

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Environmental History: As if Nature Existed

Review Number:

1111

Publish date:

Monday, 1 August, 2011

Editor:

John R. McNeill
Mahesh Rangarajan
Jose Augusto Padua

ISBN:

9780198064480

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£22.50

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

New Delhi

Reviewer:

Lise Sedrez

Environmental historians take pride in the interdisciplinary character of their field. Yet they practice this interdisciplinarity mostly by drawing from methodologies and approaches from several disciplines. Rarer, and definitively more challenging, are the attempts to establish an actual dialogue between disciplines. That is exactly what John McNeill, José Pádua and Mahesh Rangarajan have sought to do in their edited volume *Environmental History: As if Nature Existed* and the result is a valuable contribution to both environmental history and ecological economics. The book puts together the papers presented at the panel 'Talking across disciplines: environmental history and ecological economics', held in New Delhi in December 2006, during the Ninth Biennial Conference of the International Society of Ecological Economics. It demanded a remarkable collaboration effort across time zones in three continents, but it was finally published in early 2010.

Environmental history and ecological economy seem to constitute a natural (no pun intended) association for environmental studies. After all, one of the classics of environmental historiography is Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy*, published for the first time in 1977. And the influential works of Herman Daly do include a fair amount of historical analysis, mostly in case studies. And yet there is still a demand for a more

explicit integration between the two disciplines, an integration that at once accounts for the diversity in focus and methodology and underlines the overlapping of agendas and concerns. *Environmental History: As if Nature Existed* partially answers to this demand.

The volume is divided in three parts: global studies, macro regional studies and case studies ? or micro-regional studies. The four articles in the first part comprise theoretical reflections on the connections between economics and history in the analysis of environmental issues. John McNeill's article opens this section by emphasising the editor's proposal, and works as a *de facto* introduction for the entire book. McNeill writes on the development of environmental history in Asia, both thematically and nationally, while highlighting the areas of potential contact for ecological economists. Aware of the limitations posed by language barriers in a continent with so many rich academic traditions, McNeill analyzes in particular Indian environmental historiography. Indian historians are obviously more accessible to English-speaking readers, and have shown a fascinating and inspiring focus on studies of the relationship between State and nature, both in the colonial as in the national periods. According to McNeill, there is some similarity between Indian and Latin American environmental historiography for their more political content and stronger political commitment, when compared to their European or North American counterparts. In contrast, Chinese historians have shown little interest in environmental history ? and most of the work done in the field comes from ecological historians. Although McNeill does not suggest it explicitly, there seems to be room for Asian environmental history to develop just by exchanging more of these national historiographical traditions ? which, as a bonus, would also bring environmental history and ecological economy closer together.

In sequence, the work of Krausmann, Shandl and Fischer-Kowalski follows this path of integrating disciplines, by incorporating concepts of social-metabolic regimes into their analysis of industrialization processes between history and ecological economics. Social metabolism is a concept familiar to ecology economics and environmental sociologists, but environmental historians only recently have tackled it ? as, for instance, in the work of Joan Martinez Alier. In fact, the article may read somewhat uncomfortably for historians: after all, historians are used to studies on the ?relationship between population and the land, energy and materials?, and even ?the biophysical characteristics of the agrarian and current industrial socio-metabolic regimes?, as the authors put it; but fewer, unless they are Donald Worster, are ready to discuss ?the necessity to design a new, sustainable industrial regime? (p. 27).

The other two articles take a more traditional route, but they also explore the potential wealth of an alliance between environmental history and ecological economics for the development of methodologies of analysis for contemporary or historical environmental questions. Tommaso Luzatti, for instance, writes on the life and work of German economist William Kapp, in a way that, far from being a traditional biography of celebrated intellectuals, proposes an intricate (and sometimes confused, despite the very creative approach) interpretation of Knapp's works not only in their own time, but within more modern debates on sustainability and the limits of economic growth. In fact, while tackling very complex themes, Luzatti presents a convincing argument for the relevance of Knapp to a larger debate on sustainability, ethics and politics. In the last article of this group, Abeysuriya, Mitchell and Willetts propose a broader approach and explore Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions to understand the evolution of urban sanitary processes in Europe. It is a delightful mix of classic environmental history bibliography and very ecological economics-inspired schematic figures, in a daring, if not completely developed, argument and it fits very well with the book proposal.

The two remaining parts, however, cannot hold up to the same global promise. In fact, with the single exception of José Augusto Padua's article on the European colonialism and the destruction of tropical forests in Brazil, Asia remains the main focus for all contributors, and within Asia, India. The emphasis on Asian themes is not surprising, considering how the book was conceived ? and the predominance of India confirms McNeill's comment earlier that India's environmental history has advanced considerably compared to its neighbors. But it is slightly disappointing that, for instance, Padua's text underlines the need for the construction of global comparative structures for a better understanding of the deforestation process in Brazil, but the volume itself does not actually address this.

This limitation should not discourage readers, particularly non-Asian readers, from engaging with the book. First of all, it does address an annoyingly persistent demand in the literature for introductory narratives on the environmental history of Asia, accessible to the public in general. Despite some isolated advances in the field, the other two macro-regional studies, by Bao Maohong and by Mahesh Rangarajan, represent much needed and welcome additions to this literature. In particular, Maohong composes a pluri-secular narrative of China's environmental history which, if it sometimes risks superficiality, sets up a useful map to locate the recent economic history of the country within a wider context. It includes a discussion on the Huang River of about 5,000 years ago, long-term climate change in China, and very up-to-date reports on China's Green GDP experiments, drawing from studies on geography, environmental policy and agrarian science. Bao's bibliography is in fact a gift to any student interested in the environmental history of China, regardless of the time period. In contrast, Mahesh Rangarajan's contribution focuses on a relatively short time period, related to Jawaharlal Nehru's writings since 1905. The importance of Nehru for the building of modern India cannot be overemphasized ? and the publishing market has enough biographies of him to prove it. Yet, Rangarajan pursues a novel approach to his work, by calling attention to his ambivalence regarding nature and the role of science in India. Nehru emerges from this article as a much more multidimensional than the relentless apostle of progress who once described Bhakra Nangal Dam as the ?new temple of resurgent India?. Rangarajan shows a more nuanced Nehru, who wrote lyrically about birds while in prison, who had refused to hunt wild animals since 1916, and who wrote to his daughter in 1940 that ?nature must be allied to life, to flowers, to trees and mountains and rivers ? otherwise it is lifeless? ? a quote which could be easily attributed to Aldo Leopold. Yet he is still the Nehru of giant dams and irrigation projects, no less an enthusiast of large projects of water diversion than his British engineers and colonial predecessors. Like Bao, Rangarajan seeks to reach a new audience, and his careful analysis of Nehru's texts makes them accessible even for readers with little familiarity with Indian history.

The micro-regional studies, which constitute the third part of the book, also keep up with this Asian perspective. As case studies, they may be somewhat taxing for the same non-Asian readers who were attracted to the macro-regional articles ? and a map or two would have definitively eased the way for those readers. In addition to their own value for the literature in the field, however, these studies may inspire historians and economists to incorporate new viewpoints in their local analyses for more global, comparative perspectives, as suggested by Padua. For instance, Asmita Bhardwaj's article, ?From the Green Revolution to the Gene Revolution in India, 1965?2008?, surely offers a remarkable springboard for scholars of the Mexican Green Revolution to place their studies within a global framework. It would not be the first time: 20 years ago, Vandana Shiva's writings led many Latin Americans in their critique of the much vaunted first Green Revolution, as the importance of both Mexico and India in this historical process has been well established. Bhardwaj knowledgeably discusses both the development of biogenetic technologies and that of the Indian legislation, and she presents the dilemmas of Indian peasants and rural producers in the face of the introduction of biotechnology in a way that is all too familiar for Latin American historians. V. P. Raghavan's text, while less engaging in its narrative, also broaches a little explored but very important topic for modern environmental studies: the environmental consequences of migratory movements. In the case of Kerala, in India, Raghavan's focus on internal migration avoids most of the legal considerations that have shaped much of the immigration debate in Europe and the Americas. Instead, the author outlines the ecological and environmental characteristics of peasant migration within the region of Kerala on the rural economy and societies of both Travancore ? the place of origin of the migration ? and Malabar ? its

destination, within a historical perspective. It is a sad tale of community loss and environmental degradation, one that deserves further study than a chapter in an edited volume can allow; nevertheless, Raghavan's proposal of criteria by which to analyze migration movements within environmental history is certainly a valuable contribution. Finally, the last article in the volume, by Golam Rasul, also draws from multiple disciplines to discuss the environmental degradation, in this case, in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. Rasul focuses, however, on the policy roots for environmental degradation, and emphasizes the role of the state in defining short-term policies with long-term consequences for the region. In fact, Rasul analyzes the actions of several administrations within the traditional periodization for Bangladesh: the British Colonial period, the Pakistan period and the Bangladesh period. On the one hand, the article's conclusion confirms the importance of local communities in environmental conservation and the dire consequences of alienating local peoples from resource management. On the other hand, the article also highlights how local communities promptly reacted to governmental policies and to the way they perceived the enforcement of these policies – although they did not react always in the direction their governments would have liked. This shifting relationship between local population and state policies is a classic theme in environmental history, and Rasul's use of historical series of population growth, forested areas and institutional policies shapes his narrative within a framework that hopefully invites future comparisons to be made using longer, more in-depth analyses.

Environmental History: As if Nature Existed thus has two great accomplishments. First, in geographic terms: with the support of well-known names such as John McNeill and José Pádua, the book unveils a wealth of debates and challenges on the environmental history of Asia that promises great rewards for historians who dare to cross intercontinental bridges. Without being exactly world history, it offers more than enough to make the book very enticing reading for an international public. And secondly, in disciplinary terms: if at times the language, methodologies and theoretical approaches derived from ecological economics may appear a mysterious puzzle for environmental historians, and vice-versa, the final high quality of *As if Nature Existed* is proof that it pays to cross not only geographic, but also disciplinary bridges.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1111>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7751>