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Seeing beyond Culture

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The centerpiece essay began as a brief paper for a Social Science History Association session, chaired by Robert Swierenga, on connecting ecology to rural history; only later, at the request of this journal's editor, did I try to expand it into a broader statement on environmental history, and then I never intended to make it a definitive survey or a critique of my colleagues. My purpose was merely to indicate some of the big doors environmental historians ought to be opening, although I did immodestly tend to point most strenuously to those doors leading to my own recent work on the nature-agriculture connection. Now with these excellent commentaries included, the field is indeed more adequately characterized, and it should be far more obvious why it is stirring up so much excitement. There are many fundamental, and huge, questions being asked, and they are questions that ought to interest all historians.

A decade or two ago, when environmental history was just beginning to take form, all the prominent scholars were writing histories of environmental policy, ideas of nature, and conservation reform. They gave us many stimulating works, but I felt the field was starting off too intellectualistically, too homocentrically, and that it needed to locate some clear, distinct ground of its own; otherwise, the new field would never be able to claim an identity of its own, never expand our understanding of causality beyond human agency, never really challenge the ethical imagination of our time. Since then each of the authors in this round table has helped correct those deficiencies by bringing in the world of nature as an active agent in shaping the past. Each has at the same time managed pretty well to integrate the ideal with the material. Unlike William Cronon, I don't think we have overlooked or neglected the role of ideas; for example, his book, *Changes in the Land*, offers a superb analysis of economic ideas, notions of property, and the commodification of the environment in early New England.¹ All of us have made the point that there are and always have been physical limitations and ecological constraints on society; I would single out that insight as the most important one we have to offer. Now, however, what I sense stirring in a few of these replies is nostalgia for that old narrow focus on the self-referential history of human ideas, society, and culture, with its tendency to dismiss nature as a mere epiphenomenon.

Cronon's main complaint seems to be that my doorway into environmental history is too constricted in its materialistic emphasis on the idea of modes of produc-

¹ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983), esp. 54–81.

tion and yet is too broad and unsubtle in its “metanarrative.” Alfred Crosby, in contrast, would have me be even more global in imagination, less parochial in time and space: “the geographical areas,” he insists, “have to be large.” Carolyn Merchant seems to like the structuralist approach I take but wants recognition of the unique role of women in agroecological matters built more conspicuously into it. Stephen Pyne wants to reduce all environmental history, preindustrial and postindustrial alike, to a common pile of ashes. Richard White will not permit anything smacking of cultural materialism, but he does want someone to furnish “a clear demonstration of causality” along with uniform standards for measuring historical change. A casual observer who thought all environmental historians must belong to one harmonious back-to-nature cult must be astonished to witness this diversity of outlook and to learn that there are starkly different philosophical assumptions, and perhaps irreconcilable moral universes, clashing with one another.

The longest of these critiques is Cronon’s, which raises many more stimulating questions than I can reasonably deal with here. Instead of my overgeneralized “holism,” he thinks historians ought to adopt the “particularist” squint: that is, they should focus more narrowly on the particular interactions of people with particular parts of nature in particular places, placing less emphasis on how or whether those interactions and parts are integrated into some bigger economic or ecological picture. We should undertake mainly local and regional studies—piling up lots of facts about lots of small places, from which we draw only microconclusions about environmental “change.” That looks like a productive, pleasurable, safe activity to me, and because I too appreciate the irreducible, elegant concreteness of facts, have located a few myself, and stand in fear and trembling before an excess of abstraction, I do not want to divert anyone from it. However, beware: the historical profession is full of narrow, empirical busyness these days and the public is obviously and rightly bored by it; too few broad, compelling, provocative ideas come out of our “particularism” to be interesting to them. I am also impressed by Crosby when he urges us to pay more attention to the “largest and most important dimensions.” If we get too obsessed with particularities, he suggests, the public may not be truly helped by our writings to think clearly and coherently about the larger issues of our time—the relation of nature and capitalism, the collective myths and institutions of nations and civilizations, the workings of imperialism, the fate of the earth.

After Cronon’s heavy pummeling of the concept of “modes of production,” I have room only to reply that a certain vagueness in our analytical terms is inevitable, as it is in those of natural scientists. For example, the concept of *species* is far less rigorous than nonscientists might suppose, and there are perhaps tens of millions of species to deal with—hardly a “finite taxonomy” there either. Like many of the terms we use and will go on using (language being what it is—messy, wonderful, indispensable), either the concept of the mode of production, or something very like it, is inevitable; and it is never going to be distilled into some tidy scientific “tool” that every scholar will use in the same way, no more than the other crucial but equally malleable words we depend on, like “values” or “world view” or “natural environment.”

Cronon recommends that we throw out the whole taxonomic enterprise and concentrate instead on a kind of descriptive natural history, but that is not going to get us out of the problems he fears. We would have just as much difficulty defining *sustainability* as categorizing the tools and social relations of production. Nothing, we would soon hear ourselves saying, is sustainable forever; almost everything is sustainable for some moment in time. No society, we would hear argued, would ever admit that it was *not* sustainable; however, no one these days would want his society to become so sustainable that it was stagnant. Like *mode of production*, the term *sustainable* is incredibly difficult to pin down and, in the end, will not save us from jargonizing or being inexact. So let's agree that the perfectly adequate set of terms, labels, standards, and structural schema is a chimera.

More serious matters lurk in the rest of Cronon's critique, matters over which we may sharply divide. What Cronon and perhaps Merchant really seem to want is to reduce environmental history to social history and to embrace the latter's causal arguments and moral concerns—the importance of gender, race, class, and so forth. In so doing, Cronon would redefine environment as cultural landscape, a move that would encompass virtually every place on earth, even hospitals and military bases. And in writing about those cultural landscapes he would apparently have us concentrate far more on telling how each social group, and finally each individual, living in that landscape saw it or felt about it. Merchant would be pleased to see historians spend more time on the places women have traditionally shaped, such as the kitchen garden and nursery, and on the distinctive views women have had of the natural environment. The result of that shift in emphasis would undoubtedly be to leave readers better informed about the infinite variety of human beings, about the desires expressed in their habitations, and about the complex process by which they decide how to use the space around them. I support that work enthusiastically and accept Merchant's thoughtful suggestions about how environmental history might be enriched by the study of gender. There are, nonetheless, risks in hastily refashioning the field in these ways. First, environmental historians might find themselves on the same downward spiral that social history has taken toward fragmentation and a paralyzing fear of all generalization. Second, we might spend so much time distinguishing the different interpretations people have had of, say, the North American forest that we would forget about the forest as an independent entity. No landscape is completely cultural; all landscapes are the result of *interactions* between nature and culture. That last point is the crucial one, making environmental history more than social or cultural history, though I agree with Cronon that we should never assume that either nature or culture is an altogether seamless whole.

If I seem to push the agency of nature a little hard, it is because I believe that nature ought to be valued more highly in our society, given more credit in our list of civilization's achievements, and respected as a self-managing set of patterns and processes. Apparently, some of my commentators disagree with that belief and feel I am underestimating the centrality and force of humans in environmental history; that is, I am too much of a determinist, materialist, naturalist. Good: at least I am understood in my tendencies. So let me be forthright about the kind of determinist

I am and the kind of moral and causal hierarchy I believe in. I have reason to believe that the patterns of nature both do and ought to set a course for our lives—not the only course, or the only possible course, but a reasonably clear course that wise societies have followed in the past, foolish ones have scorned. If that view appears too hierarchical, to the point of becoming a “simple determinism,” then I must answer that my critics, White in particular, seem to me to be getting lost in an excess of relativism. White tends to argue along two contradictory lines. In the first place, following the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, he insists that nothing can be separated for analysis, nothing really causes anything else. But then he laments that without a clear demonstration of causality, the field of environmental history cannot tell any convincing moral tales. In my view he suffers from the common modern malady of knocking down all “hierarchy,” all forms of explanation and all standards of value; he then finds himself living in a confused, relativistic morass from which he wants deliverance.

White goes on to complain that I am merely providing evidence for a conclusion I have already deduced, that is, capitalism’s critical role in environmental transformation, and he wonders whether that “deductive” logical procedure is either valid or adequate. But isn’t it obvious that is what we all really do—mix our facts with deductions? Am I really acting differently from a historian who, after years of reading and thinking, exclaims, “Eureka! the Civil War transformed the American nation-state”? Or one who insists that slaves were more resistant to their condition than we have allowed? Or who has decided that the French Revolution turned out to be a disaster for the common people? We all operate by similar combinations of induction and deduction. Personally, I have followed a long process of study and reasoning to the thesis that capitalism, defined as both ethos and system, has been one of the most revolutionary forces in history, and nowhere more so than in ecological relations. Like other revolutionary forces, it has not been able to evade the pressures of environmental adaptation—hence all those taxonomic varieties it displays—or displace every prerevolutionary habit of thought; wonderfully then, historians have an incredibly complex story to uncover and tell about the capitalist transformation of nature.

My position is emphatically not that all people in all eras have thought like modern capitalists, who believe, in the virtue of “rational greed.” On the contrary, I have always insisted, as Richard White surely knows, that there have been many more logics and virtues at work in history than those followed by capitalism and that some of them may have incorporated a better understanding of the logic of nature. It is the Pawnees described in White’s book *The Roots of Dependency* who have been most obviously made over into a modern white man’s model of efficiency, rationality, and managerialism.²

Finally, let me make clear one more time, so that no one can accuse me of telling an oversimplified story, that I do acknowledge that capitalism has brought substan-

² Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, 1983), 147–211.

tial benefit as well as damage into the world, perhaps has even made the world a happier place on balance. But above all let us not, whether out of ennui or timidity or reductiveness, fail to discern that big story of the capitalist revolution or try to hide it behind another cover.

As for Pyne's comments, the point of his long, intriguing digression into firestick ecology seems to be that I am guilty of holding some eighteenth-century view of divine design and eternal equilibrium in nature and that the tough-minded spirit of modernistic history rebukes me—tells me we live in a world without order or equilibrium or any meaning apart from humankind. People have been so long rearranging nature, he argues, that we can no longer even say what it looked like before they began, and if we could it would be a pretty unstable thing.

I have read Charles Darwin and understand reasonably well the processes of evolution in nature. But the literature about evolution hardly requires us to accept Pyne's extreme agnosticism about the order of nature. Nor does it necessitate his view that people have been rearranging the earth so drastically that we can no longer talk meaningfully about a nonhumanized nature. My problem with his version of environmental history is that it is based on shaky evidence: an assortment of traveler's reports, a few handfuls of charcoal from a core sample, and the like. We are in no position to insist, on the basis of such evidence, that the Australian eucalyptus forest was completely the result of aborigines' torches. And when Pyne suggests, as he does in his book *Fire in America*, that much of the eastern United States was once an open savannah created by Indians, he has jumped off a veritable cliff of speculation.³ Currently he has many fellow leapers, some of them more reckless than he, a little too eager to depict all Indians or others as potent, activist, or managerial in the environment or a little too ready to kill off the idea of a pristine nature so the contemporary earth managers can have a free hand reorganizing things to their satisfaction.

Frankly, I don't mind being a little out of step with Pyne's modernistic history. We have gotten ourselves into a great deal of trouble by adhering closely to the mentality behind it. The foremost philosophical challenge of this age, in my view, is to escape the state of nihilism, relativism, and confusion that modernistic history, and modernistic everything else, have left us in. That requires an ability to step outside ourselves, our dreams, artifacts, and domineering drives, to discover and acknowledge another, objective reality that we have not created nor ever fully controlled. Yes, I do believe in that reality; yes, I seek to base my history on it—but not because of any privilege uniquely bestowed on me to see it. One of humankind's oldest intuitions is that the realm of nature has an objective, independent order and coherence; that we are to some extent a part of that order, to some extent out of it and opposed to it; that in any case we ought to respect it. For me that intuition is basically an acceptance of the unconscious, unplanned, unsuperintended wisdom of evolution, which is very different from asserting a belief in some transcendental "moral design," as Pyne maintains I do. Only within the last few decades, especially since

³ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, 1982), 75.

World War II, have humans begun extensively to doubt that intuition. The faster our global economy has produced goods and consumed them, the more tightly it has woven us into its technological cocoon, the more uncertain we have become about the objective reality of nature and the more incapable we are of seeing any order or independent force or intrinsic value anywhere outside our own human realm. The animating purpose of environmental history ought to be an attempt to rescue us from the predicament.

I would not, however, base that history simply on current science's apprehension of the natural order. Science, as White rightly says, is in too much flux and uncertainty right now to serve as definitive guide. A recent paper of mine, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," is precisely about the very recent preoccupation of ecologists with notions of disequilibrium, and my first major book, *Nature's Economy*, traced the shifting, culture-bound models of nature that science has given us.⁴ No one who has read those works will assume that I trust in science excessively or look for essential help from that quarter.

Much of our history writing has been devoid of any respect for nature precisely because historians are temperamentally and philosophically inclined to see change instead of stability in the world and to elevate human cleverness over evolutionary wisdom. Environmental history is for me an exception to that tendency and therefore of considerable philosophical significance to the profession. Our goal should not be to "put nature into history," as Cronon argues; after all, it was already put there long ago by figures such as Darwin. We are not required, simply because we are historians, to attempt some final historicization of nature, nor because we are mainly students of human society are we required to reduce all landscapes to essentially social or cultural expressions. Rather, we ought to be helping people find again the coherence, pattern, and integrity of nature, to help locate the realm of nature into which we can once more put our human history.

⁴ The paper was given as the opening plenary address to the conference "Solving Environmental Problems," Olympia, Washington, April 28, 1989. Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York, 1977).