



Summary of

The risks of thinking: A confrontation between Native American spirituality and technology

(‘De risico’s van het denken: Een treffen tussen Indiaanse spiritualiteit en techniek’)

By Jaap Breeveld (pseudonym for: Jos van Boeckel)

In the 1980s, author Jaap Breeveld had two intense experiences which triggered him to write *The risks of thinking*. One was his participation as representative of the Dutch government in the *Global Technology 2000 Conference* in Baltimore in 1980, and the other was his joining of an anti-nuclear blockade in the Dutch town Dodewaard in 1981. At this last occasion, Breeveld met Bill Wahpepah, one of the leaders of the American Indian Movement. They developed a friendship over the years. Another inspiration were the radical views of the American Anthropologist Gregory Bateson and the French philosopher Jacques Ellul. Breeveld did not live to see his manuscript published. He died in 1989 and the first print of *The risks of thinking* appeared in 1992. The editing was done by Jan van Boeckel.

The book has 12 chapters. Seven congresses are interwoven through the text. The common denominator of these meetings is that the subjects that are discussed there have (had) a profound influence on the culture and life of the Pueblo people of the Southwest. Below, a summary is presented per chapter.

1. The Fort of Reason

First Congress, Baltimore, 1980

A group of technical, political and military experts is discussing the way in which technology will develop towards the year 2000. 'Star Wars' is already in the air. Reason is the highest authority, although the consequences of the technological developments may turn out to be a nightmare.

2. The Seven Cities of Cibola

The next scene is the American Southwest, the country of the Pueblo Indians. A short history of the region is presented as well as an introduction to Indian spirituality.

Second Congress, Cañoncito

In a long poem, quoted from Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, witches are holding a conference and a contest. The witch who forecasts the coming of the white man and the ensuing destruction, wins the contest.

3. The Night That All Dogs Were Barking

Third Congress, Brussels, 1927

At this conference in Brussels, the nuclear scientists gather to discuss the implications of the Uncertainty Principle of Heisenberg. The quest for splitting the atom has started.

Fourth Congress, Los Alamos, 1945

A long historical sketch is given of the peculiar community atop of 'Magic Mountain', in Los Alamos. It is an exemplary case of autonomous development of new technology. The Interim Commission is conferring whether or not it would be wise or not to first show the Japanese the destructive power of the bomb before actually using it on them.

4. The Pattern Which Connects

In this chapter Gregory Bateson is introduced, both through his remarkable life and his uncommon views. Particularly his concepts of 'mind' and 'epistemological error' are explained. Bateson's writings on addiction and schizophrenia are seen in the light of the ecological crisis.

5. The Unbelievable Reversal

Similar as in the preceding chapter, Jacques Ellul is introduced here. Ellul sees technology as the determining factor of the twentieth century. In relationship to nature, mankind has undergone an unbelievable reversal. Our living habitat has changed from a biotope in a technotope.

6. The Conquista

The Conquista is the Spanish name for the conquest of the so-called New World, starting with Columbus' landing in 1492. The operation is seen here as an efficient, technical project, whereby the disastrous consequences for native peoples are only realized after-the-fact.

Fifth Congress, Valladolid, 1550

At the city of Valladolid an extensive debate is held to find out whether the Indian is 'human' or not.

Sixth Congress, Rome 1848

High in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, a decision is made who will be the next bishop of Santa Fe. The French Jean Lamy is the chosen one. He develops a double relationship to the Pueblo peoples of both admiration and contempt.

7. A Police Force in Space

In the mid 1980s the Star Wars plans are being developed the young physicist and laser specialist Peter Hagelstein plays a crucial role. Due to problems of conscience, he resigns, but then he has given his most important contribution already.

8. Indians in Dodewaard

During the protest blockade of the nuclear power station of Dodewaard, a group of Native Americans, who have just visited the United Nations in Geneva, join the protests and express their solidarity. Leader of the group is Bill Wahpepah, who gives an eloquent speech in the big tent of the demonstrators.

Seventh Congress, Santa Clara Pueblo, 1983

At their seventh session, the indigenous representatives gathered in the Traditional Elders Circle issue a serious warning to the industrial world that the present way of life cannot proceed as it does.

9. The End of the Rainbow

A new phenomenon is catching on in the eighties in California: the rise of the so-called New Age Movement. One of the prominent leaders is Marilyn Ferguson. She comes to present a speech in Amsterdam. Discussed is why the New Age movement is so successful in this time and what the parallels are between high-tech development and New Age rhetoric.

10. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Drawn from the analogy of the Four Horsemen in the Book of Revelations, a short biography is given of four 'horsemen' who entered the Southwest on horseback: conquistador Coronado, archbishop Lamy, novelist D.H. Lawrence and physicist Robert Oppenheimer. All have had some lasting influence on the Southwest. Lawrence is the one who is highly impressed by the Pueblo cultures he encounters. In his writings, he warns that the Western world has chosen the wrong course. Oppenheimer is the one who actually chose the site of the Los Alamos laboratories. He seemed to have a split character: he loved deserts and admired Indian culture. Yet, he was the driving force behind production and detonation of the atomic bomb.

11. We Live in World that is Insane

In 1987, philosopher George Steiner presents the Huizinga Lecture in the Dutch city of Leiden. Steiner gives a diagnosis of the core problems of our time and gives his personal view of the root causes. Although he is aware as few others of the immensity of the cultural crisis of the West, Steiner finds it quite exciting to live in this period. Rather than reducing 'the risks of thinking',

he remarks, western man seems to prefer to continue the way he is living, even at the risk of annihilation.

12. After All Science

In the final chapter ways are discussed in which human beings can do something about the ever-increasing power of technology. The author suggests that choosing 'for' or 'against' technology is a too easy way out. Technology causes more and more paradoxes in nature and in our lives. Rather than neglecting them, we should acknowledge their existence. The immense problem that is facing us seems to be that we live in a de-spiritualized, disenchanted world. How can we 'develop' a new metaphysics '*after* all science'?