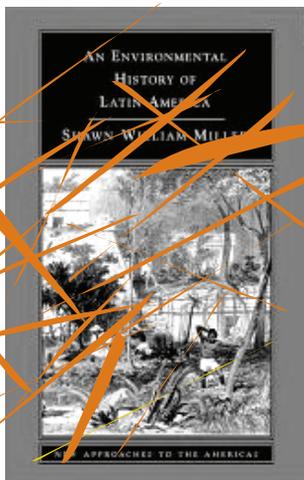


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Shawn William Miller
*An Environmental History
of Latin America*

**New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2007**
**Collection: New Approaches
to the Americas**
Stuart Schwartz Editor

Reinaldo Funes Monzote

This book makes a laudable effort to systematize and synthesize some of the main results of studies on the environmental history of Latin America. It is an excellent example of the potential of environmental history for the analysis of historical processes. Following the concise definition of environmental history as the study of the mutual interactions between human beings and the rest of nature, it embraces a wide range of themes within the environmental history of Latin America, not only that of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries, but also of the English, French, and Dutch Caribbean.

Studies of the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean are beginning to show a growing maturity, although we may agree with the author that they are still in their childhood (p. 203). By the mid 1990s only a handful of studies on the region inspired by environmental history had seen the light. Authors from academic circuits out of the region, mainly United States and linked to ASEH, had produced several pioneering works, and, parallel to this, some dispersed studies by Latin American authors had begun to appear. In recent years, however, Latin American and Caribbean

environmental historians have been increasing their output and one remarks a growing consolidation of scholarship in individual countries and at the regional level.

Any reader or specialist interested in exploring the environmental history of the American continent south of the Bravo river will find in this book an excellent starting point. It is useful for beginners as well as for experienced scholars, and provides a helpful reference at different educational levels for teachers who want to present a history granting a central place to the complex problem of the sustainability and survival of human cultures and civilizations. Moving from this perspective, although he is aware of its limitations, the author places the greatest emphasis on four variables that appear in one way or another at different moments in the book, viz., population, technology, attitudes toward nature, and attitudes toward consumption. The analysis of these variables starts from the principle that neither nature nor culture are able to entirely determine their respective outcomes. Therefore, a history that does not take into account interactions with nature is at least inaccurate and of limited purpose, and at most dangerous.

The main body of the book comprises seven chapters, preceded by an introduction that combines a statement about the importance of environmental history with an outline of the specific issues raised by the study of the historical experience of the region presently known as “Latin America”. Chapter 1, “An Old World Before It Was New”, examines some of the main cultures or civilizations that existed in the continent before the arrival of the Europeans, particularly the Aztecs, the Incas and Tupis from Brazil. Among various topics examined, the author devotes special attention to the controversial debate about cannibalism among several Latin American cultures before the arrival of Columbus. In 1492, the future America was in no way an uninhabited continent with pristine landscapes, but rather just the opposite. Some of its cities rivaled in population with its contemporaries in Europe, and its agricultural systems showed a high degree of productivity and great adaptation to unequal ecological conditions. Thus, as Miller affirms, “If Columbus discovered paradise, it was a humanized paradise.”

Some of the demographic and environmental consequences of the arrival of Europeans are discussed in chapter 2, “Nature’s Conquest”, including epidemics, the introduction of new sources of food, such as bovine meat, and the reactions of Europeans in front of the nature of the New World, which opposed allegories of paradise and hell. Chapter 3, “The Colonial Balance Sheet,” centers on topics such as the environmental impact of the sugar industry in Brazil and in the non-Spanish European islands in the Antilles from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; silver mining; pollution and its harmful effects on human health; and the metropolitan monopolies dedicated to preserving, in the name of mercantilist interests, certain natural “products” such as timber, rubber, diamonds, salt, and whales. The author makes some very interesting considerations on the – usually ineffective – natural resource conservation policies implemented by imperial politicians.

The remaining chapters are devoted to the situation after independence. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have received the most attention from environmental historians. Chapter 4, “Tropical Determinism”, examines the implications of certain European ideas about the influence of climate and race that prevailed until beginning of the twentieth century. These ideas presupposed not only the inferiority of the inhabitants and nature of the tropics, but even the degeneration of European white immigrants. In close relationship with these conceptions, Miller discusses tropical illnesses such as yellow fever and Chagas disease, as well as plagues that affected commercially valuable crops such as rubber and banana. In both cases, he emphasizes their socioeconomic implications, as he also does in his analysis of some of the natural disasters that have affected the region historically, for example the hurricanes in the Caribbean and Central America.

Chapter 5 presents some of the most notorious examples of what Miller designates as “Human Determination”, through cases such as the drainage of the lakes of Mexico City; guano and nitrate extraction on the coast of the South American Pacific to supply a potent fertilizer for European and North American agriculture; and the construction of large dams to generate electrical power. Chapter 6

treats of one of the biggest challenges for Latin American nations in the twentieth century, viz., the formation of gigantic cities. The author regards the city as an unavoidable reality in any Latin American environmental politics, due to the deep urban tradition of the region. Related topics include the growing use of the automobile since the mid twentieth century and politics to reduce population, such as the discriminatory practice of female sterilization in countries like Puerto Rico or in impoverished areas like the Northeast of Brazil.

Chapter 7 discusses Latin American historical experiences in conservation politics since the XIX century. Miller finds here less of a romantic attitude towards nature than in the United States, a fact which he explains, in part, by later industrialization. He observes, however, that when Latin American environmental history is better known new personalities may emerge who may force us to revise this impression. The author examines in more detail recent examples of environmental issues in places such as the Dominican Republic (where president Balaguer played an important part), Sandinista Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, “the darling of biodiversity conservation.” Miller warns against the hypocrisy of modern environmentalism: “while collectively we can agree to save the earth, individually we consume the earth at an astounding rate” (p. 215). He gives the example of tourism, which is but a continuation of the exploitation (and spoliation) of natural resources; he includes as representative cases Acapulco, Cancún, cruises, and “eco theme parks.”

Not everything in the book is a succession of disasters or setbacks in humans’ relationship with nature. The author mentions some hopeful examples indicating that a concern for nature does not conflict with aspirations to social justice or equality, or even with urban growth. Under this regard, the recent experience of the Brazilian city of Curitiba stands out. Curitiba has implemented an urbanization policy emphasizing public transportation and the use of bicycles, although Miller does not omit to point out some potential risks. The author’s concern for connecting the past, the present, and the future is an especially commendable aspect of the book. It is no coincidence that Miller’s history concludes with an epilogue entitled “Cuba’s Latest Revolution”, which examines the consequences for

the island's economy of the collapse of the Socialist block and the USSR, which caused petroleum imports to decrease more than 50 percent, and consequently stimulated an effort on the national scale to shift from an industrial agriculture that was highly dependent on external inputs towards a sustainable and organic agriculture.

Those more familiar with the topic of this book, will be able to quickly find the sources that stimulated the author to carry out this synthesis. In the chapters we can find the results of pioneering studies in this field, including those coming from historical geography, mainly works published in United States. One may perhaps object to the absence of some authors and topics, but in any work with such a broad scope this is unavoidable. One may also criticize the lack of references to works in recent years in Latin America, as well as the fact that the author puts too much emphasis on topics he has dealt with in previous studies, and hence pays more attention to some countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, and less to others. Furthermore, some topics that are discussed for one period disappear in the next, even when their environmental implications may be greater in this subsequent phase. None of these remarks, however, can eclipse the contribution of this book to the goal of constructing an environmental history of Latin America. Certainly, the book does not call attention to some of the deepest causes of environmental deterioration in the region, notably the ways in which the region was integrated into the world system beginning in 1492 and, above all, during the nineteenth century; nonetheless, this does not diminish its merit as one of the first works of its kind. Miller's book is a valuable contribution and a stimulus for all who are attempting to construct a history that is not just a history of humans.