

BIOGRAFIA EM HISTÓRIA AMBIENTAL: CONSOLIDANDO A VIRADA CULTURAL

BIOGRAPHY IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY: CONSOLIDATING THE CULTURAL TURN

BIOGRAFÍA EN HISTÓRIA AMBIENTAL: CONSOLIDANDO EL VIRAJE CULTURAL

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RESUMO:

A literatura recente promove a ideia de que a história ambiental poderia consolidar a sua “virada cultural” (White 2004), centrando-se sobre indivíduos que foram significativos nas interações entre o homem e o ambiente. Sugere-se uma abordagem baseada na noção de biografia de Margadant, e são observadas as publicações mais recentes na história ambiental utilizando uma abordagem biográfica.

Palavras-chave: Meio Ambiente. Biografia. História. Cultura. Método.

ABSTRACT:

Recent literature promotes the idea that environmental history could consolidate its “cultural turn” (White 2004) by focusing on individuals who were significant in human-environment interactions. An approach based on Margadant’s notion of biography is suggested, and recent papers in environmental history using a biographical approach are noted.

Keywords: Environment. Biography. History. Culture. Method.

RESUMEN:

La literatura reciente promueve la idea de que la historia ambiental podría consolidar su “viraje cultural” (White 2004), centrándose sobre individuos que fueron significativos en las interacciones entre el hombre y el ambiente. Se sugiere un abordaje basado en la noción de biografía de Margadant, y son observadas las publicaciones más recientes en la historia ambiental utilizando un abordaje biográfico.

Palabras-clave: Ambiente. Biografía. Historia. Cultura. Método.

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In the late 1980s Peter Bakewell (1988) published a fascinating book on Antonio López de Quiroga, an influential mining entrepreneur in seventeenth-century Potosí. López de Quiroga was noteworthy because of how he integrated silver mining, refining, financing, and supply of inputs through land ownership; Bakewell called him “one of the most diverse and capable businessmen to appear in the whole span on the Spanish Empire in America” (BAKEWELL, 1988, p. xii). Bakewell’s book is notable on at least two levels: one, in the way that Bakewell took us into the life of this important entrepreneur, and another, in the way that the story of Potosí is told not through the prism of abstract entities, such as groups or classes, but rather from an individual who assembled the capital, expertise, and raw materials to turn silver ore into wealth. In putting an individual at the center of his narrative, Bakewell reminded us the power and insight that comes when people, rather than categories of people, become the focus of historical inquiry.

What does Bakewell’s approach to López de Quiroga tell us about environmental history? I think biographical method such as Bakewell used to tell a story of Potosí mining could be used to great effect in environmental history; indeed, as I describe below, several recent examples evidence how environmental historians have been using biographical approaches to gain new insight into familiar issues, or to draw out attention to new phenomena that are inseparable from the stories of individuals. Biography is a means to write engaged, critical, informative, environmental histories that, potentially, may reach broader audiences than environmental histories informed by other categories of analysis. Biographies may lead us to new sources of evidence and may encourage stronger linkages between environmental history and scholars of gender, ideas, and labor, among other sub-fields of history.

I have been thinking about how Bakewell’s biographical work might inform a “biographical” environmental history as I have worked on the story of two competing men who offered competing organizational and institutional models for irrigation in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas during the early twentieth century. The Lower Rio Grande Valley was the object of a massive early-twentieth-century land-speculation and propaganda campaign that aimed to settle white farmers and investors in a region dominated, demographically, by people of Mexican origin, and isolated from the US economy (Brannstrom and Neuman, 2009).



Two people attracted my attention as I aimed to create biographical narrative of environmental history in south Texas: John Shary and Charles Pease, each with diametrically opposed views on the organization of irrigation systems. They were both born in the latter part of the 1800s, and migrated to south Texas around the same time, in the 1910s. Shary was a land dealer who nearly entered politics; Pease was a lawyer who helped establish a bank, then became active in municipal politics. Shary's vision for irrigation was the norm in the Valley, but Pease's dream was never constructed. Shary owned a private irrigation firm based on pumps, while Pease wanted the US federal government to build a gravity irrigation project that never constructed. In public, Shary both supported massive earthen canals and the huge pumps necessary to fill them, but in more private moments, he admitted that made mistakes in his early operation of the irrigation system, and that water losses in earthen canals were very high. For Shary, irrigation water was the means by which his land held or increased value; the contradiction he faced was that the water he controlled had to accomplish two aims, which at times could be contradictory: water was a means to sell more land, but it was also a vital input into the farmers that paid for it, and the right to get it. For Pease, the connection between ownership of land and water was the beginning point to understand the Valley's fundamental contradiction: land entrepreneurs are incapable of pursuing profit and making decisions about irrigation and flood control in the best interests of farmers. Both men projected their own selves onto the irrigated landscape: Shary's white farmer-investor, reads the newspaper on his porch as he oversees a Hispanic worker picking grapefruit, and Pease's image of a farmer "at the end of the lateral," the epitome of a yeoman democracy that was exclusionary from the moment of its discursive invention in the Valley.

In focusing on two prominent individuals for an environmental history of irrigation in south Texas, I find several important claims made in the "new biography" as guiding principles. Perhaps the key text in this area is the work of Margadant (2000, p. 1), who argued that "biography is once again in fashion," having undergone a "resurrection" after many years of the heavy influence of "interpretive approaches drawn from the social sciences." For years, "individual life histories lay nearly as dormant as the dead." For Margadant, the "new biography" is poised to replace, at least partly, historical approaches informed by "collective rubrics" and "agglomerated

individuals,” such as class, community, minorities, crowds, and groups. In her interpretation, the ethnographic or cultural turn has challenged the materialist understanding of historical processes, and helped open the door for biographical approaches. But the new biography is not interested in writing about a “coherent self,” but rather, “a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time” (Margadant, 2000, 7). In particular, Margadant (2000, 9) offers two key suggestions. First, that “every social location offers a limited number of possibilities from which individuals can create a possible self.” Second, the subject of the new biography is necessarily the individual with “particular visibility” so that the biographical study may have the potential for challenging long held historical arguments.

Symptomatic of the resurgent interest in biography is a recent roundtable in the *American Historical Review* dedicated to “Historians and biography.” David Nasaw lamented that biography is “the profession’s unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the ruffraff” as a “lesser form of history” (NASAW, 2009, p. 573). The resurgence of biography, argues Nasaw, is a product of how biography “allows, even encourages, us to move beyond the strictures of identity politics without having to abandon its ever-expanding and often useful categories” (NASAW, 2009, p. 576). For Hellbeck, an historian of the Soviet Union, a critical question is “how and why the sources we that we treat as biographical raw material were produced in the first place” (HELLBECK, 2009, p. 615). For Brown, a biographer of Gandhi and Nehru, a biographical approach or “life histories” “enables a more nuanced methodology that allows the historian to shift gaze from the general theme to the particular and precise experience of people and groups” (BROWN, 2009, p. 587). Brown is concerned with prominent men, using Gandhi and Nehru to “gain insight into the changing political and social systems in which they functioned” (BROWN, 2009, p. 590). In women’s history, a biographical approach is well developed (BANNER, 2009, p. 580).

Moreover, Hearn and Knowles (2004, p. 8) discuss biographical approaches to labor history, suggesting how several historians are showing “new ways of reading a life” in that they “closely interrogate the experience and values of the historical actor in the context of time and place.” I see no reason why an interest in individuals, how

they construct meaning in their lives in relationship to other people, things, and places, could not be applied to individuals with particular relevance to the environment.

Indeed, in environmental history, the “new biography” informed by ideas such as Margadant’s constructed self, is congruent with Richard White’s argument for a “cultural turn.” White’s (2004) argument for a “cultural turn” in environmental history emphasized the attention scholars had begun to devote to competing and complex discourses about the environment, in addition to concerns for consumption and hybrid landscapes rather than wilderness. Discourses, of course, are created by individuals for particular reasons, in particular times and places, as people seek to create meaning in their lives, in the sense of Margadant’s “constructed selves.” Is it possible that we will better understand the environmental discourses if we more fully understand the individuals who create the discourses, and consider their complexities, their contradictions, and their “constructed selves”?

According to Mark Carey (2009, p. 229), Latin American environmental historians have “embraced the cultural turn” that White describes. He argues that the cultural turn represents an alternative to the “declensionist narratives of tragedy” (CAREY, 2009, p. 222) that have often attracted Latin American environmental histories around the themes of colonialism, capitalism, and conservation. Lise Sedrez, in her survey of Latin American environmental history, is largely in agreement with the need to move beyond the declensionist approach, as her identification of the history of ideas in environmental history suggests (2009, p. 266). In earlier work, I argued for a framework for nineteenth-century Latin American environmental history that would focus on territorial conflicts between states and communities, commodities, and knowledge necessary to extend territories and commodity production (Brannstrom and Gallini, 2004). We made no mention of biography, although one chapter in the volume focused precisely on the production of geographical knowledge through one person, Aimé Bonpland (Bell, 2004). In the last few years, however, we now have a much more solid basis on which to support a biographical approach. For Carey, the cultural turn represents a critical view of science, a focus on cultural landscapes, interest in environmental narratives, concerns for the consumption of nature, work on “unnatural disasters,” and focus on culture and gender. Carey would have these concerns replace the declensionist

narrative that will place the field on far stronger intellectual footing that is far better connected to the broader historiography. Carey's main target is Miller (2007, p. 4), who argued that "attitudes toward nature have yet to prove themselves historically significant."

In scholarly journals, recent articles have drawn out the individual, although this is not the "constructed self" that Margadant considered. Terrence Young (2009) has written on William J. Trent, a US government official concerned with racial segregation in campsites. In the late 1930s, Trent worked to stop racial segregation in US National Parks. Greg Bankoff (2009) has analyzed the several years that Gifford Pinchot, a prominent US forester, spent in the Philippines immediately following the Spanish-American War and who helped create early forestry laws adjusted to conditions in the Philippines. Simon Pooley (2009) has focused on the Dutch East India Company's commander during the early 1600s in the Cape of Good Hope. Jan Van Riebeeck's daily journal provided evidence for the early role of the Dutch in introducing plants meant to provide food for Dutch ships. Finally, Merchant (2010) worked on George Grinnell, the founder of the Audubon movement in the late 1800s. Grinnell was keen to include women into the Audubon movement, and, as Merchant argues, women helped restore the Audubon movement after its demise in the 1890s.

In Brazilian environmental history, a biographical approach has also been used by several scholars. Dean (1995), for example, paid attention to individuals, even if in passing; he wrote of Francisco Freire Alemão, the nineteenth-century botanist, and was careful to include discussion of Alberto José de Sampaio, Frederico Carlos Hoehne, and Armando Magalhães Correa, among others. Indeed, throughout his book he mentions individuals who might yield fascinating biographies for environmental historians to pursue. Pádua's (2002) concern with ideas regarding environmental destruction between 1786 and 1888, focusing on the writings of several prominent individuals, such as José Bonifácio and Feire Alemão, excavating various environmental criticisms. Franco and Drummond (2008) aim to reestablish a "second generation" of Brazilian scientists from the mid twentieth century as environmental leaders; for example, scientists such as Antônio Carlos Diegues have been criticized, unfairly according to Franco and Drummond (2008) by present-day authors. Other individuals attracting their attention include Alberto José Sampaio,

Armando Magalhães Corrêa, and Cândido de Mello Leitão—these are a “second generation” of environmentalists that is “remembered by unfair and uninformed criticism” (FRANCO and DRUMMOND, 2008, p. 726). Duarte (2009) provided a less sympathetic portrait of Mello Leitão, focusing on his connection to the authoritarian Vargas regime while emphasizing how his views favored a centralized state.

If the “cultural turn” in environmental history is to move in the direction identified by White and Carey, we would do well to consider biographical approaches—not of well known public figures, but rather focusing on the many less well known scientists, explorers, activists, and government officials who had direct involvement with human-environment issues. This approach might lead to new types of environmental stories that are less reliant upon categories such as class or group, and to working with new types of sources, getting us away from stale census data, for example. We would do well to ground or root the biographies in the landscape, so that we do not get far removed from the environmental processes that we seek to explain. Grounding biographies in particular environmental interventions, policies, and outcomes will serve us well to consolidate the “cultural turn” and to make broader claims about established claims in environmental history.



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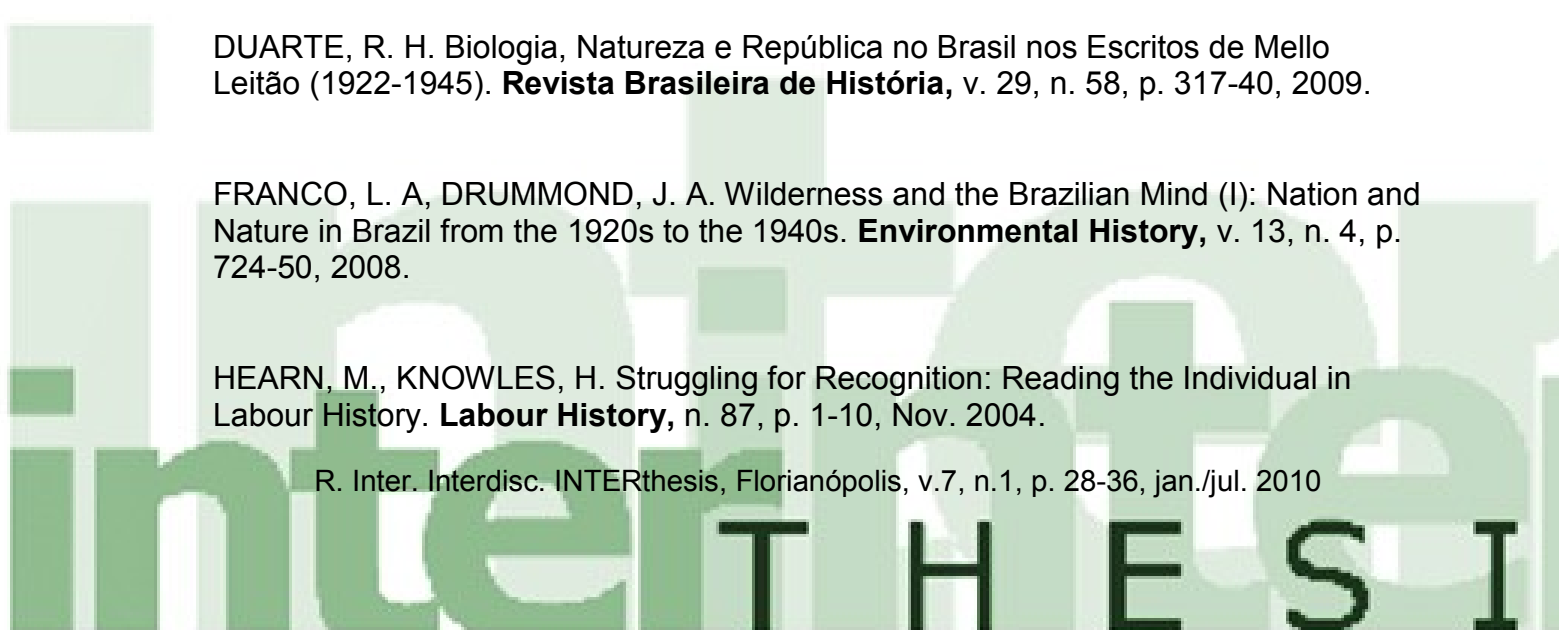
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