

Call for papers

Destruction and conservation in debate: Brazil's environmental history in a global perspective

October 13th- 14th 2016 – Workshop at Centre Alexandre Koyré (EHESS), Paris

Since the European invasion in 1500, the vast land known as 'Brazil' is associated with images of an exuberant tropical nature, which generate both fascination and greed. Although this country hosts the richest biodiversity in the world, it has often been depicted as an environmental villain, due to large deforestation rates attracting the attention of the international media since the late 1970s.

Brazilian environmental history emerged quite recently as an academic discipline, even though many economists, anthropologists and geographers have worked for a long time on the issue of environment in Latin America. However, Brazil's historiography very early on articulated the analysis of nation building, identity and race in perspective with the representation and transformation of nature. After the national writer Euclides da Cunha, in the early twentieth century, described the influence of the environmental milieu on the national character in a somewhat deterministic fashion, many other Brazilian 'classics' made this question their own. Authors such as Capistrano de Abreu, Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Junior attempted to design a national narrative that largely takes the tropical space, climate and natural diversity into account.

Until recently, the effects of the plundering economy, first by colonial powers and then by the State and multinational companies, dominated environmental histories of Brazil and Latin America. Although those histories are based on an interpretative framework with strong political implications, they tended to overlook the analysis of how local populations used their natural environment. Furthermore, by attributing the function of historical agents only to humans, Brazilian environmental history ended up with a pessimistic worldview staging the fauna, flora, landscape and climate as perpetual victims of capitalist expansion. Today, this 'eco-declensionist' narrative tends to be put aside in favor of more careful readings. Delivering a more nuanced appraisal of the country's experience, recent studies have pointed at uncontrolled destruction trends but also at a strong Brazilian tradition of conservationist critique, in line with powerful national narratives.

Yet, the global dimension of Brazil's environmental history is still widely unexplored. In transnational areas such as the Amazon or the Pampas, collective identities grounded on the regional environment play a very important role. It is therefore urgent to explore more closely the cross-border socio-environmental dynamics that exist in South America. We also need to put Brazil's environmental history in perspective with the experience of other world regions and countries. For example, some authors have suggested that Brazilian culture might, in some aspects, testify to an exceptional environmental awareness as compared with other tropical countries. But we lack international comparisons to corroborate

or refute such claims. The question of shared responsibilities of European countries in the degradation of tropical environments has also been little addressed. The interface with the rest of the world in the transformation, management and negotiation of Brazilian nature is another, still under-researched area. Despite major focus on some specific resources, especially rubber, history has not extensively explored the circulation of animal, plant and mineral species across the Brazilian (land or marine) borders.

This workshop intends to discuss both the state-of-the-art and new perspectives for Brazilian environmental history in the broad sense of the term, including studies about the representations, politics and material changes produced by the interaction between humans and non-humans. Convinced that only a multidisciplinary effort can help academic research meet the scale of climate and environmental changes, we also aim to make this event a space for dialogue between researchers from diverse scientific backgrounds.

Communication proposals of approximately 300 characters must be written in French or English and sent no later than the 29 May, along with a brief biography of the author, to

workshop.histenvdubresil@gmail.com

Please send your proposal in *Word* format

Further information:

This event will result in a collective publication. After the workshop, participants will be given a new deadline to submit a written contribution, which will be reviewed by two anonymous readers.

We are currently exploring new funding possibilities to finance the participation of researchers living outside Paris, and invite applicants to inform us in case their home institution cannot fund their participation. Unfortunately, we will not be able to pay for intercontinental flights.

For any specific question, please contact:

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