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Linking World History and Environmental History

If decisions of scale pose a dilemma to all types of historical analysis, they are perhaps especially challenging in environmental history. After all, one of the many attractions of environmental history is the fact that much of its subject matter–soil, plants, animals, climate, disease–pays little heed to the national or other political boundaries that so often frame historical writing. In certain respects, this encourages an emphasis on local or regional studies as the only way to deal with the complexities of ecosystems and the role of human activity within them. Yet at the same time, it also demands a keen awareness of much larger patterns and connections–international trade, global climatic shifts, species transfers, disease diffusion–that have so dramatically shaped the biosphere over the past half millennium. For this reason historians have often remarked on the inherent complementarities of world history and environmental history; indeed, the value of such a fusion of perspectives has been amply demonstrated by a handful of excellent studies over the past couple of decades. The stated aim of this volume is to drive this synthesis further forward, while at the same time connecting the early modern and modern periods more deliberately than has generally been done so far. The result is a timely, challenging, and eminently readable survey of how human activity and the global environment have shaped each other over the past five centuries.

The key question underpinning the volume is how best to relate the many local adaptations between humans and their surroundings to broader patterns of global change. The eleven chapters–spanning "Old" and "New" worlds, and tropical and temperate zones, though focusing predominately on what are today "developing" regions–cover a wide range of different cultures, societies, and ecosystems that inevitably defy easy generalization. The common theme that unites these variations is what the editors call the "developmentalist project" (p. 7): the widely shared trend toward centralized states, sedentary human settlement, and intensified efforts to manage and exploit natural resources that has fundamentally characterized the modern world. The implications of such an approach are numerous, as Kenneth Pomeranz's introduction clearly explains. For one thing, it broadens the focus far beyond Europe as the essential "core" of the modern world, and correspondingly relativizes the centrality of capitalist production narrowly defined as an essential ingredient of modern economic development and environmental transformation. In so doing, it also cautions against drawing overly sharp distinctions between precolonial practices and colonial-era ecological destruction, or indeed against the notion that European determination to control nature was wholly unique. Moreover, it recognizes the many similarities between European overseas expansion and the "internal" colonization of lands and peoples by other polities, while at the same time acknowledging that foreign colonization generally marked a great acceleration of such "home-grown" trends in areas that fell under European control. Above all, it highlights the cyclical, self-reinforcing process whereby states around the globe have encouraged greater human exploitation of natural resources in order to increase their fiscal and military powers, the proceeds from which were generally used to enhance yet further their ability to harness the productivity of the people and ecosystems within their (often expanding) territories. If the *Annales* tradition de-emphasized the role of the early

modern state in its focus on agrarian structures and relegation of politics to the level of "event history," the process of state-building is utterly central to the story of environmental change told here.

This is clearly the case with John Richards's synoptic chapter on land rights and property regimes. As land became scarcer and more intensively utilized over the past few centuries, societies around the world have tended, he argues, to converge around a remarkably similar regime of simplified land rights that displaced locally specific tenure arrangements and systems of communal property. In every region of the world this process went hand in hand with the increasing value and commodification of land and the corresponding emergence of land markets. Although such markets in some respects functioned to enhance the position of private landowners, states and political elites nonetheless played a central role as the ultimate guarantors of private property rights and regulators of land use. Changing property regimes were thus a fundamental part of modern attempts to render resource use more predictable and reliable. So, too, were the rapidly evolving systems of human energy use. Adopting the vantage point of "big history," Edmund Burke places the modern era within the very long-term sweep of human energy use to emphasize not only the intensifying demands on resources since the fifteenth century, but above all the utterly unprecedented changes wrought by the fossil-fuel revolution. Though a familiar point, it is one well worth repeating: if fossil fuels were crucial to breaking through the Malthusian constraints of the "old biological regime," the prospect of their eventual scarcity suggests the very real possibility of a future trend reversal in human control over the environment.

Overcoming ecological constraints always incurs certain costs, a point most vividly illustrated in the chapters by Mark Cioc and Douglas Weiner. The Rhine, as Cioc's work has shown, was the object of particularly intense efforts at hydraulic management ever since the early nineteenth century. In the course of straightening, canalizing, and embanking its waters in the service of industry, engineers effectively turned it into a fully functional transport canal-*cum*-sewer laden with pollutants and devoid of most aquatic life. Given the extent of the damage, postwar efforts to restore it as a habitat could only achieve marginal results. An even starker version of this instrumentalist attitude to nature can be found in the Soviet Union's megalomaniac development projects. By placing the oft-remarked utopianism of Soviet designs within the longer sweep of Russian history, Weiner portrays them not just as the product of a no-holds-barred modernizing ideology but also as a particularly virulent form of the "predatory tribute-taking state" that long characterized the mode of governance in this part of the world. Like their czarist predecessors, Soviet leaders viewed land and labor as resources to be exploited essentially at will for the purpose of catching up with more economically advanced societies.

The many parallels one can discern between capitalist and Communist, pre- and postrevolutionary "developmentalist projects" were by no means the only similarities. As Burke argues in his chapter on Middle Eastern environments, Ottoman attempts to encourage commercial agriculture at the expense of pastoralists were broadly analogous in intention and effect to French actions in the Maghreb, just as British irrigation schemes in Egypt and Mesopotamia essentially represented an extension of indigenous efforts to control water supplies. Chinese developments in the imperial era likewise show numerous parallels with Western trends, as scholars have increasingly emphasized in recent years. Yet as Pomeranz argues in his chapter on China's environmental transformation, the particular version of economic development and environmental management pursued there was nonetheless significantly shaped by certain long-lived cultural preferences, especially the maintenance of a large rural population and the commitment to strong state intervention in support of human settlement in ecologically marginal regions. For all that the People's Republic of China has moved toward Western models since the late 1970s, he persuasively shows how these legacies from the imperial era still visibly shape Chinese environmental policies, especially with regard to water management.

The remaining four chapters largely revolve around the impact and legacy of European overseas expansion. Inevitably, the question of continuity and change between the precolonial and colonial eras is a common focal point, though the emphasis differs somewhat from one chapter and region to the next. Of the four, Michael Adas's account of colonial rice frontiers in Southeast Asia most strongly accentuates the similarities. Despite triumphal European claims of having brought civilization to these tropical wildernesses, the huge expansion of rice cultivation in the region's river deltas was very much a coproduction involving colonial powers, immigrant settlers, and, in Siam in particular, local elites. Techniques changed very slowly, and even the massive expansion of water control for paddy cultivation was less disruptive to local ecologies than many other agricultural frontiers have been. The picture was rather different in

Africa, where scholars have long emphasized the traumatic changes (epidemics, forced cultivation, land alienation) that attended the often brutal and rapacious process of European conquest. Yet as William Beinart shows in a concise but informative survey, recent research has begun to modify this picture by gaining a better understanding of the longer-term human impact on African landscapes as well as the partial successes of "colonial science" in formulating policies to cope with very challenging environments, some of which built on rather than displaced indigenous practices. In a somewhat similar vein, Mahesh Rangarajan's chapter on India charts a comparable move away from the more binary judgements of earlier nationalist historiography toward greater recognition of the continuities between Mughal and British policies of agricultural sedentarization, the complex divisions within the colonial state, the persistence of many colonial policies after independence, and not least the immense regional diversity in India that largely defies blanket judgements. Finally, Lise Sedrez's chapter on the development of Latin American environmental historiography shows that despite the unfortunate dearth of exchange with scholars working on Africa and Asia, and despite the particularly tumultuous ecological upheavals caused by European colonization, there has been a similar trend away from narratives of inexorable post-encounter decline, even as questions of global inequalities and social justice long central to Latin American historiography have given the literature on the region a peculiar inflection.

Overall, the great strength of this volume–besides the high quality of the individual chapters–is its versatility. At one level it provides a set of up-to-date critical overviews of the literature that will prove highly useful to scholars seeking to situate their work within broader comparative and/or global frameworks. At another level it offers a series of intelligent yet accessible introductions to specific themes and world regions (including index and sizeable bibliography) well suited for teaching purposes. Yet at the same time it also makes serious arguments of its own, especially in Pomeranz's introduction, about how to place specific processes of environmental change into the global picture and how best to integrate an ecological dimension into "mainstream" world historical narratives. The volume's chief limitation is that the coverage is less "global" than it might have been: North America, Japan, and Australasia do not feature; and while many world regions are given a synoptic treatment, Western Europe only comes into focus through the (albeit revealing) lens of the Rhine. Yet given the inevitable concessions that editors must make to practicality, the prioritization of certain regions over others is quite justifiable in view of the ready availability of literature on the most "developed" parts of the world, especially North America. In this spirit of complementarity its selective coverage can indeed be seen as strength rather than a weakness. For all these reasons it deserves a wide readership, and will profit anyone interested in modern global and/or environmental history.

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