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Radkau on the Americas

In his book Nature and Power *Joachim Radkau seeks to provide a broad vision of environmental history that is not unduly influenced by American perspectives but does justice to the experience of the "Old World." Given this motive behind his work, how does Radkau deal with the American hemisphere? Examination of the relevant sections of his book shows that Radkau is drawn toward areas of environmental history with scholarly debate, takes conventional positions for the most part on those debates, and follows the literature in emphasizing the United States over the rest of the Americas.*

On occasion an author must begin with an explanation of his or her relationship to the subject, as Fernand Braudel (1972, 1: 17) did in the first lines of his famous book on the Mediterranean. I have known Joachim Radkau for more than 10 years. I hosted a visit he made to my campus. I attended a conference he put on in Bielefeld, Germany, and on that occasion visited his home—more crammed with books than any other I have yet seen. So I am not a neutral observer when it comes to Radkau. Nonetheless, I will try not to pull my punches. In this I am encouraged by the fact that an earlier critique I wrote of his ideas on European exceptionalism in environmental history seems to have done nothing to impair our friendship (McNeill 2003).

Nature and Power (Radkau 2008) is a wide-ranging study of several enduring issues in environmental history. It is not a narrative that seeks to cover the long span of environmental history, in contrast to Hughes 2001 and Penna 2010. Instead, it aims to probe into certain issues that Radkau deems of interest and importance. Among other reasons, it seems, Radkau wrote

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his book to counter what he thought was undue emphasis on the experience of the Americas, more precisely of the United States, in the field of environmental history. In the foreword to the German edition, penned in March 2000, Radkau (2002 [2000]: 8) writes:

> It has become clear to me, especially at conferences on environmental history in the United States, that however much I admire the productivity of American environmental historians, the time has come to incorporate the experiences of the Old World more thoroughly and consistently into the discipline: to examine not the cult of "wilderness," but questions about sustainability in old cultural landscapes; to analyze not the imagination of Native Americans, but institutional traditions.

In 2000 this sentiment rested on a firm foundation. Environmental history as a subdiscipline got off to its fastest start in the United States. Even as late as 2000 US environmental historians working almost exclusively on US topics remained the most conspicuous and admired figures in the field. Australian, European, Indian, and other colleagues were redressing this early imbalance with vigor. Radkau was among them.

To judge by his critiques of authors such as Richard H. Grove (1995) and Alfred W. Crosby (1986), Radkau felt that the emphasis on the American hemisphere was often misleading and distorted environmental historians' appreciation of a broad range of issues, from slash-and-burn agriculture to modern environmentalism's roots. Pointing out what he sees as America-centric distortions and offering corrective (or at least alternative) perspectives seem to rank high among Radkau's objectives.

With this position of Radkau in mind, I wish to explore what he said about the Americas and what he chose not to say. By and large I will claim that Radkau presents (1) a thoroughly conventional appreciation of the environmental history of the Americas with the exception of his vision of popular environmentalism in the 1960s and (2) one powerfully skewed toward the experience of the United States, with scant attention to the rest of the hemisphere. In this latter respect he has much in common with the environmental historians of the Unites States whose productivity he admired but whose blinkered vision he did not.

I will deal with the latter point first. Radkau's American hemisphere is mainly the United States. He includes a few mentions of Brazil and Mexico

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and a few of the Aztecs and the Incas, but no other Latin American countries or societies are mentioned except in passing. Canada is mentioned in one sentence in the text (Radkau 2008: 52) and in one footnote (ibid.: 389n80). The likely reasons for this distribution of attention are familiarity—Radkau knows the United States better than anywhere else in the hemisphere—and the existing bias in the environmental history literature that made it in the 1990s, and still makes it today, easier to research the United States than Canada or Latin America. Radkau also reads English more comfortably than Portuguese or Spanish. Even so, for a book with a subtitle that promises a world or global history, this is a shrunken version of the Americas.

His US orientation notwithstanding, Radkau still has several things to say about the Americas in *Nature and Power*. In his discussions of such issues as the impacts of fire, religion, nuclear power, ecotourism, slash-and-burn agriculture, nature romanticism, and mountain terracing, he mentions examples drawn from the Americas. In his treatments of various intellectual movements linked to environmentalism, he often cites American (US) thinkers, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin. So the Americas figure frequently in the book, if normally only in passing.

Radkau's detailed treatment of topics pertaining to the American hemisphere is necessarily more restricted. His first such examination comes in the context of a chapter on the hunting and domestication of animals and concerns the sustainability of hunting undertaken by Native Americans (Radkau 2008: 47–49). This takes him back to the extinction of American megafauna at the end of the Pleistocene some 13,000 years ago. In the span of a thousand years or so, both North and South America lost the great majority of their large mammals—giant sloths, mammoths, huge wolves, and so forth. For nearly 50 years scholars have struggled to explain this wave of extinctions, debating the likely roles of climate change, epizootics, and human hunting. Radkau's reading of this issue conforms to the majority view among specialists, which is that Amerindian hunting was not always ecologically sustainable and likely played a leading role in the late Pleistocene extinctions. He relies on an older literature here, but the newer studies tend to bear out the early work by Paul Martin (2005; Martin and Wright 1967) and others (Barnosky et al. 2004; Burney and Flannery 2005; Haynes 2009). The controversies surrounding the late Pleistocene extinctions in North America are one of the most com-

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pelling scholarly quarrels concerning hunting in the history of the Americas. But they are not the only one.

Radkau might equally have turned his attention to the literature on the Plains Indians and the bison. One of the key works (Isenberg 2000) was not yet available when Radkau first wrote, but others were (Flores 1991). The Plains Indians of North America had hunted bison for millennia but suddenly became far more efficient when they acquired horses (late seventeenth century) and rifles (mid-nineteenth century). Their motivations changed too when they began to trade bison hide, meat, and bone to whites (Euroamericans). In 1830 the bison roaming the North American prairies numbered perhaps 20–40 million. By 1885 almost none remained. One of the keystone species of the grasslands ecosystem was brought to the brink of extinction. How and why did this happen? The controversies in this issue overlap with but do not match those of the late Pleistocene case. Scholars argue whether Amerindian bison hunting was sustainable or was driving down the bison population, whether epizootics were at play, whether white (Euroamerican) hunters applied the coup de grâce or intruded on a previously sustainable hunting regime. No one argues that climate change played a significant role. Attending to this more modern story rather than the Pleistocene would have been more in keeping with the modern focus of Radkau's book. But had he again been persuaded by the majority view, it would not have changed his overall conclusion that Amerindian hunting could be unsustainable.

Radkau (2008: 157–62) also engages with the environmental history of the Americas in his discussion of colonialism. Here he has a fair bit to say about Mexico, mainly based on the work of Elinor Melville (1994), as well as about the United States. He presents a conventional picture of colonial impacts on ecology, emphasizing the consequences of introduced species of plants and especially animals. Hoofed animals especially proved disruptive of agriculture and soils in the Americas, as did browsing animals left free to roam and munch crops, as Melville (ibid.) and others have shown (Anderson 2002; Cronon 1984). In emphasizing animals, Radkau passes on the opportunity to foreground deforestation, another dramatic trend associated with colonization in the Americas. The chief historiographical lacuna among English-language works in Radkau's reading is Warren Dean's (1995) magnum opus on the environmental history of the Atlantic forest of Brazil. Including Dean would have allowed Radkau to say more about the most important form of

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agriculture in the colonial Americas, the plantation, and more about deforestation. Dean's book would also have been useful for Radkau's (2008: 20–27) discussion of the role of moral judgment and value judgment in environmental history, because Dean wrote with his heart on his sleeve, lamenting and lambasting the replacement of forest by farm and plantation. On the subject of plantations in the Americas, Radkau drew on the book of the geographer David Watts (1987) on the Caribbean, mainly the British Caribbean, which remains an important text for West Indian environmental history. But the plantation world extended far beyond what Watts took in, and Dean's classic on Brazil is one of Radkau's most conspicuous omissions.

Every author knows that one cannot put everything in one's book, and Radkau's emphasis on Melville's animal story over Dean's deforestation and plantations story is not in any way wrong. Perhaps Radkau preferred the animal story because it is more distinctive (although he does not say so). Deforestation is part and parcel of environmental history almost everywhere. Ungulate irruptions, to use Melville's pet phrase, are not. In any case, this observation is intended only to draw attention to the choices Radkau made about what to put in and what to leave out.

Radkau's most unconventional point in his consideration of colonialism in the Americas is that Crosby's (1986) *Ecological Imperialism* fails to appreciate the reciprocal impacts on Europe of introduced species, such as potatoes and corn. In that book Crosby (ibid.: 89–90) argues that European imperialism over the centuries was abetted by a "portmanteau biota" of animals, plants, and microbes that worked together in complex ways that gave European settlers insurmountable advantages as they displaced indigenous populations in temperate zones of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. There is good reason that Radkau's position on Crosby is unconventional, because almost everyone who has read Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* is aware of his *Columbian Exchange* (Crosby 1972). That earlier book details the impacts on Europe, and to a lesser extent on China and Africa, of American food crops. Radkau (2008: 370n14), in a footnote, acknowledges this: "In an earlier book, Crosby himself pointed to such reciprocal effects of colonialism. . . . But this book, which still presented the ecological story without the word 'imperialism' and on the model of 'reciprocal effects' did not have nearly the impact of his *Ecological Imperialism*."[1]

The second contention, that Crosby's first book did not have nearly the impact of his second one, is at first glance a curious one. Most US histori-

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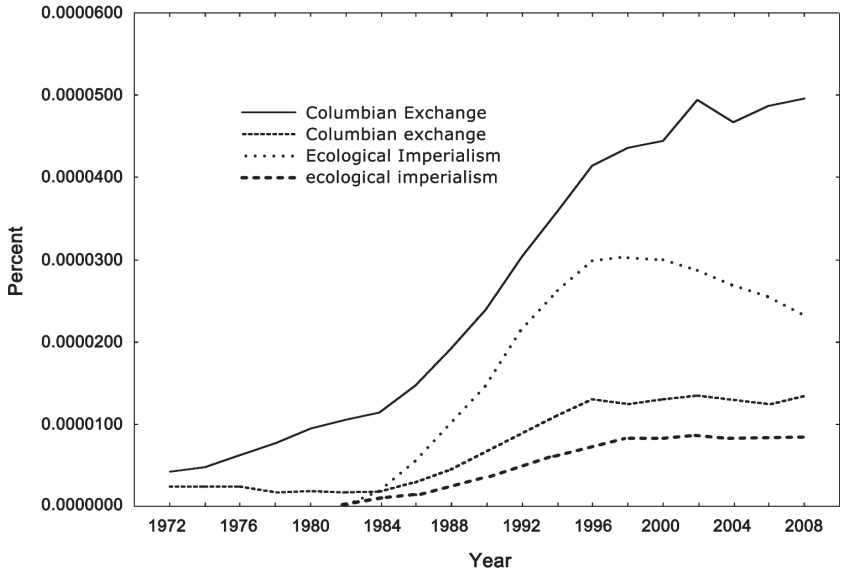


Figure 1 Mentions of four phrases in 5 million books in Google's collection, 1970–2008

ans would vigorously claim the opposite. The phrase *Columbian exchange* has entered the lexicon of all US historians (and most world historians operating in English). Textbooks at the university and high school levels devote paragraphs to the concept, whereas they say nothing about Crosby's ideas in *Ecological Imperialism*. Thanks to a website called Google Ngram Viewer, it is now possible to see how frequently the two phrases *Columbian exchange* and *ecological imperialism* appear in 5 million English-language books for any period between 1800 and 2008 (figure 1; Ngram does not yet allow one to probe closer to the present). One must recognize, of course, that Google's collection may be skewed in any number of ways beyond the evident one (English only). Moreover, the phrases in the Google sample might in some cases be used to refer to something other than the books or ideas connected to Crosby; each phrase appeared in a few books before the publication of Crosby's works with these titles. One cannot know if mentions of the phrases indicate acceptance or dismissal of the ideas they represent. So the conclusions based on Google's data must be taken with a grain or two of salt. What the data seem to show is that, while Radkau's assessment of the two books' impacts is likely wrong for the English-language community, the concept of ecological imperialism rivaled that of the Columbian exchange during the

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1990s. Outside the Anglosphere, Radkau could well be right—and Google Ngram cannot tell us one way or the other.

My best guess, based only on impressions, is that *The Columbian Exchange* is by far the more influential book in the United States and among Americanists wherever they are found but that *Ecological Imperialism* is more influential in Europe. This impression is supported by the translation histories of the two books. Crosby's 1972 book was translated only into Italian, Korean, and Spanish, while the later one appeared in German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish among European languages and Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Turkish among Asian ones. So Radkau's contention that the first book did not have nearly the impact of the second is probably correct from a European perspective, wrong as far as the United States is concerned, and plausible but uncertain in a global context.

Radkau (2008: 177–83) also engages at some length with the history of agriculture and specifically soil erosion, soil fertility, and soil exhaustion in the history of the United States. He juxtaposes this story with that of soils in Russian history, on which, as he notes, the literature (for those who do not read Russian) is much thinner. This section takes up two main subjects, "soil mining" in early American history and the Dust Bowl on the Great Plains in the 1930s. Radkau has a bit to say about other agricultural subjects as well, such as the use of fertilizers in the nineteenth century, the irrigated farming of the dry West, and the careful soil husbandry of the Amish, Hutterites, and others influenced by central European traditions. On early American soils history, Radkau by and large supports Avery Craven's (1926) contention that up to the Civil War farmers in the Eastern Seaboard colonies and later the United States took poor care of their soils. While Craven had his critics, his position remains the standard one. Craven made his case only for the plantation zones of Virginia and Maryland, but in generalizing from this base Radkau is merely doing as dozens of US historians have done before him.

On the Dust Bowl, Radkau's presentation seems at least as influenced by James C. Malin as by Donald Worster, whereas today in the United States Worster casts a much longer shadow than Malin. Malin (1947) argued that dust storms were natural events that happened from time to time, redistributing prairie soils. Worster (1978) offered a darker picture, emphasizing short-term greed among farmers driven by requirements of a particular American brand of capitalism. Both Malin and Worster are now either

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complemented or superseded—depending on one's point of view—by Geoff Cunfer (2005), whose work is much more systematic and quantitative than theirs. Cunfer shows that since 1920 the basic pattern of settlement and farming on the North American Great Plains has held remarkably stable, despite recurrent droughts and dust storms. Radkau revisited the literature on agriculture and soils in the United States either for the English-language edition—it includes footnotes to works published after the German edition appeared—or perhaps for later German editions. But the revisiting seems to have taken place around 2003, and so Cunfer does not appear.

Radkau's Dust Bowl, like those of the US authors who went before him, does not extend north of the 49th parallel. This is another observation, not a criticism. Canada had a dust bowl, too, in southwestern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta. An examination of that experience might have shed light on the debates about the role of American capitalism versus climate and other variables in bringing about the Dust Bowl. Radkau adopted the blinkered vision of his US predecessors here. That blinkered vision, I hasten to add, is normal among US historians. In their peer group no one is faulted for neglecting Canada, even if the subjects of their research span the border. So Radkau should not be faulted for following in their footsteps.

It is at the conclusion of this section on soils and agriculture that Radkau (2008: 182) brings up the Amish, Hutterites, and "groups of German immigrants who preserved the principles of Central European farming under American conditions. . . . They paid attention to good fertilization and crop rotation as well as a careful treatment of the forest." He contrasts these groups to "the pure soil exploiters" (ibid.) and notes that typical American farmhouses are not built to last for generations as European ones are. Here, at least in Thomas Dunlap's translation, we get a clear sense of Radkau's moral preferences. He finds the more frugal traditions he associates with central Europe and Germany preferable to the more prodigal behavior of Americans in general. This begs the question why immigrants from England, Finland, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Ukraine, and other lands that sent sons and daughters of the soil to farm the United States became prodigal farmers in American conditions and yet some central Europeans (certainly not all) did not. Radkau (ibid.) provides more a clue than an answer by noting in passing that the Amish and the Hutterites were "sects" motivated to cling to "the agrarian traditions of the Old World" for religious reasons. In this connection a broader lens taking in the experience elsewhere in the Americas

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of French, Portuguese, and Spanish farmers might have proved interesting. Were members of religious sects and central Europeans somehow special? Or did French settlers in the Saint Lawrence valley and Spaniards on the Argentine pampas also practice the agrarian traditions of the Old World? How did members of the same sects and central Europeans behave toward soils in southern Brazil or western Canada?

The third main subject in the environmental history of the Americas that Radkau (2008: 232–34, 272–74, 277–79) explores is environmentalism. Again, his discussion is dominated by the experience of the United States. He adopts the traditional twofold conception of the subject, first taking up the Progressive Era environmentalism of c. 1890–1914 and then the environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s. He also discusses US environmental policy in the 1990s (ibid.: 294–96). The handling of Progressive Era environmentalism follows the well-worn path from park making through the US Forest Service to Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt.

The treatment of the 1960s and 1970s is a bit more distinctive. Radkau remembers these days himself, and that normally colors any author's interpretations. He places Rachel Carson more prominently than do most US historians of modern environmentalism. He credits Thoreau with influencing "Hippies" and suggests that Woodstock, the three-day outdoor rock concert held in upstate New York in 1969, might be "remembered as an event in the founding period of environmentalism" (ibid.: 277–78). He also makes more of the spiritual roots of US environmentalism than do most historians (but see Stoll 1997). His mention of Earth Day and the founding of the US Environmental Protection Agency, both in 1970, is fleeting and intended (I think) to convey that accounts that foreground these events neglect the religious background of US environmentalism. These emphases are unconventional. Some readers may find them mistaken, some may find them refreshing. They are the primary respect in which Radkau's treatment of the American hemisphere departs from the dominant paradigms (see, e.g., Hays 1987; Kline 1997; Montrie 2011; Rome 2001).

Radkau's handling of 1960s–1970s environmentalism is distinctive in another way as well. He toggles back and forth between Germany and the United States in these pages. In the rest of the book he either dedicates sections to one country or region or offers a general treatment that draws on

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examples culled from any- and everywhere. German history is always in the back of Radkau's mind, whatever part of the world he might be writing about. Here, in his presentation of modern environmentalism in the United States, it seems to be in the front of his mind.

Radkau takes up a few other subjects in the environmental history of the Americas but only briefly. He offers short passages on contemporary (1990s) Los Angeles (Radkau 2008: 292–93), on air pollution in modern Mexico City (ibid.: 255–56), and on Mormon irrigation in nineteenth-century Utah (ibid.: 28–29). But that is about it for the Americas. The issues that occupy him most are Amerindian hunting, colonialism, agriculture and soils, and environmentalism.

This selection of topics is perfectly defensible. One could, of course, easily imagine a different quartet that is equally defensible: the trapping of beaver, the impacts of railroads, the US Army Corps of Engineers, and the emergence of environmental law. One could easily imagine still another quartet less focused on the United States: cod fisheries, Amazonian deforestation, guano mining off the Peruvian coast, and irrigation among the Anasazi a millennium ago in what is now New Mexico and Arizona. The one part of the US story that strikes me as conspicuous by its near absence is industrialization and urban pollution. Radkau mentions now and again air and water pollution in US contexts and in Mexico City. But in most reckonings industrialization counts as a fundamental transformation of the ecology of any region in which it happens. Perhaps because Radkau wrote about it in other contexts, notably Germany, he felt it would be redundant or uninteresting to do so for the United States or anywhere else in the Americas. A considerable portion of the US environmental history available when Radkau wrote, and indeed much of it cited in Radkau's book, puts industrialization front and center (e.g., Cronon 1991; Melosi 2000; Steinberg 1991). Whatever his reasons, the choice not to emphasize industrialization makes his handling of the Americas, North America in particular, distinctive.

Radkau's book surely provides a version of world environmental history that does not overly rely on the US experience. It expands the blinkered vision of those nurtured on US environmental history with its emphases on wilderness and national parks. But it suffers from another—smaller—form of blinkered vision. It features the United States prominently but infrequently touches on

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the rest of the American hemisphere. In this he reproduces one of the blind spots of US specialists. His handling of the subjects he selects in US environmental history, and indeed with respect to the Americas generally, follows prevailing interpretations with one exception. The exception is the discussion of 1960s–1970s environmentalism, an experience Radkau remembers, albeit from a perch across the Atlantic (Berlin, Hamburg, and Bielefeld).

Radkau seems drawn to debates. The subjects he selects for the most thorough discussion are ones where controversies thrived and in some cases still thrive. Where he comes down on one side or another, he typically sides with the prevailing or consensus view. He does not seem drawn to maverick positions, at least not in his treatment of the Americas. That perhaps befits an outsider. In other contexts more fully in his comfort zone, such as debates over fuel-wood shortage in German history; the nexus among scientists, the state, and German nuclear power firms; or his work on neurasthenia, Radkau (1983a, 1983b, 1998) has shown himself willing to stake out minority positions and to take on conventional wisdom. Few scholars risk embracing dissenting positions when writing outside their comfort zones, which on balance is probably a good thing.

Note

1 If the search engine of amazon.com can be trusted, Crosby used the word *imperialism* only once in that book, bearing out one of Radkau's contentions (Crosby did not use *reciprocal* at all).

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