



What Is Environmental History? Why Environmental History?

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ESSAYS

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By James O'Connor

...in truth, the environmental issue defines and dramatizes the need for a radical social consciousness in a *total* fashion — William Appleman Williams

1. Introduction

Postmodernists think that there is a logic to the seemingly chaotic tales of high personages, important places, and the accumulation of events called "history." Everyone has his or her own experiences and stories to tell about the present and the past. Historians are professional story tellers who dip into the available stock of narrative forms (the *one* constant in history) and arrange people and events in accordance with the logic of the particular story form chosen. For Marx, Louis Bonaparte was farce; for the French upper class triumph and tragedy. For anti-communist historians, the Cold War was a fight between good and evil; for geopolitical historians, a clash of empires; for the Sandinistas, a Yankee excuse to intervene in Central American revolution. And so on.

Hayden White's book of essays, *The Content of the Form*, is an important postmodern text. To simplify a complex and elegant argument, White suggests that once the historian chooses a narrative

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form, the content or substance of what he or she writes, how this content is arranged sequentially (e.g., when Act One begins, when Act Three ends), and how much emphasis is placed on certain people, places, and events are all more or less determined. The narrative form helps to decide which of what White calls "real events" get a big play and which do not.

White's concept of a "real event" suggests that postmodernism suffers from an excess of idealism. This expression appears in White's book a number of times, but it is neither defined nor even problematized. "Real events" are dropped into White's narrative like raisins into a pudding. This is so even though he and many other postmodernists would agree that no "real event" (e.g. material or socio-economic event) ever occurs without a corresponding "ideal event" (my expression) — that is, a speech act, a new twist on shared meaning, a fresh perspective on a form of intersubjectivity or the social construction of the "individual," etc. Postmodernists tend to ignore or downplay the way that "real events" articulate with "ideal events" — the ways that material activity is organized socially and that meaning and intersubjectivity mesh with material activity — hence tend to be blind to one of the main problems of historiography.

Despite this lacuna, postmodernism "explains" why each generation or historic period rewrites history, and also why in any given period historians dispute what happened in the past (as well as the ways that anyone can know what "really" happened and why). The logic of postmodernism is that it is natural and inevitable that history stories will change over time and also differ at any given time, depending on who is telling the stories. Everyone has her or his own ax to grind and stewpot to simmer because everyone has his or her unique life experience, political and cultural perspective, and personal narrative. Everyone has a sense of what an ax and stewpot "really" are, what they may signify to the user (as words, as physical objects), to the outside observer, to someone in Tibet, to posterity. However, postmodernism fails on three counts, which leads, finally, to a methodological individualism and subjectivism, and an arbitrariness and relativism, so extreme as to border on nihilism: First, postmodernists are blind to the ways that social structures lay behind both real events and narrative forms, i.e., they neglect the structurally determined or influenced interconnectedness of things (which generates the need for abstraction and levels of analysis). Second, they fail to privilege typical (as contrasted with atypical) stories in which historical data can be interpreted in relevant contexts (which eliminates the multiplicity of possible meanings of things within a chosen context or framework).

Third, they disregard any structurally based social psychology, or account of subjectivity and cultures of resistance, which might bridge the gap between structure and process or structure and meaning.

Fortunately, there seems to be at least a partial escape from the postmodernist trap. The writing and rewriting of history — the illumination of previously obscure corners of the past, the sound of voices long forgotten or suppressed, the explanations of fads and fashions, the reassessment of "great men," the ways that subjectivity (or identity) is historically constituted, and so on — follow a certain crude logic, as least as far as the history of capitalism in the past three or four hundred years is concerned.¹

It is possible to decode the logic of history writing by keying it to the developmental logic of capitalism itself rather than to that of a particular narrative form. Broadly speaking, modern Western history writing begins with political, legal, and constitutional history; moves to economic history in the mid-to-late 19th century; shifts to social and cultural history in the mid-20th century; and culminates in environmental history in the late 20th century. This family tree of historiography is a logical follow-up to the development of capitalism itself: first, the political, legal and constitutional reforms and revolutions which created the framework for private property, property rights, civil liberties, and formal equality under the law; second, the industrial and technological revolutions of the late 18th and early 19th century, partly set in motion by political reform and revolution, which created the possibility of capitalist economic history (economic conflict, growth of markets, finance, competition, etc.); third, the growth of a specifically capitalist society and culture, which emerged from the commodification of the fictitious commodities land and labor, and of social life and culture; mass society; consumerism and social struggles; and the migration of labor and the development of multi-ethnic society, which inspired social and cultural history; fourth, the capitalization of nature, or the creation of a specifically capitalist nature, and struggles over nature, which developed within the frameworks of evolving capitalist legal systems and economic and

¹A disclaimer: Paul Buhle reminds me that "the emergence of history from an examination of collective myth begins with Vico, and without his attempts to recollect folklore, and Boethius's parallel recuperation of the dialectic, history would be a...dry subject. The general narrative you lay out (political to economic to social to cultural and then ecological history) is a good one. But the idea that it proceeds scientifically, without big injections of myth, romanticism, etc., quite beyond mere class prejudices is itself potentially lacking in dialectical observation" (personal correspondence).

social/cultural imperatives, and which have produced environmental history — the latest and (perhaps) last type of history. In effect, the structural transformations of developing capitalism have written, at least with a crude logic, their own historical narrative, corresponding to changes in politics, the forces and relations of production, and society and culture as a whole, including universal themes of struggles between objective circumstance or necessity and desire or subjective will.

Structural change does not directly give rise to new types of history writing: social conflict and social struggles (of which the new histories are a definite part) mediate the two. Particular structural changes produce particular types of social struggle: political, economic, social and cultural, and environmental, in that order. But while the proximate cause of successively new historical subjects and new critical readings of capitalist history is new types of conflict and struggle, the deep cause is the structural evolution of capitalism itself — the unfolding of capitalism as a way of work, as a way of life, as a way of relating to nature. Any full account of this whole subject would have to explore in detail both the structural changes and also the mediation between these changes — namely, social conflict — and the evolution of new types of historiography.

This is not a lockstep, linear progression. The notion of uneven and combined development applies to historiography just as it does to the world that historians study (the development of industrial capitalism). Thus each type of history (at its best) reworks and sublates, hence radicalizes, previous types. If each stage of capitalist history is marked by particular forms of conflict — political conflict, conflicts between capitals and between capital and labor, social and cultural conflict, and conflicts over nature — the appearance of these conflicts is uneven over space and time. Each country obviously has its own history, as a capitalist social formation. For example, the sense that the bourgeoisie's hold on power and reason was weak or treacherous, as a result of opposition movements of all kinds, varied from country to country. The dialectics of development and underdevelopment also produced different national histories. Imperialism and empire have been more or less parts of the narrative of the major industrial countries. Some socialist traditions emerge in a counter-historical or counter-narrative fashion. In the U.S., history "jumps" from political history to the "environmentalist" history of Frederick Jackson Turner, followed by Charles Beard, then William Appleman Williams, who "relaunched the Western history in which the bulk of environmental history has taken place, and set up the contest-and-conquest colonizing scholarship which is in its way at the heart of the environmental history enterprise" in this

country.² The "stage theory" historiography sketched above thus abstracts from the uneven and combined forms of the politics, economy, and society of particular countries, as well as the different relations that particular countries have with one another in particular historical periods.

Social struggles also combine in various ways over space and time. Newer struggles tend to progressively sublate older ones. There was no talk about "environment" during the bourgeois political revolutions but there is plenty of talk about politics in contemporary environmental struggles. Labor struggles in the 19th century rarely included environmental concerns; today they increasingly manifest environmental dimensions. Early cultural struggles over ethnicity or gender were more or less silent on the environment. Today there are struggles against environmental racism (for environmental justice) and also ecofeminist struggles which try to sublate the issues of poverty and inequality, class, race, and gender. We thus have a dialog between the concerns and experiences of past and present: past milieus get sedimented in the kind of history that gets written which present history builds on. And the present, because of its concerns and because of hindsight, can see things that the past was blind to, and thus reworks its own history writing. The dialog includes the future as well, since present history writing to some small or large degree changes the wider world. Environmental history, for example, will help shape the kind of nature future historians will inhabit.

Seen in this light, environmental history may be regarded as the culmination of all previously existing histories — assuming we include environmental dimensions of contemporary political, economic, and cultural history, as well as environmental history strictly defined. Far from the marginal subject so many historians still regard it to be, environmental history is (or should be) at the very center of historiography today. As J. Donald Hughes, student of the ecologies of ancient civilizations, puts it: "A historian who has decided to place history within its context, and to 'make sense,' will have to become an environmental historian."³

²*Ibid.*

³ J. Donald Hughes, "Ecology and Development as Narrative Themes of World History," *Environmental History Review*, Spring, 1995, p. 9. In Hughes' definition of environmental history, ecology is not seen as one leg of world history, but rather "its major theme" ("The new narrative of world history must have ecological processes as its major theme" [*ibid.*]).

2. What is Environmental History?

The claim that environmental history is the culmination of all previous history may not be as extravagant as it seems. Many environmental historians define their field in the most inclusive terms imaginable. Environmental history's "principle goal," Donald Worster writes, "became one of deepening our understanding of how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time, and, conversely, how they have affected the environment and with what results."⁴

According to Worster, environmental historians face three sets of questions: One is "understanding nature itself, as organized and functioning in past times," including the human organism. The second level "brings in the socioeconomic realm as it interacts with the environment. Here we are concerned with tools and work, with the social relations that grow out of that work, with the various modes people have devised of producing goods from natural resources." The third level is "the purely mental or intellectual, in which perceptions, ethics, laws, myths, and other structures of meaning become part of an individual's or group's dialogue with nature."⁵ These "levels" are analytical categories: "...although for the purposes of clarification, we try to distinguish between these three levels of environmental study, in fact they constitute a single dynamic inquiry in which nature, social and economic organization, thought and desire are treated as one whole....this whole changes as nature changes, as people change, forming a dialectic that runs through all of the past down to the present."⁶ Another way to put this point: how do human beings affect

themselves by modifying, destroying, etc., their environment, and how does the environment affect itself by constraining and enabling in various ways human activity? The question arises, in the triad — nature, labor (tools, work, etc.), culture — what term, if any, should be privileged?

Put somewhat differently, environmental history is the study of how human agency shapes and modifies "nature" and constructs built environments and spatial configurations, and how natural and cultural environments both enable and constrain human material activity, and, conversely, how human activity both enables and constrains cultural development and "nature's economy." Seen in this light, the method of environmental historians tilts toward the only totalizing social science — Marxism. The method of both is an active materialism; environmental historians put a mirror to the world and show the world how it has produced and shaped its own nature, including its own body. The world accomplishes this by *labor* (technology and the divisions of social labor; power and the social divisions of labor), defined as socially organized, symbolically mediated material production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. In the drift of environmental history toward Marxism, "human impact" or "human agency" becomes "human material impact" or "material activity" and labor is seen as the mediation between culture and nature. The history of nature is, thus, in part, the history of — labor.

So fruitful are these ways of looking at the world — and at history writing — that it is no surprise that environmental history is one of the

Another passage: "What is asked for is a world history that adopts ecological process as its organizing principle" (*ibid.*, p. 10).

⁴Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), "Appendix: Doing Environmental History," pp. 290-291. This is a *historian's* definition. Two social scientists have defined "political ecology" thusly: "Political ecology...is a historical outgrowth of the central questions asked by the social sciences about the relations between human society, viewed in its bio-cultural-political complexity, and a significantly humanized nature. It develops the common ground where various disciplines intersect" (James Greenberg and Thomas Park, "Political Ecology," *The Journal of Political Ecology*, 1, 1994, p. 1).

⁵Worster, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁶*Ibid.* Worster makes a valuable sketch of the different approaches that have been taken by anthropologists and others to this "whole," although I am dubious about his call to "merge the two theories" of Marvin Harris and Karl

Marx. Harris' concept of a "techno-environmental system" can not be abstracted (in my view) as a kind of independent variable, from the organization of work and social organization, e.g., forms of property or cultural organization. I think it's possible to "ecologize" Marx but not to "Marxize" Harris. A final comment: in his account of culture (*ibid.*, p. 302 *passim*), Worster's usually keen formulations of issues gives way to a discursive meandering. I believe that this is so because he doesn't see that culture provides modes of cooperation, normative rules, etc., which are imported into production or labor, in this way becoming productive forces in their own right (*ibid.*). Worster's account does not quite make the transition from an "interactional" to a dialectical mode; a dualism runs through much of his pathbreaking work. See, for example, his "reflection" theory of ideas (p. 303) and his account of Rappaport (pp. 304-305). Nature and culture are separated: the latter permits people to live within the constraints of the former; labor itself drops out of this account, i.e., material activity seems to merely function as a way for humans to "live in equilibrium."

fastest growing fields of history today. More and better studies of the dialectics of human material agency, culture, and nature appear ever more frequently. More conferences on the environment and more courses on environmental history are held and given every year. Local environmental history is challenging the antiquarianism long characteristic of local history. The interaction between human economy and "nature's economy" — and their mutual interdependencies, asymmetries and contradictions — are studied by ecological economists and theorized by ecological Marxists and critical social scientists. Political theorists have taken up the concept of "nature" in the thought of Hobbes, Rousseau, Jefferson, Paine, and other political philosophers. There are studies of Thoreau, Muir, Pinchot, and other preservationists and conservationists. In the past decade, the subject of "women and nature" has received innumerable and diverse treatments by historians, ecofeminists, anthropologists, and environmental militants in the South and North. There are new "world environmental histories" and new general and detailed studies of the environment in the U.S., Australia, India, Mexico, Brazil, Africa, and many other countries and regions. There are new historical studies of the human body, birth, sickness, pain, and death, of the meanings of "cleanliness" and "diet," and of village and town defined as environments. The once esoteric field of "human ecology" is now in the mainstream and environmental impact reports, a practical type of environmental history, proliferate. The borderlines between physical and cultural anthropology have long been breached. Social scientists are taking up "nature" defined as tap and sink more seriously and in more systematic ways. The humanities are addressing the problem of how and why various representations and meanings of "nature" are established, conflict, and change. Environmental preservation and the protection and restoration of historic cultural landscapes are flourishing. Economic geography has made an 180-degree turn from the kind of environmental determinism that used to dominate the subject, increasingly adopting the method that Marx called "active materialism." Cultural studies have deconstructed the ways that "nature" has been understood by science, and ecology is one of the most dynamic fields within the natural sciences. Nature writing is increasingly more popular, and general interest in the greenhouse effect, the ozone layer, and the impact of environment on human health and mental well-being grows each year.

The range of methods and subjects of environmental history is enormous, more so than those of political, economic, and social and cultural history. Environmental historians study the history of energy use and depletion; atmospheric, climatic, and even human-assisted

geological changes; populations of particular species life and their inorganic "bodies"; bioregions, watersheds, ecosystems, and ecological patches, boundaries, edges, corridors, and mosaics. They investigate the environment defined as resource, as amenity, as socially constructed space, as mental map. There are histories of cities written in light of their relationship with their hinterlands and vice versa; histories of forests, lakes, rivers, coastlines (preserved or otherwise), and of built landscapes of all kinds. Urban parks, architectural styles, suburban tracts and malls, street patterns, strips, old army bases, industrial parks — all have been scrutinized by environmental historians.⁷

The sounds of children playing in a park, the biological effects of using ecological niches as park space, the calming rumble of traffic up the street, the noise of large-scale passenger aircraft taking off nearby, the park's meaning in terms of the sense of neighborhood — all belong under the rubric "environmental history." Books have been written about spaces as small and insignificant as the household garden and as awesome as an original growth redwood forest. In principle, it appears, everything is environmental history; the remotest places have been affected by (and affect) in some small or large way human material activity.

Environmental history is, in short, the history of the planet and its people and other species life and inorganic matter insofar as these have been modified by, and have enabled and constrained, the material and

⁷Worster excludes "the built or artifactual environment" from environmental history. While this exclusion "may seem especially arbitrary, and to an extent it is...the distinction [between "nature and artifact"] is worth keeping, for it reminds us that there are different forces at work in the world and not all of them emanate from humans; some remain spontaneous and self-generating. The built environment is wholly expressive of culture....But with such phenomena as the forest and water cycle, we encounter autonomous energies that do not derive from us. Those forces impinge on human life, stimulating some reaction, some defense, some ambition" (*ibid.*, pp. 292-293).

Geographers might question this distinction. Urban space, for example, has unintentional consequences for the lives of human beings, i.e., not only is it a human construct, it also helps construct what is human. In a fully active materialist approach, there are certainly "autonomous energies that do not derive from us"; but most of these energies have been modified in small and large ways by human action. The ocean, the atmosphere, the soil have not only "made themselves" over time but also have been made by human activity, again in some (very) small or large part, depending on circumstances.

mental productions of human beings. The subject is nothing more nor less than the study of the relationships between the human species and its "surroundings" (a dictionary definition of environment). Since these relations are indecipherable without an investigation of the social relations between human beings ("society," "economy"), on the one hand, and nature's own (modified, stunted, enhanced) biological, chemical, and physical relations, on the other, the scope of environmental history is for all practical purposes limitless. The present environment has been changed in many ways by countless generations of human beings. And since political, economic, and cultural structures and processes "decide" how environments are utilized, and with what effects, ideally, environmental history incorporates (and sublates) political, economic, social, and cultural history. The history of nature presupposes not only biology, soil science, and so on but also political and legal history (e.g., the history of property relations and property boundaries, which are important in determining what kind of nature flourishes and what kind doesn't); economic history (e.g., the history of capital's use of nature as tap and sink); and social and cultural history (e.g., the history of aesthetics, social tastes in particular periods, flora that are regarded as ornamental, what is viewed as "beautiful" and "ugly," and so on). One might add "moral history" here. A century or less ago, sellers of seeds and bulbs for gardens told their customers that a beautiful, well-kept garden was a sign of household morality, cleanliness, respectable living. In principle, environmental history is a totalizing history, the only true "general" or universal history.⁸

⁸...our project of exploring the human past as part of a web of systematic relationships with the natural world offers exciting opportunities for seeing things whole at a time when the historical profession seems desperately in need of such a synthesis" (William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review*, Fall, 1993, p. 4). However, Cronin points out that while there are many studies of the idea of nature and also of the economy-nature nexus, there are few if any studies bridging ideas and culture, economy, and nature taken as a whole ("Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *Journal of American History*, 76, 4, March, 1990, p. 1124). He is thus skeptical about environmental history as a totalizing method and field, stressing the "particularism of its storytelling." One way to bring in the missing culture-economy nexus is by investigating cultural norms and practices which are imported into the workplace and economic system generally, and valorized as capital. These have been variously called "social capital," "community capital," and "cultural capital." Greenberg and Park write that there are "two major theoretical thrusts that have most influenced the formation of political

Environmental history, however, is also space-bound. It operates at the level of site specificity defined in various ways, e.g., as a watershed, as successional activity or the dialectics of change between native and exotic species, as changes in agricultural soil, and so on. Environmental historians study particular places during particular periods — the effects of dam construction on the American West in the 1930s, the sources of pollution of North Sea beaches during the 1960s, the antinomies of monoculture on the coastal plains of Central America in the 1970s.

While environmental history is the study of the interrelations among human culture, material life, and nature's economy, it is limited by the peculiarities of the particular place or places studied. Yet since the history of one place, in the last analysis, is inseparable from the history of other places, in principle every environmental history can be linked to every other history. The cultural "geography of nowhere" (tract homes, malls) is connected with agricultural history (chemical monoculture to expand the production of basic foodstuffs for the residents of "nowhere"); configurations of transport routes (freeways to carry nowhere residents to and from work); conservation biology (the effects of nowhere homes and freeways on wildlife habitats and populations); aesthetics (the shape of suburban development, freeway clover leaves, "Main Streets"); resource depletion (forests to manufacture the lumber for nowhere split levels and ranch houses); air and water pollution (from cars, from sewage).

The peculiarity of environmental history is that it is general and universal history and at the same time specific and concrete local history. Environmental history therefore faces two dangers. The first is the risk of vapid overgeneralization (the "death of nature," the "end of the world," "spaceship earth"). The second is the danger of triviality, of being a mere digest of this or that type of environmental change in this or that place. The risk, then, is that environmental history will become the history of everything hence the history of nothing. Yet both overgeneralization and misguided attention to superfluous detail are risks that many, if not most, environmental historians, cultural anthropologists, geographers, ecological economists, and others regard as worth taking. Otherwise, how could we develop totalizing concepts, on the one hand, and knowledge of the borders, corners, and back alleys

ecology. These are political economy, with its insistence on the need to link the distribution of power with productive activity and ecological analysis, with its broader version of bio-environmental relationships" (*op. cit.*).

of our surroundings, on the other? How would we have any way of thinking about the agglomeration of ecotopolises called "global nature?" The problem of the relation between the particular and the whole, the specific and the concrete, and the concrete and the whole is thus especially important for environmental historians.⁹ Put differently, what Worster has noted as the grand ambitions and totalizing possibilities of environmental history are not matched by a corresponding totalizing method, defined not as the "whole truth and nothing but the truth" but in terms of the interconnectedness between specific historical projects and processes, on the basis of the concrete, or what things have in common; hence how things are related to one another, and how one thing is related to all other things. Environmental history remains a loosely defined field, borrowing, often uncritically, from a variety of natural and social sciences, and also Marxist-type theories of human material activity which are essential to truly illuminate the "history of nature." The argument here is that all historical relationships are *simultaneously and irreducibly* social; social-material; material-social; and material (natural). Historians have to operate at all levels of abstraction (and their many mediations) to delineate exactly how and why economic and other forces have depended upon the environment; how nature is both enabling and constraining of human material activity; and how changes in the environment modify (and are modified by) political, economic, and cultural/social changes.

3. A History of Histories

To appreciate its full import, we need to situate environmental history in the lineage of capitalist historiography of the past two or three centuries. Sticking to the history of the "West," three major types of history writing preceded environmental history: political, economic, and social/cultural history, in that order.

The first histories of capitalism were political histories, the first modern historians, political historians who studied the rise and consolidation of the nation-state and the related political struggles and constitutional, legal, and other political reforms and revolutions in the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Germany, and other European countries (and their anti-colonial "inverted" mirror images in the white

settler capitalist countries). "In the old days," Donald Worster writes, "everyone knew that the only important subject was politics and the only important terrain was the nation-state. One was supposed to investigate the connivings of presidents and prime ministers, the passing of laws, the struggles between courts and legislature, and the negotiations of diplomats. That old, self-assured history was actually not so old after all — a mere century or two at most."¹⁰

Many early political historians were also philosophers or political and legal theorists: they did not separate theory and the historical object of study. Thus they not only described but also tried to explain and justify (and often celebrated) the nation-state (which according to Worster reached "a peak of acceptance in the 19th and early 20th centuries"), and the political and legal struggles, institutions, and climates which helped to create the nation-state — in which specifically capitalist production relations and productive forces were inserted and flourished.

These new relations of power, defined in the broadest political and legal senses, provided the political framework for the Industrial Revolution and the growth of capitalist economy in the 19th century. The historian-philosophers who documented the new power relations made the emerging economic ruling classes aware of the new and seemingly permanent changes wrought by the reforms and revolutions during the age of absolutism, the beginnings of constitutional monarchy, and, finally, the development of liberal democracy.

The second histories of capitalism were economic histories, studies in the revolution in material production and technology, distribution, and exchange — broadly speaking, of the expansion of the productive forces and of capitalist relations of production. The subject of the first economic histories was "political economy," which originally consisted of attempts to develop an economic conception of the state in the age of mercantilism. Later, the classical political economists, reflecting the struggles between the young bourgeoisie and the forces of

⁹The "particular" is the individual (person, species, etc.), where "individual" is that which is irreducible to a smaller unit of analysis. The "concrete" is what individuals have in common with other individuals, (birth, life, death; class, gender, community, etc.). The "specific" is that which distinguishes one individual from another or others. The "whole" or "totality" is constituted by the "particular" and constitutes the "concrete."

¹⁰Worster, *op. cit.*, p. 289. Within the social sciences, political science, economics, sociology, and cultural and environmental studies also had their own logic of development which roughly paralleled the development of the four types of history. For example, social science began as "moral science" (the 18th century term for human science) but in the late 19th century economics was separated from other social sciences, indicating that a capitalist economy had been established in fact. "Sociology of culture" developed in the mid and late 20th century; environmental studies in the late 20th century.

mercantalism, wove together economic history and economic theory, hence were in their own way economic historians as well as theorists. Both Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Karl Marx's *Capital* are theoretical histories of capitalism. As the 19th century wore on, the main subjects taken up by economic historians included the development of the divisions of industrial and social labor; national and world trade; technological change; and the new categories of industrial capitalism — wages, costs, prices, and profits. There were early histories of labor struggles, too, but these were mainly confined to labor markets and the workplace (the history of labor struggles in the sphere of reproduction, i.e., in the family, community, ethnic groups, and so on, became the object of investigation of social historians, later on). Economic history was closely related to political history. Nation-states had to evolve and property/legal relations had to be reformed or overthrown (all in the context of the new enclosures of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, of craft production, of the development of manufactures, and so on) before fuller or more robust capitalist material forces could develop and international trade in means and objects of production could evolve. Particularly with the appearance of Marx's *Capital*, the new industrial and financial classes became more conscious of the trend toward permanent revolution in the productive forces, of the growth of competition, of the central importance of international trade, and of the permanent tendency toward the concentration and centralization of capital, all of which both caused and were caused by this revolution. Finally, capitalist economy was "naturalized" or made into "second nature" in the sense of appearing as a power external to human or social self-control (ironically, one of the justifications for both the free market economy of liberal theory and the original socialist project).

Next to appear were social and cultural history, studies in the revolution in social and cultural structures and processes — broadly speaking, the rise of consumerism (that is, the generalization of need satisfaction in the commodity form) and mass society (the universalization of the wage form of labor and the appearance of the "mass worker").¹¹ The commodification of social and cultural life (the family, community, ethnicity, and so on) or the development of a specifically capitalist mode of social reproduction completed the process begun with the commodification of manufactured goods.

¹¹James O'Connor, *Accumulation Crisis* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

While political and economic history were largely celebratory of capitalism, social and cultural history (and, later, environmental history) were critical. This was because social and cultural struggles (of women, of oppressed minorities, etc.) were "from the bottom up" (while political and economic struggles were organized by propertied interests "from the top down," against the structures of the old regime, mercantilism, state-sanctioned monopoly, and absolutist economic regulation). "Some time back...history as 'past politics' began to lose ground," Donald Worster writes: "Historians lost some of their confidence that the past had been so thoroughly controlled or summed up by a few great men acting in positions of national power. Scholars began uncovering long submerged layers, the lives and thoughts of ordinary people, and tried to reconceive history 'from the bottom up.'"¹² In this passage, Worster skips over the stage of economic history; he also implies that the move from political to social history was a kind of "course correction" made by more enlightened later historians, and reflecting the growth of specifically social struggles (feminism, anti-racism, etc.). This line of thought is right as far as it goes. However, underneath the social and cultural conflicts of the last half of the 20th century were the new structures of a specifically capitalist society. "History from the bottom up" does reflect the growth of social and cultural struggles, including the deepening of formal democratic forms in daily life and work. But these histories, like the social struggles themselves, of which the former are a part, had deeper roots. The revolution in political/legal relations, and the resulting explosion of the productive forms, market competition, international trade, and the new capitalist relations of production both caused and were caused by the commodification of labor and land. Polanyi called these "pseudo-commodities," Marx "conditions of production" — meaning that while labor and land are treated as if they are commodities, they are not produced as such according to the law of value. Polanyi showed that the generalized commodification of labor and land created a specifically capitalist society. Social values and norms tended to become embedded in, and subject to, market forces. This line of analysis was developed further by the Frankfurt and critical theory schools. Marx, Polanyi, and critical theory thus laid the groundwork for the analysis of capitalist society and culture, but did not fully develop the implications for social and cultural life of the commodification of

¹²*Ibid.* In a later passage, however, Worster speaks of "social, economic, and cultural history" (*Ibid.*, p. 290), which reverses the order of economic and social change and transformation in the development of capitalism itself.

land and labor, that is, a mode of social reproduction based on the wage form of work and the commodity form of need satisfaction.

Marx and Engels had demonstrated how and why social conflict in capitalism took the form of the struggle between capital and labor (not only in the marketplace but also in production itself), between fractions of capital, between all capitals against all other capitals in the process called "competitive accumulation." Less than a hundred years later, Marxist and other social and cultural historians (for example, feminist historians, gay and lesbian historians, local historians) broadened Marx and Engels' original conception to include social conflict within and between spheres of social reproduction, community, and cultural life (including the history of "traditional" ways of life in the process of being lost to the wage and commodity forms). Historians and historian-social scientists worked out the logic of the commodification of needs, the consequences of commodification for social and cultural relations and institutions. Focus was, finally, placed on consumerism — the universalization of the auto, the development of suburbs, the extreme separation of places of residence, work, and recreation, and so on. The department store, the shopping mall, mass media and TV, and other major features of late capitalist social and cultural life were subject to close scrutiny by historians, as were themes drawing from ethnic and other cultures of transition, when "all that was solid melted into air." Finally, a basic (albeit unstated) premise of cultural studies today is that the development of, and upheavals in, the growth of wage labor and consumerism are but one aspect of the more general processes of migration and urbanization. Proletarianization was increasingly seen as the same process as out-migration from the countryside and poor regions and countries and in-migration to more developed capitalist centers, particularly cities. Along with the defeat of really existing socialism and social democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, this proletarianization-migration (which has resulted in a steady increase in the mix of "races" and ethnic and national groups) has multiplied problems of social control and cultural and political identity, today helping to define "identity politics," often combined with the "politics of place."

Situated within this "history of histories," the appearance of "the idea of environmental history...in 1970" (Worster) is not difficult to understand. The proximate cause is the environmental movement, of which environmental history is a part, and the global, multi-faceted environmental crisis which engenders struggles over nature. Underlying the proximate cause is a structural one: capitalist political and legal systems, capital accumulation, and the commodification of social life

and culture have produced (or combined in ways that no one has systematically studied) a new nature, a specifically capitalist "second nature." This includes the "division of nature" between means and objects of production and consumption. Like the market in land before it, nature has been capitalized and subjected to the discipline of the financial market. Lakes, oceanfronts, forests, biological systems, and so on are "assets"; in the absence of "real prices," a growing corps of economists, ecologists, and engineers calculates "imputed prices" to clean air, fresh water, even entire eco-systems, which become part of a region's or country's "investment portfolio." Further, nature is remade in the image of capital, e.g., via bioengineering, factory forests, and the like. This remaking of nature and its representations would appear to be unimaginable before social and cultural life were commodified (also an ongoing process, one which began in earnest after World War II).

Donald Worster explains the shift from political to social to environmental history in terms of the historians' discovery of "fundamental forces at work over time."¹³ In his schema, first powerful men are seen as controlling history; then "hidden layers of class, gender, race, and caste" are revealed; finally, it is the "earth itself (which is) an agent and presence in history." This account seems to ignore the fact that there is a new *object* of historical study — a specifically capitalist nature and environmental crisis. Worster's schema appears to assume that capitalism as such is unchanging while history writing follows some law of progress, whereby historians over time discover ever deeper forces causing historical change. These forces — politics and political leadership, class and social struggles, and "nature's economy" — remain unproblematic in terms of the changes in capitalism itself.

Worster makes the trenchant point that historians were typically confined within national perspectives, creating obstacles to environmental history, which spills across regional, national, and continental borders.¹⁴ This suggests that the globalization of capital is

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.* Stephen Dovers explains the emergence of environmental history in terms of the "rising concern over the ecological sustainability of modern human societies" ("Sustainability and 'Pragmatic' Environmental History: A Note from Australia," *Environmental History Review*, Fall, 1994, p. 22). This explanation, which misses the development of a specifically capitalist nature, leads Dovers to a "pragmatic" view of environmental history. "This is a history which...makes a positive and practical contribution to environmental management and the quest for ecological sustainability" (*Ibid.*, p. 21). Such an approach guts the profoundly critical content of the

a prime determinant of both environmental change and movements and the new concerns of environmental historians. Yet, while Worster writes elsewhere of the environmental effects of capitalist agriculture (monoculture; dependence on fossil fuels and chemicals), in this passage he seems to ignore the development of capitalist nature. Thus, he explains the appearance of environmental history in terms of the environmental movements of the 1960s, and their attachment to "cultural assessment and reform" and "moral purpose."¹⁵ Missing is any self-reflexivity, or account of environmental history as *part* of the environmental movement (hence the circular reasoning of anyone trying to explain the former in terms of the latter). Missing, too, is any dialectical account of the development of capitalist nature and the rise of environmental and social movements, placed in the context of the problems of the new global economy of the 1960s through the 1990s. Why certain lands, mineral resources, watercourses, and so on are devoted to petro-chemicals, paper and pulp products, high tech equipment and other manufactures which produce commodities used to produce other commodities; why other lands and resources are used to produce consumer goods; why environmental regulations are more difficult to enforce in capital goods industries; why environmental movements target the industries or patterns of consumption and waste that they do; why financial capital has had severe effects on nature; why the size of the average farm is growing — answers to these and a host of related questions presuppose a theory of capitalist accumulation of a Marxist type.

Environmental historians are discovering not only what capitalist second nature is, but also how and why it came about, when they adopt political economic, political sociological, and sociological economic methods. They are making the economic and political classes (and literate classes generally) conscious of the whys and wherefores of the material impacts of their own economic, political, and social revolutions on the environment, hence creating one essential basis for green resistance movements, movements for environmental justice, and other social movements concerned with "nature as the body of human beings."¹⁶

best environmental history, turning the field into a handmaiden of capitalist rationalization.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁶I ignore here the important subject of ecological science, on which ecological history depends, and which, in turn, is informed and modified by ecological history. My belief is that ecological science is the culmination of past science, as environmental history is the culmination of past

In sum, the conventional account of the appearance of new types of history writing is that these appear when new social struggles force hitherto repressed or invisible issues to the surface of social or public consciousness. History from the bottom up is thus seen as a reflection of the growing democratization of liberal democratic society. And it is true that there is a close correlation between bourgeois revolutions and political history; economic conflicts and economic history; social and cultural struggles and social and cultural history; and environmental struggles and environmental history.¹⁷ The problem with this account of successively newer histories, including the general trend of history writing from the bottom up, is that they (and a bottom up perspective itself) are *part* of these respective social conflicts. Thus the standard account, while having the strong virtue of linking new historiographies to historical struggles, hence of debunking simple myths of progress, social consensus, and so on, in fact explains little. The deep explanation of both social struggles and their constituent part called

history-writing—in the sense that ecology is the science that must combine methodological individualism or atomism with holism or organicism across all scientific levels of analysis and also must encompass more levels of analysis than other sciences, which are bounded by a particular, specified analytic level. Other sciences may also be dialectical but they are so within more constrained parameters than ecological science, which may be the only truly dialectical science.

About the account above, Alan Rudy writes: "what gets lost is the history of 'natural history,' how 'science' was the study of 'nature's economy' and 'natural history.' This goes back to Gilbert White and Linnaeus in the 18th century and becomes part and parcel of colonialism as 'naturalists' (Humboldt, Darwin, etc.) explored natural history, species diversity, evolution, and geologic relations important to the imperial mission and visions of Europe. As Worster's *Nature's Economy*, Kloppenberg's *First the Seed*, Hecht and Cockburn's *The Fate of the Forest*, and Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* make clear, colonialism and exploration were as much about eco-agricultural appropriation as they were about the mercantile and industrial exploitation and industrialization of the globe. The processes of political, economic, and social history are written, or inscribed, in the language of natural history — including the natural history of class, gender, racial and social superiority/inferiority" (personal communication).

¹⁷Jay Moore writes: "Populism and Progressivism 'produce' economic history a la Charles Beard: Depression era union struggles and socialism 'produce' labor history; the Civil Rights Movement and the Sixties 'produce'...political and professional interests in the new social movements manifested first as social, then cultural, and now environmental histories" (personal correspondence).

historiography lies in the developmental logic of capitalism, i.e., in the changes in the structure of society, as politics, economics, social and cultural life, and environment are successively revolutionized, i.e., become more specifically capitalistic.

4. Uneven and Combined Development

The growth of capitalism is a process of the uneven and combined development of political, economic, social, and environmental structures and processes. The Haitian Revolution was in part politically constructed as the logical climax of the French Revolution, as represented in C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins*. The U.S. Constitution was copied in the 19th century by many Latin American countries. The first industrial revolution in Britain did not spread evenly around the globe; it was held in check by colonialism and neo-colonialism ("underdevelopment") in the South. The hottest center of software programming today may be in India, not Silicon Valley, and primitive forms of wage labor may be found in the capitalistic metropolis of Los Angeles. So, too, did capitalist society and culture develop unevenly. Capitalist class structures are coming late in much of the South. American pop culture is a universal commodity, perhaps the only one. Old spiritual beliefs and practices that modernism was expected to obliterate reappear in new forms in Tokyo, Miami, Cairo, and other cities and regions.

By the same token, the development of history writing is not linear, but complex and dialectical. Historians did not abandon political history with the emergence of capitalist industrial economy. Political history made new turns with the development of capital and wage labor, the pluralistic politics of liberal democracy, imperialist rivalries between industrial powers, state regulation, welfare systems, public bureaucracies, administrative law, and so on. Nor did economic history disappear with the appearance of capitalist society and culture. Its scope was widened to include the second and third industrial revolutions (the age of electricity, the age of electronics), mass retailing and mass consumption, the Keynesian revolution in economic policy, and so forth. And social and cultural historians broadened their method and vision with the creation of a specifically capitalist nature, to account for (among other things) new meanings and interpretations of wilderness, conservatism and preservationism, cultural and urban landscapes, and the like.

There is (and always will be) continuity in change in both "real history" ("real events") and history writing. Uneven and combined development means that each type of history writing must be reworked

in light of the scope and method of new types appearing at a later time — political history in light of economic, social, and environmental history; economic history in light of social and environmental history (and revised political history);¹⁸ social and cultural history in light of environmental history (and revised political and economic history). Robert Wiebe's *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (1995), which interprets democracy in the U.S. as (among other things) the way that white men forged solidarity, depends on the insights of cultural history. So does the work of the economic historian, Eric Hobsbawm, who brings to economic history a depth of understanding of capitalist society and culture missing in earlier economic histories. (Conversely, most historians have given more weight to the "economic factor" in history, since the appearance of Marx's *Capital*.) The importance of English consumerism during the Industrial Revolution has only recently come to light, because of the development of social and cultural historical methods. Economic history, once narrowly defined (e.g., T.S. Ashton's *The Industrial Revolution*), is enriched today not only by cultural history but also by environmental history. Only recently is there a history of the economically efficient but ecological destructive Watt steam engine. So, too, have contemporary environmental historians begun to rewrite the history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. They have underscored the hitherto neglected role of ecological degradation; revised the standard account of industrialization and rapid economic growth in the West (stressing industrial capital's reckless disregard for negative externalities or social costs); and pointed up the antinomies of the development of capitalist society and culture (with the introduction of Polanyi-like themes into standard Marxist historiographies).

History writing thus tends to change direction with the dialectical unfolding of new "stages" of capitalist development. But it is also a cumulative process, which at best incorporates and sublates older histories. Political history today incorporates not only the story of bourgeois political reform and revolution two or three centuries ago but also the political changes brought about by the growing hegemony of

¹⁸Geoffrey Elton once said, "When I meet a historian who cannot think that there have been great men, great men moreover in politics, I feel myself in the presence of a bad historian." That historians often neglect "great men" today indicates how far history writing has come, and how dependent it is on social science. Not yet have historians found a way to incorporate "great men" into their economic, social, cultural, and environmental histories, e.g., how important, really, was John Muir in the evolution of environmentalism?

the capitalist market, the new symbolic politics associated with the rise of capitalist culture, and the politics of environmentalism. Economic, social/cultural, and environmental history tend to follow a similar path. Environmental history in effect "completes" political, economic, and social/cultural history, e.g., by broadening political history to include the politics of environmental struggles; by extending economic history to include struggles over resources and environmental amenities; and by radicalizing cultural history to take into account struggles over representations of land and space, mental maps, and the like. Each type of history feeds on both its own past development and also on that of its "rival" fields, with environmental history at the top of the food chain. Each type is also rewritten in accordance with the practical political, economic, and social problems (and dominant ideas and social forces) of the day. One example: The importance of legal changes in the 18th century, which established definite property rights in land and inventions for capitalist development was for a long time ignored or under-estimated. While few contemporaries could foresee the economic significance of these laws at the time they were promulgated, today their importance is being reexamined and upgraded in light of global capital's problem of establishing laws governing property, trade, and so on in the ex-socialist countries and the "emerging market economies" of the South.

There is, ideally, an accumulation of history writing, based on a process of accretion and sublation, parallel with the accumulation of capital and its unfolding as a global political-economic-sociological-biological order. Each field of history, again ideally, becomes richer and more complex, more cross-and-transdisciplinary.

As history writing becomes more demanding, historians tend to become more specialized in particular periods or topics. This parallels the growing specialization within capitalist politics, economy, culture, and the uses of nature. Anyone who has attended panels at an annual meeting of the American Historical Association (or regional and topical organizations of historians) knows that most history writing today stops there. The accumulation of specialized knowledge in the hands of experts in this or that period or subject is truly awesome. On the other hand, the best historian's craft within his or her specialty exhibits more multi-layered methodological approaches and deeper understanding of the "real events" which the historian maps and interprets. Two generations ago, C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins* and Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, pathbreaking as they were, did not and could not interpret certain cultural and ecological themes which are now common currency in cultural and ecological history. A useful revealing comparison is

Dale Tomich's masterpiece, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar*, constructed on a Russian doll model to deal with political, economic, and social/cultural themes (which also implicitly integrates geography and nature). The masterworks of the French Revolution written in the 19th century did not and could not take up certain cultural and environmental (and even economic) themes which a host of lesser studies have worked into their narratives in the past two or three decades. Environmental historians are getting around to decoding the ecological dimensions of the political and cultural thinking of Washington, Jefferson, and Tom Paine, among other figures, and their importance for the American Revolution.

In sum, there is continuity in change in that each type of history incorporates (and often sublates) previous history writing, but there is also change in continuity because "real events" are altered so dramatically with the unfolding of the structures of capitalist economy, society and culture, and nature. Capitalist economy widened the scope of political history; capitalist society extended the limits of economic (and political) history; capitalist nature is revolutionizing social (and political and economic) history.¹⁹

The uneven development of both history and history writing suggests that political, economic, cultural, and environmental themes may appear "before their time" (as it were). In the capitalist epoch, political and legal history preceded the period of bourgeois political revolutions and economic history was invented before the Industrial

¹⁹Most of Marx's own important writings focused on politics and economy. In the first half of the 20th century, specifically cultural subjects made their appearance within Marxism (Lukacs, critical theory). Today, environmental subjects are becoming the center of what's living in Marxist thought (the eco-Marxist school). In the 19th century, political history had yet to develop contending theories of the capitalist state that are now common currency in Marxist writings, mainly because of the low coefficient of development of capitalist classes and society a century or so ago. Economic history neglected the theme of consumption and consumerism for the same reason and environmental history could scarcely be said to exist at all. Today, as cultural and environmental themes are rapidly becoming more important within Marxism, economic themes ("the logic of capital") are regarded by many as mere sub-texts (a mistake in an age when world economy is simulating the model of economy expounded in *Capital*). The chapter titled "Cooperation" was neglected in the most important readings of *Capital* until recently: today, the study of cultural forms of cooperation and their import for the workplace, and ecological systems ("nature's cooperation") and their central role in production, are being taken up by more scholars in the Marxist and other critical traditions.

Revolution. Cultural histories appeared during the Renaissance and environmental themes figured in many historical works before the "age of the environment."

These histories are anomalies, however, in the sense that they typically were not part of, or integral to, the sequencing of the four types of history writing noted above. The main inspiration for the great political/legal tracts two or three centuries ago was the transition from late feudalism to early industrial capitalism, e.g., the problem of rule in the age of absolutism. Economic history during the past two centuries owes little to contemporary accounts of agricultural economy and mercantilism and much to the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath. Histories of high culture during the early modern period (c. 1500-1800) left almost no mark on modern social and cultural history, which represents the world "from the bottom up." Finally, environmental themes in the 18th century through the early decades of the 20th century had more to do with political and economic concerns than with nature per se. Stanley Jevon's *The Coal Question* (1865) examined the importance of coal for British industry and empire, not for the ecological effects of coal mining and use.

When historians introduced political, economic, social/cultural, and environmental themes "before their time," the latter functioned more as background or stage setting than as autonomous or semi-autonomous historical processes or agents. These themes tended to appear in passive, not active, forms. At one time, politics was seen as the stage on which Great Men acted out their destiny, less a process of conflict and compromise, revolution and reform. Early economic histories did not and could not represent the dynamism inherent in mature industrial capitalism, which did not take on its autonomous, nature-like quality until the 19th century, after the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The first histories of high culture downplayed the autonomy of culture, now one of the ten commandments of cultural studies, because the production of culture depended so much on Church and Crown. The first environmental histories presupposed nature as a determining background, not as dialectically interrelated with human production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) and Ellen Churchill Semple's *American History and its Geographic Traditions* (1903) focused more on the influence of climate and terrain on human habitation than vice versa. Edward Fox's *The Two Frances* is a political history, deeply informed by geography, but silent on environmental themes per se. Against environmental or geographical determinism, Marc Bloch (*French Rural History*) stressed the role of geography in

determining forms of production from the late middle ages to the French Revolution without losing sight of the importance of relations of production and power ("geography limits the kind of environment [people] create") and Braudel argued in favor of geographical "possibilism," an important step toward giving nature its full due as an active subject. "Nature as subject" has come to fruition in a number of recent works, for example, Elinor G.K. Melville's *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (1994) which incorporates biology and history, economics and politics, and traces of cultural history.²⁰

5. Conclusion

Postmodernism does have an important lesson to teach. History writing is story telling. The "content of the form" is, in part, the form of the tale itself. Given the requisite materials, historians can spin many kinds of story about any historical "real event." But just as there is a certain logic inherent in every story form, there is also a logic inherent in the story of capitalist development. Of course, it is an unfinished story, and is very different depending on whether it is told by a financier, a union agitator, an AIDS sufferer, or a new immigrant from Puerto Rico. In the U.S., particularly, the most multi-cultural country in the world, there may be as many different stories as there are people. Yet each American story, if halfway plausible, embodies the "deep logic" of capitalist accumulation and development, and, in countless instances, reflects this or that particular form of capital. One need only think of the works of William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Joyce Kolko, among many others. There is no totalizing history, except in the form of all relevant histories regarded as a totality. William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* tells the story of Chicago up to the Great Exposition; a totalizing story would include other works about New York, St. Louis, and the West, during the same period — Chicago's history is but one "moment" of the history of U.S. capitalism generally and American cities in particular. "Everything depends on everything else" should be as much of a truism in history as it is in ecology.

Environmental history can be plausibly understood in terms of the development of capitalism and its political, economic, social/cultural,

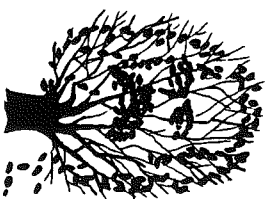
²⁰The "environmental determinism" of 19th and early 20th century geography largely neglected nature as an autonomous "actor." New environmental histories (e.g., of Australia) have reintroduced nature as an autonomous force without slipping back into the old environmental determinist view.

and environmental revolutions—and also of political, economic, social/cultural, and environmental history writing. In this sense, environmental history is the culmination of (or, more modestly, the missing link in) all past history writing in the capitalist epoch.²¹ It is also true that just as political, economic, and social/cultural historians ignore political science, economics, and sociology and cultural studies, respectively, at their own peril, so, too, do environmental historians neglect not only the ecological sciences but also the social sciences at *their* own peril. A reading of some of the leading environmental historians today—Donald Worster, Richard White, Carolyn Merchant, William Cronon, Stephen Pyne—indicates that environmental history is becoming more suffused with *both* political, economic, and social/cultural history *and* politics, economics, sociology and cultural studies, and ecological science. Environmental history is being placed on a more scientific footing, thereby becoming more radicalized.

Just as Marx sublated political and economic history, and political and economic theory, and as generations of Marxists have tried to sublate political economic and social/cultural history, so are environmental historians incorporating, and sublating the three major earlier types of history and the human sciences. It is not so much that environmental historians are standing on the shoulders of past political, economic, and social historians (they are). More radically, environmental history is turning out *to be* political, economic, and social history — widened, deepened, and made more inclusive. Environmental history, in this sense, is the logical culmination of all past historiography to date.

To close the circle: One can be sure that environmental history will be reinterpreted, even revolutionized, by future generations of historians, in light of new problems, techniques, sources, etc., but also of revolutions in political, economic, and social history themselves, to which environmental history is contributing today. Environmental history is constantly negating and reconstituting itself, as it sublates the other three types of history, which themselves change with advances in environmental history and ecological science. Insofar as this process of negation and sublation can be understood, it is very important that environmental historians try to understand it. If global capital finally triumphs, and if nature is regarded by future generations merely or only

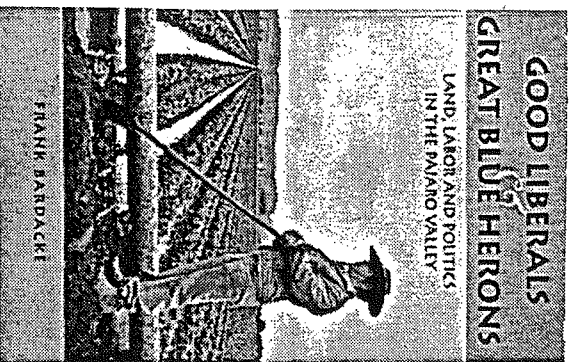
as “natural capital” (with humans as “human capital” and community as “community capital”), environmental history will turn out to be the history of capitalist nature, pure and simple. Resistance movements probably will be forgotten. The world will be a history of the growing dependence on, and reification of, technology, which will substitute for human social relations mediated by relations with nature — and vice versa. If greens, red greens, green reds, feminists, indigenous peoples, oppressed minorities, workers, and the “environmentalism of the poor” engaged in struggle with global capital today are actually victorious (a very long shot? a distinct possibility?), environmental history in the future will look very differently. The punch line, of course, is that the future will be the future of capital pure and simple, or not, partly in accordance with how environmental historians (indeed, all historians) understand and practice their art. The more that (human-modified) nature is seen as the history of labor, property, exploitation, and social struggle, the greater will be the chances of a sustainable, equitable, and socially just future.



²¹Robert Young (“Biography: The Basic Discipline for Human Sciences,” *Free Associations*, 11, 1988) makes a similar claim with respect to biography (and much of environmental history is biography of a place, region, or resource).

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