, political and economic control should be the community, that is, a more or less intimate grouping, either on the scale of a dense village of about 1,000 inhabitants, or probably more often, on the scale of the extended community of 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants that very regularly happens to be (unofficially or officially) the fundamental political unit. It is in such a place – where people know each other and know the essentials of the environment they share, where, at a minimum, the most basic information relating to problem-solving is known or readily available – that governance should take root. (…) This is the type of governance established by premodern peoples everywhere in the world."

"A bioregional polity must seek to achieve the dispersion of power and the decentralization of institutions. » Kirkpatrick Sale

The description here echoes, in a striking way, some of Murray Bookchin's writings – notably those where he sets out the various paths for organizing local communalist direct democracy around popular assemblies. It is therefore, in both cases, from the places of life and by trying to organize as closely as possible to the modalities of life that ecological and social transformation is conceived.

Ecotopia: Between Fiction and Ecofeminism

In the midst of all this, in 1975, the American writer Ernest Callenbach proposed a romantic and utopian extension of the emerging links on the West Coast between local autonomy and

ecocentrism. His work *Ecotopia* [4] (which I highly recommend reading, and even rereading) is a small masterpiece of the genre: 25 years after the date of writing, in 1999, an American journalist from the East Coast was the first to have the right to enter Ecotopia, a new independent country to the west of the United States, which seceded in the 1980s following an economic crisis. The book presents itself as a mixture of newspaper articles and logbook excerpts, and through this, traces all the dimensions of daily life in Ecotopia: local organic food, decentralized non-fossil fuel transportation, forestry service, popular education for all, workers' self-management, solar energy, etc. Through this pragmatic approach, the book allows us to imagine what it would mean to live in a truly ecological society. Through its permanent interweaving of ecological justice and social justice, Ecotopia draws us – from the mid-1970s – into a fictional but realistic universe resembling the marriage of communalism and bioregionalism.

One of the salient points of this book (which deserves to be mentioned as a reality that cuts across the various "sources" of this first part) is the importance of ecofeminism – which in fact places itself at the crossroads of these two currents. In Ernest Callenbach's book, it is women who have the power in Ecotopia, and they have it because their role was decisive in the fight for independence. Political life in Ecotopia is refocused around decision-making processes very close to everything that the writer Starhawk described in her magnificent Dreaming the Dark (1982)[5]. And these attentive and sincere decision-making processes give rise to a progressive consensus: the inherited institutional hierarchies have been overturned. Bringing together municipalism and bioregionalism 1/2

Beyond this single reference to fiction, I would like to mention here the names of at least three other important ecofeminist women, who have placed themselves from the beginning – and each in their own way – at the intersection between bioregionalism and communalism.

Ynestra King first of all: close to communalism, professor at the Institute for Social Ecology since its opening, she clearly influenced Murray Bookchin (who quotes her in *The Ecology of Freedom)*. A great anti-nuclear activist, she is one of the co-founders of the famous collective "Women for Life on Earth" which marched on the Pentagon in 1981. She notably wrote the article "If I can't dance, I don't want to take part in your revolution" (reprinted in the very beautiful anthology Reclaim by Émilie Hache [6]), or "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology" (1983).

Judith Plant then, editor of the journal The New Catalyst and a well-known editor of ecological texts – both ecofeminist (Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism, 1989), bioregionalist (Home: A Bioregional Reader, 1990) and communalist (Putting Power in its Place: Create Community Control, 1992 – in which we find texts by Kirkpatrick Sale, Murray

Bookchin and Peter Berg). She also wrote an important article in 1987, entitled “Searching for Common Ground: Ecofeminism & Bioregionalism”.

Stephanie Mills finally, author and editor of several ecological journals, coordinated the “Bioregions” issue of the journal CoEvolution Quarterly with Peter Berg (1981). Already present at the first North American Bioregional Congress in 1984, her work focuses, among other things, on the issues of overpopulation and criticism of technology in an ecofeminist approach, but also on the challenges of ecological restoration in a bioregional perspective (In Service of the Wild: Restoring and Reinhabiting Damaged Land, 1995).

Upstream

Once past the first sources, we find ourselves at the very upstream of the watershed. There, a whole network of small rivers comes, like ribs, to irrigate the head of the basin: this is what we call a "hairy". Within this network of aquatic veins, I propose that we dive into three different torrents, united in their diversity.

Turtle Island: Gary Snyder among the Indians

Gary Snyder, born in 1930, is one of the great poets of the beat generation, but also a bioregionalist from the very beginning. He is the one behind Japhy Ryder, the hero of Kerouac's The Skywalkers, and his friend Allen Ginsberg would say of him: "He's the craziest and smartest guy we've ever met." Raised on a farm on the West Coast, studying anthropology, anarcho-syndicalist working odd jobs, having practiced Zen in Japan for several years, Gary Snyder is a jack-of-all-trades deeply connected to nature. When his second son was born, he settled with his family and Allen Ginsberg in the northern Sierra Nevada, in the Yuba River Valley. He would then write that his plans for the future were “the rehabitation of Turtle Island and revolutionary ecology.”

Turtle Island is the name that some Native American communities have always given to North America. And it is also the title of the magnificent collection of poetry for which Gary Snyder received the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. America is a name inherited from colonialism (derived from the name of Amerigo Vespucci, a 15th-century Italian explorer). But to truly reinhabit places, to embody “wild practice,” Gary Snyder—and the bioregionalists after him—believe that names matter. As he wrote in 1976 in a text entitled *“Rehabit*”:

“I am descended from a line of people who have made their way from the Atlantic to the slopes of the Pacific, over a period of one hundred and fifty years. A grandfather ended up in Washington Territory and built a farm in Kitsap County. (...) But when we arrived, there were already people there, long before my family, I was taught as a child. An elderly Salish Indian would stop by our farm every four months in a Model T Ford to sell smoked salmon. “Who is that?” “He’s an Indian,” my parents would say.

As I looked at the different types of trees and plants that formed the basis of my childhood world (a world of young Oregon pine forest and cow pasture), I realized that my parents lacked certain knowledge. They could say, "That's a Douglas fir, that's a cedar, that's a fern," but I could sense a subtlety and complexity in those woods that went far beyond those few names. When I was a kid, I talked to old Salishan a few times when he stopped by the house—and then, all of a sudden, he never came back. I had a sense of what he stood for, what he knew, and what he meant to me: he knew where I was better than anyone else." [7]

Bringing Municipalism and Bioregionalism Together 1/2

In the early 1990s, Gary Snyder would propose two key ideas to continue to connect bioregionalism and communalism.
One is the "Village Council of All Beings" (in an eponymous article) – directly inspired by the work of Joanna Macy (ecofeminism is still there), but more precisely focused on the specificity of each place: "Imagine a village that considered its trees and birds, its sheep and goats and cows and yaks, and the wild animals of the high pastures (ibex, argali, antelope, wild yaks) as members of the community. Village councils would, in a sense, give voice to each of these creatures. They would allow everyone to have their own space." "

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Gary Snyder

The other, directly related, is the "watershed council" (in the article "Accessing the Watershed"), which proposes a non-nationalist conception of community, where anyone who cares for places and waters is welcome, a model that builds on the idea of upstream-downstream solidarity: "The agenda of a watershed council starts modestly: 'Let's try to rehabilitate our river so that wild salmon can reproduce there again.' In trying to complete this agenda, a community may have to contend with commercial logging upstream, water grabbing for sale downstream, Taiwanese net fishing off the coast of the North Pacific, and a host of other national and international threats to salmon health. »

Behind bioregionalist ideas, as behind communalist ideas, the question therefore arises as to whether there is not a forgotten memory, or the resurgence of a collective unconscious: that of the organization around commons – both communal and community – of human populations for millennia. In this, reconnecting with an ecocentric direct democracy, perhaps it is also reconnecting with immemorial traditions, deeply local and deeply ecological. This is what a whole section of anthropology tells us (Pierre Clastres, James C. Scott or David

Graeber). But it is also what the natives themselves tell us. And Oren Lyons, guardian of the faith and spokesperson for the Seneca nation, reminds us in "The People of the Turtle":

"So we were in our own hemisphere, developing our own ideas, our own thoughts and our own vision of the world. There were great civilizations here at the time. By 1492, the Haudenosaunee – better known as the Iroquois to the French and the Six Nations to the English – had already had several hundred years of democracy, organized democracy. Here we had a constitution based on peace, on fairness and justice, on unity and health. It was a continuing tradition." [8]

Zapatismo: Revolting Like a Mountain

"Recreate society to the rhythm of children" and "Make a world of many worlds." These are two of the mantras that guided the uprising of some of the indigenous peoples of the Chiapas mountains in Mexico in 1994, and led to the creation of 38 "Zapatista rebel autonomous municipalities."

By taking up arms against the Mexican state (judged as a colonial remanence) to defend their right to self-determination on their ancestral territories, these indigenous populations, supported by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), have engaged in an experience of radical social and political transformation. An experience that still continues and that – without seeking to idealize it – can be seen, de facto, as an intersection between bioregionalism and communalism.

At the heart of this indigenous uprising [9], there is a very inspiring experiment in the operational and pragmatic ways in which political life can be reinvented. Following multiple twists and turns and conflicts, five "Good Government Councils" were created in 2003. Their goal is to implement the demands autonomously, and to promote coordination between the liberated municipalities. The figure of the snail (caracoles) is central here: both for its slowness (the decision-making modalities are profoundly slowed down) and for its spiral shell (which materializes a non-linear, and therefore non-Western, conception of time).

To explain it quickly, the Zapatista mode of organization nests the levels of the village, the commune and the zone. Each village has its own community organization (for the distribution of land, collective work, festivals, etc.) and is organized into popular assemblies in direct democracy – just like in communalist theory. The municipal level allows for the organization of autonomy between the different communities and facilitates certain cooperations and confederations. Each village appoints a representative to these municipal bodies; their mandate is unpaid and revocable at any time – politics is a burden to be shared together, never an individual power. Finally, each municipality sends a few representatives to the Good Government Council of its zone. These representatives ensure the proper functioning of the

health, education and justice systems, as well as good relations with the non-Zapatista populations of the territory.

The entire educational system has been rethought, women play a central role in the struggle as well as in the construction of autonomy, the principles of self-government require "governing by obeying" (mandar obedeciendo), and this new autonomous life is all oriented towards the recreation of a subsistence of buen vivir. In short, completely against the universalist Western model, the Zapatista experience attempts to pragmatically establish a pluriversal society – that is, a society united in its diversity, where a myriad of worlds in partial connection can coexist freely [10].

"In short, completely against the universalist Western model, the Zapatista experience attempts to pragmatically establish a pluriversal society - that is, a society united in its diversity, where a myriad of partially connected worlds can coexist freely" **Marin Schaffner**

Where this world-famous example interests us is that it mixes a geographical and cultural reality (the life of indigenous mountain peoples) with a libertarian and revolutionary political organization [11]. In its own way, and without necessarily needing to claim either of the two currents, the Zapatista movement appears as one of the ways of living bioregional communalism.

Back to the Commune: Inheriting Élisée Reclus & Louise Michel

More than a century before the Zapatista revolts in Chiapas, in 1871, it was the city of Paris—and its million inhabitants—that rose up and succeeded in creating an exciting form of autonomy for three months. Refusing to recognize the authority of the new National Constituent Assembly, the people of Paris also revolted, setting up barricades, holding the city around 16 sections reorganized into a direct democracy. Although bloodily crushed by the army (nation-states always have an ambiguous definition of self-determination), returning to this founding event allows us to shed some additional light on the deep—almost archaeological—links between bioregionalism and communalism.

It should be remembered that if the Paris Commune was able to hold out for three months, it was largely due to its food organization, and the support of all the market gardeners and farmers who still formed the green belt of Paris. To put it another way, the city of Paris in 1871 and its million inhabitants was still capable of being self-sufficient in food. This leads to two analyses. On the one hand, the fact that the material and pragmatic implementation of bioregionalism and communalism necessarily involves an ability to feed the members of a wider community. Without the possibility of eating and drinking, no social experiment lasts very long. Times of war have proven this many times. On the other hand, and this is related, we must also look at how nation-states have tried to unravel, or even destroy, any possibility

of structured and lasting local food autonomy. In a certain way, it is this very abandonment that characterizes the “consumer society”. Remembering the Paris Commune therefore also invites us to put the issues of subsistence back at the heart of our current political struggles, in France as in the world.

There is one who had no doubt about this at the time, and who is one of the tutelary figures within the meanders of our counter-history: Élisée Reclus, the anarchist geographer, libertarian pedagogue, vegetarian and ecologist before his time. He is mainly remembered for a few of his works: Man and the Earth (encyclopedia in 6 volumes, 1905-1908), To my brother the peasant (1893), as well as History of a mountain (1875) and History of a stream (1869). In this last work, from the middle of the 19th century – two years before the Paris Commune in which he actively engaged – Élisée Reclus demonstrates a real awareness of the watershed.

"The entire mass of the river is nothing other than the set of all the streams, visible or invisible, successively swallowed up: it is a stream enlarged tens, hundreds or thousands of times, and yet it differs singularly in its appearance from the small watercourse that meanders through the side valleys." **Élisée Reclus**

In his chapter "The River", he writes for example: "The entire mass of the river is nothing other than the set of all the streams, visible or invisible, successively swallowed up: it is a stream enlarged tens, hundreds or thousands of times, and yet it differs singularly in its appearance from the small watercourse that meanders through the side valleys.[12]" By already interweaving human issues (anthropological and geographical) with ecological issues, Reclus the traveling communard is similar, without forcing it too much, to a "proto-bioregionalist". This internationalism and this concern for others than humans – embodied by Élisée Reclus, but also by Louise Michel[13] – recalls that the seeds of eco-anarchism go back to the 19th century. And that the Commune was already, at least partially, a crucible of political ecology.

Notes

[1] Lire dans *Topophile*, « Rachel Carson et le printemps silencieux » de Thierry Paquot, 18 mai 2022.

[2] Trois des chapitres centraux du livre ont été traduits par mes soins dans *Écologie sociale, penser la liberté au-delà de l’humain* (Wildproject, 2020) – mais le livre n’a jamais été entièrement traduit en langue française.

[3] Kirkpatrick Sale, *L’Art d’habiter la Terre*, trad. A.Weil & M.Rollot, Wildproject, 2020.

[4] Ernst Callenbach (1975), *Ecotopia*, traduction française de Christiane Thiollier, Stock, 1978. Nouvelle traduction française de Brice Matthieussent, Rue de l’échiquier, 2018 & « Folio », Gallimard, 2021.

[5] Starhawk (1982), *Rêver* l’obscur, traduction française de Morbic, Cambourakis, 2015.

[6] Emilie Hache (coord.), *Reclaim. Anthologie de textes écoféministes*, traduit de l'anglais par Emilie Noteris, Cambourakis, 2016.
[7] Tous les extraits de Gary Snyder cités ici sont issus de : Gary Snyder, *Le Sens des lieux*, trad. C.R. Tounsi, Wildproject, 2018.
[8] Oren Lyons, « Le peuple de la Tortue » (entretien) *in* Barry Lopez, *Réécrire l'Amérique*, Wildproject, 2020.
[9] Pour de plus amples détails, voir notamment les livres de Jérôme Baschet : La Rébellion zapatiste – Insurrection indienne et résistance planétaire (Flammarion, 2005) et Adieux au capitalisme – Autonomie, société du bien vivre et multiplicité des mondes (La Découverte, 2014).
[10] Voir Plurivers : un dictionnaire du post-développement, A.Kothari & al., Wildproject, 2022.
[11] On n'hésitera pas également à faire des liens avec l'expérience de « confédéralisme démocratique » au Rojava (le Kurdistan syrien) qui, depuis 2011, en application explicite des thèses de Murray Bookchin, a proposé une réorganisation communaliste et écoféministe de la vie quotidienne – analogue au zapatisme par de nombreux aspects – sur un morceau du plateau kurde. Pour plus de détails, voir notamment l'ouvrage collectif *La Commune du Rojava* (Syllepse, 2017).
[12] Cité dans Les Veines de la Terre : une anthologie des bassins-versants, F. Guerroué, M. Rollot & M. Schaffner, Wildproject, 2021.
[13] Une rapide note en complément pour invoquer aussi la figure de Louise Michel, institutrice féministe, militante anarchiste, écrivaine et figure majeure de la Commune de Paris. Inépuisable militante pour la « révolution sociale » (comme elle disait), elle a elle aussi – tout comme Reclus – lutté contre la maltraitance animale, et a été l'une des rares à prendre la défense des Kanaks lors des révoltes de 1878.

PART II
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Going back down from the sources and after crossing the ~~hairy~~, we necessarily end up crossing tributaries: sometimes larger rivers, which come from elsewhere, which have crossed other realities, but which mix with the main current and transform it by crossbreeding. Here we are embarked in a zone of confluences. The forest that loves the sea The forest that loves the sea: the idea of a river twinning "The forest and the sea, since the beginning of time, are the cradle where life grows. When, entering silently into the deciduous forest, you listen to the rustling of the leaves, when, standing on the shore, you hear the rumor of the sea, does it not soothe you? The forest and the sea are connected by rivers full to overflowing with fresh and clear water, and the purer the water, the deeper the connection.

With the motto "The Sea-Loving Forest," Mori wa Umi no Koibito, and praying that the Ô-kawa, the mother river that flows into Kesennuma Bay, will always keep its flow pure, around Mount

Murone-san, we planted a forest of nearly 2,000 hardwood trees, beech, chestnut, dogwood, etc., and named it “The Oyster Forest,” Kaki no mori. The children from upstream, invited to the sea, studied the ecosystem by frequenting the marine fauna and flora. In return, the children from downstream, by planting trees, learned the importance of the forest, and this helped us educate them about the environment. What we have learned, in four years of this movement, is how important it is for the people who live in the Ô-kawa river basin, from the watershed of the Murone-mura and Iwate-ken mountains, to preserve the aquatic environment of this entire region, including the sea. [1]

In the early 1990s, Japanese oyster farmer Hatakeyama Shigeatsu saw all his oysters perish due to pollution in the bay where he lives. His idea in response: to plant thousands of trees with the inhabitants of the upstream Ô-kawa River. Through this gesture, he both managed to save local oyster farming and to forge new relationships with the inhabitants of his region – and to activate a new care for the forest and the sea, the collective awareness of their profound interdependence.

Here again, without needing to use the words “bioregionalism” or “communalism”, the “Forest Lover of the Sea” movement works towards a true watershed culture, a pragmatic upstream-downstream solidarity. Thus, many practices and places of life can be a source of inspiration, close to home, but also on other continents and in other cultures. In this, as Doug Aberley said, bioregionalism seems to be a “political arena for developing resistance to all forms of ecological and social exploitation” – a definition that can just as easily be applied to communalism. In other words, both are potentially applicable approaches around the world to support the advent of truly ecological societies.

“The place you live in is alive, and you are part of its life. What then are your obligations to it, what is your responsibility to ensure that this place welcomes you and nourishes you? What concrete steps are you going to take to return the favor?” **Peter Berg**

Finally, it is also in the face of questions of health and survival (as Murray Bookchin already pointed out in 1962) that new forms of mutual aid are likely to reappear. Continuing to “live well” in damaged territories necessarily requires moving away from automatic default modes and out-of-touch imaginaries. The life of places, when we try to truly inhabit them, to take care of them, obliges us in return. Or, as Peter Berg said in 1986: “The place in which you live is alive, and you are part of its life. What are your obligations towards it, what is your responsibility towards the fact that this place welcomes you and feeds you? What are you going to do concretely to return the favor?” [2]

Lo-TEK Lo-TEK: some indigenous examples

At the crossroads of questions of local self-management and care of living spaces, we also find a myriad of examples among various indigenous populations on the planet. These forms of communalism and "de facto" bioregionalism can also inspire us, and in any case invite us to humility – because those who live in strong interaction with their living environment have always found answers of great finesse and great power to adapt to alterations.

After seven years of research in the four corners of the world, Julia Watson has compiled multiple fascinating examples of "indigenous ecological knowledge" in her magnificent book Lo-TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism[3]. In her introduction, she writes:

"Traditional ecological knowledge is not primitive, it is incredibly innovative. These Lo-TEK technologies are born from symbiotic relationships with our environment – humans living in symbiosis with natural systems."

"Traditional ecological knowledge is not primitive, it is incredibly innovative. These Lo-TEK technologies are born from symbiotic relationships with our environment – humans living in symbiosis with natural systems." » Julia Watson

There are many examples of "indigenous design" that resonate with us, but I will take just one here. The bheris of Calcutta are a complex of natural wastewater treatment ponds, created in the 1920s, that clean half of the grey water of this megacity of 12 million people (or 680 million litres of wastewater per day). There, on 3,000 hectares, 300 fish farms produce 13,000 tonnes of fish per year (16% of local consumption), 16,000 tonnes of rice per year and 150 tonnes of vegetables per day. The other half of the city's wastewater is treated with "Western-style" sewage treatment plants (electric and concrete), which cost more than $20 million per year. The bheris themselves cost zero, and even bring in quite a bit of money, since 60,000 fisherwomen and farmers organized into a cooperative share the profits equally. The fish feed on the wastewater, and the symbiosis between plants, algae and bacteria does the rest of the sanitation work during several stages of water treatment – including an initial retention for 25 to 30 days which already purifies 90% of the water.

Such an example of restorative aquatic permaculture shows us how self-organized care practices can be guides to rethink our ways of fighting against the deterioration of living environments, of organizing our livelihoods differently, and of creating virtuous political systems – within which the economy finds its rightful place: that of being second to ecology, while creating equity.

Vandana Shiva: Water Wars and Earth Democracy

This is exactly what Vandana Shiva, a famous Indian ecofeminist and tireless defender of peasant communities, has carried throughout her life. From her involvement with the Chipko

movement in the 1970s (where thousands of women hugged trees for years to prevent deforestation) to the creation of a network of self-managed indigenous seed banks, to the fight against the ravages of the Western model (agricultural monocultures, large dams, industrial pollution, etc.), Vandana Shiva is a symbol – among others – of the deep historical intertwining of subsistence, ecology and feminism[4].

"The system of community rights is an ecological and democratic imperative. Bureaucratic control by external and distant agencies, and market control by corporations and commercial interests both have a disincentive effect on water conservation. » Vandana Shiva

At the crossroads of the peasant, Gandhian and ecological traditions of which she is the heir, we find at the same time: on the one hand a deep care for all living environments and all living beings, as well as the recognition of the rights of Mother Earth; and on the other a defense of community, local and peasant lifestyles, which are at the foundation of the ancestral subsistence cultures of India. Or, to put it another way, an inseparation between ecocentrism and communalism. This is how she wrote in 2002 in her book The Water Wars: "Sustainable water management systems have developed, in conditions of scarcity, from an idea transmitted from generation to generation: that of the collective ownership of water. (...) In the regions of Gujarat, subject to drought, water supply systems based on local management constituted a kind of insurance in the event of a water shortage. These systems were primarily controlled by village assemblies. (...) The system of community rights is an ecological and democratic imperative. Bureaucratic control by external and distant agencies, and commercial control by corporations and commercial interests both act as disincentives to water conservation."[5]

Vandana Shiva then established the nine principles of a water democracy:
1. Water is a gift of nature;
2. Water is essential for life;
3. Water connects all forms of life;
4. Water necessary for survival must be free;
5. Water is a finite and exhaustible resource;
6. Water must be conserved;
7. Water is a commons;
8. No one is entitled to a 'license to destroy';
9. There is no substitute for water."[6]

In 2005, in keeping with these multiple commitments, she even went so far as to coin the term "earthly democracy" and thus deploy its foundations: "Every time we engage in modes of consumption or production that take more than we need, we engage in violence. Earthly democracy is rooted in the ancient Indian concept of Vasudhaiva kutumkam – the earthly

family. As a family, all beings have equal rights to subsistence through the gifts of the earth. (…) The principles of earthly democracy are as follows:
1. Democracy of all life;
2. Intrinsic value of all species and peoples;
3. Diversity in nature and culture;
4. Natural rights to subsistence;
5. The earthly economy is democratic and living;
6. The living economy is a local economy;
7. Living democracy is done by local communities;
8. Defense of living knowledge;
9. Balancing rights and responsibilities;
10. Globalizing peace, care, and compassion." [7]

From the peasant realities of India, and with an international aura (which notably led her to meet many of the people cited in this article – including Gary Snyder and the Zapatistas), Vandana Shiva embodies yet another current of the links that unite the promotion of an ecocentric society and the defense of local autonomy. Estuaries This long history between communalism and bioregionalism, rich in multiple ramifications, finally leads to larger areas, where watercourses slow down their course and expand, until they mingle with the sea. There, in these metaphorical estuaries, rehabitation projects take shape and open up new perspectives – offshore, the pluriversal horizons of the Tout-monde.

Cascadia: Networking Autonomous Places
"From the Mountains to the Ocean lies a vast green land. On the northeastern rim of the Pacific, Earth and Sea intertwine in great cyclical flows. This Earth is a gift from the Sea. Cascadia is a place-of-life, a bioregion, with its own distinct characteristics and context. Water is the voice of this place. Cascadia says what it means: Cascadia in the sense of waterfalls! Cascadia is the name of the whitewater currents that cascade down the slopes of the mountains in the area. Cascades and waterfalls are the signature of this region, assembling the land & sea & sky in infinite cycles of life." [8]

In the early 1980s, David McCloskey, a professor at Seattle University, drew the first maps of Cascadia, the emblematic bioregion of the West Coast of Turtle Island. From British Columbia (Canada) in the north to Oregon (USA) in the south, the boundaries of Cascadia strangely resemble those of Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia. In fact, the communities that inhabit it and identify as "Cascadians" seek to create a world close to what Callenbach described in 1975: a rehabitation movement, with pro-independence overtones, along the entire Cascade Range – a piece of the biosphere whose general unity (geological, biological, hydrological, etc.) makes sense. There, for 50 years, a set of living communities, and a set of ecological and popular cultural projects have emerged in a connected way: the Cascadia Cup (football championship),

the Cascadia Dark Ale (local beer), the Cascadia Poetry Festival, the Cascadian Flag (flag with an Oregon pine), or even the Cascadia Independence Party (officially registered as a political party) – and on the website of which we can read: “The Cascadia Independence Party is a grassroots political entity, with the long-term political objective of uniting the Cascadia bioregion into a new nation-state – separate from both the United States and Canada – within which the unique cultural, biological and environmental assets of the region can flourish.”

In a 2011 article, Time magazine even ranked Cascadia in the top 10 “aspiring nations,” alongside Tibet, the Basque Country, Kurdistan, and Quebec. Beyond this question of the “nation” (which deserves to be explored further and re-discussed), it should be noted that the recognition by multiple local communities of belonging to another type of “country” (here a bioregion) is an innovative way of networking places that all aim for autonomy and ecological-and-social justice.

“We believe that people who know and care about the places where they live will work to maintain and restore them. » Planet Drum Foundation

In this, the imaginary of an autonomous bioregion on the West Coast of Turtle Island is in line with the utopia defended since its beginnings by the Planet Drum Foundation, the bioregionalist association based in San Francisco and created by Judy Goldhaft and Peter Berg in 1973: that of building sustainable ways of living in each place, around the ideas of community self-determination and regional self-sufficiency. What Planet Drum summarizes thus: "We believe that people who know and care about the places where they live will work to maintain and restore them. »

Australian Permaculture Australian Permaculture: Subsistence Degrowth
Half a world away in Australia, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren gave birth to permaculture in 1978. Blending agriculture, landscaping and ecology, permaculture can be summed up as the design of “consciously created landscapes that mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while harvesting abundant food, fibre and energy to meet local needs.” [9]

Bioregionalism and permaculture emerged at about the same time, and Bill Mollison proposed the marriage of the two movements – under the term “permaregionalism” – in the late 1980s. In his article “Strategies for an Alternative Nation,” published in Home! In A Bioregional Reader (1990), the same Bill Mollison imagines “intentional villages,” focused on unconditional hospitality and organized around a “bioregional ethic.” According to him, the goal of these villages would be to promote local cooperative work, with a view to recreating local subsistence and gradually decommodifying daily life. According to Mollison, it is through the confederation of these intentional villages within the same bioregion that a sufficient critical mass could be reached, in order to ensure the sustainability of this new system [10].

The key words here are voluntary simplicity, self-management, and interdependence. And such "local autonomy strategies" undeniably place us at the crossroads between bioregion, communalism, and permaculture.

For his part, for the past fifteen years, David Holmgren has focused on the issues of "energy descent" – that is, on building significantly less energy-intensive lifestyles, with a view to adapting to the increasing difficulty in obtaining energy. In How to orient oneself? Permaculture and energy descent [11], he deploys a series of reflections that are both prospective and practical to consider the adaptation of local communities to the scarcity of fossil fuels and climate upheavals. He writes: "We must go beyond the naïve and simplistic notions of sustainable development seen as an accessible future for us or our grandchildren, and accept our role, that is, use our habit of permanent change to adapt to the energy descent." »

« *We must go beyond the naive and simplistic notions of sustainable development as an accessible future for us or our grandchildren, and accept our role, that is to say, use our habit of permanent change to adapt to the energy descent.* »
David Holmgren

One of the local avenues deployed by Holmgren in this context is that of "*Retrosuburbia*", which aims to apply the issues of energy descent to the Melbourne region where his Melliodora farm is located. His idea: to redevelop and re-ruralize the Australian suburbs to make them a food-producing territory. To do this, he published a manifesto-manual for local populations – a work located and adapted to the living spaces of his region – in which he multiplies concrete examples and all the strategies for gradually modifying "houses, gardens and lifestyles"[12].

This attempt to reorganize local subsistence autonomies at the very heart of the lifestyles specific to the modern West (here the suburbs) intersects with many aspects of the municipalist strategy as described by Murray Bookchin and his successors. Here again, the intersections between permaculture, communalism and bioregion seem fruitful.

Limousin Mountains Towards Residents' Unions
To return to mainland France and draw on experiences of ecological and social transformation close to us, one of the inspiring examples of recent years is the creation in 2019 of the Limousin Mountains Union, which aims to simultaneously, over a territory of 150 km2, "relocalize the use of resources (water, energy, forest, food, etc.); allow access to land and housing; defend existing infrastructure; establish a local right to asylum; and put an end, at [its] scale, to the destruction of living things." [13]

Poster of a mobilization initiated by the Limousin Mountain Union in favor of living forests //

Limousin Mountain Union Straddling the departments of Corrèze, Creuse and Haute-Vienne, the Limousin Mountain is a natural region that covers most of the Millevaches plateau. There, for several decades, multiple rehabitation practices have emerged: continuity of subsistence agriculture, several waves of neo-rural settlements, defense of local landscapes and cultures, but also self-managed communities resulting from alter-globalization. This is where the municipalities of Faux-la-Montagne and Tarnac are located, around which many self-organization dynamics have emerged. It is a melting pot conducive to the interweaving of the imaginations and practices of communalism and bioregionalism. The Limousin Mountain Union is a symbolically strong example of this. As the founding text of this residents' union writes: "The Limousin Mountains, where we live, are the right scale for us to tackle a certain number of essential problems that otherwise give rise to a great feeling of helplessness in us. For those who live on the Limousin Mountains and are concerned with preserving its resources, the diversity of forms of human and non-human life that make up its wealth, and to defend decent living conditions for all: [we propose] a union to come together on the territory that we inhabit and defend our common interests. A collective force that is more than the sum of its constituent parts, and that can oppose the powers that shape the future of the territory on our backs - the banks, the various administrations, the local, regional, international economic lobbies..." [14]
"A collective force that is more than the sum of its constituent parts, and that can oppose the powers that shape the future of the territory on our backs" Syndicat de la Montagne Limousine

Taking back control over the ways of inhabiting a territory – from close to close and in a way that is both transversal and affinity-based – is another way of giving substance to the rehabitation so dear to bioregionalists. The “residents’ union” form also appears to be a stimulating modality for creating new confluences and recomposing local and inter-local power relations. It is an additional avenue to explore at the intersection of the care of places and the reappropriation of our means of subsistence, all geared towards open and confederated relocations.

Elwha and other rivers-people: dismantling anthropocentrism
To finish and come full circle, I propose to return to the sources: those of the West Coast of Turtle Island. There, several Amerindian peoples had and still have salmon as their totem, because their rivers were among the richest in fish on the continent.

Salmon are fascinating migratory animals, particularly for their orientation abilities, which allow them to find their way across thousands of kilometers of ocean, to return to their native river, reproduce there and die. Near Seattle, the Elwha River is a small coastal river (72 km long for a watershed of 800 km2), but a large salmon river. The Klallam people, who have

lived for centuries (even millennia) on the banks of this river, are one of these animist peoples for whom the salmon is a tutelary figure. They are great fishermen; and the salmon plays both a nutritional and spiritual role. That being said, for this Native American population - as for many others - the relationship with this waterway is of a family nature. And it is a bit as if the river were their grandmother.

However, in 1911, in violation of the treaty signed between Native Americans and settlers, two large dams (33m and 64m) were built on the Elwha River. While before the dams were built, it is estimated that more than 400,000 salmon used the river to spawn, only 4,000 remained in 2011. Following the tireless mobilizations of the Klallams (because their material and spiritual life depended on it), a local coalition with environmental associations and certain political figures led to the acceptance by the American Congress of the dismantling of these two dams – the largest dam dismantling project in history. Since then, thanks to significant restoration work, life has resumed freely in an impressive way, and scientists hope that the number of salmon will reach 300,000 adults per year by 2040[15].

I would like to draw three complementary threads from this story.

The first is a reference to the text "Accessing the Watershed" by Gary Snyder, a resident of the same Pacific Coast of Turtle Island, who proposed that the political program of a watershed council should be to ensure that salmon can freely swim up rivers. Since a **long**-term struggle by local populations (indigenous and non-indigenous) – a first action in this direction was carried out on the Elwha River – and others are following, notably on the Klamath River (still on the West Coast of Turtle Island), but also in France with the Sélune (which flows into Mont-Saint-Michel Bay, and where two large dams have been dismantled in recent years).

The second thread is that of the recognition of the rights of Mother Earth – also called the rights of nature. Since 2008, several States have recognized the rights of Mother Earth in their Constitutions (Ecuador, Bolivia, Uganda, Panama); and legal personality has been recognized for multiple natural entities: the Whanganui River (New Zealand), the Atrato River (Colombia), or more recently the Mar Menor Lagoon (Spain). We should also note the drafting of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010. These approaches, mainly from the South, call into question the very foundations of modern Western law, and its structural separation between "people" and "things," and between "nature" and "culture"[16]. The idea of the river-person, long present in indigenous cosmologies (and which overlaps with the notions of animism and Pachamama), questions the anthropocentrism of modern Western law from within. Following this, all our dualistic conceptions are put back on the table: our living spaces can be experienced as body-territories, and collective identity can be allied with natural entities (mountain peoples, forest peoples, water peoples), or even with totem species.

The political and legal recognition of indigenous cosmologies once again allows us to strengthen the links between communalism and bioregionalism, in mixed and decolonial perspectives. The political and legal recognition of indigenous cosmologies once again allows us to strengthen the links between communalism and bioregionalism, in mixed and decolonial perspectives. **Marin Schaffner**

The third thread, finally, is that of dismantling and its multiple, complex and profound issues. **Dismantling means removing part of the layer of human technical infrastructures that today surrounds all territories.** From a pragmatic point of view, the bioregional vision is difficult to activate in all its magnitude today, because of these "chains" of metal and concrete placed on the biosphere – the same is probably true for communalism, since we no longer have direct control over our subsistence (food, energy, water, etc.). Large dams are among the most upstream socio-technical locks in our system: they are what make it possible to supply metropolises with drinking water all year round, to ensure massive irrigation in summer, to support the low-water flow of nuclear power plants, or to build highways and railways in the valleys. The prospect of dismantling here makes it possible to consider in its true measure the work of deconstructing the existing model – fissile and fossil – prior to the advent of any truly ecological society. Here we come back to the very beginning, and to Murray Bookchin's famous phrase: **"None of the ecological problems we face today can be solved without profound social change."**

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After having navigated between all these complementary currents, all the way downstream from the waters that converge between bioregionalism and communalism, the imaginations can finally emerge towards a borderless horizon. There, they join the ocean of emancipatory thoughts of ecology. There, in this pluriversal sea, multicultural immensity of a future that is both postcolonial and post-industrial, the inhabiting communities could find the practices and stories leading to a deep reconnection with natural cycles. Ways to reconnect with the veins of the Earth. Like any horizon, this one remains utopian – but it is part of these real utopias that are gradually woven in the interstices of a damaged world.

So to finish, let us open: "Watersheds transcend all our borders (departmental, regional and national) and are deployed along blurred and porous limits – dividing lines. To the revolutionary imagination of the Workers' International, we would like to add an aquatic supplement. To federate the hydroworlds, there is no longer any need for nation-states: the veins of the Earth offer us another channel, that of an Intermondiale of watersheds." [17]

Notes

[1] Hatakeyama Shigeatsu, *La Forêt amante de la mer*, trad. A. Berque, Wildproject, 2019.

[2] Les deux citations de Doug Aberley et Peter Berg sont tirées de *Qu'est-ce qu'une biorégion ?* (Wildproject, 2021).
[3] En anglais, TEK (*traditional ecological knowledge*) signifie « savoirs écologiques traditionnels ». Le livre de Julia Watson, publié en 2019 chez Taschen, reste non traduit.
[4] Pour une vision d'ensemble des multiples combats dont elle a été la porte-voix, on renverra vers son inspirante autobiographie : *Mémoires terrestres*, trad. Marin Schaffner, Rue de l'Echiquier/Wildproject, 2023.
[5] Cité dans Les Veines de la Terre : une anthologie des bassins-versants, F. Guerroué, M. Rollot & M. Schaffner, Wildproject, 2021.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Pour lire les détails et développements de ce trop rapide résumé, voir l'ouvrage : Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy; Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, South End Press, 2005 (non traduit).
[8] Cité dans *Qu'est-ce qu'une biorégion ?*, Mathias Rollot & Marin Schaffner, Wildproject, 2021.
[9] *Permaculture One*, Bill Mollison & David Holmgren, 1978.
[10] Lire dans *Topophile*, « La permaculture, boîte à outils du biorégionalisme », d'Agnès Sinaï, le 10 septembre 2022.
[11] David Holmgren, Comment s'orienter ? Permaculture et descente énergétique, trad. S.Marot, Wildproject, 2023.
[12] Le livre *Retrosuburbia* est accessible en ligne via le site : https://online.retrosuburbia.com
[13] Voir la brochure « Pour un Syndicat de la montagne limousine », 2019. À retrouver sur https://www.montagnelimousine.net.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Pour approfondir le sujet, voir le documentaire *Le fleuve Elwha : quand la nature reprend ses droits*, de Jessica Plumb, 2014. Se reporter aussi au chapitre 4 de *La Condition terrestre*, Sophie Gosselin & David Gé Bartoli, Seuil, 2023.
[16] Voir Marine Calmet, *Décoloniser le droit*, Wildproject, 2024.
[17] « **Pour une Intermondiale des bassins-versant**s » in Les Veines de la Terre : une anthologie des bassins-versants, F. Guerroué, M. Rollot & M. Schaffner, Wildproject, 2021.