

Week 11: 31 October 2017, Guest Lecturer:
Germán Vergara (HSOC) STS & the Environment

INTRODUCTION

I've never thought of myself as an environmentalist, but the recent hurricanes that flooded Florida, Houston and Puerto Rico, and the devastating fires in California, have resulted in my rethinking my participation in environmental issues. The week that Professor Vergara held a seminar on the environment provided an opportunity for me to read material that might give me insight into HSOC involvement in environmental issues.

There were three journal articles assigned by Professor Vergara for the October 31 seminar, but I am only going to concentrate on J.R. McNeil's "The State of the Field of Environmental History," because it is an in-depth discussion on the evolution of a new sub-set of history and that will need the entire 1500 words to cover the material.

DISCUSSION

I had mixed feelings after reading McNeil's journal article because he denigrated one of my favorite books, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond 1995), by stating it was not a book on the environment. I also questioned the validity of McNeil's conjecture that environmental history had not been seriously studied until the 1970's, until attending Professor Vergara's seminar, and afterwards, doing a critical re-reading of the material.

On the first page of the journal article, McNeil asks the question, "What is Environmental History?" He then goes on to explain that it involves is a new sub-field of history that evolved when "a growing cohort of renegade historians decided to *write history as if nature existed* (346). McNeil explains that in the 1970's a historian, Rodrick Nash, coined the term *environmental history* to delineate their focus on nature and

humans from other historical approaches to the environment. McNeil breaks environmental history down into three areas of study: *Material Environmental History*, *Political Environmental History*, and *Cultural Environmental History*.

Material Environmental History (347)

Material environmental history is the study of human involvement with forests, frogs, diseases and chlorofluorocarbons—materials in nature—and how they influence and impact on one another. This form of environmental history recognizes that nature and humans have equal agency and power in shaping how the earth evolves.

Political Environmental History (347)

Political environmental history concentrates on human efforts to regulate the impact of societies on nature—soil conservation, pollution control, land resource use, etc. These types of policies only extend back to the nineteenth century because there was no joint effort to regulate land use before that time. These types of policies were sporadic until 1965, when states and environmental groups joined forces.

Cultural Environmental History (347)

Cultural environmental historians concentrate on cultural and intellectual history. They pursue evidence of human interaction with nature from written texts, paintings, songs, dances, and other archival material. Their effort to glean from historical artifacts may go back thousands of years to the writings of Aristotle and Mencius, and as recently as twentieth-century thinkers like Mohandas, Gandhi and Arne Naess. McNeil points out that the most comprehensive work on environmental history, *Traces on the Rhodian*

Shore, Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (Glacken 1967). It explored nature through the eyes of several dozen writers and peaked interest in studying environmental issues.

Environmental History as an Interdisciplinary History (348)

McNeil recognizes that scholars have been studying the impact of humans on nature for centuries, but the efforts of these earlier scholars were more as climatologists than environmentalists. Modern environmental historians are scholars from a variety of fields, like geographers and historical ecologists, who search bioarchives for data about vegetation patterns, climate history, etc.

Origins of United States Environmental History (349)

Environmental History in the United States (U.S.), evolved around 1970 after environmentalism became popular. The first environmental historians were academics and intellectuals, like Alfred W. Crosby, Donald Hughes, Rodrick Nash and John Opie. *Columbian Exchange* (Crosby, 1972), who popularized environmental history globally because it focused on the ecological impact of travel across the Atlantic after 1492. *Dust Bowl* (Worster 1978), brought forward how climate changed nature after human intervention affected soil erosion and grasslands. *Changes in the Land* (Cronon 1984), explored the transformation of New England's human ecology between 1600 and 1800. Cronon and Worster became two of the most influential U.S. historical environmentalist.

United States Environmental History

United States environmental history first focused on rural areas and the west, but soon shifted to urban areas after books like *Garbage in the Cities* (Melosi 1989) and *The Search for the Ultimate Sink* (Tarr 1996) were published. These books opened the door for cities to begin publishing their own environmental historical biographies.

The success of the U.S. environmental historian's influence can be attributed more to institutional factors (American Society for Environment History, 1976 (ASEH), rather than intellectual factors. After formation, the ASEH began publishing the journal, *Environmental History*. This journal was widely read by English speaking countries globally.

The prominence of U.S. environmental scholars began to wane in the latter half of the twentieth century when Africa, Asia, Europe, and Central and South America began publishing their own environmental histories. The opening of the *Rachel Carson Center at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, Germany in 2010* further shifted prominence to Europe (351).

The Value of Studying Environmental History

Historical scholars are not unified in supporting this new sub-group of environmental history because they feel it is too tangential, when there are bigger issues that are more important like empire building, gender-identity, revolutions, slavery or wars. McNeil counters this argument by pointing to Carol Merchants systematic use of the gender perspective in environmental history in books like *The Death of Nature*

(Merchant 1980), where she focuses on Europe's Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, the quest for mastery over nature and the oppression of women. As well as her book, *Ecological Revolutions* (Merchant 1989), that focuses on Colonial New England, and changes in the biosphere that resulted from transformations by a male dominated society that continued to oppress women. Merchant, *as well as other eco-feminist voices*, have inspired several environmental historians working in other fields. The environmental justice literature focuses on Native Americans and African Americans, and how they are unfairly targeted as sites for building nuclear power plants and dumping nuclear wastes (Jacobs 2003, Blum 2008, etc.).

The Critiques of Environmental History (359-361)

A drawback to the study of environmental history is the "nation-state" focus. United States environmental historians were, at first, prominent figures in environmental history until external nation-states began publishing their own environmental history. These countries began to ask why they should defer to the U.S. as experts when they were not participants in these countries' environmental studies. Another problem brought forward was *Declensionism*. Many historians challenged data environmental historians presented that emphasized humans as the only cause for a decline in natural habitats. To counter these criticisms, since the 1980's environmental historians have shifted their focus to changes in the environment rather than losses and degradations in nature.

A third negative criticism is environmental determinism. Social scientists have been sensitive to issues related to environmental determinism for over a century because of books like *The Pulse of Asia* (Huntington 1907), that focused on climate determinism,

and Crosby's Ecological Imperialism (Crosby 1986) which focuses on European imperialism in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond 1995) is given as another example of environmental determinism.

Although there are many critics of environmental history, McNeil believes that scholars have learned a great deal in the past twenty-five years about the environment. They learned that the Nazi's did not focus on "greening" the environment, but were enthusiastic despoilers, biological invasions have been occurring for several thousand years, there is no true wildernesses in the U.S. today, and it is not only the Judo-Christians who degraded their environments, that was also done, historically, by Hinduist, Buddhists and Daoist also have contributed to the degradation of nature.

CONCLUSION

In the last 30-35 years, environmental history has been the fastest growing historical sub-group. The U.S. still dominates in some areas, and although funding for environmental studies has been waning for several years, there are hundreds of scholars, who continue to focus on environmental issues. McNeil suggests that collaborations between other disciplines will help sustain environmental historical research studies.

In the Introduction of this paper, I mentioned recent natural disasters that have caused catastrophes in Florida, Houston and Puerto Rico, as well as the devastating fires in California. After reading about the impact of human interactions on nature, I have begun to wonder if nature is beginning to retaliate for the trauma that we humans have caused over the thousands of years since we first learned how to build fires and cook our food. I hope to learn more about the environment next semester when I take Professor

Vergara's environmental history class. Until then, over the Christmas holidays, I plan to reread this journal article—as well as the other two assigned readings from Vergara's seminar—along with *The Death of Nature*, *Silent Spring* and *The Dutch Rural Economy*.