The "Environmental Turn": A Teaching Perspective

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Undeclared ambitions for the future notwithstanding, my current research profile is one that could qualify me as an "environmental historian" by only the most indulgent of standards. My contribution to this roundtable will thus be written less in the mode of a practicing researcher in the field and more from the perspective of a teacher (at a U.S. public land-grant university) currently in the process of trying to "environmentalize" two large survey courses in history.

Here I must begin by confessing my motivations for this venture, which are of the most mundanely pragmatic sort. Like most universities in the United States, mine is in the midst of a severe fiscal crisis, and the humanities in particular are under mounting pressure both to increase enrollments and to make themselves "relevant." As a result, our faculty has been called to redesign all of its introductory-level courses according to a new set of "Liberal Education Themes," among which "the environment" figures particularly prominently. However, lest we pesky historians get the wrong idea about what this category of "environment" might actually imply, the official university guidelines include a stern warning that merely "raising issues about the environment" is not sufficient for certification. Instead, all qualifying courses must "explore *solutions* to environmental problems" that, most important of all, "*must be based in science*!"

This is truly a tall order for a humanist—moreover, one for which my own professional training might be fairly judged more inadequate than most. After all, not only am I a nonscientist, but as a historian I suffer the particular foibles of my generation, having been nurtured as an undergraduate on healthy servings of Edward Said and shepherded through graduate school during the halcyon days of postcolonial studies. This has conditioned me, as a first impulse, to see "science" not as a solution but rather as a problem and to regard "scientific principles" not as objectives to be internalized and implemented but rather as objects to be critiqued and deconstructed. Nevertheless, because these are undoubtedly desperate times, I have done what I can to adopt correspondingly desperate measures. And, almost despite myself, after much trial and error, I have now seen one of my courses officially certified "environmental" by the powers that be.

So what have I learned from the process so far? First and foremost, I have gained a new appreciation for the historical moment in which my students are coming of age and for the important and valuable ways in which their perspective consequently differs from my own. As I write these words, for example, tens of thousands of barrels of oil continue to spew from a hole in the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, in what is now being referred to as "the greatest environmental catastrophe in the history of the United States." Meanwhile, closer to my home in Minnesota, we have just logged the warmest spring on record, pushing our much lauded "10,000 lakes" yet farther down a treacherous climatic path that, scientists tell us, will see them shrink from evaporation and, with great likelihood, vanish entirely in the decades to come. And of course, we ponder these present and future

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disasters even as we have barely recovered from last winter's apocalyptic (if ultimately unfulfilled) predictions of a globally lethal "swine flu" pandemic.

As I have come to realize with an ever greater sense of clarity, it is these kinds of concerns that weigh most heavily on my students' minds, shaping their fears, their hopes, and their aspirations for the future. Yet in a way very much unlike the great social and political convulsions that shaped my generation, today's environmental dangers are of a kind that simply cannot be ameliorated—or even satisfactorily understood—by means of what many humanists today consider the central mission of their craft: a postmodern critique of knowledge production. On the contrary, perhaps the single greatest obstacle to confronting the world's impending environmental challenges stems precisely from the strategy—now practiced just as frequently from the right as from the left—of politicizing "science" as a way of challenging its truth value.

All of this hints at the dawn of a new era, one in which the threat of global ecological catastrophe will force a fundamental reevaluation of the way the humanities understand and justify their role in society—perhaps culminating in an "environmental turn" on the same scale as the "cultural turn" that so profoundly transformed the discipline of history a generation ago. Indeed, the early signs of such a transformation are already present, for instance in the recent endorsement of "species history"—explicitly because of its potential to transcend identitarian politics in an era of global human-induced climate change—by no less a standard-bearer of postcolonial studies than Dipesh Chakrabarty.[1]

But does not such a level of self-questioning within the humanities, especially when combined with the grim economic realities of our present historical moment, risk exacerbating a cynical view about the value and relevance of the liberal arts in today's students? Happily, at least among the young people in my own classes, I have seen surprisingly little evidence of this. To be sure, many retain a healthy suspicion of anything smacking of sophistry and are particularly wary of the most abstract, self-indulgent, and self-referential strains of postmodernism, to which they ironically refer as "Studies Studies." Conversely, I have found them veritably hungry for humanistic approaches to concrete, scientifically driven problems, especially when these approaches allow them to experiment with a flexibility and a rootedness in direct human experience inaccessible to the more rigorously quantitative disciplines.

In other words, there is simply no reason to expect that an "environmental turn" in historical studies will compel us to throw down our weapons and abjectly prostrate ourselves before the altar of "science." Rather, it suggests a future in which, as humanists, we might reapply our finely honed tools of textual analysis, our deeply nuanced understandings of cultural and linguistic variation, and our sensitivities to both the potential and the limits of understanding lived experience, all in a way that will complement rather than destabilize the endeavors of our more technologically oriented colleagues.[2]

And here, if I may be so bold, I conclude by suggesting that as historians of the Middle East we are particularly well suited to this new role. This is because, in comparison to other humanists, ours is a field that is by its very nature rooted in the problems of a specific place and space or, in other words, an environment. Such rootedness necessarily requires expertise in the languages, cultures, and physical and human geographies of our chosen region—expertise whose specificity has until recently placed us too often on the defensive but which I have every reason to believe will entitle us to a newfound measure of self-confidence in the years to come. The work of the authors in this volume, and

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my partners in this roundtable, are a testament to the extent to which this is already the case.

NOTES

[1]See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222.

[2]On this question, see Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007).

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