Op ed

Environmental History For An Emerging World

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'…In contrast to the type of environmentalism and environmental history that emanated from the developed world that had a strong wilderness and protectionist focus, I am arguing that environmental history speaks to urgent issues such as environmental and social resilience and sustainability and to injustice. These are perhaps the most critical of our current challenges. They exist in tandem with debates on global climate change that will affect the emerging world inequitably…'.

Environmental history is a well-established field, the origins of which resonated with Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring*, the first Earth Day (1970), and the wilderness movement of that era. 'Green politics' elicited a Western academic response at a time when profligate use of natural resources, climate change, demographic growth, inappropriate conservation practices, and other environmental issues began to have visible adverse global—as well as local and regional—impacts, and demanded understanding and historical context. Many prominent scholars were attracted to this field that integrated 'nature' and 'culture', described by Donald Worster (1994) as being so fundamental that it was central to all historical study. More recently, however, cautious voices have suggested that environmental history has not fulfilled its promise owing to issues around the discipline's theoretical ambiguity and methodological challenges (History and Theory 2003; Weiner 2005; Sörlin and Warde 2007). I would like to suggest that while such critique is valuable and interesting, it may point more to an underlying disconnection between history and society than to theoretical lacunae. It is important to re-consider *why* we write environmental (or any other) history. Powerful history and influential historians 'engage' with their topic and insert values and ideology relevant to humans. It is more than something merely 'nice to know about the past'; indeed it is activist.

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When the field of environmental history emerged in the 1960s certainly one of its aims was to contextualise and historicise environmental issues. However, it also held promise for catalysing action towards human improvement and justice, and for connecting with growing ideas around sustainability and environmental equity. If there is some current concern that environmental history has less public and academic purchase than was the case when it was 'new', it may be productive to look at themes and localities where the discipline thrives, rather than to concentrate on theoretical matters.

I am a South African, and I often begin conference and other presentations by explaining how very different mine is from other countries. Last June, however, I was privileged to be invited to Colombia to give a keynote address at the 6th Symposium of the Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental (SOLCHA – the Latin American and Caribbean Environmental History Society). Despite enormous differences between an African savannah landscape and Colombia's tropical forest, and societies that have differently complex roots, in preparing my paper I was struck by how much the two environments and histories shared. I was also struck by how these determined the kind of environmental history we produce, and the impact that we, as academics and public intellectuals, can have as we engage with society around us. This has led me to think more about the distinctions between environmental history in the emerging world in contrast to the developed world.

Most parts of the emerging world are spectacularly beautiful and extraordinarily biodiverse. For example, although small, South Africa contains an entire floral kingdom with many endemic species, has three Hotspots of Biodiversity, ten biomes, 243 mammals, more than 800 birds, and 370 reptiles and amphibians, all of which co-inhabit the land with a large number of human ethnicities (total population 51 million), cultures, and languages (there are 11 official languages). There are other less pleasing statistics and characteristics that are shared by most emerging nations, including colonisation, slavery, civil wars and other domestic conflicts, political repression, and social upheaval. Generally in common too are an extremely high unemployment rate, a poor education system, inadequate welfare and health services, a young population, and rapid, inadequately planned urbanisation.

South Africa is ranked first in the world for firearm violence, rapes and murders, with other personal and domestic violence an everyday—sadly, even a 'normal'—occurrence. Corruption is rampant and organised crime is of great concern. A recent description by Stefania Gallini resonated strongly with me. She wrote: 'I live in Bogotá, a megalopolis where the notion and practice of risk is an everyday experience… like walking along the street whose manhole has been stolen by "recyclers"… or major fears such as having your urban sector flooded, or being kidnapped for a "millionaire walk"' (Gallini 2011: 12). This is the situation in my home city of Johannesburg, where in addition to sewage and water leaks and automatic teller machine bombings, I can add car hijackings, regular theft of electricity and telephone cables and house robberies in middle-class gated communities and in impoverished squatter camps. The lack of basic services—water, housing, health, education, electricity, roads—has led to xenophobia against the 5 million 'illegal foreigners' (the same number as white South Africans) who are alleged to be taking jobs and services away from local people. There are violent demonstrations, protests, strikes and riots, clashes with police and bloodshed. Contributing to volatility and endemic violence is the enormous gap between rich and poor, South Africa being 10th on the Gini index, this exacerbated by the fact that land is unequally distributed.

One of the consequences of these inequities is that there is political and social priority for urgent economic development and employment and, in the absence of other tools, this has to be predicated on the use of natural resources. In South Africa such growth means the construction of coal-fired power stations and mineral extraction from environmentally sensitive areas, unsustainable urban and rural lifestyles, and a commodification of 'nature' in order that ecotourism and wildlife management may produce employment and wealth.

These statistics and the socio-economic and political environments of the emerging world are directly relevant to environmental history. I can only agree strongly with Paul Sutter that there are specific research questions and priorities relevant to the emerging world (Sutter 2003). But I would argue that, in addition, these provide direction, purpose and passion that create vibrancy in the academic field. In his overview of 'The state of the field of environmental history', John McNeill described Latin American scholarship as burgeoning and exuberant, moving in both traditional and novel directions (McNeill 2010). The same needs to be said of the environmental history of India and parts of Africa. As Emily Wakild has recently accomplished so professionally in her book about Mexico's national parks, in places where the 'nation' itself is contested or reconstructed – generally the emerging world – the study of institutions that are apparently 'national' is particularly instructive (Wakild 2011).

Environmental history in and of the emerging world seems to have originated from a strong social history (often Marxist) paradigm (Beinart 2000; Carruthers 2004). Ellen Stroud (2003) believes that conceptualising how the environment should 'be construed' in historical terms is imperative, and she has suggested that insights will emerge more fully when the environment is employed as a site for examining other axes of power, including the categories of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. In 2005 Doug Weiner reminded the academy that environmental history in the United States had grown out of intellectual concerns that galvanised society, and once these connections are lost—or relegated to the background—it is perhaps not surprising that some scholars are arguing that the historiography has less to contribute.

So what can environmental history contribute? I would argue that this field assists in bringing a large number of disciplines together, creating understanding through analysis and narrative, critiquing evidence and avoiding over-generalisation and inappropriate comparison. As all good history should, environmental history needs to apply creative thinking to generating understanding and context, not eschewing possible policy and other solutions. Many people believe that the humanities are retreating, that they are irrelevant, and students—especially in the emerging world—are encouraged to study subjects that are considered to be more useful for the labour market. The task of the humanities, according to Wilfrid McClay, is to be distinctive from the natural and social sciences, by grasping 'human things in human terms… to understand the human condition from the inside… we need the humanities in order to understand more fully what it means to be human' (McClay 2008). Together with the natural and social sciences, the humanities are critical in developing understanding and, in this regard, environmental history has a large part to play.

Environmental history is *the* humanities field that lies at heart of the interface between people and their physical environments. Within environmental history, we have an arena in which to broaden the horizons and boundaries of historical study. In the emerging world it should become one of the most important and relevant fields. Not only can environmental history 'allow a more complex reading of the past… [and]… also challenge and revitalise the subject of history itself' (MacKenzie 2004) but it can relieve the historical narrative from becoming bogged down in 'tragic tales' as Mark Carey (2009) calls them, and provide a reinterpretation of our understanding of historical processes.

In contrast to the type of environmentalism and environmental history that emanated from the developed world that had a strong wilderness and protectionist focus, I am arguing that environmental history speaks to urgent issues such as environmental and social resilience and sustainability and to injustice. These are perhaps the most critical of our current challenges. They exist in tandem with debates on global climate change that will affect the emerging world inequitably. Today there is no doubt of the fact that ecological economics has demonstrated that environmental quality is not a 'luxury good' but that real economic growth and development will not occur without improving the environmental health of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2012). Rob Nixon's (2011) award-winning book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* resonates especially with this topic on a transnational canvas and is brilliantly conceived and evocatively written. In sum, environmental history can contribute by untangling the sometimes chaotically intertwined threads of past and present and lead into a future.

There is perhaps disproportionate pressure and responsibility on academics who study Africa, Latin America and other regions of the emerging world to use their research and knowledge constructively and objectively. They cannot ignore the moral dimension nor should they disconnect their research from the societies they study. As Catherine Nash (2000) puts it, 'Environmental history can offer a powerful critique of modern capitalism and colonialism but also challenge the romanticism of pre-modernity and pre-colonial societies and so counter the primitivising claims of some environmental philosophies'. Here environmental history has a large role, particularly in the emerging world where ideas of 'victimhood' have been a prevalent trope.

The greatest environmental challenge of our time is that of global change with the realisation that we live in the 'Age of the Anthropocene' (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Appreciating that humanity has the capacity to alter the future of the entire planet has necessitated a shift in our understanding of human agency (Palsson et al. 2013). More than other aspects of history, environmental history has purpose. As Roderick Nash itemised many years ago, it is responsive to the concerns of society, it has a strong intellectual thrust and it is relevant to matters of morality and moral judgement (Nash 1972). It has these characteristics because, more than any other discipline, it connects at so many intellectual, social, political, economic—and indeed other—levels to respond to the challenges of the emerging world.

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