



The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?

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WHAT UNDERPINS the study of history is the notion of human agency, the ability of people to act intentionally to shape their worlds. When modern historical scholarship emerged in the nineteenth century, it recounted the ability of European male elites to shape political and intellectual arrangements. With the rise of social history after World War II, historians sought to demonstrate that intentionality and purposive action were not solely the preserve of the powerful. In short, the premise underlying social history was the belief that agency resides in all human beings—not only elite European men, but Native Americans, women, workers, colonized peoples, slaves. More recently, environmental historians have argued that nature too has agency. This claim often has been met with skepticism. After all, the argument goes, although nature may resist and complicate human actions, producing all sorts of unintended consequences, nature has neither the intentionality nor the choice that humans do. Nature may constitute a dynamic *structure*, but it is not an agent. Human beings alone are the motor of history.¹

I agree that there is a problem when environmental historians assert an “agency” for nature, but it is not that we are confusing agency and structure. Rather, the problem is that we have not overtly challenged common assumptions about *human* agency. What are these assumptions? Typically, the agency of human beings is distinguished by our ability to convert ideas into purposeful actions. Thus while it is not only human action that alters the world, human action remains unique. To invoke a classic example, while a bee can build a hive, the bee cannot envision the hive prior to its building. The bee just builds, whereas the human is presumed to think and then build. The bee is not an agent, while the architect clearly is.² This assertion locates agency in the human mind, separating it from both the body and the non-human environment.

But what if, instead of following the model of social history and insisting on the “agency of nature,” environmental historians followed those scholars who insist on the need to think about agency in altogether different terms. To give but two examples, Bruno Latour, in his studies of modern scientists and engineers, has maintained that agency is better understood as something that is dispersed among humans and non-humans in what he terms “actor-networks.”³ Tim Ingold, an anthropologist, has argued that our point of departure for social analysis should be the organism-in-its-environment rather than the self-contained individual confronting an external world. This perspective, he suggests, allows us to overcome the dichotomy between evolution and history, biology and culture.

Environmental historians are uniquely positioned to contribute to this rethinking and rewriting of agency because we study the interactions of humans and the non-human world in such detail. And what we often uncover is not merely the way that nature influences and constrains human *actions*, but also the way that particular environments shape human *intentions*. What I want to suggest, following Ingold, is that the bee/architect metaphor does not hold. It is through practical engagement with the world, not disembodied contemplation, that human beings develop their plans. Let me use the example of tidewater rice cultivation in colonial Georgia, drawing on the work of Mart Stewart.⁴

Viewed from a distance, a tidewater rice plantation resembled, in the words of one planter, “a huge hydraulic machine,” a rational design that humans had imposed on nature. But Stewart immediately complicates that perception. No overarching plan ever existed for tidewater rice cultivation on the southeastern coast; in fact, no one is quite sure how the system originated in America (although west African slaves probably brought many of the techniques). But certainly for those who found themselves in this location, both slaves and planters, the characteristics of the Georgia landscape suggested certain alternatives. To put it simply, tidewater rice cultivation could be imagined on the Georgia coast but not in the Colorado desert. Actual methods, moreover, hardly comprised a unified system; they were idiosyncratic and often ad hoc. Many actions undoubtedly emerged spontaneously in the fields, and only later were they passed on as “ideas” or “expertise.” What we might label planters’ (or slaves’) “intentions” were always under adjustment. In other words, it was not merely the particular techniques of rice cultivation but the very ability to envision those techniques that emerged when planters and slaves interacted with the tidewater lowlands.

I am not advocating some variant of environmental determinism here. To the contrary, the development of rice plantations was always contingent upon the shifting presence of certain human and non-human elements. Nor am I suggesting that there is no difference between the ways that humans and bees inhabit the world. But the notion of a human “agent” and all that it implies is, like environmental determinism, too simple to describe what took place. Even if agency is always constrained by “structure,” the very idea of agency concentrates a vast amount of power in a supposedly rational center, while constructing non-human elements as always external and secondary. What I would like to suggest is the possibility of writing environmental histories in a way that critically foregrounds the issue of agency, rather than taking it for granted.

But does this really matter? Timothy Mitchell has argued that by failing to put human agency into question, the telling of history helps reproduce familiar forms of power, particularly the power of technical expertise.⁵ If we study the emergence of tidewater rice plantations, or genetically engineered crops, as outcomes—however unintended and constrained—of an exclusively human agency, our narratives themselves contribute to the separation between ideas and their objects. We imply that some kind of universal reason exists apart from the material world, and that history is (still) the story of (western) reason’s gradual unfolding.

Thus, perhaps, environmental history should strive not merely to put nature into history, but to put the human mind back in the world. Perhaps our narratives should emphasize that human intentions do not emerge in a vacuum, that ideas often cannot be clearly distinguished from actions, that so-called human agency cannot be separated from the environments in which that agency emerges. It is worth considering how our stories might be different if human beings appeared not as the motor of history but as partners in a conversation with a larger world, both animate and inanimate, about the possibilities of existence. If that is one of our goals, then social history is not our model, and longstanding assumptions about “structure” and “agency” will not suffice.

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NOTES

1. See the discussion between William H. Sewell, Jr. and Ted Steinberg at http://historycooperative.press.uiuc.edu/phorum/read.php?f=13&i=5&t=5#reply_5.
2. The example is from Karl Marx; however, I come to it via Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
3. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
4. Mart A. Stewart, “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*”: *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).
5. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).