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Reaching and Grasping

Some Reflections on Joachim Radkau's *Nature and Power*

Radkau's ambitious volume illustrates both the opportunities and the risks offered by expansive chronological overviews. His environmental approach to global history confronts some of the challenges common to all such projects, such as the inevitable need for heavy selection. Environmental history adds both special benefits and special costs that are derived from its connection to current politics and from its distinctive subject matter.

> Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for? (Robert Browning, "Andrea del Sarto")

History has been going on for a long time, and many things have happened in many places. It is not possible to include them all in a single tome, however massive, or even a single set of tomes, however capacious. Laurence Sterne (1964 [1761–67]: 32) summarized the problem in *Tristram Shandy*: "Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule,—straight forward . . . he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey's end;—but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible." That novel is an ostensible autobiography, and as a concrete illustration of the problem, the narrator complains that, although he has been writing for six weeks, he has yet to arrive at his own birth (ibid.). Of course, Sterne (or Shandy) was working on a relatively small canvas. For those who aspire to document more than a single fictional life, the challenge is proportionately (or perhaps exponentially) larger. Much must always be left out.

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Nor is space the only obstacle to inclusiveness. Tristram Shandy attributes his slow progress toward what should have been the beginning of his account to inability to limit his subject and, consequently, to decide what evidence is most relevant to his narrative. He declares that like any "man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line" in his account (ibid.). In consequence, he forfeits the default structure provided by the genre of biography. His lapse lands him in the situation routinely faced by historians whose topics provide no such automatic structure—that is, whose topics lack an obvious beginning, middle, and end. Such chroniclers cannot simply identify their topics; they have to create them.

Such difficulties confront even social historians whose research is narrowly focused, and they become more acute as chronological and geographic scales expand. For practitioners of big history or global history or world history, there is more and more to leave out, and constructing a unifying or even a coherent narrative arc becomes increasingly problematic. One possible solution is to impose a thematic or subdisciplinary filter. For several reasons, environmental history often appears to be a particularly attractive option. The "environment" is difficult to define precisely, but whatever it is, it clearly exists everywhere and significantly predates the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. It seems inherently transnational and nonverbal. Thus in their masterful survey *The Human Web* John R. McNeill and William McNeill (2003) condensed 10,000 years of human history into a little over 300 pages by omitting individuals (except a few, such as major religious figures) and stressing processes, such as technological developments (including agriculture) and disease pandemics, that affected diverse and distant societies at similar periods.

This may be the shortest attempt at a global environmental history, but, of course, it is far from the only one. Nevertheless, few environmental histories are quite so expansive. Even sweeping overviews generally incorporate some additional restriction, whether it is regional, as is the case with Mark Elvin's (2004) *Retreat of the Elephants*, or chronological, as with John Richards's (2003) *Unending Frontier* (a strategy John R. McNeill [2000] also adopted in *Something New under the Sun*). In this context, Joachim Radkau's (2008: 35) goal, as implied in the subtitle of *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment*, appears particularly ambitious, especially as he makes correspondingly generous claims for his approach: "What shapes the environment throughout history is not individual ideas and actions, but the persistent and large scale: in other words, the day-to-day, habitual, and institu-

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tional behavior by large masses of people over long periods of time. That is one reason why environmental history recognizes in the longer span of time many things that escape a focused and singular examination."

He thus sets a high bar for himself and intensifies the challenges with his detailed awareness of the potential weaknesses of environmental history and the traps that lie in wait for its practitioners. As he explains in the prefaces, he is aware of them because others have fallen in. In the preface to the original German edition, dated 2000, Radkau (2008: xii) reiterates his previous ridicule of "stereotypical thinking and unexamined contradictions within environmental history"; he regrets the limited range of "the majority of empirical studies" and the parochialism of (admirably productive) American historians whose focus on wilderness leads them to neglect more important questions about sustainability. By 2007, the date of the preface to the English translation, his view of Anglophone environmental history had softened, and he expresses particular appreciation for "the model of a global approach" offered by at least some of its practitioners (ibid.: xvi), although his earlier perspective reemerges in the text proper. Both prefaces understand environmental history as derived from the environmental movement and to some extent undertaken in its service. Radkau (ibid.: xiii) makes it clear that his own political commitment is strong and based on sentiment ("the wisdom of the woods") as well as information and analysis. To pick a few instances from the many in his general introduction, he comments that "we are confronted in many parts of the world with the destructive consequences of rampant free market selfishness" and that "xenophobia, today for many the very embodiment of political pathology, may well have served a purpose under premodern conditions" (ibid.: 3). The long epilogue that concludes the volume is also explicitly tendentious: its title is "How to Argue with Environmental History in Politics." ("With" in this case means "using environmental history" rather than "against environmental history.")

Sandwiched between these bold statements is Radkau's extended and detailed attempt to live up to them. His chronological sweep is comprehensive, extending from the preagricultural societies to modern globalized ones, and his geographic range is similarly inclusive. But large though they are, these scales are far from unprecedented. The general contours of his account are similar to those of other world histories with no explicit focus on or even attention to the environment, hitting such predictable high points as the rise of ancient empires, industrialization, and colonialism and decoloniza-

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tion. His environmental orientation changes the selection of details, but it does not produce a noticeably new story. In addition, because it must inevitably depend largely on secondary sources no matter how deeply learned its author (despite his characteristic tone of assertive confidence, Radkau [ibid.: 32] confesses that "honesty compels one to admit that there is a good deal in environmental history that one does not know"), a work of this scope inevitably follows the paths of its predecessors. Thus, for example, central Europe figures more prominently in Radkau's history than it does in parallel accounts written by Anglophone environmental historians, and (or because) he draws much more extensively on the work of scholars who write in German. This geographic shift and the incorporation of German scholarship both very usefully supplement the monoglot Anglophone mainstream. But moving the center of geographic gravity from the United States 5,000 miles to the east results in an equally parochial alternative to American-centered environmental history, not a freshly global approach.

In addition, Radkau's substantial reliance on secondary sources works to undermine, although not to moderate, his bold authorial persona. That is, his summary of research in many areas of environmental history faithfully reflects his miscellaneous reading and differences of opinion among those who have studied these fields more closely. His chapters are arranged in rough chronological order, but each encompasses a grab bag of times and topics. For example, he discusses the hunting and domestication of animals, understandably enough, as part of the "primeval symbioses of humans and nature" (ibid.: 36), which he characterizes as the earliest relationship between people and the natural world. Both hunting and domestication have attracted considerable recent scholarly interest, but Radkau's opening authority is a book published almost half a century ago by a couple of anthropologists. From his consideration of human and prehuman history (going back 2 million years), he segues to Native Americans, conflating the lifeways of the Navajos of the Southwest with those of an unnamed eastern tribe in the eighteenth century, then to "forest-dwelling pygmies in the Philippines" (ibid.: 46), the theory of Pleistocene overkill, the dodo, the moa (exterminated by the Maori), and back to North America. His easy juxtapositions suggest that he feels that these various peoples are interchangeable in some way, even though they represent diverse cultures scattered through time and over the globe. His sources also often seem somewhat randomly chosen, and he occasionally offers generalizations with no apparent basis at all (except to the extent that

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they incorporate truisms): for example, "In nature, the higher mammals are most similar to humans, and the relationship of humans to animals is often much more emotional than their relationship to plants; it is only in ecology and tranquil nature romanticism that the preferences are reversed" (ibid.).

Radkau wisely resists committing himself on the question of whether "hunting peoples" employ sustainable techniques. With reference to the precepts of a Confucian philosopher and the practices of eighteenth-century French officials charged with regulating fishing in the Dordogne, he claims that "in principle, sustainable fishing is quite straightforward: one simply has to make the nets wide enough to let immature fish escape" (ibid.: 49). He surprisingly regrets that environmental history has not paid much attention to fishing or to hunting (or a little later to the horse), rapidly jumping from William the Conqueror to the Hudson's Bay Company to the big game hunters who helped found the modern wildlife protection movement in the early twentieth century. The notion of conservation leads him to consider the domestication of animals, which he finds "hard to imagine . . . as simply a purposeful, economically motivated action on the part of humans." Following the lead of the nineteenth-century geographer Eduard Hahn, he instead asserts that a religious explanation would be more plausible. He concludes, persuasively enough, that "the history of the relationship between humans and animals is certainly not benign and harmonious" (ibid.: 55).

Why examine a few small sections in such detail in an essay that is supposed to be a reflection and not a review? They serve as synecdoche for the work as a whole in terms of method, although not, of course, in terms of content. When researching the history of the scientific classification of animals, I read a great many zoological manuals written in the eighteenth century, when the field of taxonomy was at its most exciting cutting edge. Very frequently, the introduction to such works contained bold claims about the application of the newest systematic theories, but the body of the text told a different story. The overwhelming preponderance of their pages was devoted to kind-by-kind descriptive entries that closely resembled the contents of the derogated bestiaries of the previous age. This repeated pattern suggests that it is easier to formulate new theoretical positions than to put them into practice; colors nailed to the mast do not necessarily predict how the ship will be sailed.

Something similar is going on in *Nature and Power*. The ambitious claims of the introduction are not sustained (to use one of Radkau's favorite words)

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when he descends (or ascends) to cases and details, although such occasions are impressively numerous—a kind of battering-ram technique of argumentation.[1] It is not just that his sources have frequently been superseded by work that he has, very understandably given his ambitious range, not been able to consult. The information in the first edition of *Nature and Power* was in many cases already outdated, and little attempt was made to redress this in the English version, even though the field of environmental history had gone through a period of vigorous development in the intervening years. In addition, the disciplinary diversity of his authorities (one of the distinctive strengths of environmental history is its willingness to cast a wide net) means that their insights often lack historical sensibility, a lack for which Radkau is not necessarily inclined to compensate. And there are problems at the level of detail. Reliance on secondary sources inevitably leads to inaccuracies. For example, Charles Darwin's (1964 [1859]: 73–74) comments about the relation between cats, mice, and bees in *On the Origin of Species* refer to the ecology of English villages, not that of the British Empire; there is no mention of beef or spinsters (see Radkau 2008: 169).[2] Despite the robustly assured tone that predominates in *Nature and Power*, Radkau's (ibid.: 19) inclination merely to summarize previous scholarship often produces inconclusive on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand discussions (perhaps in accordance with his opening stricture against "the danger of one-sidedness and monomania").

What are the implications of this for the admirable grand project? Does it mean that some topics are too big to be attempted at all? The short answer is, of course, no. After all, geologists and physicists routinely bite off much larger chunks of time and space, and they often digest them much more quickly. (For example, Stephen Hawking's [1988] *Brief History of Time* is just over 200 pages long, significantly shorter than even *The Human Web.*) The combined difficulty and utility of producing synthetic historical overviews, whether of the whole earth and the entire human experience or of some chronological and/or geographic subset, makes such work all the more valuable to students and general readers as well as to specialists. But perhaps Radkau's agenda is a bit too comprehensive. He proposes not only to provide an illuminating new subdisciplinary focus for global history but also to correct the methodological errors implicit in the standard practice of that subdiscipline. Both goals are worthwhile, but they may be mutually inconsistent. The first requires a broad expansive view, while the second can be more effectively accomplished from closer up. The critique provided by the sec-

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ond undermines assertions based on the first. The desire to provide guidance for political engagement complicates matters still further. So the example of *Nature and Power* suggests that those brave and public-spirited historians who undertake such projects should be particularly aware of the limitations that may hedge them.

One of these limitations reflects the inevitable disjunction between the stasis of a completed project and the perpetual motion of time. It is puzzling that historians, who of all people should know better, sometimes write as if they are at the end of history and historiography. Even when it deals with periods long past, historical scholarship can quickly become dated. The risks become more acute as the topic approaches the present and the future, and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish history from the news. Arguments or assertions that might have been timely when the German edition of *Nature and Power* was published can seem irrelevant or worse now. For instance, Radkau (2008: 239) suggests that "in contrast to the earlier ecological nationalism [with specific reference to water supply], environmental awareness today tends to promote and understanding between Israelis and Arabs." Since historians seldom double as futurists, except in the general "past is prologue" sense, there is no way to avoid the scrutiny of hindsight. But it is possible to write with some anticipation of its harsh glare. (This issue provides another instance of the disjunction between some of Radkau's [ibid.: 35] general pronouncements—"what stands at the end of environmental history is not the illusion of final knowledge"—and his concrete practice.)

The impossibility of keeping up-to-date on a myriad of specific topics means that this issue is even more acute in the focused subchapters. To take one small example, Radkau (ibid.: 177) cites the creation of tiger preserves as "what seems to have been most successful" among modern Indian efforts at environmental protection. Wild animal censuses are inevitably approximate, but the best estimates of the wild tiger population suggest that it has declined approximately 95 percent since the beginning of the twentieth century (World Wildlife Fund 2012). In 2011 the Wildlife Protection Society of India (2012) sadly reported that "prevailing conservation efforts are not geared towards, nor have they adequately addressed, the new threats" to the few remaining tigers, although it concluded that "despite all these problems, India still holds the best chance for saving the tiger in the wild." This statement may register mild optimism (or it may not), but it certainly does not convey satisfaction with a goal effectively accomplished. Of course, Rad-

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kau's main concern in citing this example is not really with the tigers; it is rather with the people who have been displaced to create and maintain the preserves. The protection of wildlife often pits the interests of animals and some humans against those of other humans, and if the preserves were in fact created to displace the people, then they have unquestionably been successful. That assessment, however, involves a series of unacknowledged political judgments; it is not based on the tiger demography to which the initial statement seems to refer.

Of course, environmental historians are not alone in confronting the challenge presented by the shifting sands of time. But writing comprehensive environmental history does involve some special risks, which are, as is often the case with risks, connected to its distinctive potential rewards. In some ways, environmental history seems ideally positioned to be the basis of a novel and expanded global history—one that is truly transnational—since it foregrounds important factors that are nevertheless often absent or overshadowed in other historical approaches. At least in theory, most of these factors—including climate, soil, water, microorganisms, plants, and animals—are not constrained by human political boundaries. With a very few possible exceptions, they are nonverbal, and so they are also not ineluctably limited by human cultural boundaries. But the consequent liberation is far from complete. Environmental history is, of course, not independent of human activity. (There is such a history, but it is written by paleontologists, climate scientists, and others of their ilk. Reluctance to engage with massive human impact is the reason, for example, that the mathematical ecologist E. C. Pielou [1992] ended her account in *After the Ice Age*, an excellent example of a history of the environment with as few people as possible, before the advent of European settlers.) The effect of environmental factors is very rarely absolute—even the destruction caused by a massive volcanic eruption or earthquake tends to be mediated by human decisions about where to live and how much to invest in protection against possible catastrophe.

In most cases, human influence is much greater. Radkau (2008: 30) persuasively cites the Irish famine of the 1840s as an example of the political and historical risks of reductively "ecological argumentation." Such an explanation would emphasize the advent of the potato blight and the reliance of the Irish agricultural population on potato monoculture, which had allowed unprecedented demographic growth. He characterizes the inadequacy of this explanation in modern political terms: "Does ecology . . . function as an

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antisocial sleight-of-hand by diverting attention away from the problem of the distribution and blame that belongs to the structures of social power?" (ibid.). It can also be critiqued on intellectual grounds as insufficiently complex or nuanced, since it disregards the moral, economic, and political determinants and consequences of official decisions about how to manage the food supply and how (and whether) to relieve the famine victims, and it also disregards decisions made in the remoter past. The transatlantic routes of both the potato and the potato blight reflected an earlier phase of European expansion. The people who succumbed to hunger and typhus were Irish residents subject to British law and policy. If they had lived in a different place or under a different regime, they would have experienced this semiecological disaster differently. Thus environmental history, in contrast to the elements that constitute the environment, turns out to be less easily transnational than it may seem at first glance. As in the case of the Irish famine, human relationships with the environment are frequently formulated by those in power and implemented through laws and regulations, which reflect both political and cultural boundaries. Environmental historians (like other historians) then reify these boundaries in their work, as the availability of both primary and secondary sources encourages (and often requires) them to do.

The political resonances of environmental history also complicate its claims to comprehensiveness. Radkau persuasively connects the emergence of environmental topics as foci of historical scholarship with the emergence of the modern green movement in the 1960s. He is clear about both the strength and the nature of his own political commitments (although—another disjunction—he also asserts that environmental history "revolves not around 'ought,' but . . . around 'is'" and that it "should not become too moralistic" [ibid.: 27]). But he tends to overstate or oversimplify the consequences of this association. As with scholarship in such analogously inspired fields as the histories of women and of minority groups, shared sympathies do not inevitably predict identical politics or degrees of engagement. Like Radkau, most environmental historians would also call themselves environmentalists, even though they might not espouse identical positions on particular issues. And sometimes the arguments of environmental historians have troubled and even enraged their fellow environmentalists outside the academy, as happened when William Cronon (1995) reconsidered the notion of pristine wilderness that underlies the commitment of many [American] nature lovers. In addition, because at least some of the factors that distin-

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guish environmental history—that is, the animate ones—are also actors, their inclusion complicates and enriches the perspective offered by environmental history. The claim that animals and plants have (moral) standing has been in the air since at least the 1960s, although no consensus has emerged about the nature of that standing or even whether the claim is justified. But with regard to particular issues, it is often clear that their interests conflict with those of some (or all) of the human stakeholders. The inadequately protected tigers and the effectively displaced villagers have many historical analogues as well as contemporary ones.

This is an imposing book. It runs to many pages, and its declared scope is ambitious. Its title takes no prisoners and brooks no compromises. But it delivers less than it promises, although at great length. In a way, its great contribution is to illustrate the manifold difficulties of the important task that it attempts. As Robert Browning suggests in the epigraph to this article, biting off more than you can chew is both very aspirational and very human. Sometimes the results are worthwhile, and sometimes the results are a dog's breakfast. *Tristram Shandy* provoked both controversy and enthusiasm when it appeared, and it is still a pleasure to read. It has inspired a very clever film (*Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* [2005]). As always, the future is likely to be full of surprises. Perhaps the movie version of *Nature and Power* is in the offing.

Notes

1 This technique has appealed to other historians in pursuit of similar goals. See, e.g., Grove 1996.

2 Radkau's source is not Darwin but Berenbaum 1996.

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