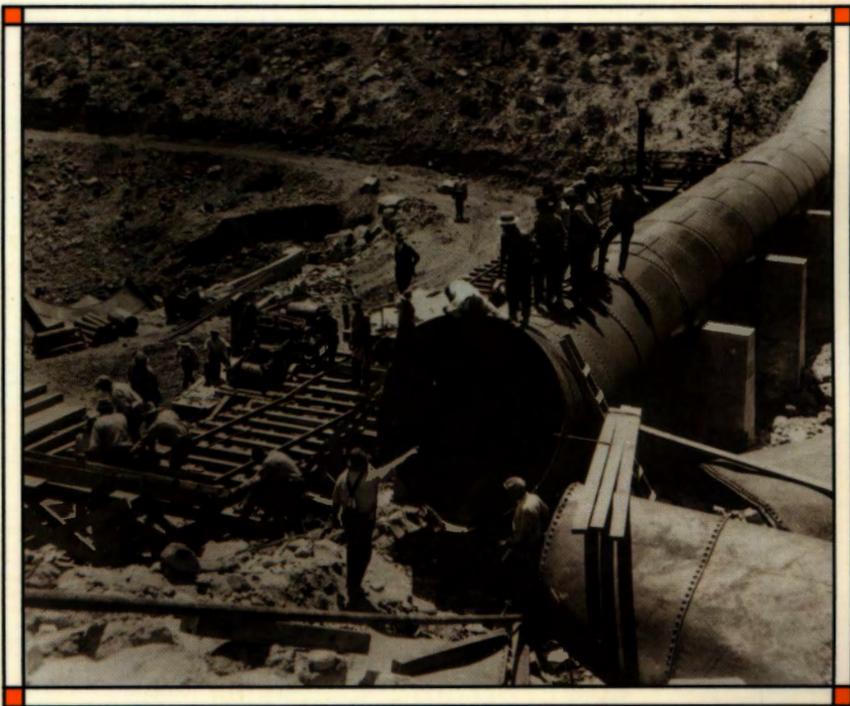


# RIVERS OF EMPIRE



*Water, Aridity, and the Growth  
of the American West*

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The ancient water-controlling civilizations of Asia were all stagnant and fearful of change. The elaborate infrastructures they created in their drive for technological dominance over nature became an obstacle to new possibilities, to creativity. Marvin Harris calls this inflexibility the predicament of the "hydraulic trap." Today that sense of being trapped by our own inventions pervades industrial societies everywhere. In this respect, the situation of the American West is hardly unique. It especially claims our attention because it is a modern variant on the oldest form of infrastructure rigidity and because it exemplifies, as its predecessors did, the problem of the trap in the crystalline clarity of desert light.

The essential question facing the region today, and the question that this study has been leading up to, is this: Does stagnation have to be the future of the West, as in other hydraulic societies, or can the trap be pried open and people walk free from their history? Now, confronting that question directly, I confess there is no unequivocal answer to be given.

History is always easier to understand than it is to change or escape. In the case of the West, a reversal of past trends must be regarded as a small possibility—and nothing more than that. Long the mythic land of new beginnings, it is now a region heavily encased in its past. What has been done there with the water and land over the past century and a half has had consequences for the people as well. It has handed them a fate, and there will be no quick release from it. For some time to come, the region will likely be ruled over by concentrated power and hierarchy based on the command of scarce water. There are, after all, many people living there these days who are dependent on the hydraulic apparatus, along with many vested interests, protective of their position. Despite the empire's loss of legitimacy and ecological sustainability, they will resist any substantial changes in it.

Much depends, of course, on the willingness of western Americans to yield to the rule of authority over them. If they accept those dominating powers as indispensable to their welfare, then the hydraulic trap will not

be escaped, at least by rational, humane methods. No one will make the effort to find alternative ways of organizing institutions and using rivers, and the power elite will go on appropriating every available drop of water for its canals and pipelines, while providing the masses with a few dribbles to support them in their managed oasis life. And the masses will, in gratitude, agree to make no trouble. They will not feel secure enough to go and meet the desert on their own, nor be willing to take the trouble to do so when the rewards of acquiescence are so high. For the pessimist, that scenario is the most plausible one for the future. All through history, he will insist, the masses have tolerated one elite after another, and they will go on doing so now in the American West. Their lethargy, their conformity, their lack of self-confidence, and their thirst will outweigh any resentments they may feel toward those in power. The historical record gives plenty of reasons for accepting this pessimistic analysis.

But then again, perhaps the future may not turn out quite that way after all. In the broader contemporary world, there is some evidence that the old obedience to established authority has begun to crack somewhat. A new spirit of restlessness and challenge may be gathering, and it may acquire sufficient momentum to force radical changes in the western water empire. Beginning in the 1960s, a generation of protesters came on the scene, and their questioning mood spread to the larger, older population. Many ordinary citizens learned to speak out against the principles and powers governing the modern industrial apparatus, to dispute the creed of unending growth, larger and larger units of organization and domination, and the reign of expertise and profit. So clamorous have the protests been at times that the hierarchists have become deeply worried, gloomily warning of impending catastrophe if people do not settle down. Among the high-placed Jeremiahs is the Harvard professor of government Samuel Huntington, who fears that there has been of late a dangerous upsurge of popular unrest and that it threatens the survivability of modern complex societies. To avoid chaos there must be, in his opinion,

a realistic appreciation that we can't go back to a simpler world—that we're going to live in a world of big organizations, of specialization and of hierarchy. Also, there has to be an acceptance of the need for authority in various institutions in the society.

Elsewhere Huntington describes the disease he believes is infecting the industrial world as "an excess of democracy". It is sapping the vitality of the economy, spreading distrust of those in power, and raising hopes

(misguided ones, he insists) that people can once more manage their own lives.<sup>1</sup> If he is right about the strength of the democratic rebellion, then the implications for the hydraulic order in the American West could be very grave. After moving for so long in the direction of empire, the region may be about to join the rest of industrial civilization in trying to make an about-face, seeking a freer, more human scale in its relationship with nature. Such a turning, to reiterate, would not be easy to effect, but, conceivably it could happen. The historian has no doubt that big changes are always possible, even in the most stagnant circumstances. Indeed, they are at some point inevitable. Furthermore, the new turn toward freedom might be far less grim than Huntington fears—unless one is sitting high up on the pyramid.

Let us assume that the next stage in the West will not be a mere continuation of the present. What then might we expect? What should we work for? Now no one could reliably prepare a detailed blueprint for a posthydraulic society. To do so would be to indulge in fantasy or utopianism, neither of which is much to be trusted. And it would be to substitute for the combined searchings of millions of people, generation following generation, the schemes and predictions of a single individual, which is not the way history is made. But one can confidently say that there are certain general strategies the West is going to have to pursue if it wants to find its way toward a more open, free, and democratic society. Those strategies must begin with a new relation to nature and a new technics.

Humans have been drinking, directly and indirectly, from the rivers of the West for a very long time now, and they will go on doing so, as they have a right to do, for the indefinite future. That is incontestable. The problem is how to do that drinking in ways that are not destructive to the integrity of the natural order. A river, to be sure, is a means to economic production, but before that it is an entity unto itself, with its own processes, dynamics, and values. In a sense it is a sacred being, something we have not created, and therefore worthy of our respect and understanding. To use a river without violating its intrinsic qualities will require much of us. It will require our learning to think like a river, our trying to become a river-adaptive people. In the past, groups as diverse as the Papago Indians and the Chinese Taoists seem to have met that requirement successfully, and there is much we can learn from them. If we could cultivate a consciousness more like theirs, the effects would be immense. We would start thinking about creating a very different kind of water-exploiting technology than the one we have been designing and putting into play. We would come to agree that henceforth no river should be appropriated in its entirety, nor be constrained to flow against its nature in some rigid, utilitarian strait-

jacket, nor be abstracted ruthlessly from its dense ecological pattern to become a single abstract commodity having nothing but a cash value. Such a change in thinking, from nature domination to nature accommodation, will be difficult to achieve anywhere in American culture, but nowhere more so than in the parched reaches of the West. Yet without such a shift in perception and valuing, such a freeing of our minds from the tyranny of instrumentalist reasoning about nature, there can be no basis for a more democratic social order.

One of the most compelling intuitions of the last few decades has been that the unprecedented environmental destructiveness of our time is largely the result of those "big organizations" Samuel Huntington defends as necessary and inevitable. Whatever they may accomplish in the manufacture of wealth, they are innately anti-ecological. Immense centralized institutions, with complicated hierarchies, they tend to impose their outlook and their demands on nature, as they do on the individual and the small human community, and they do so with great destructiveness. They are too insulated from the results of their actions to learn, to adjust, to harmonize. That is another way of saying that a social condition of diffused power is more likely to be ecologically sensitive and preserving. In contrast to the big organization, whether it be a state or a corporation, the small community simply cannot afford massive intervention in the environment. Moreover, it lacks the technical hubris common to concentrated power. When it does undertake to make use of an entity like a river, that effort is more easily undone if it goes awry, and the damage is more readily perceived and repaired. In short, the promotion of democracy, defined as the dispersal of power into as many hands as possible, is a direct and necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, means to achieve ecological stability.<sup>2</sup>

In the years to come, practical men and women looking to create a new West along these lines might reexamine the social and environmental ideals of John Wesley Powell, distilling out of them their democratic essence. He proposed, it will be remembered, a West divided into hundreds of watershed-defined communities. Each of them was to be left responsible for its own development and for the conservation of its own lands and waters, reaching from streambeds to the natural divides separating one community from another. Much of that territory was to be owned in common and managed for the public good. Power was to be seated within and limited to the boundaries of these communities. They would have to generate much of their own capital, through their own labor, just as the Mormons initially did in Utah. They would have to use their own heads instead of those of outside experts, though science and technology might, if carefully controlled and kept open to popular participation, be put to their service. This

scheme of Powell's, if worked out in modern terms unencumbered by his urge to dominate nature, would bring a radical devolution of power to the ordinary people of the West. The resulting communities, relying on their own capital and their own knowledge, could free themselves from the distant, impersonal structures of power that have made democracy little more than a ritual of ratifying choices already made by others—of acquiescing in what has been done to us.

In no way could such self-managing communities maintain their independence by pursuing all-out the large-scale, commercially oriented agriculture of today. To be free of outside control means not participating to any great extent in the national or world marketplace, concentrating instead on producing food and fiber for local use. Independence also means a significant cutback in irrigation dependency and intense water consumption. When so much is taken from the river that the flow is severely diminished or exhausted, downstream communities complain and seek redress. Inevitably water rivalry leads to the setting up of powerful state arbitrators and bureaucratic regulation. Fortunately, there are alternatives to both agribusiness and bureaucracy, though they are not so profitable and they require considerable local self-discipline. They include relearning old, discarded techniques of floodplain and dry farming, finding or creating new cultivars that require little water, shifting to a more pastoral economy based on sheep, goats, and cattle, and diversifying into a variety of craft and small industrial livelihoods.<sup>3</sup> Those western farmers who wanted to raise cotton or corn on an extended basis would have to migrate back East, where the rain is naturally available and the farmer does not have to rely on technological giantism.

Redesigning the West as a network of more or less discrete, self-contained watershed settlements would have another environmental benefit. It would train the widest possible number of people in the daily task of understanding and adapting to their ecological conditions. They would not be able to turn the job over to a federal agency. They would be forced to restrain their lives more closely within the limits of their immediate world, and those limits would be starkly before them, impossible to ignore or evade. They would have to bear the costs of their mistakes, not pass them on to other regions to absorb. Direct responsibility is the surest road to carefulness: that is the oldest, clearest lesson in the environmental history of the species. By and large, it has not been a road taken by Americans. Instead, we have tried constantly to evade the discipline of nature by moving on to new, virgin lands when we spoiled those in our possession, by drawing on distant sources of commodities when we exhausted local supplies, and by calling on a federal agency for help when we got in trouble.

A West organized more along Powell's lines would make all those options less available, leading to a more ecologically conscious people.

If this model of settlement and use were in fact to become the next stage in western history, it would have little adverse effect on the lower economic classes in the West, though conceivably it might improve their lot by giving them a better chance to participate and to share in river use. On the other hand, there can be no denying that anything like this decentralized, localized, nonhydraulic West would lower profits, require a redistribution of population eastward, and diminish the wealth as well as the power of the hierarchy. That was why they turned it down a hundred years ago. And to the extent that ordinary westerners agreed with that decision then, they were saying that they too preferred private wealth to equality of condition, personal accumulation to personal or communal autonomy, a metropolitan bourgeois style of life to an ecologically disciplined one. Having turned down the possibility once, the West may well do so again. But if it does do so, then it should at least be honest and forthright about it. The hard fact it must face up to is that, despite so much rhetoric to the contrary, one cannot have life both ways—cannot maximize wealth and empire and maximize democracy and freedom too. An unwillingness to acknowledge that fact has been a characteristic American as well as western trait, one deriving from the innocence and dreaminess of youth. Now it can no longer be evaded. A clear-minded choice has to be made. That is what the West, the last American place for dreaming and for evasion, has to tell us in the starkest possible terms.

The English iconoclast E. F. Schumacher has written that "every increase of needs tends to increase one's dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control, and therefore increases existential fear."<sup>4</sup> That has been the central point of this book. What Schumacher did not say is that one of the best places to go to free oneself from both the needs and the fear is the western American desert. Deserts have long had a remarkable liberating effect on people. In the Old World one of their traditional functions, along with providing a setting for pompous, vulnerable, despotic empires, has been to show humans what their true needs were, helping them slough off their useless baggage and arrive at a sense of essentials. In the United States, that alternative use has seldom been sought or valued. When experienced, it has more often than not been a traumatic moment, not a liberation. For example, the forty-niners who had to dump out their Chipendale chests along the trail in the Humboldt Sink were being taught what was essential to living, all right, but in the unexpectedness and bitterness of that circumstance it was a hard, painful education for them, one they had not undertaken voluntarily and would quickly try to forget. Encountered

more freely and rationally, however, the desert can be a means to freedom. There, one can liberate oneself from extraneous needs and in that process also rid oneself of the demands of outside powers and of the shapeless, nagging fear they instill.

Approached deliberately as an environment latent with possibilities for freedom and democracy rather than for wealth and empire, the unredeemed desert West might be an unrealized national resource. It might be valued as a place of inspiration and training for a different kind of life. Relieved from some of its burdens of growing crops, earning foreign exchange, and supporting immense cities, it might encourage a new sequence of history, an incipient America of simplicity, discipline, and spiritual exploration, an America in which people are wont to sit long hours doing nothing, earning nothing, going nowhere, on the bank of some river running through a spare, lean land. They would come then to the river to see a reflection of their own liberated minds, running free and easy. They would want little, enjoy much. Now and then they would dip their hands into the current and drink a little. They would irrigate their spirit more than their ego. In the midst of what had once been regarded as the bleakest scarcity they would find abundance. Is it a fable, this alternative, a idyll from an inaccessible yesterday, or is it a real possibility, one being pushed along to fulfillment by the currents of history? The West will let us know.