



Polar bears, cactus, and natives: race, agrarian reform, and environmental determinism in Latin America (1920–1950)

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Abstract

Early twentieth-century environmentalism or environmental determinism, as it is more pejoratively known, has been widely denounced by critical human geographers on the grounds of its well-established role in imperialist dispossession and subordination. Recently, however, historical geographers have re-visited environmentalism in an effort to better understand its diverse and often contradictory deployments. This article examines environmentalist thought as a function of Latin American anti-imperialist reform movements in the first half of the twentieth century, arguing that progressive Latin American intellectuals emphasized constitutive links between race and place to support community claims to land and subsistence.

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To make a scientific study of man abstracted from the soil he cultivates, the landscape he travels, or the sea he sails is as impossible as understanding a polar bear or a desert cactus outside of their living mediums... The study of the Indian and the earth that sustains him can be found in a general ecological perspective, sounding the depths of past indigenous cultural developments and observing from this vantage point the American and the possibilities of his cultural future.

—Pío Jaramillo Alvarado (1946)

In 1911, Ellen Semple published *Influences of Geographic Environment*, a text that would anchor the emerging discipline of geography in the mainstream of global social science. A re-interpretation of the ideas of Friederich Ratzel, Semple's text became synonymous with a mode of analytical inquiry that saw human societies as the dynamic product of place-based environmental engagement over time. Known as environmentalism, this methodological lens appealed to both scholarly and popular audiences seeking to make sense of human difference in light of increasingly cosmopolitan social experience. The best of this work asked challenging questions about the effects of material constraints and opportunities on

social and cultural development. The worst deployed notions of geographical difference to justify ongoing exploitation, subordination, and dispossession, arguing that environment was fundamentally determinative of a given people's political and economic development. On a global scale, the latter sought to naturalize colonialist relationships between far-flung social landscapes, contrasting, for example, the natural industry and acumen of northern peoples with the lassitude and intellectual torpor of the south.¹ More locally, it offered ostensibly scientific legitimization for institutionalized discrimination between racially-differentiated persons inhabiting contiguous political space. In all cases, ethnicity became synonymous with geographical origin, offering a specifically spatial analysis of human social development. As such, environmentalism offered an analytic structure with which to make sense of social unevenness on both a global and local scale.

While environmentalism entered the world under many different conditions and realized diverse potentials accordingly, conventional wisdom among geographers and social scientists has ascribed to it 'a special explanatory quality which uniquely suited it to serve as a cover for a deeper imperialist *Weltanschauung*.'² Geographers sensitive to the destructive impacts of environmentalist

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¹ D. Livingstone, Race, space and moral climatology: notes toward a genealogy, *Journal of Historical Geography* 28 (2002) 159–180.

² M. Bassin, Geographical determinism in fin-de-siècle Marxism: Georgii Plekhanov and the environmental basis of Russian history, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992) 3–22.

thought have sought to distance themselves from Semple's legacy even as that legacy has continued to represent a high-water mark in the history of geography's global intellectual influence. Various indicted as enabling colonial exploitation and capitalist imperialism; legitimizing racist policy and culture; and subordinating human agency to the vagaries of nature, environmentalism came to stand as an uncomfortable testament to the power of science and geographical science in particular to justify global imperialism.³ By the 1960s, the very term 'environmentalism' had become an epithet among critical geographers seeking to distance the field from earlier collaborations with empire.

However, as important as the assignment of disciplinary responsibility for that collaboration has been, it has also held a particular cadre of Euro-American intellectuals at the generative center of scholarly production. The breadth of environmentalism's influence – extending beyond the field of geography to turn-of-the-twentieth-century intellectual life more broadly – makes clear that a critical accounting of its analytic power must be attuned to the complexity and diversity of its deployment. Attending to environmentalism's multiplicity not only resists the unwitting replication of a colonialist or imperialist frame, it also sheds light on the ways that globally circulating ideas are transformed in their travels. Further, while such concepts carry ideas and assumptions from elsewhere, their local realization is always resonant with the particular social and historical grounds of their reception.⁴ This paper asks how geographically rooted environmentalist notions traveled beyond the Anglo-American world, and particularly how they worked in service of anti-imperialist as well as imperialist projects.

As Karin Roseblatt has argued in her study of racial theory in the Americas: 'To understand the meaning and effects of comparison, and how audiences use ideas of similarity and difference for political ends, we need to pay attention to the specific contexts in which comparisons take place. We also need to examine the categories that structure comparisons and transnational exchange, including race.'⁵ Recently, Innes Keighren has shown how contingencies of place generated a geographically uneven reception and incorporation of Semple's *Influences of Geographic Environment* among Anglo-American social scientists in the early twentieth century. Refuting the notion that reading is an abstracted intellectual process, Keighren follows contemporary literary theorists and other cultural geographers to argue that textual interpretation is an active process of meaning-making in which 'where, when and by whom books are read matters.'⁶

While Keighren's book-length study admirably tracks diverse engagements with Semple's work within the Anglo-American academic community, very little attention has been paid to environmentalism's manifold reverberations and manifestations beyond that context. In one of a very few examples of such an investigation, Mark Bassin's study of Russian revolutionary Georgii Plekhanov refutes commonly held assumptions that environmentalist perspectives were inherently reactionary or conservative. Rather, he argues that environmentalism was transformed in diverse contexts by the terms of particular intellectual engagements, winning

adherents from across the political spectrum, including revolutionary anarchists such as Elisée Reclus and Lev Mechnikov and Marxist intellectuals like Karl Kautsky.⁷ Such investigations offer a deeper, more nuanced understanding of a formative moment in international social science history. They also present the possibility of critically recuperating aspects of environmentalism for social investigations in the present.

This paper contributes to such an accounting by tracking environmentalist thought in the politically contested post-colonial and settler-colonial spaces of Latin America in the decades before the Cold War. In contrast to the mainstream of Euro-American environmentalism, an important strand of environmentalist social theory in this context worked in support of anti-imperialist mobilizations, naturalizing historic connections between peoples and places to legitimate collective claims to land. While fundamentally invested in assimilationist modes of national governance, New World environmentalism offered an important challenge to universalist regimes of private property associated with imperialist and capitalist dispossession in the early twentieth century.

Further, unlike Russian leftists, who eschewed the racist undertones of Anglo-American geography, Latin American anti-imperialist environmentalisms made explicit use of racial tropes to emphasize the generative nature of spatial difference within global economies. If race offered an opportunity to naturalize imperialist social hierarchies of the present, then race, and particularly indigeneity, could also allow anti-imperialists to de-naturalize those hierarchies. Their work linked the historically-rooted development of peoples in place to contemporary claims on territory and community sovereignty. New World environmentalists made strategic use of colonial-era racial categories to connect nationally-scaled political contests with global processes of appropriation, exploitation, and exclusion, evoking change over time and space to legitimate indigenous claims to territory and sovereignty.

In their analysis of Latin America's diverse intersections of race and nation-building, Appelbaum, Macpherson and Roseblatt constructively emphasize the distinction between race as a contingent, lived phenomenon and race as an analytic.⁸ As an example of the latter, Latin American environmentalism was simultaneously the product of the region's long-standing global entanglements as well as the particular local and regional dynamics of the 1930s and 1940s. The highly abstracted nature of modern racial categories that made them so amenable to globally-scaled imperialist projects had the reciprocal effect of providing a ready-made frame around which to assemble an anti-imperialist movement of far-flung historical subjects whose diverse experiences of dispossession were united under a broad banner of racialized difference. As historian Thomas Holt points out, when W.E.B. DuBois famously declared that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea,' he spoke of a battle not over scientific taxonomies but rather for the human spirit in the face of global

³ R. Peet, The social origins of environmental determinism, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75 (1985) 309–333; D. Livingstone, Reproduction, representation and authenticity: a rereading, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23 (1998) 13–19.

⁴ F. Driver, Geography's empire: histories of geographical knowledge, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992) 23–40; D. Harvey, The geographies of critical geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2006) 409–412.

⁵ K.A. Roseblatt, Other Americas: transnationalism, scholarship, and the culture of poverty in Mexico and the United States, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89 (2009) 603–641.

⁶ I. Keighren, Geography to the book: charting the reception of influences of geographic environment, *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2006) 525–540;

I. Keighren, *Bringing Geography to Book: Ellen Semple and the Reception of Geographical Knowledge*, London and New York, 2010.

⁷ Bassin, Geographical determinism in fin-de-siècle Marxism (note 2).

⁸ N. Appelbaum, A.S. Macpherson and K.A. Roseblatt (Eds), *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, Chapel Hill, 2003.

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