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# The Environmental Crisis and the Tasks of History in Latin America

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## SUMMARY

The study of history in a sense that can be called ‘environmental’ is a discipline yet to be created in Latin America. This has become an obstacle that must be overcome if we are to understand better the serious social and environmental deterioration of the region. To this end, Latin American historians must engage in dialogue simultaneously with their own societies and with environmental historians from the North Atlantic world. Collaboration between our societies – so different in so many ways – is essential if we want to survive the global environmental problems created by the world system of which we are both part.

## 1. RECALLING AN EXPERIENCE

History, it has been said, is always easier to understand than it is to change or escape.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the events characteristic of this ‘fin de siècle’ from that Southern part of our Hemisphere that begins just below the US-Mexican border, where I come from, this reference to the nature of history defines quite precisely the kind of challenge being faced by Latin American societies: that of understanding history once again, to attempt to change it if they want to avoid the many menaces posed by a rapidly deteriorating natural, social, cultural and political environment.

The region has changed a lot in its realities, as well as in the dominant perceptions about its own future. In less than 10 years, Latin America has gone from an exultant optimism about its possibilities for social and economic progress to a dark mood of pessimism and uncertainty. Today, many commentators agree that what started in 1982 as a simple economic crisis is now a crisis of our civilisation, as it faces manifold challenges from the ongoing transformation of the world as we once thought we knew it.<sup>2</sup>

For our societies, the main issue at stake is the simultaneous increase in the rate of destruction of both natural and human resources, in the exacerbating

context of a 'plundering economy',<sup>3</sup> the roots of which go deeply into our past, at least to the 16th century. And the most important part of this issue in my region is the existing relation between poverty in society and the impoverishment of Nature.

The easiest answer to the questions associated with this relationship is to affirm that poverty is a major factor in the deterioration of our environment. In this perspective, reducing poverty – especially through economic growth, as it is understood in the 'structural adjustment policies' promoted by international financial institutions and implemented with singular enthusiasm by the majority of the governments of the region – should suffice to preserve Nature from further deterioration.

There are, of course, other opinions, more complex in their approach and in their political, economical and cultural implications for our societies, and correspondingly less popular among our governments. For instance, such social scientists as Fernando Tudela in México, and Juan Jované in Panamá,<sup>4</sup> who come from quite distinct ideological and academic approaches, agree that the impoverishment of both society and Nature in Latin America results from the same structural causes. What they mean by this is that the problems we face are the consequence of the ways our societies have been organised to fulfil some specific functions within the realities of the international system that has existed for at least the last 150 years. When we note that in 1991 the ten most important export goods of Latin America were essentially the same they as in 1891<sup>5</sup> – in much greater amounts, of course – this point of view appears quite convincing.

This is not the place to recall the many events that brought me in contact with environmental history as understood and practised in the United States. Suffice it to say that around 1990, I became intrigued by the contrast between official optimism and repeated bureaucratic failures in dealing with the ever increasing environmental problems in my country and my region. Coming from a career in the Humanities, I naturally tried to look for an explanation in history, only to discover that the study of history in a sense that may be called 'environmental' was still a discipline to be created in my region. So, without knowing about the works of authors like Donald Worster, Richard White and Alfred Crosby, I became convinced that an environmental history was needed for Latin America, in order to understand better the serious environmental deterioration we have been suffering since the 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

Through the work of my mother, the Panamanian geographer Ligia Herrera, on the environmental impact of extensive cattle-raising in Panamá,<sup>7</sup> I became aware that my society had destroyed as much of the rain forest between 1950 and 1990 as it had between 1550 and 1950. I was deeply shocked by this extraordinary intensification of the process of deforestation, which has now created the possibility of the total elimination of my country's rain forests by the year 2000.<sup>8</sup> So I began to try to envision a theoretical model which would allow me clearly to define a problem for study, and the questions to be asked in studying it.

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I know little about the way theory is conceived by English-speaking academics, but in our Latin American academic culture, with its French and German roots, the notions of system and structure receive great attention – to the point that we are used to thinking of all phenomena as the expression of the relations underlying to them, more or less as Max Weber signalled. To be objective, in this sense, means essentially to be logically loyal to the ‘objet d’étude’ which we previously define as a ‘constellation of relations’ that for cultural reasons happens to be meaningful for the researcher. In this approach, the ‘constellation’ to be studied makes real sense only in its relations with the whole ‘galaxy’ of knowledge pertinent to the current field of study.<sup>9</sup> Looking at it another way, we could say that one characteristic of this approach is the tension between the construction of specific concepts and the necessity of producing open results that can be incorporated into holistic ‘visions’ of reality, as Alfred Crosby seem so enthusiastically to commend.

To do this in my own research, I started by defining the ‘theoretical model’ I wanted to work with, in three basic areas:

- i. A definition of the field of relations, resulting from the interaction between societies and the environment in which they exist. This definition of the field should be able to help me identify a set of categories through which to direct my questions to an ample number of sources about the past roots of the present environmental problems in my region.
- ii. An articulated set of questions, resulting from the application of those categories. These questions, once addressed to the field of relations previously defined, should offer us the answers we need in order to characterise it in its basic stages of development.
- iii. The creation of a basic scheme of periodisation, able to facilitate the organisation of the answers so obtained in a way useful to the study of that field in an historical perspective, both in what has to do with the characterisation of the intrinsic features of every period, and in the identification of the relations of change and continuity between those periods, in a Braudelian sense.

For the definition of the field, I started with a concept of ‘environment’ developed by Osvaldo Sunkel in 1980 as, simultaneously, ‘the natural biophysical ambit and its successive artificial transformations, as well as the spatial deployment of these’.<sup>10</sup> Looking at things in this way, it was possible for me, in that early moment, to conceive of environmental history as research on the processes of artificial transformation of the natural biophysical ambit, as related to successive styles of development in a given region. This was enough for me as a starting point.

I still had to work on identification of the ways and means for a dialogue between environmental history so conceived and other disciplines in the social

sciences. So, my next step brought me to a more detailed reflection on the 'constellation' I called 'the environment', initially distinguishing three fields of relations, interacting one with another: those of nature, society and production. Culture was for me inherent to all of them, in the way Antonio Gramsci describes it as 'a vision of the world with an ethic system in accordance with its structure', which emphasises the narrowness of the linkages between acting, thinking and believing.

Finally, I obtained a model which defines the field of study as the tridimensional space resulting from the interaction of those fields along an axis of time. Environmental history emerged from that interaction as a part of culture, as does science too – which is not difficult to conceive in my education, where the old French division of the sciences into the two fields of the 'human' and of the 'natural' is still alive and well. It is my impression that interactions among these fields are different in different societies, along the axis of time and within the 'times' of a common historical era, such as that of the world system we know today. In some societies, usually primitive ones, the sphere of the natural is hegemonic; in others, underdeveloped but well organised, the sphere of the social is the one predominant – and at very high levels in times of special stress, as seems to have happened in North Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and seems to be happening in Cuba today. Finally, in societies like those of the North Atlantic Basin and Japan, hegemony seems to correspond to the sphere of the technological, which imposes its logic and needs over the other two. An interaction like this, of course, is always conflictive, and the resulting equilibrium is always transitory and relative to multiple factors inside and outside of the model at the level of each society, or even at the regional level. For instance, there is no contradiction between the high level of rationality in the realm of technology in North Atlantic society and the (apparent) high level of irrationality of the 'plundering economy', through which the peripheral regions supply the centre of the system with cheap and abundant natural resources.

As for the questions to be asked from the model, the first one seems to be why the 'spheres' came into a particular state of interaction and (relative) equilibrium in a given society, region and/or civilisation. The second one could be about the limits of that equilibrium, and the role played by different factors – economy, culture, politics, and nature itself – in the process.

While at this stage of my work, I discovered – from the March 1990 issue of the *Journal of American History*, and from Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* – that an environmental history already existed, and I gained a basic formulation of its theory and methods.<sup>11</sup> Things now began to move in a different way. Even if I had been travelling in approximately the same direction, the approach I came in contact with through the work of American environmental historians was infinitely wider, more comprehensive and stimulating than anything I had imagined before.

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It seems to me that authors like Donald Worster propose a theoretical model aimed at incorporating nature into history as an agent as active as economy, culture, or social conflict, and closely interacting with all of them. And that kind of approach reminds me of the way the Cuban philosopher and politician José Martí (1853-1895) understood history when he wrote that every time an historical or individual act is studied, 'it is seen that human intervention in nature accelerates, changes or stops its work, and that the whole of history is just the narration of the works of adjustment, and combats, between the extra-Human nature, and the Human nature'.<sup>12</sup>

Seen from a Latin American perspective, the model proposed by authors like Worster appears to conceive of the historical process as the interaction of three basic dimensions of reality: nature; the use of it by men through social and political structures; and culture, understood as systems of values and modes of perception with important ethical implications for social behaviour toward the natural world. Each of these dimensions has its own legitimacy, but none of them can really be understood without the other two; and the field of environmental history became defined at the point where they interact. It was quite exciting for me to see an approach so different from the 'case study model' so common with many other authors from your cultural area. But I still feel that the way you think about environmental history has been conceived – and it has to be so – from the perspective of a society that, although sharing with my own a common planet, has come to be in many ways different from mine.

I can, of course, agree with the author of *The Vulnerable Earth* when he writes:

If each of us now has two countries to care about, we also have two histories to write, that of our own country and that of 'planet Earth'. And it is high time we began asking what that second history has been, began pursuing not merely the history of this people or that living in isolation from all others ... but the history of all peoples colliding and cooperating with one another on a shrinking island in space.<sup>13</sup>

But, even when agreeing in the general, I feel like something is still missing here. Countries, as I understand it, do not relate directly with one the another on a planetary scale, but through regional mid-levels that function as instances of central, peripheral and semiperipheral articulation in a world system. This notion of a world system could be of great importance for the development of a planetary history. Thinking about the ways nature, culture and production interact over time in societies sharing a common historical era, it is my impression that the resulting differences could be explained by referring to the regional 'times' that coexist and give form to another, 'global' time.

It can be said, for instance, that within this common world system, the same processes that has made your societies more and more homogeneous has made ours more and more heterogeneous and conflictive, both at the regional and the

national level. In my region and up to the present day, non-capitalist visions and social practices coexist in conflict with – and do not merely precede – capitalism. That is what allows people like the Catalonian economist and ‘green’ anarchist Joan Martínez-Alier to talk about an ‘ecology of the poor’, acting outside and against the market economy in many Latin American countries, and contributing one of the local factors constitutive of the relative equilibrium I talked about before.

This is illustrated by the socio-environmental conflicts associated with the presence in my country of the Panamá Canal, that magnificent example of the kind of highly centralised bureaucratic institution developed in association with large scale hydraulic works that Donald Worster describes in *Rivers of Empire*. Being a lock-Canal, it depends on supplies of fresh water provided by the Chagres river, and of course that supply depends in many ways on the well-being of the Chagres river basin. But the Canal, created and managed by the US government in a US ‘wittfogelian’ style since 1904, also coexists with the rest of the Panamanian society, including our rural poor.

Deprived of their access to the land in other parts of the country by large capitalist agricultural enterprises, those poor peasants had been slowly migrating into the Canal basin, deforesting it for cattle-raising and small scale and primitive agricultural production, and so affecting the water-retention capacity of the Gatún Lake. Both the peasants and the Canal need the same space for different and mutually exclusive purposes, because both represent different kinds of capitalist development: the peasants, for the small local market economy; the Canal, for global, multinational commercial purposes and, of course, for military purposes as well. So, conflict is inevitable, endemic, recurrent and sometimes violent, especially when the army gets involved.

So, this dispute over land and water is at the same time global and local, and it has its origins in a fully developed style of capitalist development, characteristic not of Panamá, but of the way Panamá exists within the world capitalist system. The parts are articulated, but not integrated, and their mutual relation is necessarily conflictive and unstable. Stability and harmony, if ever achieved, will also depend on both local and world scale reforms that may allow a different use of the basin. But this is only understandable through an historical-environmental-systemic approach, and that kind of approach is yet to be created in this case.

Looking at problems like these from the periphery of that world system, the necessity seems self-evident for a comparative analysis between the evolution of the relations with the natural world in both our regions – as suggested by Donald Worster in his essay *Transformations of the Earth*.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it is also evident that such a comparative analysis should take into account that the development of capitalism in Latin America has already gone a long way since the dominance of financial capital (mostly at first of European origin) over

the exploitation and marketing of natural resources of this region first began around 1870.

By the late 1930s, for example, the capitalist organisation of Panamanian agriculture and its expressions through the problems associated with monoculture were clearly established both as a fact and as a dominant tendency, the later development of which was essentially quantitative.<sup>15</sup> The landscapes, productive activities, economic and social organisation, and the regional culture associated with that kind of capitalist development were all essentially defined more than 65 years ago. Much has happened since then, of course, but most of it has been the accumulated results of the realities then established, which have acted as long-term major premises.

Thus I consider that it could be of great help for a planetary history to get nature, society, and production as analysis levels for environmental history, in explicit contact with the factor that made them 'planetary' and open to comparison, that is, with the way the world system effectively works. Alfred Crosby has already made very important contributions in this direction, and one can also find many other examples. But I think it is our duty in the South to re-create the other face of the world system we all share, and to research and debate the differential effects brought on by the de-accumulation, de-socialisation and de-culturation processes that our societies were and are subject to.<sup>16</sup>

The definition of my own research area has led me to consider the possibility of applying some of the theoretical, methodological and historical concepts developed by environmental historians in the North Atlantic world to the definition of environmental history as a new field in Latin America. That is not an easy thing to do, since it implies the contrasting of experiences derived from quite different realities, but still the task seems possible since both societies belong to a global capitalist world system within which their differences exist and interact.

For instance, the way Donald Worster refers to capitalism and its consequences for the environment in *Dust Bowl*,<sup>17</sup> considering it as a complex economic culture that expresses itself as 'a mode of production that is constantly evolving in many particular ways and varying from country to country, from region to region, from decade to decade', has allowed me to define part of my task as that of trying to identify in the most precise possible way what these variations had been in Latin America. Besides that, the importance given by Worster to the fact that capitalism preserves in all its variations 'a recognisable identity ...: a core of values and assumptions more permanent than these outer forms – an enduring ethos ... that gives the economic culture continuity', led me to try to characterise that 'ethos' in the circumstance of my region, as a factor of *longue durée* in the way the Latin American societies relate with their environment.



## 2. DIFFERENT FINDINGS ON A COMMON ROAD

In trying to define the historical specificities of capitalism in Latin America that should be considered of importance for an environmental history of my region, I found a most valuable source in the book *La Géographie Humaine*, by the French geographer Jean Brunhes, first published in 1910. Brunhes here makes use of the concept of *raubwirtschaft* or ‘plundering economy’<sup>18</sup> to analyse what he called the ‘destructive use’ of natural resources in a most intense manner in the case of the colonial countries of his time.

While the destructive use of some non-renewable natural resources is inherent to any mode of production, what Brunhes was referring to was the plundering of all resources of value for the industrialised economies in what would today be called the peripheral regions of the world market. And it appears to me that ‘raubwirtschaft’ was the fundamental axis along which capitalism developed in Latin America in the past, and it continues, so defining the *first* of the specificities I was trying to look for. The *second* one has to do with the fact that the ‘raubwirtschaft’ developed as a general mode of relation with nature under the hegemony – financial, technological and cultural, but not necessarily political – of foreign capital; i.e., subordinated to needs, interests, demand and prices generated in the North Atlantic societies: particularly Great Britain from the 1870s until 1914,<sup>19</sup> and the US afterwards.

To these two specificities, I would add a *third* one, in the political realm. Different from Africa and most of Asia, Latin American nation-states were created and basically organised and defined as institutionalised systems of internal power relations in the first half of the 19th century. So, when North Atlantic capitalism began to give shape to the world market under its hegemony in the way we know it today, it found already organised political counterparts in most of our countries, mostly in the form of oligarchies of landlords eager to associate with foreign capital, offering abundant ‘undeveloped’ land and resources and plenty of cheap labour in exchange for investment capital and technology.

These oligarchies did not simply give away their internal power to foreigners. On the contrary, they used that power as a commodity and a guarantee in their association with foreign investors: one should never, never, underestimate the capacity of these oligarchies, then and now, to understand and defend their own interests. ‘Dependency’, in this sense, is as useful as it is dangerous a term in defining the kind of relations that took shape between the Latin American oligarchies and their North Atlantic counterparts from this period on.

Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy*<sup>20</sup> especially helped me to understand this and to identify what is probably a *fourth* specificity of our environmental history, in the cultural realm. The process of creation of the basic conditions for the development of capitalism in Latin America – a market for land and a market for labour – happened through the violent expropriation, from around the 1850s,

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of very important non-capitalist sectors of our societies, mostly indian and peasant communities, and of land held in non-capitalist forms of property by the Catholic church.<sup>21</sup> All of this was quite different from what Adam Smith, for instance, described as the ways and reasons for the development of capitalism in rural England. It means that capitalism was developed in Latin America, from its very start, without the presence of medium and small-scale rural capitalist producers, of the kind described for instance in *Dust Bowl* for the first period of occupation of the Southern Plains, before agribusiness became king in the 1940s.

What happened in Latin America was that the non-capitalist producers, after being expropriated, were partially converted into free workers, and partially expelled to the worst lands, so that the better lands could be used for the development of monoculture of exportable goods. From this resulted a *fifth* difference, in the economic and technological realms, with important implications for the socio-cultural one. That was the re-emergence of newly excised societies, differentiated *and* articulated along historical fractures of nearly geological persistence, which were at the same time obscured for the most part behind the turmoil of the conflict between modernity and tradition (or, what is the same, between 'liberals' and 'conservatives') within the capitalist – i.e., oligarchic – sector of those societies.

As early as 1845, that excision among the capitalist and non-capitalist sectors of our societies was admirably expressed by the Argentinian politician and writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in his book *Facundo. Civilización y Barbarie*, without reading which it is impossible adequately to understand what – and how – was going on in the region at that time. There, Sarmiento declared: 'To be or not to be savages, that is all it is about for us', meaning that the fate of our societies depended on the outcome of a conflict between civilisation and barbarism that he identified as crucial at that particular historical moment.

It is interesting to note that this conflict evolved in a very different way from that of the war of Euro-Americans against native Americans during the same period. With notable exceptions such as the interior of Argentina, where the natives were totally wiped out with the enthusiastic support and collaboration of Sarmiento himself (who, by the way, always considered the US as he saw it as an absolute model to follow in the path of progress), in most of Latin America the conflict tended to be solved through a transaction, under which the oligarchies opted not for the extermination of natives and *mestizos*, but for the reconstruction of a hegemony defined in terms of a re-elaboration of the capitalist ethos which the oligarchs quickly learned about in their dealings with their North Atlantic peers.

The subsequent coexistence within our societies of two different, virtually antagonistic, ways of relating with nature, and two different visions of the role of nature in the life of society, defines a *sixth* difference to consider in this analysis. That is, that in contrast to the conflictive interaction between 'arcadian' and 'imperial' visions of nature within the North Atlantic societies since the 18th

century (as described in *Nature's Economy*), the 'imperial' vision has reigned alone in Latin America since the late 19th century and virtually until today, vehemently and many times violently excluding from the realm of culture – as understood by the oligarchical elite – what in other circumstances might have evolved as the equivalent, if never the equal, of the kind of 'arcadian' vision Worster describes, elaborated upon the experiences of the non-capitalist sectors of our societies, whether native, *mestizo*, Afro or Iberian.

This exclusion of the non-capitalist experience from the realm of the dominant culture had other important consequences for us. Our oligarchical elites, in effect appropriated for themselves the role of representatives of civilisation in the region, in a most peculiar way. The way Worster describes civilisation as a problem for the Victorian culture, and the different strategies developed to face that problem within that culture, has helped me better to understand the way our oligarchical elites conceived themselves and their assumed role as organisers of society and nature in our countries. In *Nature's Economy*, he states that:

Civilization has never cinched up well on the human frame; now and then it has to be tightened or let out a few notches. The problem is that man, like the rest of nature, is not born civilized, broken to ride and firmly saddled. So it seems ordained that the process of civilizing mankind must go on and on, never getting a secure hold or a perfectly adjusted fit. But in the late Victorian age, from the 1860s to the end of the century, there appeared an unusually fierce determination to make the civilizing process stick good and tight, once and for all. Never before had this demand of the times seemed so important to attain. In fact, the defining demand of the times may have been the need for an aggressive, resolute, even violent force of Culture to harness and subdue the nature that Darwin, among others, found so menacing. It is, in short, hard to exaggerate the pervasiveness and significance of this impulse toward civilization in the Anglo-American thought of the period.<sup>22</sup>

As sharers of that pervasive impulse, our oligarchical elites also perceived themselves at the wrong side of the ' yawning gulf between savagery and civilisation'. This helps to understand why, in that circumstance, they identified themselves with the first of the strategies mentioned by Worster, virtually disdaining the other two completely. That is, they conceived themselves as destined to lead their societies along the path of progress, and to defend that path in a fiercely 'competitive struggle for existence' against both nature and savagery or, in more precise terms, against a nature defined as the environment of savagery.

Considering this way of looking at nature and at themselves on the part of Latin American oligarchies, it is tempting to say that there is a *seventh* Latin American specificity to be noted in the role that politics and its most extreme instrument, violence, has played and is playing in the continuous reorganisation of nature and societies in my region. But this may be an even ampler phenom-

enon, whose roots are traceable long before the European conquest, in events like the Mesoamerican and Andean transitions from the coexistence (antagonistic or not) of agricultural communities, to the emergence of tributary empires, as described by Conrad and Demarest in their book *Religión e Imperio*.<sup>23</sup> And in its very amplitude, this role of politics is probably common to the history of the relations of every human society with its natural world.

Anyhow, violence – from the European conquest between 1500 and 1550, to the wars for independence and ‘liberal reform’ that devastated my region between 1810 and 1865 – seems to have been decisive both in the creation of preconditions indispensable for the region to be able to respond to demands of external origin for the exploitation of certain natural resources, and in the way to do so at the socio-technological organisational level. In both cases, too, the continual use of authoritarian methods of government – including the repression, often violent, of alternative visions and attempts at social organisation, associated with different modes of relation with nature – has always been necessary among us to keep those preconditions working adequately.<sup>24</sup> So, the almost absolute hegemony of the ‘imperial’ vision in its most crude expression is the real fact to deal with here. Working against nature in order to plunder her: this is the ethos we are talking about.

This situation, for its part, must be explained in relation to the absence in Latin America – and especially in this period – of an intellectual sector equivalent to that which developed the arcadian vision in the North Atlantic societies. A middle class of intellectuals, of the kind of Gilbert White and Henry David Thoreau, has never really existed as a sociological entity in our region, but even so, that did not necessarily exclude the possibility of our developing an arcadian vision of our own.

In the creation of a non-oligarchical vision of Nature in Latin America, a very important contribution was made by the Cuban philosopher and revolutionary politician José Martí, who lived in exile in New York from 1881, making occasional trips to Washington DC and Florida, before leaving the USA to fight and die for the independence of his country in 1895. The importance of Martí for an environmental history of Latin America has just started to be understood.<sup>25</sup>

While living in the United States, Martí worked as a free-lance correspondent for newspapers in México, Venezuela and, most of all, Argentina. Five of the 28 volumes of his complete works are dedicated to his ‘American Scenes’. He was a very acute and well-informed observer of life in the East and Central-South regions of the United States in those years, and very familiar with the works of authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, Henry George, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, as well as with Father McGlynn, a spiritual leader of the poor Irish catholic immigrant workers in New York in the late 1880s.

Martí, mostly inspired by his American sources and sympathies, was the most important of the very few voices – others would include the Brazilian

authors Euclides Da Cunha and Gilberto Freyre – which were raised against the oligarchical vision of nature in Latin American newspapers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is important also to note that Martí closely linked his own vision of nature with, on the political side, his struggle for self-determination for the Latin American nation-states. In his most important essay, *Nuestra América*, simultaneously published in New York and México City in January 1891, ‘nature’ becomes a widely used political concept. In this essay, Martí attempts to transcend Sarmiento’s dichotomy by saying, for instance, that there was not a real conflict between civilisation and barbarity in our countries but, instead, another one between ‘false erudition, and nature’.

The works and thoughts of Martí left a very deep and lasting impression in what, at least until the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1940 – and of course the Cuban one since 1959 – may be called an ‘underground grass roots culture’ in Latin America. Today, he has been largely legitimised as a fundamental source for our cultural identity as a region, and I think he has still very much to offer. In my opinion, his ideas about nature, self determination, and what may be called – in the current environmental debate – ‘sustainable development’, offer a very fertile ground for the collaboration between our cultures and societies, without which the environmental problems of our Hemisphere will never be solved.

This kind of legacy is not something to be disdained in times like these, when two basic truths seem already to be defining our future. In the first place, that ‘development’, as conceived by the civilisation we share, is becoming less and less sustainable every day. And second, that collaboration between our peoples – so different in so many ways – has become unavoidable if we want to survive. History can help us to understand how have we arrived at this situation. It may also reveal to us some new ways to work together, and go beyond.

### 3. WORKING TOGETHER

In Latin America today, the presence of ecology in our cultural and political life reproduces, once again, old difficulties already faced by our societies in integrating ourselves. A dominant vision of nature results that proclaims as ‘natural’ – and not historical – the way the practices and values of business management organise human actions and relations, including those under which nature is reduced in its essence to the condition of a set of resources to be exploited as intently as possible, under the rule of the demands of our external markets.

This being so, an environmental history in my region must question that ‘natural’ image in the current relations existing between the socio-economic structure and the environment, making clear that, as Juan Jované says

under certain conditions of human organisation, in which social relations become asymmetric, the relations between production and nature become also contradictory.

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On the contrary, a harmonic, synergetic relation between production and nature could only be possible in a society in which social relations are also harmonic.<sup>26</sup>

But to do so, a Latin American environmental history should face two other tasks. The first one is that of developing itself, not in isolation, but in a simultaneous dialogue both with its counterparts in other places of the world and with its own societies in the region. Unless this is done, the debate on environmental issues in Latin America will keep on avoiding the political inconvenience of taking into account the contradictions Jované talks about. And at the same time, it will only be by working with the world, and not against it, that we shall be able to create a new kind of public awareness about our environmental problems, less dependent on governmental approval and support than that existing today.

The regional specificities of that common ground of understanding will be decisively important in the design of the strategies for social action and cultural change that are necessary to guarantee the efficacy of political action, and the economic transformations that are indispensable to face the socio-environmental crisis that affects us. That is why it is so important to create the historical knowledge necessary to understand the kind of community we can become, at a moment in which, as never before, our destiny coincides with that of the rest of our species.

These regional-level tasks, on the other hand, will only have some chance of success if they are done with a clear understanding of their relation with the problems of a global order that are posed by the current environmental crisis. At this wider level, a Latin American environmental history could make a significant contribution, for instance, to the debate on the concept of sustainable development, which is today the most important space at our disposition for the creation of a new North-South consensus on the definition of the means necessary to face the global deterioration of the biosphere.

This contribution should assume at least two main directions. The first one should be that of facilitating the understanding of the historical character of the debate itself. That could be one of the most effective ways for pushing it beyond its current tendency to conceive the problem as one of more efficient management of natural resources, rather than as one of better comprehension of the origin and rationality of the ways of relating with the natural world that sustain the current model for economic growth, and within which our region is seen mostly as an 'economic frontier' with unlimited resources – which is false, of course.

In a debate so historicised, a Latin American environmental history should also have to face the task of characterising the differences between our environmentalisms and those of the North Atlantic societies, in order to facilitate the identification of new possibilities for the participation of my region in the search for mechanisms of global co-operation; thus helping to overcome the current Hemispheric conflicts which tend to aggravate further the crisis we share. As we have seen, there are still frontiers to be explored in Latin American culture,

which may offer us visions of how a far-sighted use of natural resources can coexist in close association with the need to incorporate solutions to the problems of our social majorities, particularly those of poverty and social and political marginality.<sup>27</sup>

These kinds of coincidence – which, from a Latin American perspective, would make it necessary to redefine the concept of ‘development’ itself, with the capacity to offer at the same time economic growth, social welfare, political participation and a much more responsible relation with our environment – constitute a still unknown reserve of elements necessary to facilitate dialogues among ourselves in Latin America, and with others who are facing problems and preoccupations of the same kind in their own regions. So, incorporating that cultural reserve into the current cultural debate in my region has become a new task – as urgent as it is fascinating – that awaits contributions from a wide array of disciplines in the human and the natural sciences.<sup>28</sup>

Latin American environmental history should continue the pioneer efforts of our own authors, such as Nicolo Gligo and Jorge Morello, and those of the North Atlantic world, such as Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove, among many others. And it will also require the search for new ways of mutual understanding and collaboration between the natural and the human sciences, so as to find the means to combine them in a new kind of intellectual enterprise able to point to an even wider problem, and to a richer promise.

It seems that the scholars from Latin America are not alone in their loss of that capacity for an ecumenical way of learning and thinking, characteristic in other times of such men as Martí and Darwin, to give examples on both sides of the Atlantic, or like Martí and Thoreau, in this Hemisphere. But the new kind of challenges we are facing today is rapidly creating a new circumstance, which may contribute to restoring the human sciences to the place they deserve as a fundamental axis of the culture created by our species. In order to do so, it is more necessary today than ever before for us in Latin America to start working together with those who may help us to the knowledge of what is still for us the hidden face of the ecological culture of the North, which affirms the necessity of confronting the fact that

despite so much rhetoric to the contrary, one cannot have life both ways – cannot maximize wealth and empire and maximize democracy and freedom too. And unwillingness to acknowledge that fact has been a characteristic American as well as western trait, one deriving from the innocence and dreaminess of youth. Now it can no longer be evaded. A clear-minded choice has to be made.<sup>29</sup>

So defined, dialogue would greatly facilitate the identification of the obstacles and opportunities of a political and a cultural order for an international co-operation that could include the affected societies, and not just their governments. What it is about, in brief, is to make – and not just to write – a planetary history able to go beyond the tendency, currently dominant, to consider the

biosphere as a mere context for the development of economical and political relations among human societies.

Such an environmental and historical approach could promote a policy of international collaboration able to face the deterioration of the biosphere with the necessary emphasis on the problems associated with equitable sharing of costs, benefits and efforts among the regions involved. This working program, if implemented, would have to be translated into a plurality of initiatives for research, debate, and organisation, always preserving its multidisciplinary character through an approach simultaneously combining long-term historical research into the past, and middle-term analysis of developments into the future.

As long as we are able to do what is within our reach and constitutes the most essential of our duties – that is, to act as people of culture committed to the survival and the well-being of our societies – we will have contributed to the solution of one of the great problems of our region and our time. In doing so as Latin Americans, besides, we will attend in time to the warning made by Simón Bolívar in the context of another crisis, also decisive in our history: ‘Crime works under the shadows of ignorance.’ And there is no doubt that, already knowing at least how much is to be done, not to do it would be the greatest possible crime of our time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> For instance: Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente/Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Urbanismo, *Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo en América Latina. Una Visión Evolutiva* (Madrid, 1990), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> The expression has been taken from Jean Brunhes, *La Geografía Humana* (Madrid, 1953, originally published in 1910). The author, for his part, took the concept from the previous one of ‘tropikal raubwirtschaft’, elaborated by German geographers in the late 19th century.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Jované, *Ajuste y Medio Ambiente* (Panamá, CECADES, 1992); Fernando Tudela, ‘Diez tesis sobre desarrollo y medio ambiente en América Latina y el Caribe’, *Ecológicas, Boletín Bimestral del Instituto Autónomo de Investigaciones Ecológicas A.C., México*, Año 2, Vol. 2, (Sept./Oct. 1991), pp. 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> From sugar to petroleum, all coming from the primary sector of economic activities. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), *Balance Preliminar de la Economía de América Latina y el Caribe* (Santiago de Chile, December 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Excepting such contributions as those of Nicolo Gligo and Jorge Morello, ‘Notas sobre la historia ecológica de América Latina’, in *Estilos de Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente en América Latina*, ed. O. Sunkel and N. Gligo, (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, *El Trimestre Económico* No. 36, 2 vols, 1980); Santiago R. Olivier, *Ecología y Subdesarrollo en América Latina* (Mexico, Siglo XXI, 3rd edition 1986); and Fernando Ortiz Monasterio; Isabel Fernández; Alicia Castillo; José Ortiz Monasterio and Alfonso Bulle Goyri, *Tierra*



*Profanada. Historia Ambiental de México* (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología, 1987). It can be said that the scarcity of achievements in this field is due in great part to the fact that institutionally organised interest in the environment in Latin America emerged directly under the influence of the New Ecology, stimulated from the outside by international organisations like the UN and the World Bank, and closely associated with the debate about what has been understood as ‘development’ in my region since 1948: that is, economic growth eventually capable of also producing social welfare and political participation.

<sup>7</sup> Ligia Herrera, ‘El impacto sobre el medio ambiente de las actividades ganaderas en Panamá’, in *Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo en Panamá* (Universidad de Panamá, Instituto de Estudios Nacionales, *Cuadernos Nacionales*, No. 4, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> As usual, there was an easy explanation: it was the peasants’ fault, due to their ignorance and irresponsibility. But my mother’s research demonstrated that it was not the peasants, but large landholders, who were mainly responsible for the devastation, and that extensive cattle-raising was intimately linked in its forms, purposes and rhythms of development to the way my country’s economy, society and political life has been organised since the construction of the Panamá Canal. But there was more to the problem, and reaching farther in the past, and it was not exclusively a Panamanian problem, but a Latin American one, nor was it just an economic problem, but a social, cultural and political one as well.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, for instance, observed how in the study of the processes of genesis of civilisations, ‘the factor we are trying to identify is not something single, but multiple; not an entity, but a relation’ (*Estudio de la Historia*, Alianza, Madrid, 1981, vol. 1, p. 105), while Martí said that the particular fact is usually different to the relations to which it serves as a way of expression. So, the ‘constellation’ I was looking for was to be found within a ‘galaxy’ composed by such fields of study as:

1. A characteristic form of organisation of the human beings in order to produce and reproduce their own existence, which we usually call ‘society’;

2. A characteristic form of organisation of the relations of production, exchange and consumption, internal and external to that society, which we usually call ‘economy’;

3. A peculiar form of institutionalisation of the power relations arising from those social and economic forms of organisation, which we usually call the ‘State’;

4. A characteristic form of exercising that power – or of struggling in order to achieve it – which we usually call ‘politics’; and finally,

5. A characteristic form of organisation and development of the relations between that society and its natural ambit, from which results – in this case and for this end – what we call ‘the environment’.

<sup>10</sup> In a book of great value for anyone interested in the study of the environmental dimension of development in my region: Osvaldo Sunkel (ed.), *Medio Ambiente y Estilos de Desarrollo en América Latina* (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980). Sunkel, an economist, is one of the leading social scientists in Latin America, currently working with CEPAL.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Crosby, Jr., *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Cuando se estudia un acto histórico, o un acto individual,... se ve que la intervención humana en la naturaleza acelera, cambia o detiene la obra de ésta, y que toda la historia es solamente la narración del trabajo de ajuste, y los combates, entre la Naturaleza

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extrahumana y la Naturaleza humana...'. In José Martí, *Obras Completas*, (La Habana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 27 vols, 1975) 'Serie de artículos para *La América*', Vol. 23, pp. 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Worster, 'The Vulnerable Earth: toward a planetary history', p. 7. In Donald Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 3-20.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Worster, 'Transformations of the Earth: toward an agroecological perspective in history', *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990), pp. 1087-1106. A more recent version is available in Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 45-63.

<sup>15</sup> My mother, for instance, still remembers from her childhood the time when the United Fruit Co. came to our province of origin, Chiriquí, looking for new lands after a plague of fungi devastated its banana plantations in the province of Bocas del Toro, on the Atlantic coast. But the UFCo. – 'Mamita Yunai', as the peasants and workers called it – was already what it was and, more important, what it still is.

<sup>16</sup> It should be necessary, for instance, to take into account the intrinsic weakness of the nation-state and of civil societies in my region, in order to understand some very important aspects of our particular ways of participating in that global process, like the hegemony of the plundering economy precisely in the more 'modern' areas of our agriculture; the preeminence not only of monoculture, but of monoexportation; and the virtual absence of a helping hand from the Nation-state coming to support the peasants in their times of need.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> The Spanish for *raubwirtschaft* is 'economía de rapiña', but that latter word appears in my dictionary as 'robbery' or 'thievery' in English, so I prefer to use 'plunder', the Spanish equivalent of 'saqueo', in the way it is said that Bismarck reacted to his first vision of London, exclaiming 'What a city to plunder!', in a very similar way to the one of Cortés and Pizarro and their companions when looking for the first time at México-Tenochtitlán and Cuzco.

<sup>19</sup> And Germany and France in more specific cases, like the initial stages of the development of coffee monoculture in Guatemala, and the first attempt to build a transoceanic canal in Panamá, in the 1880s.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy : A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> And the process has continued without interruption for the past hundred years, if the Argentinian historian Sergio Bagú is right in what he observes in his essay 'Población, recursos naturales y neoarcaísmo organizativo en la economía latinoamericana del siglo XX'. In Floresco, Enrique (ed.) 1987 *Ensayos sobre el desarrollo económico de México y América Latina* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1a. reimpresión).

<sup>22</sup> Worster, *Nature's Economy*, p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religión e Imperio. Dinámica del expansionismo azteca e inca* (México, Alianza Editorial Mexicana/Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> It is possible, of course, to find traces of other 'imperial' strategies in specific cases then or later, as in the enthusiasm of our technocrats of the 1950s with the Lester Ward-type ideal of a 'necessary, rational management of nature'. On the other hand, many are the signs pointing at the probability that, in the absence of this kind of internal and external

coercion, ample segments of our societies would spontaneously revert to a more austere and egalitarian way of life, organised around an ideal of self-sufficiency complemented with external exchanges to complement their needs, and quite different from the kind of 'market economy' they live within today.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, even in 1975 most of his ideas on environmental issues were simply classified as 'miscellaneous articles' in the fine Cuban edition of his complete works. (Op. cit.)

<sup>26</sup> Jované, op. cit., p.19.

<sup>27</sup> That cultural frontier, once explored, will offer quite suggesting elements of coincidence, in the current debate, with positions that in the North Atlantic societies demand a kind of economic growth that does not occurs at the mere expense of Earth's 'natural capital' of renewable and non-renewable resources, but at the expense of the 'interests' of that capital, as those proposed by Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh in their book *Global Environmental Politics* (San Francisco, 1991, p. 30), where they say that it should be necessary to drastically reduce the use of fossil fuels, depending more on renewable energy sources, and to quickly face the transition to sustainable systems for the management of resources, as well as to look for agreements aimed at stabilising the planet's population at the lowest possible level.

<sup>28</sup> And it is not the least significant of its difficulties that, to be accomplished, that task must be assumed in terms quite different from those of our governmental bureaucracies, so committed to the search for short-term, 'practical', and low-cost solutions.

<sup>29</sup> Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, p. 334.