Rachel Carson Center Perspectives

The Future of Environmental History

Needs and Opportunities

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On the Edge of Environmental History

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I'm feeling edgy. The times will do that to a fellow. Global environmental damage is rampant, the world economy is sputtering, unemployment is catastrophic, and the political atmosphere is poisonous. Moreover, I come from California, where, as the Ohlone used to say, one is "dancing on the edge of the world," and where economic meltdown, strangulation of good government, and privatization of a great university are proceeding apace (Walker, forthcoming). It's not a good formula for dispassionate contemplation of the Future of Environmental History.

To be sure, I am a great admirer of the field, in large part because it speaks to the key questions of the human impact on the natural world and addresses many of the environmental concerns I hold to be critical to our collective future. Moreover, I admire the pluck of its practitioners for carving out a new domain of historiography over the last generation. Not only did environmental history seem like a diversion to most historians (who wouldn't know a salmon from a codpiece), it went against the grain of the times by being more materialist than cultural. And finally, this emerging subfield has done some impressive intellectual work that has forced scholars across the disciplines to sit up and take note.

But I also feel edgy about the state of environmental history. It is, after all, a branch of historiography and hence a careful, scholarly, dispassionate endeavor that necessarily moves slowly and speaks to a rarified audience. I recognize the necessity of this academic way of proceeding in the pursuit of knowledge and legitimacy, and I have no illusions about the gap between scholarship and the political fray. Nor do I put much stock in the kind of "relevancy" that means writing policy papers, unless there is very good scholarly research behind them.

Nevertheless, if environmental history (and academia in general) is going to make a dent in the public discourse on the big issues of our time, such as climate change, habitat loss, and species extinction, it needs to have an edge that it now by and large lacks. It needs to confront the big problems of the day (even if indirectly), ask the big

questions, and be willing to take hard, unpopular stands (inside and outside academia). To make this prescription more substantial than a general exhortation, I shall make several recommendations. The first set refers to basic principles of how to think about and practice environmental history. The second set is a group of concerns that derive from my own field of geography, both as to the objects of study and the geographic point of view on the world.

The Importance of Being More than Earnest

If environmental historians are to become more edgy in their knowledge and more consequent in their work, they might well adopt the following three principles of thinking about the topics they study. In this way, they could put a bit more iron fist behind the velvet gloves of their brilliant research and estimable narratives. To keep the tone from being too heavy, I take a page from postmodern architecture's bible, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi, Brown, and Isenour 1977).

1. Learning from Weber

Historians tend to dismiss the shallow offerings of social scientists, with their often simpleminded sense of the present and of causality that can be prised from the data by regression analysis (Gaddis 2002). I couldn't agree more. So I call on the spirit of Max Weber, the father of modern sociology, who pioneered so much of systematic model building in social science (before it became just an exercise in mathematical and statistical gymnastics). By contrast, the great failing of historiography as a field is its frequent evasion of causality, allergy to theory, and preference for the narrative form. Historians think that you can't step into the same river twice, but you can, in fact, step into the same river system again and again; the hydraulic and geomorphic principles remain the same, even if the water molecules and eddies are ever-changing. This is not a call for false scientism, but a plea to find the strong current between plumbing bottomless detail and cranking out shallow analysis.

2. Learning from Marx

Karl Marx was simultaneously a historian and what came to be called a social scientist by the time of Weber. His model of capitalism was famously critical of the course of modern history and sought the agency of human liberation in the working class. There

were two sides to Marx's mode of analysis. The first was to discover the logic and trajectory of capital, with its relentless exploitation of everything, in search of endless accumulation. In this vein, environmental historians must never let capitalism off the hook as a fundamental force behind the global bulldozer. Marx's second key idea was how ideology arises from practical affairs and how political economy must always be critical of the illusions of capitalism. Modern academics would, I think, come in for the same barbs as the neo-Hegelians of his time; the point is not only to analyze the world, but to change it.

3. Learning from Foucault

The champion of poststructuralism, Michel Foucault, taught us to write "the history of the present," a challenge some radical historians have taken up with vigor (see the journal *History of the Present*). This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it refers to a concern with how we arrived at the present state of things, and how things might have turned out differently (as opposed to historical studies with no point of contemporary reference or a wooden Marxism that tried to explain history in mechanical terms). On the other hand, Foucault refers to the heavy hand of social power in keeping the course of history on track—and out of the hands of the subaltern. Foucault was unrelentingly critical of power in all its forms, as well as how knowledge is deeply implicated in modern oppression. Environmental historians should, in this light, be forward in challenging the blandishments of conservative *and* liberal thought that disguise the way modern society bludgeons nature into submission.

Seeing Like a Space

At the same time, I am a geographer among historians, making me edgy in a disciplinary sense. Though environmental historians are my favorite breed among that disciplinary herd, I want to play the geographic card. To this end, I argue for three critical dimensions of environmental study that need to be given more attention by historians, where there is something to be learned from geographers (for a fuller description, see Walker and Thomas 2010, 553-77. Apologies to James Scott for the titular pun).

1. Cities: The Centrality of the Urban

Among all the possible fields of study in environmental history, cities are the most important. While there have been some excellent urban studies by environmental historians, the dominant subject matter has been rural: wilderness, parks, forestry, fish, and so on. There are, to begin with, the vast resource appetites of cities, as Bill Cronon (1991) has shown, which continue to grow in an ever-more urbanized world. In addition, nature lives within the city, as second or even "third" nature (nature transformed and transformed nature resurgent), even as the scale of cities expands and the urbanization of the countryside brings more and more land into the urban realm (Walker 2007). Then, finally, cities serve as the principle hearths of contemporary environmental ideas and politics, particularly of resistance to the scourge of capitalist development and of alternative ways of life that might save the planet.

2. Political Ecology: The Political Economy of Nature

The subfield of political ecology grew up within geography at much the same time as did environmental history within its master discipline, and for similar reasons: confronting the pressing questions of environmental degradation. While the stream of "man and nature" studies has always been robust in geography, the discipline long suffered from a denial of theory comparable to historiography. Political ecology reacted against that by bringing to bear the great concepts of classical political economy: property, markets, class, and state. And onto these it has grafted race and gender, producing a tree of knowledge of great fruitfulness. It is also one of profound critique of modern social orders and the joint exploitation of people and the land (see as example Peet and Watts 1996).

3. Space, Place and Scale: Geography as History

The great scholars Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel were as much geographers as historians, and the best students of environmental history walk in their footsteps. One thing they understood very well was that social history is directly tied to land, places, and material life. Another was that one had to think at all scales, from the local to the global, in a dialectical way, and that the latter was not just the sum of the former (just as the former is not simply the imprint of the latter). Indeed, there are key scales that defy the usual obsession with national histories, such as the Mediterranean world, Atlantic economy, and Indian Ocean realm. Finally, they grasped the key role of expan-

sion at the geographic frontiers of dynamic societies, from medieval Eastern Europe to the Caribbean sugar colonies. Perhaps, most of all, they never shied away from "Big History," with its global processes (I recommend Moore 2010, 33-68).

I am sure that many environmental historians would agree with one or more of my propositions, because they are, on the whole, a rather forward-looking group inspired by a serious concern with the fate of the earth. Nevertheless, it will not suffice to rest on a record of good behavior without thinking about how to break out of the prison of the academy and even of American liberalism. If we are to restore some measure of sanity to the mad conquest of the earth today, we'll need a bit more of a push-back from our best and brightest intellectuals.