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Recentism in environmental history on Latin America

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recentism in environmental history on latin america

DURING THE FIRST decade of *Environmental History*, articles on Latin America have been numerous and diverse. While understandably far fewer than articles on North America, those on Latin America represent a proportion roughly equal to those on Europe, Asia, and Africa. Also, they span a diversity of subregions, topics, and approaches. From Patagonia to the Rio Grande, from Andean slopes to Amazonian lowlands, they cover agricultural to industrial topics. They approach these topics from several complementary perspectives: ecological, cultural, political, and economic.

Yet those same contributions do exhibit one notable bias: *recentism*. They disproportionately focus on the twentieth century, followed closely by an affinity for the nineteenth century. In fact, twice as many articles focus on those two centuries as on all others combined.

Rhys Jones's content analysis of the major geography journals suggests that such recentism might reflect a broader trend.¹ Since the 1980s, those journals have in general shifted toward an overwhelming emphasis on the present and recent past. The content even of the *Journal of Historical Geography* has come to emphasize research on high modernity, with the majority of articles focusing on the early 1800s through the mid 1900s. One factor driving recentism might be the relative ease of working with recent versus older source materials. In combination with growing pressures to produce more rather than better research, that factor might be discouraging academics from taking on projects involving early modern times.

Even without more fully understanding the causes of recentism, though, attention to its intellectual costs will, I hope, persuade environmental historians to resist it. Generally, and quite ironically, recentism precludes understanding recent history because understanding modernity requires understanding how the salient characteristics of modern regimes emerged out of the disjunctures and continuities between premodern and early modern times. As Carl Sauer noted in reference to Mexico, "we may yet best delineate the basic traits of this land and its peoples from its prehistoric geography and from its geography of the sixteenth century."²

My first example illustrates how research on the colonial period is necessary to any realistic understanding of recent environmental history.³ Despite the promises of a Mexican Green Revolution in the 1950s, by the 1970s proofs of its failure began to mount, including the need for corn imports, biodiversity loss,

aquifer pollution, soil erosion, blight susceptibility, fossil-fuel dependence, land consolidation, rural pauperization, and rapid population growth. The Green Revolution's latest iteration, involving genetically modified (GM) crop varieties, now threatens to contaminate, overwhelm, and homogenize the heterogeneous germplasm resource that Mexican farmers have created over thousands of years. Despite the Green Revolution having thus failed to reduce hunger while very effectively destroying much environmental and cultural heterogeneity, Mexico continues to disown its highly productive and sustainable indigenous food production systems in favor of GM crops. Understanding why requires understanding how, during the colonial period, *indigenismo* became established among the nationalist Creoles who later became the ruling elite of independent Mexico. *Indigenismo* remains a central element in Mexican cultural politics: Its discourse celebrates ancient Maya and Aztec architecture, art, and military heroes to the exclusion of the accomplishments of living natives. Thus the ancient Maya became the Greeks of the New World while the living Maya and their land-use practices became categorically "traditional," supposedly too conservative to actively participate in economic development models that focus on the diffusion and adoption of western institutions and technologies. Accordingly, Mexico's germplasm resources have become the ancient patrimony of all humankind while biotechnology corporations develop GM crops from that germplasm and patent them to the detriment of native peoples and their local agricultural knowledge and crop varieties. Understanding the recent environmental history of Mexican agriculture therefore requires understanding the colonial emergence of *indigenismo* and other such elements in the process of political struggle over resources.

My second example illustrates the necessity for research on processes that emerged as part of what Carl Sauer termed "prehistoric geography." Some have concluded that a plague of sheep, among other livestock the Spaniards introduced into Mexico, caused such severe soil erosion in the sixteenth century that its consequences for modern development and environmental conservation continue to the present. Supposedly, exponential increases in grazing densities resulted in widespread decreases in vegetation cover and consequent soil erosion. Yet that vegetation had coevolved with ice-age herbivores, like the horses that propagated many trees by eating their pods and fruits. With extinction of those herbivores about ten thousand years ago and the emergence of plant domestication soon thereafter, those trees lost their primary dispersal agents, increasingly suffered the assault of agricultural clearance through burning, and therefore became minor elements in the landscape. When the Spaniards introduced livestock that could again propagate those trees, they re-expanded into former agricultural fields that were becoming pastures as pathogens like smallpox, also introduced by the Spaniards, vastly reduced the native population. Livestock thus did not so much precipitate new ecological processes involving changes in vegetation cover as reestablish lapsed ones. Understanding the recent, continuing consequences of colonial livestock introductions therefore requires understanding precolonial processes involved in interactions among animals, plants, soils, and people as well as the disjunctures and continuities those processes underwent during the early colonial period—which is exactly why Sauer singled out the sixteenth century as being so critical to the present.

In sum, doing precolonial and colonial environmental history is necessary to doing recent environmental history. Recognition of the intellectual costs of an increasingly exclusive focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will, I hope, persuade environmental historians to resist the institutional forces encouraging such recentism.

Andrew Sluyter is assistant professor of geography and anthropology at Louisiana State University. His recent book *Colonialism and Landscape* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) won the 2004 James M. Blaut Award from the CAPE Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers.

NOTES

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1. Rhys Jones, "What Time Human Geography?," *Progress in Human Geography* (2004): 287-304.
2. Carl O. Sauer, "The Personality of Mexico," *Geographical Review* (1941): 354.
3. For fuller accounts of the two examples, see Andrew Sluyter, *Colonialism and Landscape: Postcolonial Theory and Applications* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

A Woman Technician Tests Car Emissions, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1970s.



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Scholarship on environmentalism could expand to include the science, technology, labor, and culture of the workers for corporate and governmental institutions charged with measuring levels of pollution and determining their environmental and health effects. How did institutions decide how to define and measure "pollution" and what did employees think about their work and its meaning?