

Sihl and Limmat: colonial and natural-cultural entanglements

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Western modernity's colonial legacy is not only to be found in former colonial territories or their societal structures. Coloniality has included "nature" as another realm of subjugation, appropriation, and extraction. What we could call colonial practices towards the rivers are part of the past and present of the city rivers. The rivers Sihl and Limmat are presently highly manipulated and controlled rivers. Reservoirs, dams, canalizations have transformed them into manageable streams. The history of these rivers has been delineated mainly by two human necessities: transportation and energy. Since the Middle Ages, the city has used the Sihl river for transportation within an extractivist infrastructure to support the exploitation of timber in the Sihl Forest. The city formed a trade monopoly where their officials and workers were in charge of cutting the wood, transporting it through the river to the city and selling it to the artisans working in the city. To this end, a place in the city called Sihlhözli, where nowadays a sports complex is located, was constructed to deliver the extracted timber to the craftsmen. During the 19th century, the river lost its relevance as a means of transport, due to the construction of the first road from the forest to the outskirts of the city. By the end of the century, the city was directly connected to the forest. At the same time, the Sihltal railway line was built for even more timber transportation and a small railway system to facilitate the transport to the Sihltal railway line was established in the forest. The emerging streets and railways didn't take away from the river's relevance as a commodity. On the contrary, the two rivers were transformed into some of the main energy sources of the city of Zurich and its industry.

In Early Modern times, rivers were already major energy sources. For instance, they were used to power saw-, paper- or textile mills. The energy the Sihl and the Limmat provided to the sawmills only reinforced and accelerated exploitation of the forests around Zurich, while the paper and textile mills laid the basis for global colonial connections of Zurich. During the medial revolution in the Early Modern Age, Zurich was, after Basel, the second most important book printing center in Switzerland. Many books about the European "discoveries" were printed in Zurich. Journey books, encyclopedias contributed to the othering of Amerindian, African or Asian cultures. Water, books and colonization are more connected than we usually think.



Journey books, encyclopedias contributed to the othering of Amerindian, African or Asian cultures. Water, books and colonization are more connected than we usually think. Moreover, the textile industry was intrinsically connected with slavery. Swiss Indiennes, printed and painted cotton fabrics, were of great importance to the transatlantic slave trade. In the 18th century, Indiennes were produced at the Limmat whose location and water power were highly beneficial to the manufacture of Indiennes. This serves as an illustration of the colonial entanglements of the rivers. The subjugation of rivers as an energy resource contributed to the distribution of exciting images of non-european cultures and was part of a global colonial entanglement as slavery was.

Henceforth, a decolonial action should aim for an equilibrium between human and nonhuman life. The decolonial exercise would entail understanding such coloniality and its consequences in today's life in and around the rivers and the territories connected to them. This means transcending the anthropocentric and eurocentric views about nature. An example towards this goal would be to change our understanding of nature separated from culture. Donna Haraway suggests, for example, the concept of "naturecultures" which implies the intrinsic relationality of the natural and cultural worlds. Taking into account knowledges from the Global South, we can understand nature and culture as part of a web of relations. The rivers have connected us to the mountains, the forests, other cities – the world. In other words, the city of Zurich is intrinsically linked to that river, made up of a number of silent relations that could be made visible via their visible traces and be extended through fictional and artistic practices that make all these relations visible.OOO

Sources

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