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Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History

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Donald Worster is surely right when he asserts that environmental history, at its most basic level, "deals with the role and place of nature in human life." And yet even so seemingly straightforward a definition suggests the difficult challenge this new field poses for scholars. Environmental historians perform a delicate interdisciplinary balancing act in trying to reconcile the insights of their colleagues in history, ecology, geography, anthropology, and several other fields. Like ecologists, they are more committed than most historians to the proposition that the natural world has an autonomous place in history. For them, the story of the prairie bluestem, for instance, or the smallpox virus, or the common barnyard pig, may be no less important than the story of a presidential administration or a war. And yet unlike most ecologists, they share with other historians the belief that nature can only exist in time, that the particulars of historical environmental change are no less important than the timeless abstractions of ecological processes. To make matters worse, they understand that the very term they use to describe the environment—*nature*—is itself an astonishingly complex human construction: as Raymond Williams once remarked, "the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history."[1]

This historical complexity of nature may be why Donald Worster's "Transformation of the Earth" leaves me feeling both excited and uneasy. Like everything else Worster has written in his distinguished career as a founder of environmental history, the essay is bold and richly suggestive. Its general research agenda I can embrace wholeheartedly, and I would be loath to critique it if my remarks tended to

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[1] Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London, 1980), 67. Over the past seventy-five years, ecologists have swung back and forth about how important it is to study historical change. During the 1950s and 1960s short-term field studies and abstract modeling were the order of the day, but a number of scientists now emphasize the importance of "long-term studies" in order to test hypotheses about historical change. The new field of landscape ecology has encouraged ecologists to expand their unit of analysis from small-scale plots to larger regions that are more congenial to the work of historians. The time seems ripe for the research of historians and ecologists to converge. See, for instance, Norman L. Christensen, "Landscape History and Ecological Change," *Journal of Forest History*, 33 (July 1989), 116–25; Gene E. Likens, ed., *Long-Term Studies in Ecology: Approaches and Alternatives* (New York, 1989); Richard T. T. Forman and Michel Godron, *Landscape Ecology* (New York, 1986); and Zev Naveh and Arthur S. Leberman, *Landscape Ecology: Theory and Application* (New York, 1984).

discourage scholars who are either just discovering environmental history or who wish to explore the questions Worster has raised. They are all good questions. But perhaps because the essay's perspective is so close to my own, I worry that its synthetic framework may be too narrow to accommodate some of the most interesting work now being done by environmental historians. In his laudable call for greater theoretical rigor and a more systematic analytical framework, Worster may be needlessly closing doors to approaches different from his own.[2] Moreover, despite my sympathy for the particular line of argument he pursues, I am beginning to doubt whether his proposed solution—agroecological mode-of-production analysis—will yield the results he hopes.

Worster begins by distinguishing what he calls three levels of analysis in environmental history. These are, first, the dynamics of natural ecosystems in time; second, the political economies people erect within those natural systems; and third, the cognitive lenses through which people perceive their relationships to the other two. Nature, political economy, and belief—these, in varying mixes, have been the chief fascinations of environmental historians' work, and our greatest challenge has been to figure out how best to integrate the three.[3] To date, we have met with only mixed success. Studies that do a good job at the materialist end of the spectrum, linking ecosystems and economies, often are less successful at integrating belief systems into their arguments, and vice versa. I therefore resist Worster's claim that "the gathering strength of the human imagination over nature is so obvious and dramatic that it is in no danger of being neglected by historians." Quite the contrary: it is precisely this third level of analysis that has generally stood apart in the best environmental histories. We have either had studies of ecology and economy, or studies of ideas of nature; too rarely have we had the three together.[4]

[2] No scholar has been more generous in his support of divergent scholarly approaches than Donald Worster. For an example of his efforts to extend the boundaries of current work by promoting the work of diverse other scholars, see Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York, 1988), 289–323.

[3] The historiography of environmental history shows a slightly different but related clustering: works tend to study (1) the relationship of human beings to *material change* in natural ecosystems, sometimes called "ecological history" to distinguish it from the more general and encompassing "environmental history"; (2) the changing *ideas* of nature held by different people at different times in different cultures; or (3) the history of environmental *politics* and policy, most notably in United States historiography in the history of conservation and environmentalism. Despite their links, to a surprising extent they represent three quite separate historiographical traditions.

[4] As examples of books that do better with materialist than with idealist analysis, see Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (New York, 1986); Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle, 1980); and, for that matter, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983). For the opposite combination of strengths and weaknesses, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York, 1980); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964); John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven, 1982); or John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, 1984). These are all fine works of environmental history (whether or not their authors would so label them), but they also suggest the materialist/idealist poles that too often divide works in the field. One of the very few works that operates effectively and rigorously at all three analytical levels is Arthur F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850–1980* (New York, 1986), a superb prize-winning book that has nonetheless been much less widely read than it deserves to be. For a synthesis of its argument, see Arthur F. McEvoy, "Toward an Interactive Theory of Nature and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry," in *Ends of the Earth*, ed. Worster, 211–29.

One of my chief reservations about Worster's proposed research agenda, then, is its potentially excessive materialism. He calls for an approach that would begin with food and the ways people "create a mode of production" to get food "from the earth and into their bellies." Insofar as looking at food will encourage historians to reconstruct the intricate web of linkages between human beings and other organisms, I can only applaud such a strategy. But it is essential to remember that *food*, like *nature*, is not simply a system of bundled calories and nutrients that sustains the life of a human community by concentrating the trophic energy flows of an ecosystem; it is also an elaborate cultural construct. How and why people choose to eat what they do depends as much on what they *think*—about themselves, their relations to each other, their work, their plants and animals, their gods—as on the organisms they actually eat.[5]

Worster understands this, and he correctly notes that most environmental historians adopt an "interactionist" or "possibilist" philosophical stance when trying to allocate historical causation between materialist and idealist forces. But his decision to emphasize modes of production and his apparent belief that such modes generally occupy the second of his analytical levels suggest his preference for materialist styles of analysis. In fact, *mode of production* broadly construed presumably includes all the familial, social, religious, ideological, and other institutions that allow political-economic relationships to function and reproduce themselves from one generation to the next. One can ignore neither the cultural contexts in which a mode is embedded nor the mode of social reprodution that goes with it. This too Worster understands, and yet the elements of the agroecosystems he stresses in this essay are for the most part material. They thus encourage the bias against integrating ideology with political economy and environment that has been a continuing problem for environmental history.

There are other potential problems with the concept of mode of production as a foundation for work in environmental history. I agree with Worster that environmental history can offer a profound critique of Karl Marx's original formulation of the term; that may be one reason to avoid it.[6] What Marx labeled "relations of production" might in an ecological context better be seen as relations of *consumption*, since all human labor consumes ecosystemic energy flows in the process of performing physiological and mechanical work. This has the consequence of seriously undermining Marx's labor theory of value, in which commodities acquire their use value almost entirely from the human labor that workers contribute to their production. As Worster rightly argues, a more ecological understanding of human economy

[5] For a suggestive example, see Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (Chicago, 1983).

[6] For a rigorous and sympathetic attempt to delimit Marx's "mode of production" and explore its analytical possibilities, see G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, 1978); a more critical but no less rigorous assessment is Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (New York, 1985), esp. 241–317. For Worster's own use of the concept, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985); Donald Worster, "New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 18 (April 1987), 141–56; and Donald Worster, "Appendix: Doing Environmental History," in *Ends of the Earth*, ed. Worster, 289–307.

would almost surely have to assign a much larger role to nature in the creation of such use value. A corollary of this insight is that any given mode of production involves a host of nonhuman organisms whose labor, production, and reproduction is no less essential to human survival than the human labor on which Marx concentrated his attention. A mode of production is thus the set of relations among those human and nonhuman members of the larger ecosystem that play a significant role in maintaining and reproducing the economy and cultural life of a particular human group. With the term redefined in this way, we can watch people shift from one mode to another in order to trace with greater sophistication the processes Worster describes so well. As he says, "The *reorganization of nature*, not merely of society, is what we must uncover."

So far so good. And yet the apparent force of Marx's theory was his claim that only a few modes of production had played significant roles in human history. He named but a small number, and his theory of history led him to concentrate on only three: feudalism, capitalism, and communism. Marx's historicist teleology led him to construct a dynamic system that sought to explain *transitions* from one mode of production to another: historically from feudalism to capitalism, and prophetically from capitalism to communism. Although several environmental historians (Worster and I among them) have framed their studies of ecological change as examples of the transition to a *capitalist* mode of production, we have not succeeded in defining that term very rigorously. (Worster revealed his own uneasiness with Marx's analysis when he chose in his study of the dust bowl to ground his argument not on a capitalist *mode* of production but a capitalist *ethos*, which he essentially defines in terms of idealist ethical imperatives rather than materialist relations of production.[7]) Here we get little help from the theorists who originally devised mode of production as an analytical category. Marx's emphasis on the class relations whereby one human group extracts surplus from another is less than satisfactory in environmental terms, since it marginalizes the very processes that environmental historians wish to place at the center of their work.

Partly because our own work has broken free from the theoretical context for which mode of production was invented, no environmental historian has yet offered a finite taxonomy of modes. Environmental historians have most commonly relied on the anthropologists' distinction between hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies, with capitalism usually added as a rather awkward third term to the set.[8] Worster himself has offered two other modes of production as being particularly germane to the history of the twentieth-century North American West: a pastoral mode that characterizes the arid rural West and a hydraulic mode based on the centralized

[7] See Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 6. This may seem to contradict what I have written above about Worster's materialism, but the ambiguity is in fact present throughout his work. Committed as he may be to a materialist ecological and political-economic analysis, his critique of capitalism is ultimately moral and idealist.

[8] For a survey of anthropological concepts of modes of production, see Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York, 1979), 77–114. No environmental historian has seriously pursued the full taxonomy of political state systems that has been the principal object of this anthropological literature.

authority of a bureaucratic state that characterizes the arid urban West.[9] And yet he does not try to reconcile those terms either with the capitalist mode of production (which presumably overlaps both) or with all the other possible modes that one could conjure up on the basis of a particular technology, work process, or resource. Why not a salmon-fishing mode of production? A plow-agricultural mode of production? A petroleum-burning mode of production?

One begins to be a little uneasy at the apparent malleability of the term and to wonder what *isn't* a potential mode of production. How exactly do we identify the essential elements of a mode? Worster neither asks nor answers that question. He is apparently undaunted by the prospect of different modes proliferating in all directions across the landscape; he argues in another essay that "the modes of production are an endless parade of strategies, as complex in their taxonomies as the myriad species of insects thriving in the canopy of a rain forest or the brightly colored fish in a coral reef."[10] But if there are so many thousand of modes, what analytical force remains in them? Are they not merely particularistic labels for unique cultural systems, each getting its own name? *Mode of production* can all too easily become a jargon term that conveys the illusion of rigor while obscuring more than it reveals.

Worster is clearly right in his recognition that there are "an endless parade of strategies" for embedding human life within the natural world. His insight must be a starting point for all work in environmental history, and yet it undermines the very analytical tool he seeks to defend. The dream of a finite taxonomy of modes organized into a tight little sequential system is just that: a dream. Marx's goal of constructing a theory tracing a general transition from something called feudalism to something called capitalism inevitably does violence to the diverse complexity of ecological (and historical) reality. Even Worster's more capacious and pragmatic taxonomy promises more than it delivers. He is attracted to it because it appears to help us understand nature, economy, and society in an integrated fashion. I share his sense that this is a desirable goal, but I cannot find in mode of production itself any clear advice about how we are to discover the integration we seek. By making it so easy for us to use a single phrase to label a large, complex, and often contradictory system, mode of production can tempt us into thinking that we have analyzed that system when we have not even described it satisfactorily.

More useful, I believe, would be a tool kit of analytical approaches that would help us locate in a given historical situation the critical linkages between people and the ecosystems they inhabit. Rather than start with the system as a whole, as mode of production would have us do, we should start (like modern ecologists) with *relationships*. Having identified the most important of these for the subject we are studying, we could then seek a deeper and more precise understanding of cultural and ecological change.

[9] Worster, "New West, True West"; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*. Worster borrows the hydraulic mode from Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven, 1957). He spends much less time defining or analyzing his so-called pastoral mode, though we can hope that he will return to this suggestive idea in his future work.

[10] Worster, "Appendix," 301.

I would therefore begin at a very general level of inquiry: What are the most fruitful places to start as we set about the task of understanding cultures and ecosystems in history? What conceptual tools should we use at the outset of our work, and what questions do they suggest we should ask? Worster's present essay offers some such tools—the extent to which a given agriculture simplifies its ecosystem, exports its output, defines its crops as commodities, and sustains the fertility of its soil—but there are many more. Some we can borrow directly from other disciplines: for instance, the seasonal fluctuations of climate, the cycling of nutrients in ecosystems, or the association of species in regular patterns. They teach us to ask questions such as: How much seasonal variation in environmental productivity does a particular human community face during an ordinary year? How do its members explain such variation to themselves? How much of the output of their biological system do people store to provide food during the least productive seasons? How reliable is the system from year to year, and how do people try to protect themselves from its least reliable aspects? On what other organisms do they most rely for their own subsistence? How do they conceive of their relationships to those organisms? And so on. By pursuing questions such as these we can begin to construct a systematic picture of how people relate to the world around them and ultimately create a portrait of what Worster might wish to call their "mode of production." I care little about the label; for me, the more important issue is how we arrived at the portrait, how well-defined our questions are, how rigorously we have answered them, and how carefully we have worked out their implications.

Not all of the approaches in our methodological tool kit can be borrowed directly from other disciplines; some will have to be modified before we can readily use them. These include the much-contested concepts of *equilibrium* and *community*, which together underlie the old idea of the "balance of nature" that so often supplies the analytical (and moral) scale against which we measure the environmental effects of human societies. As Worster notes, the ecologists have been busy complicating (if not undermining) all three concepts. Ironically, their efforts to understand ecosystems in more historical terms have made them suspicious of the very models of ecological "community"—stable, self-equilibrated, organic, functionalist—on which our own balance-of-nature arguments rely. We need to grapple with their arguments, since so many of our analyses conclude that human communities (especially capitalist ones) have often radically destabilized the ecosystems on which they depend.

Our interest in *destabilized* ecosystems suggests that we need to develop a more precise definition of "stability" and "sustainability" as we evaluate the ability of human societies to maintain their resource bases without encountering ecological limits. Most environmental historians share with modern environmentalism a political and moral critique of societies that destroy their resource base. We are fuzzy, however, about the time horizon we have in mind when we speak of stability, and we rarely explore very carefully just how static or dynamic we expect the equilibrium between human groups and nature to be. Too often we romanticize nature (and "traditional" societies) as unchanging, when neither ecologists nor anthropologists

will permit us such a description any longer. We cannot simply label as capitalist or modern all forces for ecosystemic change, and as traditional or natural all forces for stability. The tautology of such an approach is too self-evident.

We can no longer assume the existence of a static and benign climax community in nature that contrasts with dynamic, but destructive, human change. Rather than benign natural stasis and disruptive human change, we need to explore differential *rates* and *types* of change. Under what circumstances, for instance, do domesticated grazing animals reduce ground cover and increase erosion of topsoil? In a farming community, how do we measure and evaluate declines in soil fertility (a term that itself requires better definition than we ordinarily give it)? Are such changes primarily a function of population density, political-economic context, or some more idealist belief system? Put another way: Are capitalist pigs intrinsically more destructive than noncapitalist pigs? Do the people we study idealize the stability of their place in nature, or do they seek a more dynamic (perhaps "progressive"?) relationship with the ecosystems they inhabit? When we critique "capitalist" peoples for the destructive consequences of their faith in progress, what is the counterfactual alternative against which we implicitly measure them? And so on. Questions such as these may make it harder for us to speak in simple terms about ecological damage, but *damage* is another conceptual tool in need of refinement. Tools of this sort would seem to me more useful than mode of production as starting points, for we can in fact only hope to construct mode of production with their help.

Two additional problems with ecological modes of production point to further difficulties for environmental history as a field. One is holism, which is a common tendency of many disciplines that study the environment. On the one hand, holistic analysis has the great attraction of encouraging historians to see nature and humanity whole, to trace the manifold connections among people and other organisms until finally an integrated understanding of their relations emerges. On the other hand, holism discourages us from looking as much as we should at conflict and difference *within* groups of people. It can bias us toward functionalist models of social and ecological community, in which all members of a society or ecosystem agree on its ends and are equally responsible for its activities. When Worster asserts that "every group of people in history . . . had to . . . create a mode of production," he follows the practice of most environmental historians in speaking about human beings in group terms, as collective actors reshaping the landscape around them according to their seemingly monolithic interests. (The most extreme example of that practice is the environmentalists' habit of attributing monolithic agency—and gender—to the human species as a whole with such singular constructions as "Man exploits the earth and fouls his nest.") Since people's manipulation of nature is almost always a collective activity, some such formulation is linguistically unavoidable—as this sentence itself demonstrates. But one must proceed very carefully to avoid missing the individuals and subgroups whose roles in that activity differ. To say that "peasants" or "farmers" or "Indians" or "colonists" collectively modified their ecosystems in a particular way can lend force and clarity to one's analysis, but often at the expense of subtlety and complexity.

If I were to point to the greatest weakness of environmental history as it has developed thus far, I would criticize its failure to probe below the level of the group to explore the implications of social divisions for environmental change. We lack, for instance, an environmental history of southern agriculture that adequately explores the different roles of slaves and masters and poor whites in reshaping the regional landscape (to say nothing of the different roles of men and women in the same process). Southern historiography is certainly rich with the materials for such an analysis, but a hypothetical environmental historian might too readily be tempted to ascribe environmental change to "southern society" or "tobacco and cotton agriculture" or "the slave mode of production." None of those formulations helps much in teasing apart the diverse material roles and perceptual experiences of different people in the holistic "system." Our work on the environmental experiences of many other groups of people remains sadly undeveloped: in the face of social history's classic categories of gender, race, class, and ethnicity, environmental history stands much more silent than it should. An oversimplified holism is a chief reason for this failure of the field, and little in Worster's essay helps guard against its dangers.

The final warning I might make about modes of production has to do with the mode that dominates Worster's argument: capitalism. It would be foolish to argue against Worster's claim that the growth of capitalism over the past half millennium has been one of the greatest forces for environmental change in human history. His critique of capitalist agriculture—its commodification of land, its drastic ecological simplification, its affection for dangerously vulnerable monocultures, its promotion of divisions of labor that in the long run can do great damage to nature and human community—is one that for the most part I share. The narrative Worster offers of a transition out of a traditional subsistence agriculture into a market-oriented capitalist agriculture has great force, and environmental historians would be foolish to ignore that great transformation. His emphasis on capitalism is crucial, and so too is his effort to remind historians that even the most urban industrial societies are ultimately agricultural at their base: environmental history without agricultural history is inconceivable.

And yet there may be danger even in so compelling an argument. The greatest attraction of Marx's modes of production was their ability to fit a complex series of historical changes to a single narrative trajectory that organized both past history and future prophecy—from past feudalism to present capitalism to future communism. The modes were so encompassing that virtually any social change could be accommodated within them, giving what might otherwise have appeared incomprehensibly complex the familiar Aristotelian shape of beginning, middle, and end. The same attraction holds for environmental historians. Even though most of us agree about only one mode of production—the capitalist one—that mode allows us to narrate our stories as an endless series of transitions, out of some "traditional" predecessor and into the world we know. The ecological contradictions of capitalism, which we both discover in history and borrow from modern environmentalism, supply the basis for a powerful prophecy about the future environmental disasters that capitalism could (will?) all too easily spawn. If we follow Worster's lead by

framing environmental history as a transition into and out of capitalism, we energize our historical argument with all the power of prophecy.

I would be the last to argue that doing this is intrinsically wrong. Donald Worster is not merely a fine historian and brilliant writer; he is also a powerful prophet, with a deeply troubling moral critique to offer the modern world. The capitalist mode of production is one of his most powerful analytical tools as a historian—and one of his most compelling rhetorical tropes as a prophet. Therein lies its attraction and its danger. The phenomenon called capitalism—if it really is the singular thing its label suggests—has been so complicated and hydra-headed that no single analysis or narrative is likely to encompass it. Even if we can recognize certain imperatives that seem to flow from the logic of the capitalist marketplace, their implications in different cultural and environmental contexts are so complex that a metanarrative concentrating only on exploitation and despoliation is unlikely to do them full justice. Were all environmental historians to embark on an analysis of agroecosystems of the sort Worster proposes, I fear they might soon discover themselves telling the same story, albeit in different times and places, over and over again. Perhaps that oft-repeated story—of soils eroded, habitats destroyed, food crops simplified, communities dismantled, ecosystem destabilized—might in some broad sense be historically true, but it might also soon come to seem a Procrustean bed.

Environmental history is too young a field to commit itself single-mindedly to the research agenda and narrative framework Worster has offered in "Transformations of the Earth." The "agroecological perspective" he proposes is a rich one worthy of work by many scholars; I hope that Worster himself will attempt a fuller synthesis on the foundation he has laid here. But it hardly captures the full diversity of environmental history as a field dedicated to discovering "the role and place of nature in human life." I would suggest that much of our work lies on humbler ground, closer to the earth itself. I would set us the tasks of finding subtler tools for building bridges among ecosystems, economies, and the cognitive lenses through which people view the world. I believe that we are likely to discover many of these tools at the local and regional level. There is still room for a host of well-focused monographs, analyzing very particular social and ecological changes, without worrying as yet about their proper place in a larger metanarrative. With few exceptions, the best environmental histories thus far have operated most effectively at the monographic level. There is some danger in this, since it has left our collective historiography rather unfocused: many of the best works in environmental history have remained *sui generis*, without generating much debate, refutation, or even duplication. But the solution to this problem lies in refining the questions we ask so as to clarify our heuristic approaches and sharpen the points about which we agree and disagree. Mode-of-production analysis may contribute to this task, but only if it leads us beyond mere labels to a rigorous inquiry into how we define, analyze, and evaluate the many connections between people and nature. Relationship more than system should be our starting point.

If we pursue modes of production, we must give equal attention to the broader cultural systems in which they are embedded, and the modes of *reproduction* that

transmit them from generation to generation. We should be wary of excessive holism. Although there is great analytical value in being able to describe the broad connections between people and the other organisms with which they share the world, we should never lose sight of the fact that different people experience those connections in quite different ways. As Worster argues, "one of the most interesting questions . . . is who has gained and who has lost power as . . . modes of production have changed." The exploration of social and environmental *difference*—and of its relation to *power*—needs to find a more prominent place in our work. So too do all landscapes in which power and difference express themselves, even those that seem on their face least natural: cities, highways, slums, factories, hospitals, corporations, military installations, all the many places that give shape to the modern world. Cities in particular deserve much more work than they have received. Environmental history continues to have too strong a bias toward the wild and the rural, when in fact the field's intellectual commitment to discovering environmental connections ought to leave no corner of the planet untouched by its scholarship.

At bottom, though, whatever the technical criticisms I may have of Donald Worster's "Transformations of the Earth," he and I are very much in agreement about the broad outlines of environmental history and its importance as a field. Even my criticisms of mode of production are directed toward the same ends as Worster's, since we both seek a more rigorous foundation for what we believe to be a critically important approach to history. If we had our way, historians would be no more willing to ignore questions about ecological context—about nature—than they would questions about gender or class or race. To that end, the time has come to build better bridges to our colleagues in other fields of history, and to the allied disciplines that share our fascination for investigating the human place in nature. Those who see in Worster's essay an invitation to help with those bridges, to join the task of reconstructing historical scholarship so as to relocate the human story within the natural world, have read him exactly aright. By examining the human place on earth and understanding the many ways in which people and planet have reshaped each other, we can hope to write a new story not merely about the past but about the present and future as well. Just so do history and prophecy meet.