

Week8 Environmental History

1. For Fernand Braudel writing about the 16th century, lithosphere, pedosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere would have meant what can be called ‘everlasting continuity’ – the base layer on which small-scale human affairs rise and fall. For John McNeill writing about the 20th century, however, it is ‘unprecedented change’ that best describes those spheres around us. Humans no longer play only small games on the stable historiographical ground of geography and weather. Their actions now can shake the deepest layer itself with their technological ingenuity. Humans can also make big impact on the environment even by their evanescent, ephemeral ‘politics’ – for instance, by succeeding or failing to make a treaty at international summit talks on the environment. Where and how would Annales historians discover, if they have to, the “long duration” in the 20th century? Does their job get more difficult when writing about the 20th century? Or, doesn’t McNeill miss anything by focusing only on vast changes rather than on continuity?

2. This book is not only an environmental history, but also a world history of mankind. Reading this book makes me think again about the ‘audience’ of world history, a question that I had when I was skimming pages of *Journal of World History* two weeks ago. Even though McNeill’s book covers many countries and cities, does the book appeal to readers of every country – developed, developing, and underdeveloped? Isn’t it more like a self-reflection of people who live in the most advanced(?) countries and claim themselves as the representative of mankind? Can world history do something more than teaching ‘American’ students in the classroom? Although I believe so, I think different countries tend to have different world history textbooks, especially different world environmental history textbooks.