

Is there any 'Latin' in the Latin American environmental history? New challenges for the consolidation of a regional intellectual community

¿Hay algo 'Latino' en la historia ambiental Latinoamericana? Nuevos desafíos para la consolidación de una comunidad intelectual regional

Germán A. Palacio C.

Universidad Nacional de Colombia-Sede Amazonia

Dirección: km 2 Via Leticia – Tarapaca

Leticia, Amazonas, Colombia

germanpalacio@hotmail.com

Recibido: 02 de febrero de 2012

Aprobado: 21 de febrero de 2012

Abstract

Since the 1990s, the Latin American environmental history community has faced three principal obstacles: novelty, dispersion, and complexity. As a result of the growth in both the quantity and quality of scholarship, a critical perspective on Latin American environmental history becomes urgent. Since the nineteenth century, the Americas were subjected to a divide between 'Latin' and 'Anglo'. Due to several two-way factors of transnational character that are weakening this divide, it is time to re-think critically on the meaning, utility, and explanatory potential of it. One can ask: is there any 'Latin' in Latin American environmental history? Consequently, both Latin American and North American environmental history scholars must take account of the porous and debilitated Latin/Anglo divide and be aware of transnationalism. This article also explores some of the ways in which the Latin American scholarship has already elaborated the global and transnational connections inherent to the study of environmental history.

Key words

environmental history; historiography; transnationalism; the Americas

Resumen

Desde la década de 1990, la historia ambiental latinoamericana ha enfrentado tres obstáculos principales: novedad, dispersión y complejidad. Como resultado del crecimiento en cantidad y calidad de su producción, una perspectiva crítica sobre estos desarrollos es urgente. Desde mediados del siglo XIX, las Américas fueron divididas entre 'Latin' y 'Anglo' América. A comienzos del siglo XXI esta división se está debilitando y es necesario pensar el significado, el carácter y potencial de esta división en el campo académico. En consecuencia, la historia ambiental latinoamericana debe tener en cuenta el carácter poroso de esta división, siendo conscientes de perspectivas globales y transnacionales propias de lo socio-ambiental.

Palabras clave

historia ambiental; historiografía; transnacionalismo; América

Introduction

Macondo is the well-known mythical town of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magical realist novel 'Cien años de soledad'.¹ Curiously, it is also known as the Macondo blow out, referring to the name of the British Petroleum (BP) field that, since 20, April 2010, has leaked millions of barrels in the Gulf of Mexico in one of the worst marine oil spill in the United States, perhaps in the world, surpassing the 1989 Exxon-Valdes accident in Alaska. The oil spills caused damages to the tourist and fishing industries, as well as to wild life. Although most of the damages directly affected the states of Louisiana, Missisipi, Alabama and Florida, other effects on the coast of Mexico and in international marine waters are not completely or clearly evaluated. Perhaps there are not powerful interests to support such a concern. Perhaps, oil interests in the world are so powerful that to get a conclusion on what could be the real scope of the damages are extremely difficult. In addition, in the marine waters beyond the national jurisdiction, the capacity to enforce provisions of the International Convention of the Law of the Sea is extremely weak.

Unexpectedly, on November 26, 2010, a group of people on behalf of several environmental NGOs such as Accion Ecologica based in Quito, Ecuador, a Mexican one, Oil Watch based in Port Hardcore, Nigeria, very well known Indian (from India) eco-feminist Vandana Shiva, a couple of the most conspicuous leaders of the indigenous movement in Ecuador, among others, presented a law suit before the Ecuadorian Supreme Court against the British Petroleum Company (BP) claiming, under the principle of the Rights of Nature established in the new Ecuadorian constitution, that BP should be judicially declared guilty for the damages caused in the Gulf of Mexico, in the waters beyond the national jurisdiction. The claimants do not ask for monetary compensation but for the disclosure of all the information it keeps, and also ask for ordering BP to cease exploiting the Macondo field. They argue that the rights of nature, constitutionally recognized by article 76 of the new Ecuadorian Constitution -the first country in the world, and the only one at this point to recognize nature, or *pachamama*, as a subject of law- is the legal support to suit BP in order to defend nature's rights that should be protected and

¹ GARCIA MARQUEZ, Gabriel, *Cien años de soledad*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamerica, 1967.

repaired. They claimed that the Ecuadorian Constitution entitled them to fight for the rights of nature, and for the possibility to claim reparations and compensations for the actions of BP.

Most legal experts would regard with skepticism the success of this lawsuit. However, the value of this legal action could be better assessed in symbolic terms, but it also could constitute an important legal precedent in Ecuadorian law, and eventually in international law. In fact, in the next two weeks after the presentation of the lawsuit, this event was reported on several Latin American newspapers and on The New York Times, as well. This claim could be formulated in other words as the fight for protection of the Earth as the 'common heritage of humanity', instead of 'rights of nature' but independently of the wording, this case can be cited as an example of the globalization of the legal phenomena; that I'd would prefer to call it as transnationalization of environmental Law.

This is only an example of the interaction between national and transnational actors and actions. I'd like to emphasize the world 'transnationalization' instead of 'globalization' in accordance with the questions raised recently by those scholars that are constructing the field of transnational studies. Without denying the importance of globalization process, they have expressed their concerns as "the rather prodigious use of the term globalization to describe just about any process or relationship that somehow crosses state boundaries. In themselves, many such processes and relationships obviously do not at all extend across the world. The term 'transnational' is in a way more humble, and often more adequate label..."²

Transnationalization could be used as a mediation analytical level that, without denying globalization or the power of state actors, let to think in processes or relationships that 'crosses state boundaries'. Sometimes current issues make easier to think analytically on historical problems. For the purposes of this article, some of the factors in the past and the present that support these transnational approaches are the following: the growing power of the U.S. government, and U.S. transnational

² See HANNERZ, Ulf and HAYA DE LA TORRE, Victor Raúl. *¿Hacia donde va Indoamérica?* Santiago de Chile: Ercilla, 1935; HANNERZ, Ulf. 'Nigerian Kung Fu, Manhattan fatwa' and 'The local and the global: continuity and change' in KHAGRAM, Sanjeev and LEVITT, Peggy (ed.). *The transnational studies reader. Intersections and innovation*. New York/ London: Routledge, 2008.

corporations since the nineteenth century, which are to produce or influence environmental changes in places and regions that are part of a region conventionally called Latin America; second, the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S.A.; third, the power of developmental international organizations, including NGOs, after the Second World War able to produce or influence environmental changes in Latin America; fourth, dramatic changes in the demographic composition of the United States which has been 'Latinized'; and finally, the growing influence of nation-states and transnational corporations originated in countries conventionally grouped in Latin American but able to influence on other neighboring countries and regions.

The environmental anecdote that initiates this article involves people and organizations from different parts of the world, despite the fact that the Ecuadorian centrality of the claimants, of the legal rule, and the judicial system involved in the case. Environmental activists are supporting their legal claim on the article 76 of their Ecuadorian national Constitution. They are not justifying this legal action circumscribed to a regional identity, such as Latin America. Their claim is global in the context of a belief of a shared common Earth. This transnationalism is absolutely understandable because it is obvious to say that environmental problems do not travel with passport, or do not recognize nationalities.

Although contemporary environmental problems tend to dissolve or, at least, make extremely porous the borders of nation states, the study of important environmental topics remains to be nationally compartmentalized. If the oil spill in 'Macondo' affects the wild life, and the environmental conditions of economic activities that cannot be restricted to a single country, it is time to make sense of the efforts to build a Latin American environmental academic organization whose object, which by its very nature, can be only paradoxically restricted to Latin America. This article begins with the description of the construction of Latin American environmental history to then discuss the validity of Latin America as a discrete category for the study of environmental history. Finally, it will explore the ways in which Latin American scholarship has already elaborated the transnational connections inherent to the study of environmental history. Rather than maintaining Latin America as a self-contained discrete category or a

collection of individual countries, the environmental history community should take note of its porous character, and push to make evident its interconnections in terms of its transnational relationships. This article asks to what extent the Latin/Anglo divide is already outdated?

The construction of an intellectual community: novelty, dispersion, and complexity

In 1994, Panamanian Guillermo Castro-Herrera won the Prize 'Casa de Las Americas' with a text published in the same year and called 'Naturaleza y Sociedad en la Historia de América Latina'.³ It was the most important research book, at that moment, offered to readers explicitly as an environmental history of Latin America. In his first chapter called 'El problema', Castro-Herrera distinguishes among three types of what he calls natural history: first, the CEPAL version that he calls "natural history as economic history"; second, "natural history as social history", referring to Joan Martinez-Allier; and finally the idea of "history as natural history". Regarding this last type of history he recalls one of the main names of American environmental history: Donald Worster.

To assert that this was the most important research-book (in contrast with essays) explicitly on environmental history of Latin America should not lead anyone to the idea that no other useful books related to environmental or ecological history preceded this one. Rather, I want to emphasize three points: this was the first book written by a Latin American scholar claiming his contribution as environmental history; it was inspired in dialogue with Latin American intellectual debate and literature; and it was deeply influenced by an American environmental historian.

Latin American environmental history has profited greatly from American environmental historians. Perhaps Warren Dean's 'The Struggle for Rubber' was the first book published on environmental history in strict sense.⁴ This is the first, in the following strict sense: this was the first book catalogued in libraries under the label of 'Latin American environmental history'. Latin American environmental history also has vastly benefited from the work of non-historians. Paradoxically, it has not started as a field pioneered by professional Latin American historians. Castro-Herrera, as several Latin

³ CASTRO HERRERA, Guillermo. *Naturaleza y sociedad en la historia de la América Latina*. Panamá: CELA, 1996.

⁴ DEAN, Warren. *Brazil and the struggle for rubber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

American scholars who have written on environmental history, is not a historian by profession but was trained in literature and linguistics, first in Cuba, and later, in Latin American Studies, at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Normally, Latin American environmental historians use to read, not just their colleagues, but historical geographers, anthropologists, environmentalists, philosophers, economists and Latin American intellectuals and literary figures. Environmentalists, and intellectuals interested in the past, preceded professional historians.

It is no surprise that Latin American environmental history is, still, marginal to the historical profession. Historians are not trained in dealing with data that comes from natural sciences; they have to re-read what has been written in other sub-fields through new lens, and in addition, they have to read on topics that do not deal with human agency, but are part of the picture of environmental history such as plants, pathogens, animals, forests, ecosystems, and ideas about nature.

The environmental history of Latin America, promising as it may be, is still young. In a paper presented at the First International Seminar on Latin American Environmental History, held in Bogota in 2001, Brazilian environmental historian, Lise Sedrez, pointed out that this type of history has a couple of major practical problems: “novelty and dispersion”. Dispersion is one of the most complicated obstacles that jeopardize the construction of an environmental history community. In writing the environmental history of Latin America, one has to deal with literatures that comes from different countries, and is written in different languages. In addition, Latin American scholars are sometimes more connected to other researchers in the United States or in Europe, than with scholars in Latin America. Lise Sedrez’s effort to put together this literature online marks the first important step in attacking dispersion.

Later, in 2003, a couple of meetings, a seminar in Panamá organized by Castro-Herrera, and Héctor Alimonda, leader of the political ecology group of CLACSO, the Latin American Council for Social Sciences, and a Symposium on Environmental History during the Congress of Americanists in Santiago de Chile, 2003, capitalized on dispersed efforts. One year later, the idea of the Latin American and Caribbean Society, SOLCHA, was launched in La Habana, led by Panamanian Guillermo Castro-Herrera

and Cuban environmental historian Reynaldo Funes, and unofficially created in Carmona, Spain, in 2006. In a multitudinous meeting, the Association was re-affirmed in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 2008. During the next Congress of 2010, coordinated by historian Micheline Cariño, in La Paz, Baja California Sur, was approved the creation of the 'Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña' (HALAC) as the official journal of SOLCHA under the direction of Regina Horta Duarte, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil.

Since the first decade of this current century, this literature has been growing. In fact, Lise Sedrez's list jumped from approximately 400 titles in 2001, to more than 1.200, among books and articles in 2010.⁵ Despite academic hierarchies that result of the predominance of the English language in science, another transnational phenomenon, environmental historiography of Latin America cannot be restricted to what is published in English, but it should also include, it is obvious, publications in Spanish and Portuguese, at the very least.

It is intellectually honest to acknowledge one's own trajectory. Although Latin American social sciences scholars are proud of what they produce, as a matter of fact, Latin American environmental history is much younger than American environmental history. While the American Society for Environmental History, ASEH, was created in 1977, SOLCHA, its Latin American counterpart, was initiated almost 30 years later. 'Environmental History', the American leading journal, has also more than 30 years of advantage. However, all the efforts done by Latin American scholars set the basis to expect that production increase in quantity and quality. In contrast with the case of the Latin American environmental history, American Environmental History is no longer marginal in the United States, and its importance can be weighed by the recent appointment of William Cronon as President of the American Historical Association.

The development of environmental history, fortunately, has changed the picture for the better: novelty is not the case anymore; dispersion can be overcome, in part, by both, a good bibliography available in the web, and an institution led by Latin American scholars that includes on its board North

⁵ See <http://www.csulb.edu/laeh>.

American and Iberian scholars, who in fact have been very supportive of these efforts. 'Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña' (HALAC) accepts articles and contributions in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. Its spirit is open. This Journal arrives just in time. When moving from infancy to youth, a critical perspective in Latin American environmental history becomes urgent, and nothing better than a rigorous journal to make this jump.

American historians devoted to Latin American history have contributed considerably to this field but they have to deal with conceptual problems relevant to the United States academy. When they engage with environmental topics, they have to be careful with gender, cultural, or bottom up narratives, for example, to make sure it is fashionable in the United States academy. Their contributions are extremely useful for Latin America, but in some cases they draw more on American scholars' debate, than from a Latin American agenda. The Latin American environmental history should find a good balance between identity and openness.

In addition to novelty and dispersion, complexity can be another factor affecting a production that attempts to be Latin American. Because the subcontinent includes several countries, different languages, and diverse and contrasting ecosystems, the level of difficulty, when writing its history, is higher than the United States case. Several factors such as tropical biodiversity combined with verticality has to be carefully taken in account; equally, understanding subtropical, tropical, equinoctial, and temperate landscapes make difficult to compare countries dispersed by latitude in the map.

The young academic production varies in quantity and quality depending from country to country, and production is uneven. Brazil, for example, has an important and encouraging production that does not always dialogue with its neighbors due to historical and academic traditions. The construction of a South American community, that started as an attempt of building a common market (Mercosur) a couple of decades ago, is building a bridge that joint literatures in Spanish and Portuguese.

In searching for inspiration, Latin American environmental historians receive the heritage of other sub-disciplines of history, and depending on the time period, the literature is more prominent or less

developed. The conquest and the colonial periods are very developed regarding Mexico and Peru, in contrast with other countries. Environmental historians from these countries have a lot to re-read from their colleagues. Academic development, university traditions, and publishing capacities also vary from country to country and region to region. Brazilian, Mexican, and Colombian environmental history communities are more numerous or better organized. In Central America, Costa Rica's university tradition is more consolidated than the rest of its neighbors, which makes less difficult to create and maintain an autonomous academic production. However, high quality literature has been published as environmental history on Guatemala, Honduras, or Panama. Argentinian intellectuals have also produced important contributions, like that of Antonio Elio Brailovsky.⁶ SOLCHA meetings have lacked of important representatives of Andean countries, and it is very strange, that excellent Peruvian historians, for example, are not yet included in the picture, pointing out the need to put more effort in bringing together these histories.

In dealing with the novelty, dispersion and complexity of the Latin American environmental history community, and in the way these problems have been surpassed, many actors of this intellectual movement have assumed the notion of Latin America as unproblematic or self-evident. However, several questions must be raised. If there is no a political entity known as Latin America, what criteria would unite such intellectual community? As this article is going to show, many of the participants consider self-evident such grouping. In fact, it is important to realize that –especially when talking about historians- this entity is not just simply a geographical concept or an eco-systemic unity. So, it is time to move from the efforts to build a community that focus their research on Latin America to what is the meaning of Latin America. One of the reasons to spend energy on such a concern is that this notion has been historically articulated in contrast with the United States counterpart, or even more precisely, Anglo American counterpart; the other reason is that this article also advocates for a common ground for research and intellectual synergy between Latin American and North American environmental history.

⁶ BRAILOVSKY, Antonio. *Buenos Aires, ciudad inundable*. Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2011.

How to understand Latin America?

Recently Walter Mignolo⁷ argued that the idea of Latin America was invented in the mid-nineteenth century, when the British and the French powers clashed, in military and political, but also in economic and cultural, terms. From the south of the Bravo River, the defense of the idea of Hispanic or Iberian features of the new republics, as a whole, was shortsighted, in a time when Spain and Portugal were discredited as imperial powers. As part of that confrontation, all of the new republics were considered as Latin, including Haiti. These republics were permeated by the French political and cultural influence, copying the Napoleonic code, receiving the French Enlightenment, and including a common denominator: a Roman language. Leaving aside originality, Mignolo is right about Latin America as an invention during the nineteenth century. However, he is not convincing about why that label was triumphant. The Latin American category was not naturalized, immediately, as a 'geographic' region, but the definition of the name was part of a political controversy, as Víctor Haya de La Torre, founder of the still influential Peruvian APRA party, argued during the 1930s.

In a document dated 1930 in Berlin, Víctor Haya de La Torre⁸ was fully aware of these 'inventions' that he considered of political importance. Instead of Hispanic America, or Latin America, he was proposing Indoamerica as the proper term to include all the people of America "that speak Castillian, Portuguese, French, Quichua, Aimara, Maya and Zapotec – not to enumerate more languages that speak our peoples-." (p. 22) He asserts that even in places where there is not a notorious indigenous population, the footprint on America by indigenous peoples is so deep that "we cannot be called by any of the European labels." (p.22) He adds that these names have a historical significance and that "Hispanic Americanism fits with the colonial period; Latin Americanism fits with the Republican, and Pan Americanism is the expression of Yankee imperialism." (p.23) His defense of the impact of indigenous peoples led him to argue that their impact even on Anglo-Saxon America is undisputable. (p. 26) He deals with objections to the term, and he accepts that because Latin America fits with the Republican period,

⁷ MIGNOLO, Walter. *La idea de América Latina. La herida colonial y la opción decolonial*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2007.

⁸ HANNERZ and HAYA DE LA TORRE. *Hacia dónde va Indoamérica?*

other notions instead of Latin America or Indoamerica would divide people that are not part of the Yanqui imperialism. (p. 23) His idea of Indoamerica was shared by another Peruvian intellectual and founder of the Peruvian socialist party: Jose Carlos Mariátegui. Both of them thought that Indoamerica was the new revolutionary expression of America. (p. 23)

If, during the 1930s, there was an important dispute about a common name for the region that curiously Mignolo does not mention, the conventional contemporary usage of Latin America was triumphant after 1950. At that time it was taken by the developmental discourse that landed in the international institutions that emerged from the Second World War, to implement projects and provide with statistics of all the countries grouped regionally down south the Bravo River. Since then, Latin America and the Caribbean have joined together, whether they speak English, French or Dutch; this includes Hispanic American countries, Brazil, and the Caribbean islands that, at that time, were in process of decolonization. For the developmental discourse, the decisive classificatory category was related to the common feature of being 'underdeveloped', first, and later, euphemistically called, 'developing' countries.

Statistically, in 'gross domestic product' terms, these countries were grouped, and differences were quantitative, thus underlining economic features, particularly their relationship to the market - as Castro-Herrera uses as departing point- was more important than the cultural reasons that allowed people to be called, starting in the second part of the nineteenth century, Latin Americans. From the point of view of the indigenous peoples that live in the continent, Indo-America, with all of the problems of 'Indo', could be a category that would join all of them, from Argentina up to Canada, but this category would not fit easily with U.S. or Canadian development. Furthermore, it would not be fashionable among Latin American elites who have put tremendous efforts for more than a century to prove that they were no longer, 'Indian'.

The Latin American category is problematic in another sense. If one puts together all the people who speak Spanish, Portuguese and French, one has to include not only Haiti and other ex-French Caribbean colonies, but also an important part of North America: Quebec. The notion of Latin America

was obviously problematic because of political implications and inconsistencies, but it was useful as a convention for developmental institutions. Some United States and European academic institutions took it, expanded, or created academic programs to study the region.

To acknowledge this discursive trajectory of the term, like Mignolo does, is not to invoke the “Orientalist” a-la-Said implication that Mignolo makes.⁹ In the period when the United States became the most powerful nation in the world, Panamericanism, which Haya de La Torre considered the ‘Yankee’ notion, was not triumphant. Mignolo asserts that the Latin American label was accepted or advocated by Francophile Latin American elites during the nineteenth century. Thus it was, at least, not simply imposed by imperial powers. Other discussion would be, argued Haya de La Torre, if France used that category to convey her own interests, one must add also that this notion, not only have an elitist connotation, but also has served to produce a critical discourse since the beginning. Take, for example, the case of Chilean Francisco Bilbao, one of the pioneers of the term. Mignolo has to acknowledge that inside the creole elite there were some dissidents. (p. 91-94) Bilbao, for example, denounced and opposed the extermination of the indigenous peoples. (p.93) Other institutions have been also erected in some Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Cuba, or they are related to educative institutions, such as CLACSO,¹⁰ or research institutions such as FLACSO,¹¹ that do not necessarily share an elitist point of view: sometimes quite the contrary.¹²

The ‘invention’ of Latin America during the nineteenth century was related to a contrast with other problematic category: Anglo America. When it was naturalized as a cultural difference, they existed as opposites. However, when reading and writing on environmental history there are some topics shared by the North American, and the South American environmental historians without much problem. Let’s mention some topics that, in fact, unite rather than split the two communities in the same type of historical problems with environmental implications: Pre-Columbian indigenous productive systems; the Columbian

⁹ SAID, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Longman, 2002.

¹⁰ Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales.

¹¹ Facultad latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales.

¹² In fact, South American leftist governments elected during the first and the beginning of the second decade of this century could be good examples of the revitalization of a non elitist ‘Latin American idea’ that do not support Mignolo’s thesis.

exchange; the demographic collapse of the native population; the misleading assumptions of the pristine myth; and transformation of the property systems, to mention some of the crucial themes, already developed in the literature, that includes all Americas: North America, Central America, the Caribbean and South America. In all of these topics, findings can be carefully generalized, and exchange is easily received and welcomed, so America, as a hemisphere, should be taken in its unity rather than in its division between the Latin and the Anglo.

Of course, important variations, still in process of being documented, are related to the way different imperial powers, - Spain, Portugal, Great Britain, Holland, or France - actually printed their marks on diverse types of landscapes, urban, and rural, in the Americas. For example, on the one hand, regarding the urban settings, organization of water, systems of disposal, distribution and features of public and private spaces, materials and techniques of construction, hinterlands, etc., can vary because of the influence of different imperial powers on their colonies. On the other, regarding the rural, the introduction of new productive systems and new populations, for example those coming from Africa, variations due to resistance and transformation of the native people, and the way animals and plants adapted or not to the new environments. In these cases, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual history are key to inspiring environmental history, which is to say, human efforts to adapt, and transform the new environment, represent landscape, fight with other humans to control and appropriate land, and so on.

Towards a better understanding of Latin America (in) environmental history: from regional to transnational history

When reviewing the literature on Latin American environmental history, there are several ways to think of the region, and/or to make the connections between different countries, or between the region and the rest of the world. Let's start with the two books that try to make sense of the region as a whole: Castro-Herrera's (already mentioned) book and Shawn Miller's 'An Environmental History of Latin

America'.¹³ Castro-Herrera's book takes some time to clarify what is Latin America. Combining a geopolitical definition, but placing it in a wider perspective, Castro-Herrera, quoting Worster, says that it is necessary to make both simultaneously: regional (Latin America) and planetary history. He says that Latin America was delimited by the geopolitical fact of the U.S.-Mexican war that resulted in the permanent borders between the two of them in 1848. This frontier that Castro-Herrera set in 1848 is really a borderline, but he doesn't pay attention to what is more than a borderline, very well developed by the U.S.A. and the Mexican frontier tradition: the borderlands. Castro Herrera does not take in account that this border was modified in 1853 in the new treaty that includes La Mesilla, which is not really important for my argument. Evidently, the distinction between borderline and borderlands is relevant when dealing with environmental concerns because the transnational character of the borderlands. Even today, when the republican and democratic right wing policies on migration try to set a strong borderline building a monstrous fence in the border with Mexico, what is happening is that human crossing is becoming more complicated and migrant has to pass the borderline through harsher environmental conditions, which has generated a deadly tramp, with hundreds of people dying. Simultaneously, the desert's fauna is finding more difficult to cross back and forth through a shared ecosystem. Rather than dividing the environmental history of Latin America from its counterpart, Anglo America, there are several reasons to consider them united and relevant to each other's history. One of them is that Latin American environmental history cannot be understood without the environmentally transformative power of US actors which expanded both before and after the borderline was set between Mexico and the U.S.: a stronger imprint in Central America and the Caribbean, but relatively less definitive in South America.

Castro-Herrera's attempt is based on a combination of a geopolitical reason and an economic one - although he labels it as cultural - that can be fairly portrait as belonging to 'dependency theory', what he calls 'developmental' obstacles. His particular way to make the planetary connection with an extremely complex and a diverse region, such as Latin America, is the international market. So he uses CEPAL's

¹³ MILLER, Shawn. *An environmental history of Latin America: new approaches to the Americas*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2007

perspective, Celso Furtado and others, as well as 'world system analysis', which builds upon Immanuel Wallerstein's concept. Castro-Herrera's criterium tries to harmonize the regional analysis with the planetary approach focusing in the international market. He wrap up his theoretical view under a model of development that he categorizes as articulated, externally determined, dependent, centralized, specialized, and based on mono-production. (p.41) No one should be surprised that his chapters are divided as 'separated development' (meaning before the European arrival into the picture), and 'articulated development', with the unwilling flavor, of evolutionism, and also of structuralism, which tends to overlook specific individual human actions. (p. 41)

Castro-Herrera's departing point is a legitimate and understandable choice but misses part of the picture. Leaving aside neoliberal intellectuals, such as Álvaro Vargas, Mario Vargas Llosa, Plinio Mendoza, Carlos Alberto Montaner or, Hernando de Soto that have considered Latin Americanists as 'perfect idiots', Latin American thinkers use to dialogue politically to other Latin American socio-political and intellectual traditions. They tend to refer to important historical figures such as José Martí, Jose Carlos Mariátegui, Enzo Faletto, Fernando Cardoso,¹⁴ Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, and others. However, one must consider what really denotes Latin America from a historical point of view? Why this notion has been so pervasive, even more than other possible groupings, such as Hispanic America/Luso America, Ibero America, or Indo America? So, in doing his environmental history he has to stress substantial differences between Latin America, and North America, and overlook people of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. What would be the reason to stress North America and Latin America divide if they share, in part, a common history, at least its colonial past, and an intermingled, even if controversial, contemporary history? One could add: they also share a common history of decolonization, and a history of building territorial nation-states. The answer is, probably, because Castro-Herrera represents a conspicuous trend that has given a continuation of a divide that helps to provide a Latin American identity against a common imperialistic enemy: The United States of America.

¹⁴ Cardoso was a champion of neoliberalism when he became president of Brazil. However, his previous intellectual work was widely known in Latin American, North America and European intellectual circles as 'dependentist'.

From an explanatory point of view, due commonalities between the U.S.A. and the Latin American environmental past, from which all historians can benefit without distinction, Shawn Miller, for example, in his 'An Environmental History of Latin America', is able to produce a fine synthesis in the first chapters of his book. Based on archeological, geographical, ethno-historical, and obviously, environmental history contributions, Miller, in a clever first chapter called 'An old world before it was *new*', writes about the environmental history of the region, and expanding from the conventional Aztec, and Inca concentration of the literature with their productive systems and specific experiences that transformed their landscape, he includes the experience of the Tupi-Guarani people, including the Amazon region. He profits from topics already well developed in the environmental history literature not based on the Latin/Anglo divide, such as the Columbian exchange with its mixed biodiversity gains; the demographic collapse; the transformation of productive systems by the introduction of new legal systems or new animals; or the critique of the assumed pristine landscapes that makes both North America and Latin American environmental history common in many ways. He does a good job in the first chapters that take the reader up to the Independence of all the Americas at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

However, his comprehensive attempt is problematic when he tries to make the same exercise for many different Latin American independent countries, particularly during the twentieth century. This part of the book, the Latin American part in a strict sense, sometimes looks like unjustified generalizations, and the result of the final three chapters, including his epilogue, seems disappointing. He has difficulties wrapping up the whole story that appears oversimplified as a result of the a-critical acceptance of the unity of Latin America. In fact, he does not take the time to say what is Latin America. So he assumes this regional division, but he does not problematize it.

It is important to underline another Miller's more substantive problem. Like many other historians, when following conventional chronology, his 'Indoamerican' part, - to use Haya de la Torre expression - is located in the first chapters, so the net effect is that indigenous transformation of the landscape belongs to the past, not to the present. Contemporary environmentalists and indigenous struggles, however, have

rescued native people's traditional relationship with lands, plants, animals, and forests, so from an environmentalist point of view, they appear more as contemporary heroes rather than a people that lived in the past and are already gone. The global rescue of an imaginary about indigenous peoples as ecological Indians should force historians to rescue and reintroduce Indian experiences, not just in the book's first chapters, but in the lasts as well because its environmental relevance for the present. Probably, he would be more successful if his epilogue were referred to the resurgence of the Indians, rather to the ecologically problematic Cuban revolution with its forced organic urbanism.

These two examples are not the only ones, but they are relevant enough to take them into consideration. For example, other important book of the recent Latin American environmental historiography is Christian Brannstrom's 'Territories, commodities and knowledges',¹⁵ produced with considerable help from Colombian-Italian Stefania Gallini. This book attempts to provide order into the diverse Latin American experiences organizing different sections under three criteria: the role of the state as a territorial institution; the role of tropical commodities; and the impact of science in environmental transformations of several countries, conventionally considered Latin America. Because these cases cover the nineteenth and the twentieth century, one of the sections that probably support implicitly the same argument of Castro Herrera, Latin America as a discrete region, on the one hand, and the connection to the world on the other, is the one related to tropical commodities, this is to say, the connection with the international market.¹⁶

From an environmental point of view is difficult to make sense out of a bio-diverse region that spread from the subtropical borderlands of U.S.A.- Mexico to temperate lands of southern Argentina and Chile. Those who support a point of view of a regional entity such as Latin America are based on cultural, and economic factors, not on environmental ones. However, some environmental literature that is very relevant to some countries of a conventionally defined Latin America does not pay attention at all to Latin

¹⁵ BRANNSTROM, Christian (ed.). *Territories, commodities and knowledges: Latin American environmental histories in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries*. London: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

¹⁶ See for example: GARCIA, Bernardo and GONZALES JACOME, Alba (ed.). *Estudios sobre historia y ambiente en América, v. I (Argentina, Bolivia, México, Paraguay)*. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1999.

America as a region. For example, Alfred Crosby's book on ecological imperialism reunites North America with the South Cone of South America, on the one hand, and both of them with Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) on the other.¹⁷ His position is then based not on markets but in ecosystems. Crosby's 'Ecological imperialism' makes the case of more similarities between temperate regions of America with other temperate regions of Oceania than with other regions of tropical America. Elinor Melville's critique to Crosby includes Mexico in the picture of ecological imperialism but her specific case, other than the Mexican Valley of Mezquitan is Australia, rather than New Zealand, which is Crosby's case. Crosby's argument could be also read as part of the literature on frontiers. How come? Let's examine quickly the literature on frontiers.

Although Frederick Jackson Turner is perhaps the most famous historian that inaugurated the literature on the 'American' frontier, Eugene Bolton's perspective on borderlands,¹⁸ - with all his pitfalls and criticisms - could be the most important predecessor of the borderlands literature that characterize the Mexican-U.S. frontier-lands, so he should be considered very important for Latin American environmental history, recognizing that the border that Castro-Herrera considers key to write Latin American environmental history is just a line designed by diplomats in 1848 and reformed in 1853 on a map that cannot change automatically environmental commonalities shared by northern Mexicans with Californians, Arizonians, Texans and other borderlands people. Some of the most conspicuous historians of borderlands are claiming also that the "American history should be transnational as well as transcontinental."¹⁹ The frontier literature is related to the territorial expansion of independent states during the nineteenth and twentieth century over new lands, and people. In fact, this territorial construction has not finished yet with cases such as the Amazon, among others.

¹⁷ CROSBY, Alfred. *Ecological imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹⁸ BOLTON, Herbert Eugene. *Bolton and the Spanish borderlands* (edited by BANNON, John). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964.

¹⁹ WEBER, David. 'Introduction' in TRUEET, Samuel and YOUNG, Elliot (ed.) *Continental crossroads*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. ix.

If adding another conspicuous figure on the literature on frontier, such as the case of Walter Prescott Webb, the connection between Crosby and the literature on frontier is easier to see. Webb considered that the American frontier described by Turner is just one chapter of the whole history of the Great Frontier inaugurated by the European expansion over America since late fifteenth century. This is a sort of 'long duree frontier' to use the Annals expression, which is also the content of Crosby's ecological and European imperialism that he traced back one millennium from the 900 to the 1900.²⁰

Let's me make a precision of my argument: what I think that could be more important than taking Latin America as a region with a specific and differentiated history is rather the transnational connections that could be relevant for different types of geographical spaces. I am not arguing against studies that concentrate on specific regions, or countries that belongs to what conventionally, and acritically, has been accepted as Latin America, but against encapsulated regions that do not show the connections with other relationships that I have preferred to call here as transnational. In this regard, for example, I have no specific objection to Warren Dean for studying the environmental history of the Brazilian Amazon through the struggle to control globally the market of a commodity such as rubber, or for studying the Atlantic forest of Brazil. If Dean's books are used to teach Latin American environmental history is other problem. Apparently the connection of countries, conventionally defined as part, of Latin America with the global market, like the case of Castro-Herrera, is something that Latin American scholars are well aware. In this case, criticisms should be directed to the problems of the 'dependency theory'. This vision normally depicts peripheral regions as powerless, and an effect of the role of mighty metropolitan powers, forgetting the active role of national elites, and other national or local actors. From this point of view, all bad things that happen to our countries should be explained (and blamed) by imperialism or neoliberalism.

There are several studies that concentrate in specific countries, but being aware of transnational connections. For example, German Palacio's environmental history of Colombia, 'Fiebre de tierra caliente.

²⁰ PALACIO, Germán. 'An ecopolitical vision for an environmental history: toward a Latin American and North American research partnership', forthcoming in *Environmental History*.

Una historia ambiental de Colombia'²¹ which is an attempt to show how Colombians decided to conquest and colonize low hot lands, with mixed results of success and failures, starting by mid-nineteenth century, which implied considerable symbolic transformations, but restricted material environmental transformations. Colombians, like other Latin Americans were trying to integrate their countries to the European and North American market. These were efforts to make transnational connections. What is referred as 'the international market', and also as 'the civilized nations' is then more specific rather than global. In describing the antecedents of the environmental history of Colombia, he presents the 'Colombian' case embedded in the Peruvian viceroyalty which is the transnational context that make sense of the pre-independent Colombia, or better defined, New Granada. Environmental comparisons and differences between Colombia and Peru are relevant to understand the environmental antecedents of these transformations. When dealing with the post-independence period, the low and hotlands of Colombia's frontier is the space of the territorial expansion of Colombians and the Colombian nation-state. Palacio also shows the struggles to control and tame tropical and equinoctial lands of this South American country, which in fact are frontier lands. Instead of thinking the environmental history of a hermetic Colombia, his attempt is oriented and conceptualized by the transnational connections that gave meaning to the environmental transformations of a territorial and political entity known as Colombia. And this is why in the Colombian history during the nineteenth century, like in other countries of Latin America, Argentinian Domingo Sarmiento is key figure to understand attempts to conquer new frontier territories, considered as 'deserts' despite counterfactual ecological characterization of places with low density population or a population of indigenous origin. The Caqueta region for example, which is the contemporary Amazon region of Colombia, was characterized during the nineteenth century as 'deserts'. To concentrate on specific countries does not mean that transnational connections are not relevant. The point is other: how or in what ways they are relevant.

Frontiers and borderlands are interesting ways to establish specific transnational connections that shouldn't be encapsulated in Latin America or in a specific country. They are a good way to mix

²¹ PALACIO, German. *Fiebre de tierra caliente. Una historia ambiental de Colombia, 1850-1930*. Bogota: Unal-Ilsa, 2006.

environmental history with political ecology. Although written in the context of dependentism, Richard Tucker's, 'Insatiable appetite'²² can be cited as an example that link tropical countries, or places, with voracious consumers in the U.S.A. on the contrary, from a non dependentist point of view, transnational corporations working on specific places of Latin America is also a good way to write environmental history as interesting books such as those written with a transnational perspective prove.²³ Thanks to these cases, one may accept that Latin American history is U.S.A. history, and the other way around. What is needed in Latin American environmental history, rather than assuming its object an identity as unproblematic, is re-asserting its identity by enhancing the quality of its scholarship and by being aware and showing the specific transnational connections of its environmental history.

Conclusion

The concept of 'Latin America' was created thanks to the contrast with an 'Anglo Saxon' characterization of North America during the nineteenth century as part of the transnational contention between two imperial powers, England and France. On the one hand, it implied a simplification of the peoples living south of the Bravo River. On the other, it implied a way to express sometimes, the difference, and other times, the distrust, or resistance to a growing imperial power coming from the United States of America. The environmental history of Latin America became deeply affected by the imprints of a variety of powerful actors that came from the North and who were enabled by their allies – not just victims- in the South.

On the one hand, a vision of North America as a simplified Anglo-Saxon region was in reality the aspiration of a political and cultural will over a complex, and ethnically varied sub-continent. Scared by the 'Latin' growth in the U.S., Anglo Saxon defenders have been spreading propaganda to strengthen divides, and recreating old hierarchies. Samuel Huntington's analysis on the challenge to the American

²² TUCKER, Richard. *Insatiable appetite. The United States and the ecological degradation of the tropical world*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

²³ SOLUIR, John. *Banana cultures. Agriculture, consumption & environmental change in Honduras and the United States*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005; SANTIAGO, Myrna. *The ecology of oil: environment, labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; GRANDIN, Greg. *Fordlandia. The rise and fall of Henry Ford's forgotten jungle city*. New York: Picador, 2010.

national identity, targeting Latinos or Hispanos as a cultural and political danger, is one of the most representatives of this influential trend.²⁴

Based on the results of the census of 2010, it is not preposterous to say that the 'Latin' component of the U.S.A. the demographic, cultural, and eventually, political balance in this country has changed forever. U.S.A. institutional attempts to stop 'Latin' immigration are undermined by Free Trade Agreements with Mexico, by prohibition policies against illegal drugs that blame 'Latin' countries, and by the force of the globalization process. One could ask then how 'Anglo' is Anglo America? By the same token anyone could question, with good reason, how 'Latin' is Latin America? In addition, as a carom effect, anybody could dispute now how 'Latin' is the 'Latin' component of the U.S.A. Therefore, it seems to me that these processes have invalidated the 'Latin'-'Anglo' divide.

The creation of the Latin American environmental history community revolves in this milieu. Consequently, its identity is being created in the vortex of the dissolution of the material basis of the antagonisms edified on the opposition between the Anglo vs. the Latin. Other contextual changes could complicate more this ideological landscape. On the one hand, some Latin American countries are repurposing the terms of their differences with the U.S. They have created the South American Union of Nations (Unión Suramericana de Naciones), and although they have been led softly by Brazil, they included countries that have defied seriously U.S. hegemony on the region such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

In this context, the identity of the growing and consolidated Latin American environmental history community can be based nor in a self-contained or chauvinistic idea of Latin America neither on a 'dependentist' vision that considers that Latin American environmental problems are simply the result of the United States' and other hiper-industrialized countries. Being aware that any discrete region is at the same time part of a transnational and/or global environmental change is the departing point to set the bases of an intellectual community that aspires to consolidate its identity, and at the same time, to be aware of that its alterity is a center piece of the transnational/global environment. Jumping from quantity

²⁴ HUNTINGTON, Samuel. *Who are we? The challenges to America's national identity*. New York: Simon & Shuster Inc., 2004.

to quality, the Latin American environmental history community would improve being aware of fallacies built during the nineteenth and consolidated during the development era, after the World War II. Equally, this community should overthrow false antagonisms that split North American and South American environmental historians. Working together with a transnational and global perspective they could contribute a lot to understand our regional environmental problems.

Agradecimientos

Al Programa LACIS y al Colloquium Culture, History and Environment (CHE) de la Universidad de Wisconsin-Madison por apoyarme en mi estadía en esa Universidad como Tinker Visiting profesor. A mis estudiantes Patricia O´Kane y Jessie Reader con quienes disfruté y me enriquecí en mi clase de Historia Ambiental y Ecología Política de América Latina. A Héctor Alimonda, Lise Sedrez, Myrna Santiago y John Soluri quienes con sus comentarios mejoraron lo que tenía por decir. A Beatriz Sánchez y Fernando Franco de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia-Sede Amazonia quienes me facilitaron el disfrute de mi año sabático trabajando sobre estos temas.