

Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 448 pp., \$24.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9-780-52161673-7. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i1.104.

In the introduction to *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment*, Joachim Radkau charts a course for an impartial environmental history, one not written in the style of a 'comic book', where ecological 'heroes fight villains', but rather a 'realistic history' in all its complexities. He argues that such a history should not be a didactic tale of humans violating an elusive 'pure nature', but rather a tale of humans and their labor, as well as stories of animals and landscapes (pp. 4-5). In this task, Radkau proves successful, and he has written an impressive and sweeping history of the human relationship with the natural world with all its puzzling nuances.

Radkau submits that humans—from goat herders to slash-and-burn farmers—have surely been aware through their destructive practices that they are undermining the ecological basis of their existence, and yet they do nothing about it. 'If one wanted to', he writes, 'it was not difficult to keep sheep and goats from destroying the forest' (p. 9). But humans tend to let their flocks destroy forests anyway. The explanation, Radkau suggests in the case of over-killing game, is natural: 'there is a broad consensus that no natural instinct urges the human hunter to practice sustainability' (p. 47). It appears that we undermine the environmental basis of our existence naturally and Radkau's *Nature and Power* is in large part the history of humanity's unsustainable practices on a global scale. The chapter organization is thematic, covering topics ranging from theoretical concerns in writing environmental history to colonialism and the historical limits of nature. The chapter organization makes sense, though at times this reader sought better chronological markers.

Radkau pushes for a study of the *longue durée*, because 'Slash-and-burn agriculture and pastures change the environment on a far more extensive scale than did the factories in the period of early industrialization' (p. 15). This is precisely the tack that Radkau takes, spending more time on topics such as early soil erosion and agricultural hydraulics than on modern industrial pollution and climate change. He also tackles the more theoretical concern of impartiality in environmental history. The cost of this emphasis is the near complete neglect of an environmental history of the oceans (the vast watery expanse receives three paragraphs). On the surface—or even below the surface—such history would appear to link global terrestrial histories. He takes aim at world religions and their views of nature, cautioning against drifting too far from solid materialist explanations. 'One must never confuse the history of religious ideas with the real history of the environment', he writes (p. 80). The 'real' history of the environment is accessed through ecological sciences and impartial histories, not the devotional statements of religion. Often world religions speak of escaping nature. This is an impossible goal from a materialist perspective, considering that we can never escape the confines of our porous, fleshy bodies. As Radkau convincingly illustrates, however, he believes that religion reveals something important about how humans perceive their relationship to nature and about their desire to simultaneously be in it and transcend it.

Radkau takes the reader on a whirlwind tour of world topics, from the hydraulic revolutions of China and Egypt to deforestation in Europe and Japan. In the process, Radkau probes some important paradigms in environmental studies. He offers a critique of the 'tragedy of the commons' and questions assumptions regarding

whether states or private individuals prove better stewards of forests (p. 140). He also spends considerable time on colonialism and the environment, challenging some of Alfred Crosby's work on the environmental (and epidemiological) consequences of European expansion. He takes aim at other watershed books in the field. In an analysis of Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, he argues that even in the context of the 'secularization and scientification' of nature, the 'core element of the divine lives on' (pp. 221-22). Nature, Radkau submits, is far from dead, even in the saccharine-smelling slaughterhouses of Chicago.

This is an impressive piece of scholarship and this reader applauds Radkau's commitment to the environmental histories of the pre-industrial world (the final chapters do address industrial topics, but they are less sophisticated). This commitment to the pre-industrial world, however, occurs at the expense of other important topics. By Chapter 5, 'At the Limits of Nature', the continuing discussion of soils, though important, had become redundant and tedious. As mentioned, the absence of the oceans is also hard to explain. In recent years, environmental historians have rolled up their sleeves—or they have rolled up their pant legs—and begun to write about oceans. Humanity appears on the brink of emptying the oceans of everything from codfish to Atlantic blue-fin tuna; more importantly, oceanic temperature changes and global coral reef bleaching pose profound challenges to terrestrial life. The globe, after all, is mostly blue; oceans surely connect global civilizations as do ideas such as capitalism. Finally, the fixation with the pre-industrial world leads to a neglect of other important topics, ranging from a global analysis of mining to deadly toxic pollution episodes. Slash-and-burn agriculture transformed landscapes on a massive scale, but mining waste and chemical toxins, such as endocrine disruptors, threaten life on Earth at its most basic levels. These chemicals represent a new kind of threat and their brief treatment under-represents the profound dangers of the industrial age.

These criticisms aside, I found Radkau's *Nature and Power* instructive at several levels. It serves as a persuasive reminder that environmental issues are not new to our time and that human history is replete with them. There probably never was a time that humanity lived in harmony with nature and environmental historians should be careful not to suggest as much. Moreover, Radkau's provocative assumption that we are not naturally inclined to sustainability makes the challenges we face all the more daunting. Ironically, perhaps the great faiths have it right: the answer to our environmental challenges lies in the transcendence of our apparently natural propensity to destroy Earth.

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