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- [76] Marsh, Study of nature, 44.
- [77] Marsh, Preliminary Notice [to Reclus's *La Terre*].
- [78] Marsh, Physical science in Italy, 420–1.

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Environmental history, philosophy and difference

Catherine Nash

Human geography seems to have 'gone back to nature', or at least returned to that central question of human environmental relations, now heavily armed with a critical sense of the social origins of ideas of nature, its materiality and the politics of environmental change. As cultural geography's double attention to the symbolic and material forms of land, environment, landscape or nature gets recast in Latourian moulds, and Marxist explorations of social justice get environmental, nature returns to historical geography via environmental history.^[1] David Lowenthal's rich and thoughtful reading of George Perkins Marsh and his reception opens up historical, philosophical, epistemological and ultimately political questions which touch upon these developments but also point in the direction of fruitful new cross-disciplinary approaches. Lowenthal traces and compares views of 'man and nature' across the hundred years since Marsh's writing. But other opportunities for comparison and synthesis are provoked by the gendered language of Marsh's central question of "whether man is of nature or above her". The philosophical and historical questions of difference, unity and domination in human–environmental relations have been central to geography and environmental history. Yet they have also been key areas of analysis and critique within feminism and feminist geography where the cultural meanings of the human, nature and the natural have been so thoroughly interrogated. Despite this, the historical focus of environmental history and the insights of feminist environmental philosophies have remained largely disconnected to the detriment of both. The problems of the isolation of these two areas of theory and research go far beyond the absence, with some exceptions, of questions of gender within environmental history, or the persistent gendering of nature. Feminist and postcolonial approaches to questions of gender, culture, nature and the environment clearly suggest ways in which environmental history could become more sensitive to social difference. But importantly also, environmental history can enrich the study of the material and symbolic relationships between gender and the environment. Most simply this means using environmental history to disaggregate the terms 'nature' or environment, and using the politics of social difference to disaggregate the notion of the 'human' in environmental history.

Arising as it has from a concern with the adverse environmental effects of modern

capitalism and especially in contexts of European colonial settlement, environmental history is already an area of study with strong ethical, moral and critical dimensions. Its practitioners have also grappled with the challenges posed by both revisions of classical ecology and postmodern approaches to epistemology.^[2] So while ‘environment’ has been problematised, and despite its fascinatingly detailed ecological narratives, environmental history has tended to work with a largely undifferentiated notion of the ‘human’. This time lag between the feminist critique of the writing of history and its effects in environmental history is a point that is being made by environmental historians themselves. As the question of what is meant by ‘nature’ or environment comes under scrutiny, William Cronon calls for comparable critical attention to be paid to the category of the ‘human’. Though, he argues, the holistic analysis of environmental history encourages historians to see nature and humanity as a whole, “it also discourages us from looking at as much as we should at conflict and difference within groups of people” whether we are talking about peasants, farmers, Indians or colonists. Despite the focus within environmental history on class and distinctions between settler and indigenous groups, for him its greatest weakness as it has developed thus far is “its failure to probe below the level of the group to explore the implications of social divisions for environmental change [. . .] In the face of social history’s classic categories of gender, race, class, and ethnicity, environmental history stands more silent than it should”.^[3]

The most prominent exception to this within environmental history is the work of Carolyn Merchant whose famous account of the modern Western interconnections between the domination of women and nature^[4] is referenced by J. M. Powell when he includes the theme of gender in a list of new directions for environmental history.^[5] Though Merchant increasingly represents feminist environmental history, in reviewing Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* for example,^[6] there are problems in taking Merchant’s work as a model of what feminist environmental history could be. In her famous text *The Death of Nature* Merchant argued that a seventeenth-century colonial ecological revolution and a nineteenth-century capitalist revolution depended upon the Enlightenment shift from viewing nature as a living sentient being to a machine which can be controlled by universal scientific laws. This, she argues, sanctioned the domination of nature and women, who were also located in the realm of the natural. In her more recent writings Merchant is careful to avoid essentialising femininity, reinforcing normative motherhood, universalising the experience of women in the past and present or gendering her notion of earthcare as feminine.^[7] Yet women’s responsibility for household food production in pre-colonial New England is frequently posited by Merchant as a lost ideal in which human–environmental relationships were harmonious and the sexual division of labour complementary rather than limiting. This notion of a pre-colonial, pre-modern, pre-patriarchal golden age of environmental and human well-being underpins much ecofeminist theory, contemporary environmentalism and romantic ahistorical notions of both femininity and indigenous peoples.

The lack of historical depth in many ecofeminist discourses has been recently thoroughly and skillfully challenged by Melissa Leech and Cathy Green who take a deliberately historical perspective in considering gender and environmental history in relation to contemporary women–environment policy debates. While, as they say, “work on the causes and impacts of land use change and of colonial environmental policy by environmental historians has shown remarkably little interest in their gender dimensions”, historical claims are used prominently in contemporary ecofeminism, especially in constructing “images of harmonious women-centred ecological relations which colonial development processes undermined”. These ahistorical and essentialist claims

then “form the basis of ‘histories’ in which women’s biology become subordinated by culture during the ‘colonial’ or ‘capitalist’ period”. Leech and Green call for a more gender sensitive environmental history and a more historically based analysis of gender and environmental change.^[8]

Leech and Green undermine the notion of a golden age of feminine ecological harmony in isolated pre-colonial subsistence agriculture by exploring the wide cross-cultural and historical differences in the meanings of masculinity and femininity and their relation to concepts of the environment. They argue that the “golden age thesis” obscures differences among women and render men and relationships between men and women invisible. It ignores the ways in which pre-colonial organic views of nature were often linked to oppressive social relations. The general use of the term nature or the environment in ecofeminism, they suggest, does not offer a sense of the different ways that different environments and ecological processes have been linked in varied ways to gender. As Cronon argues for a disaggregation of the term human, Leech and Green argue for a greater historical sense of environmental diversity in analysis of gender and ecology. Ecofeminist histories, they argue,

reduce the material aspects of people’s changing gender and environmental relations to a dichotomy between a harmonious, timeless pre-colonial golden age and the destructive effects of capitalism and colonialism; in effect, to the endless reproduction of glorious ‘tradition’ until the arrival of ‘modernity’. However this is to obscure the evidently important dynamics of gender, social stratification and environmental change in pre-colonial history; dynamics often influenced by trade and commerce in ways which strongly deny images of subsistence isolation. While all scholars agree that colonialism and capitalism have profoundly restructured—and continue to restructure—economies, societies and their gender relations, the accumulated evidence from a large number of historical analyses shows the complex and varied forms of this articulation.^[9]

Environmental history should, they argue, explore the ways in which environmental relations structure relations between women and men and wider social relations of gender structure processes of resource use. A properly gendered environmental history would, they suggest, encompass the analysis of “gender and labour in relation to ecology; changing regimes of tenure and property rights; gender dimensions of institutional arrangements around natural resource usage; changes in gendered product, site and technique use in the context of colonial economic change, trade and policy; relationships between gender and environmental knowledges and discourses, including those of colonial states”,^[10] interaction of gendered resource use with particular ecological processes, women’s agency in responding to colonial ecological interventions, and “how representation of past environments—of landscape history—become part of oral histories which uphold particular social or political relations, and gendered rights and statuses linked to them” (and often adopted by colonial authorities).^[11] Gender relations, they argue, have tangible ecological effects, just as they mediate environmental change amongst indigenous and settler groups.

Environmental history can offer a powerful critique of modern capitalism and colonialism but also challenge the romanticisation of pre-modernity and pre-colonial societies and so counter the primitivising claims of some environmental philosophies. Like the postcolonial project of criticising the material and cultural oppression of colonialism without positing a model of a true and static pre-colonial culture that can be recovered, environmental history can critique modern environmental damage while challenging the notion of a pristine nature in harmony with pre-modern native people.

The doubts raised by environmental historians and ecologists over the central ecological concepts of environmental succession, equilibrium and climax which have

been central to the critical measurement of environmental damage, undermine notions of pre-modern and pre-colonial environmental stability. The environmental histories of long-term human intervention challenge the romanticising tendencies of Western ecotourism, which in seeking a lost harmony with nature in the cultures of indigenous peoples, as Jane Jacobs has shown in relation to the production of Aboriginal heritage, essentialises and fixes these supposed survivals of pre-modernity.^[12] By understanding other relationships to nature as also socially and culturally mediated, but through different mythical and metaphorical frameworks, it is possible to remain critical of modern capitalist erosion of other kinds of consciousness and experience without primitivising or romanticising other forms of environment–human relations.

Returning to Marsh’s question of ‘whether man is of nature or above her’ it can be argued that theories of human non-hierarchical immersion in nature are as problematic as ideas of hierarchical difference. Despite the problems of some forms of ecofeminism others offer possibilities for finding new answers. In response to the now well established sense of the social construction of nature and to the critique of the dualistic category of nature and the human, recent theorists have sought not only to recover a sense of the autonomy of nature but also alternatives to the human–nature dichotomy. In spite of anxiety about environmental determinism within geography, the natural world is increasingly recognised as having a materiality and instrumentality that is independent of human knowledge. This sense of the materiality and symbolic construction of the world is central to Val Plumwood’s critical ecological feminism and her concept of the relational self, which avoids the gendered and familial discourse of feminised nature.^[13] Here, self-hood is not defined through fixed and hierarchical difference but through a myriad of dynamic and mutual relations of interdependence and partnership. Nature is understood not as an often gendered entity but as a series of diverse life forms in different relationships of partnership with a similarly diverse human community. This recognition of both the differences and the continuities between people and non-human forms of life undermines dualistic epistemologies of hierarchical difference without collapsing a sense of difference within nature or human society in a universal humanism of human integration in nature. This sense of non-hierarchical difference within and between nature and society is the starting point for an environmental politics of difference.

William Cronon has recently called to a more prominent place within environmental history for the “exploration of social and environmental *difference*—and of its relation to power”.^[14] In spite of the ways in which difference between the human and non-human world have served the interests of those who have defined the limits of the human and justified the ill-treatment of people classified as more ‘natural’ and nature itself, ecofeminist theorists like Val Plumwood and Jim Cheney are critical also of forms of environmentalism which seek to eradicate the difference between the human and the non-human through various forms of identification with nature.^[15] The significance of their approach is in critically addressing the politics of alternatives to the human–nature distinction in forms of environmentalism which seek to articulate non-dominant relationships between the human and nature, especially within Deep Ecology. Deep Ecology suppresses the difference of nature by idealising a human relationship to nature in which human subjectivity is subsumed into a deeper spiritual consciousness in the natural world. Romantic notions of self-loss in nature, they argue, deny the politics of human–nature relations as well as treating relationships between people as irrelevant to explanations of ecological change. The focus on personal identification with nature within Deep Ecology, Plumwood suggests, fails to consider social relations beyond the individual. Identification with nature is thus based on a masculinist notion of a

transcendent, autonomous, non-relational self. Its emphasis is on personal incorporation in the natural rather than a social sense of the mutuality *and* distinctiveness of the human and non-human realms. The beginnings of an answer to Marsh's question might be found in environmentalist politics of difference and its environmental and social imagination of non-hierarchical difference between people and the natural world and diversity amongst people and within nature. The sense of the agency, autonomy and materiality of nature does not then have to be couched in terms of nature as an intentional moral being—an option that David Lowenthal rejects—but as a realm which is more than its human construction. And it is this sense of the diversity, agency and materiality of the physical world that has distinguished the work of environmental historians. Environmental history and feminist environmentalism can be mutually enriched by a focus on difference within 'humanity' and 'nature'.

Department of Geography
Royal Holloway
University of London
Egham
Surrey
TW20 0EX
UK

Notes

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- [9] Leech and Green, *op. cit.*, 8–9.
- [10] Leech and Green, *op. cit.*, 12.
- [11] Leech and Green, *op. cit.*, 18.
- [12] J. M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London 1996) 132–56.
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