

DANUBE

FUTURE

WORKS²

Ulm July 7, 2026
One-Day Conference

KEYNOTE ESSAY

DULUMINI PERERA

DO TERRITORIES SPECULATE ABOUT THEIR FUTURES?

In her talk at Danube Future Works #2: New Governing Models on the Danube, Dulmini Perera, an architect by training who now works in cybernetics and systems theory, took up a question posed earlier in the conference: how can living systems that cannot be fully known or controlled be governed? She argued that the word “speculation” is a good place to start, and that asking whether territories themselves speculate unsettles the knowledge systems, markets and politics we rely on.

TWO PREDOMINANT KINDS OF SPECULATION

Speculation, Perera noted, is the word we use for the unknown, the indeterminate and the improbable, and also when we talk about change, time and futures. Two forms dominate today. The first is market speculation. In the neoliberal market, uncertainty is declared the norm, so governing is replaced by managing uncertainty. This becomes a justification for creating what she called design crisis, since non-planning does not work.

The second is the humanist option, found in politics and think tanks, which uses stories and scenarios to train people to think beyond the present moment. The intention is good and the projects are often nice, but they operate inside institutional frameworks and so run into the limits of contemporary politics. By asking whether territories speculate, she takes the question out of human agency. This puts three things in doubt: the modern knowledge systems we work within, the capitalist market that we cannot escape however hard we try, and humanist politics, including democracy.

A TERRITORY AND A TRADITION

Perera approaches the question from two places. The first is her current home in the West of Ireland, which is not Dublin. It is a large territory with many non-human actors. Through colonization it was one of the areas that kept struggling to retain what is local, and she pointed to Yeats’s Celtic Twilight, which comes out of the myths of the West.

The second is her own history in cybernetics, most recently a project on Gregory Bateson. Cybernetics has shaped how we think about governance, and most governance models emerged from it. It is connected to the military-industrial complex, and its dominant framework of modeling feedback produced models of mechanical systems, which have become part of our everyday working structures. Bateson was different from his colleagues. He worked

in many settings, including military intelligence, anthropology, psychiatry and cybernetics, before ending up in Santa Cruz and the counterculture. He asked how an organization can deal with things it cannot fully know. His “ecology of mind” holds that we must learn to participate wisely in living systems whose complexity exceeds our capacity to know them completely. He saw one of the greatest failures of his time in the gap between how living systems actually change and the models we use to think about change. Perera added that some of Bateson’s ideas now resonate with the decolonial moment, which several of her case studies draw on.

ACCELERATION: OUT OF JOINT

What makes the present moment special, Perera argued, is acceleration. For most of human history, cultural and territorial systems worked closely together and were adaptive. Humans acted on natural systems, but the background of territories stayed relatively stable, so it could be imagined and understood. Today those backgrounds and environments change so quickly that models become outdated the moment we start using them to work with the systems they describe. As a result, we constantly live in a state of being “out of joint.” Working with territorial systems, she said, you can feel this: the problems we try to deal with often produce uncanny effects.

She illustrated this with two examples from the West of Ireland. The first is an aluminum refinery built after independence to attract investment to the West. It was planned with colonial maps in which Gaelic place names had been translated into English, even though the territorial rhythms behind those names were quite different. Today the bauxite pollutes the network and produces strange chemical effects here and there. People do not know how to deal with them, and politics tries to address them in various ways, but they remain strange chemical signals.

The second is a ringfort, part of Irish fairy mythology, which lay in the path of the M18 highway. The folklorist Eddie Lenihan helped divert a multi-million-dollar road because of the fairies. In modern Ireland this is a strange thing, yet it stopped the construction, and it persists as something people do not understand and that unsettles the system. Political and public discourse and the media, Perera said, either simplify such events or treat them as problems to be fixed. Bateson would ask a different question: are they signals of environmental relationships that we have forgotten or unlearned to see, and could we learn to understand them differently?

ECOLOGICAL SEMIOTICS AND EMERGENT GOVERNANCE

In the 1960s and 70s Bateson became directly involved with the ecological movement, working with people such as the California governor Jerry Brown and designers such as Sim Van der Ryn and Warren Brodey. At a conference of the kind this one resembles, he told them they were thinking of systems mostly as energy and material constellations. They are also larger systems of meaning, value and negotiation, with a sense of purpose very different from the human one. This grew into a broad theory of how meaning, value and purpose are communicated in human and non-human systems, which is why the word semiotics applies. Perera suggested that some governance structures now look at such models, partly because they are working with machine intelligence. Ecological semiotics thus becomes a framework for understanding emergent governance.

To make this concrete she used a metaphor Bateson liked: a croquet game. In the classical organizational or design context, you hit a ball with a stick. In living, emergent systems it is the game from Alice in Wonderland, where

the ball is a porcupine and the stick a flamingo. All the components are alive, change, hit each other and create their own rhythms, at different levels of meaning-making. Human conscious purpose operates on only one of these levels. Most transformation happens at levels beyond consciousness. Yet, in Bateson's critique of Freud, the unconscious is not hidden somewhere inside. Mind is in the environment, as a field of levels and networks of meaning. His critique of "conscious purpose" invites different sensibilities.

Perera said this research led to different ways of working. The most radical were experiments with drugs and consciousness, including John Lilly's work with dolphins. Others were the consciousness-raising and self-help movements. The third, which interests her most, appears in decolonial scholarship. The first question Bateson would pose is how our ways of purposefully acting, and of consciously trying to understand change, limit us in seeing certain patterns.

ALTERNATIVE IMAGINATIONS OF CHANGE

Perera showed a familiar graph of the last ten years, whose curve points toward doomsday and an end time. Such a graph demands immediate action, and speculative proposals often take the form of techno-fixes such as geoengineering and green technology, which try to address the problem as fast as possible. But other imaginations of change exist, and they are hidden. She cited Kyle White, an indigenous studies scholar who works with indigenous communities, and his notion of responsibility and coordination time. Because of histories of colonization, many indigenous communities have already experienced an "end moment" and have navigated it through certain coordination patterns, illustrated by research on eels and ants. She stressed that this does not mean going back. The point is to foreground coordination time and bring it into governance frameworks.

FROM HUMAN TO COSMOPOLITAN POLITICS

Given so many agencies, Perera suggested, our troubles are not only those of human conversation and collaboration discussed in the morning. The question is cosmopolitan, because worlds clash and we do not understand them. Should we keep improving our humanist systems, or use this as a critical moment to think of something like the cosmopolitan?

She offered two case studies, both based on years spent within communities. The first is Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth Beings*, about the Peruvian mountain Ausangate. The mountain is a problem for the state, because it does not fit modern politics, and also for environmentalists, whose category of "the environment" cannot capture it either. De la Cadena spent years layering story upon story with the community, and the result points to a problem of language between everyday territorial operations and political and legal form. The second is *Otter's Journey* by Lindsay Borrows, an indigenous scholar trained as a lawyer, who gathers stories and myths from her Canadian community, with the otter as her spirit animal, and takes them back into legal practice and policy documents in order to redesign those systems. Perera offered both as starting points for thinking about cosmopolitan negotiation, while admitting that we struggle even with our own politics and that she does not know whether this is the way to go.

UNLEARNING PATTERNS: A QUESTION OF EDUCATION

Perera's third theme was everyday life and education. Our general education, she said, gradually clocks people out of ecological and territorial patterns and makes them unlearn the natural ways they might otherwise tap into an expanded consciousness. She noted that some of the projects pre-

sented in the morning were inspiring in this respect, because they address education at a different level, beginning with children. She also mentioned pilot projects from the 1960s with children and with blind people, who perceive the patterns of change very differently, so that the gradient of change looked radically different from what we usually imagine.

Perera teaches young students who will one day become planners, architects and designers, and she asks how to get them out of the patterns they are placed in and how to introduce a different idea of future speculation. Speculative design is one nice option, but she wondered whether the approach could be broader, for instance in standard history education.

She described a game she set up in which students spend a lot of time in the territory. She made what she called an executive decision not to teach history the way it is supposed to be taught, through periods and the categories of local and global that we have constructed. Instead, students try to understand the change processes around them, describe them, photograph them and imagine different kinds of change events. The game helps them question how we set time limits. For a factory at the edge of the territory, for example, where does the moment of pollution or impact begin, and where does it end? Treating an event as a process opens them to a different engagement with change and with how past and future connect. Play matters here because it lets students engage with the material in a more playful way.

CONCLUSION

Perera closed by reframing the task. The bigger question, she said, is not how to get people ready to speculate about possible or better futures. It is how to cultivate the capacities and sensibilities needed to participate in a field of unfolding relations whose meaning can never be fully exhausted. "How do we learn to live in that condition?" she asked.