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# An Eco-Political Vision for an Environmental History: Toward a Latin American and North American Research Partnership

## Abstract

Because analyzing environmental problems implies being aware of interrelations and interconnections, historians should examine the interdependence of Latin American and US environmental history, rather than viewing them as separate fields. This article argues that an eco-political perspective on environmental history offers an interpretative framework that is useful for connecting the environmental history of the Americas as a continent. I illustrate this argument by analyzing two debates that connect both US and Latin American historical tradition and can be treated as a mix of environmental and political concerns: frontiers and imperialism. Environmental historians from the south and north of the continent are in a privileged position to establish common ground for research on a landscape with a shared

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Germán Palacio, "An Eco-Political Vision for an Environmental History: Toward a Latin American and North American Research Partnership," *Environmental History* 17 (October 2012): 1–19.

doi:10.1093/envhis/ems081

colonial past and a controversial intertwined contemporary history. This article intends not to erase historical nuances and differences between countries of the Americas, but rather to shed light on the history of environmental transformation of our common Americas. My hope is that more US historians will discover that their US history is also Latin American history and vice versa.

## INTRODUCTION

On June 5, 2009, dozens of indigenous people from the Peruvian Amazon protesting exploitation of the Amazon were massacred in Bagua, Peru, by government forces. A brief examination of the political history of these events will illustrate why environmental history and political ecology offer important insights into the linked histories of Latin America and North America.

Nearly two years before the Bagua massacre, in October 2007, Alan García, president of Peru, had argued for economic development in Peru.<sup>1</sup> In the second paragraph of his article “El Síndrome del Perro hortelano,” he pointed out that Peru had “millions of hectares for wood that has not been used,” not cultivated, and “hundreds of mineral deposits not worked. . . . The first resource is the Amazon,” he concluded. One month later, in his essay “Receta para Acabar con el Perro Hortelano,” García proposed a solution: inviting private investors to help develop Peru.<sup>2</sup> In December 2007, the Peruvian Congress gave him special powers to enact legislation that led to the implementation of the free trade agreement with the United States.

Peru soon passed what became known as the “Law of the Jungle,” a law that put into place a policy promoting private investment in reforestation and agro-forestation projects. By altering existing regulations, the new law eased restrictions on indigenous communities of the Amazon, encouraging them to sell their land. Because dissolution of communal lands of indigenous people and privatization has often meant the beginning of the destruction of these indigenous communities, in March 2008 a strike began in the Amazon region against this law. Throughout 2008, opponents of the law mobilized efforts to reverse the legislation. On April 5, 2009, a widespread strike took place across the Amazonian provinces of Amazonas, Loreto, Madre de Dios, San Martín, Ucayali, and Cusco.

In response, the government declared a state of emergency in these regions, including Bagua. In several places indigenous people blocked the roads. On June 5, the Direction of the Special Operations (DIROES) attempted to penetrate the blocked roads, resulting in a bloody confrontation that, according to the police reports, killed nine policemen and twenty-five indigenous people and injured more than a hundred

natives. Natives, however, reported at least a hundred indigenous casualties. Other natives in the Bagua region kidnapped thirty-eight policemen in charge of the security of the Petroperu's pipeline. After learning of the massacre in Bagua, they killed ten of the captured police. The rest were eventually freed by the Special Operations forces.<sup>3</sup>

While many Peruvians interpreted these events as symptoms of colonialism, the entity that ensured the mining, petroleum, and logging companies' ability to work in the Amazon was not the US Army. Rather, the Peruvian government used armed force against its people in order to implement the free trade agreement signed with the United States. Under this context, the police and the Peruvian army believed it necessary to push against indigenous Amazon people who do not fully understand the blessings of an inevitable globalization process.

The Bagua massacre has a deeper historic context in Peru. Fifty years earlier, Fernando Belaúnde Terry, the former president of Peru, had been inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner's ideas about US expansion in the West.<sup>4</sup> He attempted to implement a development program for the country in the eastern frontier where the Peruvian Amazon is located. During Belaúnde's presidency, indigenous people from the Andes highlands were treated as second-class citizens, not as indigenous peoples with distinct ethnic roots. In 2009 Alan Garcia's policies posed similar threats to ethnic minorities in the Amazon. From a political ecology perspective, the Bagua case elicits questions about frontiers and imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

Political ecology analyzes power relations within the interaction between society and nature. Thus it deals with the political implications of the social construction of nature into a resource. These power relations are not restricted to the territorial nation-state. In spatial terms, they embody connected governance at the local, regional, and global scales. From a political ecology perspective, power relations underlie both the construction of nature as an object of knowledge, as well as the association of subjectivity and agency with nature. As illustrated in the example of the Amazonia, political ecology places power relations at the heart of the analysis of the environmental problems.<sup>6</sup> Combining US historians' distinct interpretation of frontiers with Latin American historical and sociopolitical understandings of imperialism could inspire collaboration between the two research traditions. What follows, then, is an invitation to analyze environmental history with an "eco-political" lens.<sup>7</sup>

## THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF FRONTIERS

In 1845 Faustino Domingo Sarmiento, the acclaimed father of frontier studies and seventh president of Argentina, developed a theoretical

framework in *Facundo Civilización y Barbarie* that depicted frontiers as the environmental setting for the clash between civilization and barbarism.<sup>8</sup> This framework is rooted in the expansion of the Roman Empire toward the north where it found blond Teutonic people. The Romans' northward movement crossed the divide between civilized and barbarous people. Sarmiento analogized the Roman Empire's conquests to the history of the Argentine frontier. The civilization/barbarian duality was based on the linguistic environmental assumption that open spaces with low population density are "deserts," in this case, the Argentinian pampas. Sarmiento characterized these deserts as uncultivated and without private appropriation of lands (*baldíos*). They were, however, fertile for growing: not plants, but despotism. To make his point, Sarmiento described an imagined "orientalist" landscape, a "pastoral life that reminds us of the Asiatic plains, which imagination covers with Kalmuc, Cossack, or Arab tenants."<sup>9</sup>

*Facundo Civilización y Barbarie* was a fierce criticism against Juan Manuel Rosas, the former governor of the Buenos Aires Provinces and the leader of the Confederación Argentina (1835–50). Before Sarmiento became president of his country in 1868, he traveled to the United States to learn how North Americans were dealing with the Indian problem. In Algeria, he observed how the French were doing the same in North Africa. While president of Argentina, he championed the expansion of the public educational system as a means to civilize his beloved Argentina. He also attempted to expand settlement beyond the frontiers he described in his *Facundo*. He despised not only Indians, but also gauchos, skilled horse raiders in the pampas, who were often a mix of Spanish and Indian descent. By and large, the gauchos supported Rosas's despotism in Argentina. After Sarmiento's presidency, Argentine military forces organized the infamous campaign of the desert killing Indians, similar to military campaigns organized in the United States that diminished Native American populations and displaced them to remote reservations. Contrary to Turner's idea of pioneers revitalizing American democracy, the settling of the Argentinian frontier created a fertile ground for despotism.

Three key factors must be underlined in this transformation: (1) consolidation of the territorial nation-state through a military campaign over the "deserts," (2) the enactment of a legal civil code enacting rules that enthrone the idea of private ownership of land, and (3) the proliferation of permanent settlements achieved through modern agriculture, railroad infrastructure, and communication technology. Unlike Frederick Jackson Turner's portrait of the frontier in 1893, the Argentine countryside had transformed into a region dominated by powerful big landowners on a national scale. Ironically, during the cultural and environmental transformation in the early twentieth century, gauchos were held aloft as romantic symbols of

Argentine identity and their culture remained intact. As a result, the colloquial Argentine Spanish expression *bárbaro* took on a positive connotation.

While Sarmiento thought that Europeanized Argentina, particularly the urban example of Buenos Aires, was the route to bring civilization to the new republic, Turner's vision differed in three ways. To Turner, the frontier experience was mainly a democratization process. Of course, only those able to overlook the American Indian tragedy during the nineteenth century would celebrate such a democratization process. Second, small farmers emerged as icons of a new American identity resulting from US expansion into the western territories. Third, Turner believed that the frontier had closed at the end of the nineteenth century, as the census report of 1890 stated.<sup>10</sup> The starkest difference between Turner's and Sarmiento's conception of frontier, however, lies in the mythology with which they constructed their respective narratives: while Sarmiento's gauchos were villains, Turner's pioneers were heroes.

Decades later, Turner's interpretation was further developed by his contemporaries and later received strong criticism. American historian Herbert Eugene Bolton argued that Turner's perspective did not adequately consider the Hispanic borderlands, referring to the Sun Belt of the United States. Rather than the encounter between pioneers coming from the East with wilderness and indigenous people, the Southwest was the case of the contest among imperial experiments from England, France, and Spain that ended up in the expansion of Anglo America that met Hispanic and indigenous peoples as well. It was also the conflicting encounter of two nation-states, the expansive United States of America and the Mexican Republic.<sup>11</sup> Bolton's argument shows that the culture/civilization idea of frontier is not enough to explain the idea of frontier because it should be complemented with the idea of borders between political entities. Bolton's holistic perspective of American history that takes into account pre-colonial and colonial Hispanic lands is akin to the argument made in this piece, although this essay emphasizes the postcolonial rather than the colonial period.

Walter Prescott Webb offered a new interpretation of Turner's idea of the frontier experience in his Great Frontier hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> While Turner's idea applied to the United States, Webb's idea applied to the whole American Hemisphere. Webb's idea was based on Atlantic history. He thought that Turner's idea was just one chapter in a long history of Europeans colonizing across the Americas. Each interpretation inspired environmental historians in different ways.

US historians have critiqued frontier literature, particularly Turner's ideas. However, environmental historians gleaned one particular insight important for US history. William Cronon has asked, "Does the western past have a future?... Turner's critics went too far

ultimately in their attacks on his work. . . . ; American history has been in large degree the history of the colonization of the West.”<sup>13</sup> The history just mentioned has important “eco-political” consequences on present ideas of wilderness, national parks, and indigenous people’s access to land.<sup>14</sup> A critical historical reading of frontiers and of the American West can inspire Latin American historians’ research on frontiers. The assumption that Latin American intellectuals understand frontiers only as the conventional border that divides countries is false. Borders can signify both culture and civilization expansion, and political borders as well, such as within the Amazon.

Environmental historians have infused new energy and ideas<sup>15</sup> into literature on frontiers that can be useful for studying environmental transformations from an eco-political perspective and creates new research possibilities. Frontiers have three particular concerns: *political* ideas and territorial conflict, *cultural* encounters (civilization and knowledge), and untamed *environment*, what is called wilderness in the United States and what were called deserts in Latin America during the nineteenth century.

Closed-space assumptions are one criticism of the Turnerian notion of frontiers.<sup>16</sup> Examples of never-ending frontiers contradict Turner’s idea that the frontier was closed at some point in time; some may close, some may remain open. Borders can change, so what people consider a frontier in a particular time period is not viewed as one after the transformation of the landscape. One frontier can be closed, and the frontier experience is considered region building. Other frontier experiences, such as the Amazon, are abandoned after an economic boom, and they do not necessarily advance toward the region-building process but go backward as a frontier. There are also cases of new frontiers that have opened.<sup>17</sup> Because the contemporary market and state capitalism is expansive, it is always in search of new frontiers. Powerful actors behave in the context of this framework: expansion to beat competitors. Frontiers in this sense are not only a critical historical problem but a current one involving territorial expansion, cultural (dis) encounters, and power conflicts generated by the need to transform environments. As the technological means of profiting from nature are innovated or expanded to new spaces such as the Amazon, Antarctica, the deep sea, the moon, and so on, the economic system creates new frontiers.

Let us revisit the example of the Amazon. Although scholars have linked the Amazon region to the general history of the Iberian empires of Spain and Portugal dating back to the sixteenth century, many people envision the Amazon as a pristine region, a wilderness par excellence. Explorers, merchants, monks, soldiers, diplomats, and naturalists were there before the independence of both Brazil and the other Latin American countries that share the Amazon basin. Some authors have located the second conquest of Latin

America in the second part of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century when many countries implemented an export strategy to connect with the international market.<sup>18</sup> Amazonia is then living the third conquest. Amazonia experienced the second conquest during the second part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries during a period linked to two products: quinine and rubber. Following the rubber crisis during the second decade of the twentieth century, Amazonia stagnated and only episodically was relinked to export markets. With the arrival of the developmental age after the late 1940s, Amazonia reconnected to the Brazilian nation-state and other countries that share the Amazon basin. However, with the arrival of the environmental movement during the 1970s, Amazonia became a focus of international attention because of issues such as deforestation, biodiversity, and climate change. This is a transition that I refer to as *from globalization in the Amazon to globalization of the Amazon*. It refers to the period when the Amazon was redefined as a region of global concern due to the role of environmental issues on the international agenda.<sup>19</sup>

Two global projects dispute the hegemony of the Amazon region during the beginning of the twenty-first century: neo-conservationism and neo-developmentalism. Depending on the country, the conservation-development equation varies. In Brazil, for example, strong developmental forces predated conservationism. In the case of Colombia, however, conservation led economic development. From a frontier perspective, Amazonia seems a sort of perennial frontier. Environmental discourse has made indigenous people more visible despite their minority status.<sup>20</sup> Although neo-conservationism has high public visibility, in contrast, neo-developmentalism is rather silent with business as usual: oil, mining, timber, soy, biofuels, and hydroelectric projects. The Atlantic Brazil works to connect the subcontinent with the Pacific Ocean to take advantage of the growing importance of China and India. A multimodal transportation route could cross the Amazon basin through Peru, Ecuador, or Colombia using both rivers and roads as part of the Initiative for South American Integration.<sup>21</sup> Alan Garcia brought public attention to rural Peruvians in order to exploit Amazon timber resources. The nuances and specificities of Ecuadorian, Colombian, and Bolivian Amazon regions are great in number.

Neo-conservationism and neo-developmentalism are *neos* and thus imply new ways of practicing conservation and development. Conservation policies related to national parks have altered the rigid view of nature as separate from people through attempts to integrate people with nature. Using sustainable development rhetoric, neo-developmentalism invokes environmental concerns. While conservationism in the past has catered to tourism and scientific enterprise, neo-conservationism offers benefits to those with local knowledge of

forests. However, in times of economic crisis, capitalists work to restore the economy through increased profits. If technological innovation does result in significant economic benefits, the search for new frontiers is a favored option. Neo-developmentalism has worked to increase the bargaining power of indigenous people, also benefiting big businesses that may strike more favorable deals with indigenous people than with sometimes corrupt state bureaucracies.

The case of Amazonia is not unique. Patagonia, Baja California, Lacandona, the biogeographic Chocó, Alaska, North Dakota, the Antarctic, Orinoquia, El Chaco, the deep sea, and mountains of high altitude all have parallels to the Amazon—even the moon, which until recently had only poetic value! Latin American and US researchers are charged with the great task of renewing frontier literature through environmental history and political ecology. I have presented the case of an eco-political reading of the literature on frontiers and the opportunities it offers for a cooperative effort from scholars from the whole American continent. Let us now examine how the topic of imperialism has been discussed in environmental history literature. It has unexpected connections to literature on frontiers.

## POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF IMPERIALISM

Alfred Crosby, the renowned environmental historian, significantly developed Webb's hypothesis of the Great Frontier. The hypothesis deals with European imperialism over four centuries in not only the Americas, but also across Australia and New Zealand. In *Ecological Imperialism*,<sup>22</sup> Crosby deals with the intercontinental historical experience from the millennium 900 to 1900. Latin American environmental historians praised the book but never gave it a comprehensive critique.

Crosby argues that Europeans' expansion over the long term transformed several temperate regions of the planet including Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil. Ecologically, these temperate regions became similar to parts of Europe. The landscape's transformation had several elements including the interaction of biota (animal, plants, and people) and the demographic collapse of the native population. Such changes paved the way for a new dominant ecosystem, European in origin. In this light, imperialism is not a political matter but an ecological one. Imperialism is not the result of intentional human action but has complex, unintended ecological consequences.

Crosby's thesis has great appeal to militant environmentalists coming from a natural sciences background with little training in political affairs. Environmentalists with social science backgrounds attempt to connect their interdisciplinary interests to knowledge grounded in the natural sciences. This explanation of imperialism is unpopular among university students and left-wing intellectuals in Latin America. In 2008 during the V Summit of the Americas in



Trinidad, Venezuela president Hugo Chávez gave Barack Obama Eduardo Galeano's *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina* (*The Open Veins of Latin America*).<sup>23</sup> This book compares European and US imperial actions in Latin America to a vacuum cleaner that sucks away Latin America's natural resources. *Ecological Imperialism* is a well-written book that has yet to be critically assessed by Latin American scholars.<sup>24</sup>

There are two ways to read this interesting and problematic Latin American environmental history book. In response to Crosby's assertion that Mexico is not a neo-Europe, Australian-Canadian historian Elinor Melville points out that Mexico was successfully conquered and dominated because of the ecological transformation that came about during Spanish rule. She uses the case of the Mezquital valley to illustrate how ungulates helped Spanish invaders defeat the region's native population. She questions Crosby's limited neo-Europe explanation and extends it to new regions. She asserts the caveat that she is neither in the field of sociobiology nor is she an environmental determinist. Her case combines ecological factors with political ones that include the Spanish will to impose its rule over the people of Mezquital. She argues imperialism is not only a result of unintended human actions as Crosby suggests.<sup>25</sup>

In an attempt to enlighten the environmental history of Colombia, I have interpreted Crosby's argument but applied it to different situations. Because Colombia is an equatorial country with Andean highlands, Colombia did not become an ecological neo-Europe. However, because the highlands have characteristics resembling a temperate climate, Colombian elites bestowed the landscape with their own Eurocentric cultural interpretation. This European identification distinguished those living in the highlands from country folks in the hot lowlands, the frontier regions of Colombia. The case of the *bogotano's* elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century exemplifies this cultural phenomenon. The elite believed that the temperate weather of the Bogota high plains that resembled Europe had environmental conditions that would allow them to acquire a civilized reputation. During the same time period, Baron de Montesquieu's opinions on how climate was tied to institution building were very influential in Latin America. He denied that countries with hot weather could become civilized.<sup>26</sup> Montesquieu's political theories on climate and checks-and-balance government are widely read in Latin American law schools. Montesquieu portrayed tropical lowlands as unhealthy places filled with lazy people condemned to lag in progress. Crosby's arguments then demonstrate the equatorial elites' environmental biases toward the Colombian highlands as they attempted to construct a civilized identity.<sup>27</sup> European ecological imperialism colonized not the soils of Colombia but the minds of its elites.

For all Crosby's insights, *Ecological Imperialism* has been criticized for a Eurocentric point of view. Michael Pollan, for example, has

illustrated how corn has become a crop with greater global significance than wheat in contrast to Crosby's assertion.<sup>28</sup> Arturo Warman's book on corn also highlights Crosby's assumptions about the supremacy of European wheat.<sup>29</sup> Thus Crosby's thesis can be read not as making a biological argument, but as an environmental explanation of interactions between people and nature, particularly nineteenth-century elites' environmental determinism. Imperialism is rooted in the human desire to dominate other humans and/or the rest of nature, even elements of nature that abet imperialist agents. Latin American environmentalists in their love for nature should be aware of the problematic aspects of Crosby's seductive narrative.

Australian environmental historian Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* is another work best analyzed through a political ecology framework. Despite the title's resemblance to Crosby's, his ideas on environmental history ideas are not based on biological factors. Within the framework of conventional Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French imperialism, he shows that many contemporary environmental ideas, including climatic ones, were born and rooted in imperialist experiences in colonial settings from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Grove argues that contemporary environmentalism was not born recently in developed countries, but before the nineteenth century was in the colonies, mainly islands. Grove's ideas provides evidence contrary to catastrophic environmental rhetoric, including against declensionist narratives similar to how Mark Carey portrayed the dominant narrative of Latin American environmental history.<sup>30</sup>

Grove's history of environmental ideas overlooks one important eco-political issue. In his discussion of Alexander von Humboldt, he lumps him with other colonial officers, ignoring his complexity. He does not acknowledge his role within a scientific group of people that inspired several Creole leaders including Simon Bolivar. Bolivar was a Venezuelan political visionary who led several Latin American countries to independence from Spain.<sup>31</sup> Humboldt offers a romantic view of tropical nature, something worthy of patriotic pride. Alexander von Humboldt is remembered similarly in Latin America. To underestimate Humboldt's anticolonial symbolism is analogous to rejecting romantic political, literary, and artistic figures who shaped modern sentiment toward wilderness in North America.<sup>32</sup> Humboldt invented a romantic idea of Latin American nature that today is celebrated within Latin American environmental institutions and inspired literary contemporary writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and William Ospina. The complexity I refer to is what Mary Louise Pratt called the anti-conquest narrative. It is linked to several scientific figures who visited Latin America during the nineteenth century including Humboldt and Darwin.

Ambiguity occurs in transition periods from colonial to postindependence. Jose Augusto Padua's *Un Sopro de destruição* illustrates this

occurrence.<sup>33</sup> Like Grove he argues that environmental ideas were older than modern environmentalism in the United States or Europe; its roots trace back to colonial Latin America. His example of Brazilian environmental ideas covers the late colonial and early independent period of the Brazilian empire between 1786 and 1888. This period saw both the decline of the Portuguese empire and the continuation of the monarchy and slavery system in politically independent Brazil. Padua used fifty intellectual and political figures to illustrate his point. The selected figures are difficult to characterize as either Portuguese or Brazilians. José Bonifacio, for example, was born in Santos, Brazil, but educated in Coimbra, Portugal. He returned to Brazil when he was fifty-six years old, so it is difficult to characterize him in terms of national allegiance because he lived during both the Portuguese empire and the independent monarchy. The ruler of the Brazilian empire had direct connections to the ruling dynasty in imperial Portugal. Padua presents the case that many of these figures were concerned about environmental destruction throughout the reign of imperialism and during the struggle for independence from imperial powers. His contention of a distinct Brazilian awareness of environmental problems is weakened by the persistence of a Portuguese imperialist government composed of imperial and aristocratic elite transplanted from Brazil throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

My overarching argument distances itself from the view that ecological imperialism is purely a biological result and from the dependency theory that tends to think of imperialism as the plot of imperialist foreigners who ascribe limited agency to Latin American actors. The study of imperialism in the global south should not be restricted to European colonial empires. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the growing power of the United States redefined imperialism. This new type of imperialism sometimes relied on territorial conquests, but its larger effect was largely hegemonic. The power of multinational corporations inaugurates a new type of imperialism. Such political innovation put its indelible imprint on the Latin American landscape. Latin American contemporary environmental history then must be analyzed with respect to US neo-imperialist ventures.

Richard Tucker's *Insatiable Appetite* illuminates the ecological impact of the United States in many parts of the world including Latin America. Tucker supports his case through a commodity chain analysis that tracks several commodities, such as cane, bananas, coffee, rubber, cattle, and timber. Tucker's approach, however, often regards other countries and actors as passive agents. He rarely shows how Latin American elites were committed to and benefited from capitalist enterprises that have negative environmental consequences. Similarly, Tucker does not illustrate how local or national actors engage in disputes against powerful new agents, deal with, resist, take advantage of, and influence the outcomes of imperialism.

Other post-dependency writers present an interactive vision that includes a variety of US and Latin American actors engaging in cooperative and adversarial circumstances. Specifically, I refer to *Banana Cultures* written by John Soluri, *Ecology of Oil* by Myrna Santiago, and *Fordlandia* by Greg Grandin.<sup>35</sup> These authors establish complex interactions between US agents including multinational companies and local, regional, and national actors. They offer a complex picture with an argument that articulates the transnational interactions that link US and Latin American frontier history.

In *Banana Cultures*, Soluri asks, "What does it mean to eat bananas?" His answer "compels us to think about people in the United States who consume inexpensive, identical looking and tasting bananas on an everyday basis while symbolically distancing themselves from the 'banana republics.'"<sup>36</sup> Soluri links "places of production and consumption" in the north coast of Honduras and the United States between 1870 and 1970.<sup>37</sup> He maintains that in Honduras the transformation of a "low-input production process" into a "capital and labor intensive" process implies deep environmental changes catalyzed by US companies including United Fruit Company.<sup>38</sup> He argues that the spread of two pathogens, Panama and Sigatoka, were critical to understanding the "shifting cultivation agriculture" that United Fruit had to adopt as well as their decision to replace one banana variety, Gros Michel, with a second variety. Rather than "arguing for the primacy of cultural or biological process," Soluri is interested in "demonstrating their historical entanglement."<sup>39</sup>

Soluri's work is interesting and methodologically encouraging even though his focus on environment and culture "move politics off center stage."<sup>40</sup> He avoids the one-sided vision of the "dependency theory" that blames a foreign imperialism without considering history's complexity. Soluri's work, however, requires more politics, for within Honduras, politics is embedded within the United Fruit Company, a modern-day empire.

In *Ecology of Oil*, Myrna Santiago discusses human interactions with the tropical humid forests of northern Veracruz and the "social and environmental consequences of oil extraction" that shaped the region's history and environment between 1900 and 1938. Her main argument is "that fossil fuel extraction entailed the creation of an entirely new ecology," what she calls the "ecology of oil."<sup>41</sup> She shows how the Huasteca people of the region struggled to appropriate, benefit, transform, and profit from the forests. She also uses a methodology that links US companies and their interests in a specific region in Latin America: the Huasteca of northern Veracruz, Mexico.<sup>42</sup>

Before the invasion of oil companies, two types of land tenure predominated among the Huasteca: private property and communal land ownership. These two types of property regimes did not coexist harmoniously but created conflicts between indigenous peoples and

private landowners. The picture of the region changed when powerful oil men from the United States and Britain entered the Huasteca landscape. In order to make profits from oil extraction, they drastically altered the surrounding environment, building a new oil ecology. They transformed the tropical rain forest because “oil extraction, transport, and use inevitably alter the landscape.”<sup>43</sup> Some areas required “intensive use, including those hosting camps, refineries, storage depots, terminals, and ports, others requires the vacating lands for pipelines, railroads, airplane landing strips, and telephone and telegraph lines.”<sup>44</sup> Santiago adds, “One hundred thousand acres is an extremely conservative estimate.”<sup>45</sup>

Oil development required laborers, who were brought from different parts of the world and assigned positions based on class, nationality, and race. Mexicans were at the bottom of the hierarchy. The Mexican Revolution challenged the status quo and also offered Mexicans opportunities to reflect on environmental conservation policies.<sup>46</sup> Debates on different levels took place regarding who “should manage nature in a revolutionary country: the working class, the private sector, or the state?”<sup>47</sup> Finally, the state took control, changing the ownership of the subsoil and expropriating foreign companies. Santiago argues, “PEMEX (the Mexican State owned company) has ignored the social and environmental consequences not only of oil extraction, but also of petrochemical production.”<sup>48</sup> The histories of the US and Latin American actors are entwined within this narrative, similar to the way environmental history and political ecology are interwoven.

Santiago’s narrative describes a story of the imperialist oil companies that successfully transformed the landscape of the tropical lowlands. However, the Mexican government and the oil workers’ union eventually emerged victorious after they obtained ownership of the oil fields and their revenues. Greg Grandin’s account in *Fordlandia* tells a very different story. In 1927 Henry Ford attempted to transform a parcel of land in the Brazilian Amazon the size of Connecticut into a rubber factory with the goal of controlling the automotive production process. This fascinating story connects Amazon indigenous people and *caboclos* to the lives of industrial workers in the US Midwest. Grandin’s argument is that Fordlandia, initially an economic venture led by Henry Ford, became a historic failure through his attempt to replicate the order, repetition, simplification, discipline, and social relations of automatized industrial production in Brazil.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

When dealing with the territorial expansion of different imperial powers and nation-states, I argue that the frontier literature has

provided interpretative frameworks that can be enriched by an environmental perspective. My ideas about frontiers can extend to contemporary transformations of environments. In other words, these are the boundaries between environmental history and political ecology.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, I have argued that this literature is important not only because of our interest in the past, but in its relevance to the present because the frontier expansion in the Americas is not closed and gone forever. It is still quite wide open.

In this article I have tried to incorporate political issues into environmental history. In doing so I conclude that North American and Latin American environmental scholars share a common history, ground, and interest in engaging in joint research projects. I questioned a widely known Latin American idea of imperialism based on the dependency theory and an ecological vision that shadows critical human agency in influencing imperialism and transforming the landscape.

I hope this article encourages Latin and North American scholars to build partnerships and a cooperative research agenda.<sup>50</sup> There are good reasons to expect that a more coordinated and cooperative effort is feasible. Latin American environmental history has developed into a more collaborative, unified field.<sup>51</sup> Its initial problems of disconnection, dispersion, and complexity have been solved through institutional mechanisms such as the Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental (SOLCHA) and the launching of its official journal, so reciprocity with the American Society for Environmental History can be expected. Financial support from both the north and the south is possible.<sup>52</sup>

On a hemispheric scale, the eco-political impact of the United States on Latin American landscapes has been very important in northern Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. US influence in these regions became even more notorious following the construction of the Panama Canal at the turn of the nineteenth century, a major environmental transformation that affected the entire hemisphere. Despite the fact that US imperialism is different than former European territorial imperialism, US imperialism has had territorial impacts. US companies have controlled and transformed landscapes, as illustrated in the Soluri, Santiago, Tucker, and Grandin environmental histories.

Conversely, US penetration into its Latin American counterpart is not a one-sided phenomenon as Latin America has imposed its influence on the United States. In light of the 2000 and 2010 US censuses, it is clear that the Latin component of the United States is growing demographically, culturally, and politically. The efforts to stop and to reverse the Latinization of the United States are undermined by borderlands history. It is also affected by the Latin immigration into the United States, a consequence of free trade agreements with Mexico, illegal drug enforcement, and by the globalization process.

Consequently, environmental historians do not have to adhere to the cultural and political chasm that split the Latin and the Anglo within the hemisphere, a historical process that took place during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

I have used the case of the Pan-Amazon eco-region and its frontiers to articulate my point. In the Pan-Amazon region the frontier is still a landscape that stubbornly resists radical development even through interactions between state borders, borderlands, and a multitude of actors including environmentalists. With this in mind scholars should take advantage of the fact that historians from the United States have developed a strong tradition on frontiers and that Latin American scholars are very sensitive to the subject of imperialism. Environmental history in the United States has gained prestige in academia, and environmental history in Latin America is no longer a novelty. Beginning in the 1990s, the Latin American environmental history community has faced and overcome three challenges: newness, dispersion, and complexity. This academic development enables Latin American scholars to engage in a more productive dialogue with US environmental historians.

This article is an invitation to engage Latin and North American environmental historians to undertake transnational historical research involving mutual academic interests. The invitation does not intend to erase historical nuances and differences between countries of the Americas, but to use an accumulation of scholarly work to shed light on the history of environmental transformations of our common America. My hope is that more US historians discover that their US history is also Latin American history and vice versa. Doing so would not only enhance our understanding of our past but also our present and our global future. It is a matter of scholarly work, but it is also an eco-political endeavor because scholars are citizens.<sup>54</sup>

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Olga Lucía, and my children, Lucía and Martín, for giving me energy and enthusiasm. This article benefited from two outstanding PhD students, Patricia O'Keane and Jessie Reeder, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I also would like to thank Lise Sedrez, John Soluri, and Nancy Langston for comments that improved my article. I am grateful to the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Amazon branch, for giving me time and support in my sabbatical year. Héctor Alimonda, with the support of the CNPq-Brazil, invited me to teach a course on Latin American environmental history in the Programa de Pós-graduação de Ciências Sociais em

Desenvolvimento, Agricultura e Sociedade, CPDA, da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro where some of the ideas for this article were born. I am also indebted to Hector Alimonda for his comments that corrected some of my mistakes. Excellent comments made by two anonymous reviewers made this article more cogent and coherent. Finally, I'd like to thank the Tinker Foundation and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, particularly LACIS and the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, who hosted me and gave me support to develop my ideas.

## Notes

- 1 Alan García, "El síndrome del perro hortelano," *El Comercio*, October 28, 2007. Available at [http://elcomercio.pe/edicionimpresa/Html/2007-10-28/el\\_sindrome\\_del\\_perro\\_del\\_hort.html](http://elcomercio.pe/edicionimpresa/Html/2007-10-28/el_sindrome_del_perro_del_hort.html), and Alan García.
- 2 "Receta para acabar con el perro hortelano," *El Comercio*, November 25, 2007. Available at [http://elcomercio.pe/edicionimpresa/html/2007-11-25/receta\\_para\\_acabar\\_con\\_el\\_perr.html](http://elcomercio.pe/edicionimpresa/html/2007-11-25/receta_para_acabar_con_el_perr.html).
- 3 Marcelo Langieri et al.; Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, "Cronología del levantamiento amazónico," in *La Amazonia rebelde. Perú 2009*, ed. Héctor Alimonda, Raphael Hoetmer, and Diego Saavedra Celestino (Lima: Clacso, Programa Democracia y Transformación Social, Confederación Nacional de Comunidades del Perú Afectadas por la Minería, ASD, Universidad Mayor de San Marcos, 2009), 85–98.
- 4 See David J. Weber and Jane Raush, eds., *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 33.
- 5 See, for example, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Germán Palacio, "El papel del Derecho en el cambio material y simbólico del paisaje colombiano 1850–1930," in *VariaHistoria* 24, no. 39 (2008).
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- 7 Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press: 1978), 12.
- 8 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo. Civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1979).
- 9 Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Life in The Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants* (New York: Hafner, 1971), 15.
- 10 Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
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  - 14 Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
  - 15 William Devereel, ed., *A Companion to the American West* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007). In this collection, see specifically Stephen Aron, "The Making of the First American West and the Unmaking of Other Realms," 5–24.
  - 16 Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 8.
  - 17 Paul Little, *Amazonia: Perennial Frontiers in Territorial Struggles* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).
  - 18 Stephen Topik and Allen West, *The Second Conquest of Latin America: Coffee, Henneken, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850–1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).
  - 19 Germán Palacio, "Cinco ejes analíticos para comprender la Amazonia Colombiana," in *Amazonia desde dentro. Aportes a la investigación de la Amazonia colombiana*, ed. Valentina Nieto and Germán Palacio (Bogotá: UNAL, 2007).
  - 20 According to RAISG, Red Amazónica de Información Socio Ambiental Georeferenciada, 33 million people live in the Pan-Amazonia, and 1.6 million are indigenous peoples. See <http://raisg.socioambiental.org/>.
  - 21 See the Initiative for Regional Integration of South America, known by their acronym as IIRSA.
  - 22 Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
  - 23 Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de America Latina* (México, Siglo XXI, 2009).
  - 24 Perplexity, or silence, is what I have seen in Latin American environmentalists aware of Crosby because Galeano explained Latin American poverty and dependence blaming political and economic imperialism, including US imperialism. In contrast, Crosby provides an ecological explanation, rather than a political or economic one. However, Latin American environmentalists are inclined to accept "ecological" explanations. They are perplexed because they would like to keep Galeano's point of view, but they would also like to find new ecological explanations, and they don't know how to combined the two of them without contradiction.
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- 31 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
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- 33 José Augusto Padua, *Um sopro de destruição. Pensamento político e crítica ambiental no Brasil escravista, 1786–1888* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2002).
- 34 Another interesting book about conventional European imperialism that analyzes it in environmental terms, particularly botanical expeditions at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is Mauricio Nieto, *Remedios para el Imperio. Historia natural y la apropiación del Nuevo Mundo* (Bogotá: Icanh, 2000).
- 35 John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption & Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia*.
- 36 Soluri, *Banana Cultures*, x.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 1
- 38 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 41 Santiago, 4.
- 42 In contrast to Soluri, she does not attempt to present in return the impact of oil in the United States as Soluri does with his banana culture, a particular appealing aspect of Soluri's study.
- 43 Santiago, 102.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 46 For Mexican conservationism, see Lane Simonian, *The Land of the Jaguar: A History of Conservation in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
- 47 Santiago, 11.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 354.
- 49 This effort was also made by anthropologist Paul E. Little, *Amazonia: Territorial Struggles in Perennial Frontiers* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).
- 50 For an antecedent of the effort of this article to build a common ground between political ecology, environmental history and the critical project on modernity/coloniality, see Héctor Alimonda, "Sobre la insostenible colonialidad de la naturaleza latinoamericana," in Germán A. Palacio Castañeda, *Ecología política de la Amazonia. Las profusas y difusas redes de la gobernanza* (Bogotá: Unal-Ecofondo-Ilsa, 2010).

- 51 Lise Sedrez, a Brazilian historian, at the turn of the twenty-first century, put together a list initially at the Stanford University web page where she was finishing her PhD. Now that bibliographical tool can be consulted at <http://www.csulb.edu/projects/laeh/> inside the web page of California State University, Long Beach.
- 52 Mahesh Rangerajan, Jose A. Padua, and Jonh R. Mcneil, eds., *Environmental History: As If Nature Existed. Ecological Economics and Human Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 53 Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden: Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- 54 To paraphrase the expression of William Cronon's blog, <http://scholarcitizen.williamcronon.net/>.