

Common ground: integrating social and environmental history.

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Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, one of the great strengths of social history has been its willingness to respond to contemporary concerns. However, as environmental issues have pushed their way to the top of the global political agenda, social historians have been slow to meet this new challenge. This paper examines reasons for this reluctance and, more importantly, explores the opportunities for integrating social and environmental history. It is divided into three main parts. The first section deals with the failure of social history to strike up a dialogue with environmental history. Section two aims to show that social and environmental history are basically compatible and complementary fields, and argues for increased collaboration by making human-environment relations a key theme for future research. Drawing on studies—both rural and urban—that have begun to establish common ground between the two fields, section three

outlines new areas for investigation, including: the interconnections between social inequality and environmental degradation; environments and identities; and consumption and the environment. By focusing attention on how ordinary people interacted with their environments in the past, social historians could make a significant contribution to current discussions about a sustainable future.



COMMON GROUND: INTEGRATING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

By Stephen Mosley

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Introduction

Environmental problems have pushed their way to the top of the global political agenda and pose an enormous challenge to humanity now, and for the future. The growing demands of consumer societies in both developed and developing nations are placing an unsustainable burden on natural resources such as fossil fuels, while at the same time filling natural "sinks"—the atmosphere, land, and oceans—with horrendous domestic and industrial wastes. Writing in the early 1990s, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, two of social history's most influential figures, both identified the risk of ecological catastrophe as perhaps the greatest danger facing humankind in the new millennium. Thompson in particular had a long-standing interest in environmental issues, which surfaced prominently in some of his later work.¹ To date, however, their concerns have not generally been shared by other social historians. Environmental topics, for example, were notable mainly by their absence in the recent *Journal of Social History* special issue on the field's current state and future prospects.²

Since the 1960s, one of the great strengths of social history has been its willingness to respond to contemporary concerns. So why have social historians been slow to meet this new challenge? This paper examines reasons for this reluctance and, more importantly, explores the opportunities for integrating social and environmental history. It is divided into three main parts. The first section deals with the failure of social history to strike up a dialogue with environmental history, which in recent years has produced some of the most exciting and innovative work around. The next part aims to show that social and environmental history are basically compatible and complementary fields, and argues for increased collaboration by making human-environment relations a key theme for future research. Drawing on studies—both rural and urban—that have begun to establish common ground between the two fields, section three outlines new areas for investigation, including: the interconnections between social inequality and environmental degradation; environments and identities; and consumption and the environment. However, before I proceed, one or two brief caveats about the paper are in order. Firstly, it is not my intention to chart the evolution of environmental history or to provide a comprehensive survey of the historiography: constraints of time and space will not allow it and, in any case, it is unnecessary. The vigorous growth of environmental history can be traced, and is attested to, by the numerous review essays concerning this relatively new field of study.³ Secondly, nor is it my purpose here to offer a detailed model for creating hybrids of social and environmental history: that would be a more complex undertaking. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to encourage more social historians to play their part in explaining the human role in environmental change.



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