

Foreword

This special issue includes articles from historians who have been guided, in the handling of their objects, by the new inquiries and methods of what has been called Environmental History. In recent years, North American and European associations and journals have dedicated themselves to the formulation of a new historical perspective based on the emphasis of the relations between society and nature. Sensitive to such tendencies, *Varia História*, in its 26th issue (January 2002), has brought a first issue on *History and Nature*. In it, an article from Panamanian historian Guillermo Castro points out several studies already made about environmental history in Latin America, but emphasizes the urgency to make a history in Latin America, committed to the life and well-being of our societies. The current compilation, whose title refers to the above-mentioned article, presents some studies done by researchers from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico.

We highlight that this issue is being published at the moment that there is a promising movement of professionals from many countries to found a Latin American institution of Environmental History, from great collective efforts that enabled a first meeting held in Santiago, Chile, in July 2003, and a recent Symposium in Havana, in October 2004, in which the bases of the *Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental (SOLACHA)* were announced. Among the historians involved, it is possible to cite several authors who participated in the previous issue, *History and Nature (26)*, and in this one that we are now presenting to the reader.

In this beginning of a millennium, in which history uninterruptedly consists of a social activity of transformation and criticism, Environmental History faces inquiries about its methods and purposes. Facing these challenges, if we reconsider Nietzsche's classical assertion about the "utility of historical studies" — in which he states that history must serve life or have no value — we would say that the power and the promise of this new perspective is the fact that it will be able (even if not necessarily, of course) to make serving life its priority and, more than its mere conservation, it can be constructed with the goal of affirmation of its abundance.

Enrique Leff's stimulating article offers useful methodological and epistemological reflections about environmental history. In the discussion of its sources, it presents questionings pertinent to the analyses formed as a mere narrative of destruction, or to the simplism present in the ascription of an environmental character to everything. On the other hand, it emphasizes the precious character of the anti-essentialist ontology possible in the environmental historical perspective, besides the positivity present in its prospective focuses, a source of social transformation towards sustainability.

Maurício Folchi studies the environmental effects of the processing of metallic minerals, practicing an interdisciplinary dialogue, which includes environmental history, the history of technique and science, chemistry, and geology. The analysis of such effects searches for its basis in the historicity of the relations between societies and the environment. The article gives special interest to Brazilian readers, keeping in mind the importance of mining activities in our society, in different places and during different periods.

José Augusto Pádua investigates the historical connections between the romantic heritage from the end of the 18th to the 19th century and contemporary ecologism. He presents a panoramic view of French, German, English, and American intellectual traditions, debating the need to recognize the hybridism present in the mixture of romantic and illuminist influences. Finally, he examines works by some Brazilian authors, in which he identifies a limited criticism of civilization, inviting the reader to continue to research on this theme.

Stefania Gallini's article distinguishes itself by the elegance of its narrative, the theoretical density and the appropriateness with which she guides dialogues with geography, geology, climatology, and agronomy. In an original and intriguing view about coffee planting in Guatemala, she presents us a complex picture from a historical environmental perspective in which material and cultural aspects are mixed. One of the examples of the power of her argumentation can be located in the discussion about the volcanoes and what, in that society, they represent in terms of threat, sacred force, temporal *continuum*, and a factor of soil fertility.

Reinaldo Funes builds his analysis on the progress of sugar plantations in Cuban territory, in the interface between the environmental history and the economic history perspectives. He discusses landscape transformations, changes in the techniques used and the State's policies in relation to forest resources and their exploitation by private individuals. He considers some aspects of the region's fauna and flora and the decrease of biodiversity resultant from the predominance of the economic agro-exporter project.

José L. Franco and José Drummond analyze the career of botanist

José Alberto Sampaio (1881-1946), who was a scientist from the National Museum. By privileging three of his works, written between 1926 and 1935, they discuss his pioneering attitudes regarding protection of nature, relations between nationalism and conservation during those years, as well as preoccupation with the pedagogy of the Brazilian man. They also point out to Sampaio's complex relations with the scientific and intellectual community of his time.

Before readers go forth to explore those many articles, we would like to remind them of Arturo Escobar's reflection on the dream of developmentalism, which so much motivated the so-called "third world," and rapidly showed itself to be a real nightmare, with the production resulting in increased poverty, increased exploitation, oppression, and destruction of the environment. Without giving in to a naïve view of a Latin America, treasure-house of traditions, this author draws attention, to the promising character of some cultural forms and practices, which do not present themselves as an alternative developmentalism, but as alternatives to developmentalism. In this sense, we are left with the challenge of being capable of "social invention of new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing".¹ Certainly, this is also the challenge set by an environmental history to be made by us.

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¹ Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development — the making and unmaking of the Third World*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 20.9