



**Kurk Dorsey**, “Dealing with the Dinosaur (and Its Swamp): Putting the Environment In Diplomatic History,” (Bernath Lecture) *Diplomatic History* 29:4 (September 2005): 573-587.

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Published by H-Diplo on 26 January 2007

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It’s impossible not to be encouraged by Kurk Dorsey’s lucid and light-hearted effort to expand the living space in the diplomatic historical house. Environmental history has become an extraordinarily productive sub-species over the last generation, and its concerns, its attention to the *longue-durée*, its theoretical ecumenicalism, and openness to natural science, seem to become ever more topical. Perhaps, then, the most striking thing about it is that such an effort is required at all. (I say this knowing full well that my own research barely brushes “nature” as a broad interpretive category in the sense Dorsey means it here, to my own detriment, of course). No, what I mean is that so much contemporary literature in a wide variety of fields has been riveted by the complex processes of globalization and its environmental side-effects that it would be hard to imagine how self-respecting historians of foreign policy could fail to see, excuse the analogy, the forest for the trees.

Dorsey’s address, of course, is a wonderful reminder that in many ways environmental history explores—under a new heading and armed with a generation of disciplinary soul-searching and theoretical torment—issues familiar to diplomatic historians: resources, trade, power, cultural, modernization, development, and the like, only this time with slightly more emphasis on the material autonomy of the non-human world to condition the contours of human social and political development. With this, few historians of American foreign relations could possibly argue. Indeed, from the view north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, it has long been a cliché of Canadian foreign relations history that one hardly gets very far before the words “cod” and “lumber” dominate the conversation. And the influence of Harold Innis’s “staples thesis” still runs through much of our national historical consciousness, if not undergraduate history curricula. Dorsey points to the success of Jared Diamond’s work (or, one could add, again from Canada, Ronald Wright’s *A Short History of Progress*) as evidence of how central the concerns of environmental historians have become to our consciousness of global change and the rise of fall of what we loosely call civilizations.<sup>1</sup> The burgeoning literature on globalization—often polemical and tendentious, but occasionally informed by deep historical insights—revolves to a considerable extent around understanding that the process has been, in part, driven not only by the exporting of costs to cheaper labour markets but the offloading of the environmental consequences of industrialization to other ecosystems and their more vulnerable inhabitants. In the past we might have called this progress, but today we can also tuck it under the heading of global environmental injustice. For this we owe much to the work of environmental historians. We foreign relations historians would be wise, as Michael Hogan implored us to be in his 2003 SHAFR Presidential Address not to abandon these issues to others. We also might have a tough time explaining to ourselves why thinking about natural processes shouldn’t figure more prominently in our understanding of interstate relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: Anansi, 2004).

Yet how *do* we account for this curious neglect? Dorsey offers three possibilities. First, environmental history is new and possibly tainted with ideological commitments embedded in its origins. Perhaps, although this wouldn't explain why *diplomatic historians per se* would be resistant to it, unless he is implying some sort of disciplinary affliction that makes our field unusually averse to methodological openness (he wouldn't be the first to suggest this). Second, environmental historians have generally been more interested with the American West, while diplomatic historians are preoccupied with the corridors of power and influence in Washington and New York. This is perhaps the most ethnocentric of Dorsey's casual assumption that his audience, and the field diplomatic historians are tilling here, is solely an American one. It speaks, once again, to the question of whether we are international historians or, more ominously, if our ultimate sense of purpose lies in making some sort of contribution to the American political or even public sphere. But that's perhaps another issue.

Third, Dorsey suggests that possibly because "nature" transcends arbitrary human borders in ways that few things do, it therefore does not fit into the conceptual toolbox of diplomatic historians whose work revolves around boundaries. Implicitly, of course, Dorsey's own exemplary work in conservation diplomacy does too: he deals with nation-states and their negotiations over fluid resources. However much the material substrate under negotiation may defy national allocation, the *issue* at heart remains largely state-centric. Dorsey believes that other non-national categories like race, class, and gender are still largely *explored* in terms of national identity, despite an emerging counter-tradition that seeks to demonstrate the unsustainable claims of national monopolies on ideas. But clearly Dorsey is on to something here: the economic and ecological implications of global warming—like global pandemics—demonstrate that nation-states cannot insulate themselves from networks of ecological interdependence that often have indiscriminate consequences. This isn't entirely new, as Dorsey knows, in so far as early waves of globalization (imperialism) were deeply implicated in "ecological revolutions" that violently transformed world history. But our current understanding of global interdependence has certainly done much to highlight this historical process.

Finally, Dorsey suggests that environmental historians are more theoretical and less empirical than diplomatic historians. This may be true and there should undoubtedly be much more serious intellectual engagement in diplomatic history with the ontology of terms and concepts we throw about with cavalier certainty ("national interest" being perhaps the most carelessly tautological). But Dorsey's suggestion that diplomatic history's periodic angst over theory has more to do with attracting members or readers sells us a bit short. It might be more accurate to say that environmental historians make the theoretical interrogation of their conceptual repertoire a more *central* part of the "discipline" (a loaded term, of course) than do diplomatic historians. Douglas Weiner refers to environmental historians as "fearlessly reflexive," not an expression one hears much as SHAFR meetings.<sup>2</sup> This would appear especially true of the way the two fields are taught to students, or to the type of scholar who might be attracted to the two subfields (the elective affinity between topic and methodology is something we don't have time to explore here, of course). But we can undoubtedly exaggerate this image of the dinosaur diplomatic historian—the field has opened and changed tremendously in the last decade, even if Dorsey is right in pointing out that its interest in "environmental" categories has not kept pace with its interest in race, class, gender, and other transnationalisms.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Weiner, "Environmental History and Environmental History: A Death-defying Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History." Presidential address to the Society for Environmental History, Houston, March 17, 2005. This is an address that Dorsey cites in his address.

And so Dorsey is certainly right to question Michael Hogan's otherwise tensile and forward-thinking presidential address for thinking globally but not acting environmentally. Yet here we run smack into some of the unresolved internal debates of environmental history as well. Dorsey points out that Hogan doesn't invoke nature as a category on par with race, gender, or culture (three already contested terms) but in doing so, Dorsey raises the often implicit juxtaposition here between nature (material, biological, evolving yet seemingly inert) and culture, that has long confounded environmental historians as well. Can there be any meaningful sense of "nature" outside of our conception of it? And, therefore, is culture ontologically prior to nature? He addresses this in describing the "two-way" relationship between nature and culture in Tom Dunlap's *Nature and the English Diaspora* (1999). But it was the famous American author of *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold, whose conservation work in the arid American southwest first led him to believe that culture had a much more powerful impact on the way nature affected the trajectory (and health) of a given society. The point is, I suppose, that environmental history is laudably given to serious exploration of trying to bridge ontological materialism (resources, climate, stuff that is "out there") and idealism ("wilderness", "Value", economic and scientific systems of control and dominance, hierarchies of race, class, and gender that both offload environmental costs, and also generate different conceptions of nature themselves). These debates are something from which diplomatic historians could, naturally, learn much.

Dorsey's own work on conservation diplomacy sometimes leads him here to limit his argument to conceiving of environmental issues in similar terms (that is, as a subject for inter-state competition and cooperation). It is likely on these terms that most of his intended audience would see the relevance of environmental categories for foreign policy in any case. He implies, but doesn't fully develop, what I would also think might be a fruitful way for diplomatic historians to work. We might look inside the role of the "environment" in the formation of national (or regional and thus counter-national) identities as part of the core values "worth defending" (as Melvyn Leffler once characterized it). Before we even get to the negotiation of cross-border issues affecting neighbouring states, we might look, in the American case for example, at the role of "wilderness" in the original sense of mission (both Protestant and republican) that fueled the language of the Revolution and early American nationalism; or the role it later played in the cultural Renaissance of 1830s and 40s New England, namely in the representation of wilderness as a form of cultural exceptionalism central to a national identity distinct from that of Europe itself. Cultural conceptions of nature played an important role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century journey of American continentalism and manifest destiny. It was, after all, Henry David Thoreau who wrote in 1862, moments after famously declaring, "in Wildness is the preservation of the world," that the "founders of every State which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the Northern forests who were."<sup>3</sup> This is a crazy thought, but its evolutionary determinism certainly played a role in the intellectual currency of the second-half of 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture.

Dorsey's strength in his essay lies in pointing out that in many ways environmental history provides a deeper understanding of a vast field of forces and power relationships, cultural assumptions, and politico-economic practices, that we for the most part take for granted. He uses the analogy of the transformative effect that race (or gender) has had on the field—not in unearthing new documents we

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<sup>3</sup> Thoreau, *Walking* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1992), 30-31.

didn't have before, but in showing the knowledge(s), metaphors, and power relationships that sustained the very "taken-for-granted" structures of social life. This in itself allows us to see the old documents in often dramatically more meaningful ways, as part of deeper structures of significance that are at work in defining the "national interest." In this sense, Dorsey's plea is more than a call that the next generation of graduate students take up the unexplored avenues of environmental diplomacy; it is a suggestion that all diplomatic historians come to terms with the assumptions underpinning the global struggle for power and resources surrounding nation states and global capitalism.

All of this speaks more generally to the semantic constraints of "diplomatic" history, where even the massive expansion of "private" trade and investment (albeit facilitated by the state), with its attendant ecological consequences, risks somehow falling outside the parameters of our field. But if diplomacy is conceived of as merely the formal face of state-to-state relations, the official mediating point of countless non-state interactions that provide the basic contexts around which states organize their sense of interest, this semantic limitation is, as Dorsey points out, profoundly debilitating. Moreover, even in revisiting old historical terrain, as Dorsey suggests we might with Vietnam, we might see the Cold War as a struggle between two contesting political ideologies nevertheless joined by their commitment to modernization through industrial control and development. Modernization theory is nothing if not an argument about the culture of production and resource-use; nothing, in other words, if not a statement about nature itself.

In this sense, Dorsey's parting homage to Thomas Friedman is indicative of the difficult trajectory of environmental history's emancipatory pursuits. As laudable as Friedman's discovery of "geo-green" thinking is, it's not entirely clear that his ideological motives are environmental *per se*. Friedman's grasp of culture is as resolutely and unapologetically modernist as one could imagine, and as far from the sobering anti-modernism that often lies at the heart of much environmentalism. Friedman's writings combine 19th century views of cultural difference and late 20th century business utopianism. Like Graham Greene's Alden Pyle, he is filled with "worldly innocence" that does not mean to hurt but probably does. This is not, of course, what Dorsey intended. But his intellectual generosity here, his cheerleading for a worthwhile cause, could be misinterpreted. Either way, this timely essay ought certainly to stand as a clarion challenge to the next generation of diplomatic historians to widen our conceptual understanding of the building blocks of human history.

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