

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

Historians too can be activists. In *Something New Under the Sun*, J.R. McNeill underscores the importance of environmental awareness. The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented levels of environmental destruction. According to McNeill, man was a primary agent of this destruction. Unlike the other authors we've covered in this class, the author examines an unfinished process. The brunt of the 20th century's environmental havoc has yet to be felt. Most unfortunate is that most of our losses have been a result of "negligence, not necessity" (49).

To examine the history of the environment in the nineteenth century is not an easy task. Where to begin, which regions to study, which factors to highlight, are some of the basic questions. While reading the book, I was constantly reminded of this difficulty. As novel as his ideas may be, McNeill's study lacks a general flow. Like Braudel and *The Mediterranean*, I couldn't help but wonder whether the task was too monstrous to tackle in one shot. Moreover, I noticed how McNeill prefaced each of his chapters orienting the reader with a short description of the atmosphere, the lithosphere, etc. These mini-lectures testify to the author's assumption that his readers' understanding of the natural sciences is elementary, at best. There is probably a degree of truth to that.

Unlike a science book, however, McNeill does not adhere to the geological time scale, noting that "from such Olympian heights no human problems matter" (49). Rather, he narrows the scope, to suggest that "soil degradation and erosion may indeed carry important human consequences" (49). His book is meant to warn readers that environmental problems will only grow more serious in the future if we are not more prudent now. For example, he notes that "cleaning up the Mediterranean, quite incompletely achieved, proved harder" than an enclosed region in Japan. Even more important, "the oceans are difficult to pollute seriously because of their size, but should it be done, they will be really impossible to clean up" (148). In short, he accredits humans with the ability to mess things up on a grand scale. He underscores, however, that they lack the ability to deal with grand environmental problems. Thus we should avoid the problems before they arise.

One of the ideas I found most interesting is the link between politics and the environment. On an optimistic note, "public outcry and government inquiry" were key replacing coal with gas and electric heat in London (66). Los Angeles and Pittsburgh are also examples of cities that got their act together and drastically improved air quality. Again, he puts on his activist hat when he notes that "local and regional air pollution is easily and quickly reversible, provided one stops adding new pollutants" (107). In a similar vein, his discussion of dam-building reveals how politics made humans an agent of environmental destruction. In calling the

demise of the Aral Sea a “planned assassination” by the USSR (176), he suggests how political agendas (now obsolete), could affect natural features that took millions of years to form. Again, Nuclear power, just like dams, signified “power vigor and modernity” (312), and though the national rivalries may have subsided, the environmental aftershocks will stay with us far into the future.

McNeill’s discussion of air-pollution suggested a darker reality, too. I was surprised by when he noted that “the toll from air pollution may be reckoned as equivalent to the toll from the world wars” (103). Naturally, environmental preservation tends to take the back seat to economic development. It’s not difficult to see why “attractions of higher living standards” come first. And to convince people in such societies otherwise is a challenging, if not impractical, task (116). Inequality is a major theme of McNeill's book. Seeing how different nations grapple with environmental destruction highlights the economic gap. While McNeill may not disagree that capitalism was at root in creating global inequality, the state of the region’s environment, not only per capita income, is a compelling unit for comparison. For instance, take access to safe drinking water. He writes that “Prior to 1850, pathogen and biological pollution plagued almost all urban societies and some rural one” (127). While some countries could afford to take action, others couldn’t: “Those who had clean water and good sewerage got it because they were comparatively rich, and getting it made them healthier and richer still” (128).

A difficult question: Is it acceptable to sacrifice the environment for GNP? McNeill’s answer is unclear. The South Korean case adds to this conundrum. South Koreans completely disregarded the environment in the three decades which transformed the nation from impoverished to OECD status. In turn, their economic miracle came with a huge environmental price. However, McNeill notes that “[now] they are in a much better positionto weather serious ecological dislocation-because they are much richer” (359). Economic stability came only after a period of intense industrialization and environmental abuses. Indeed, as international regimes being to regulate ecological damage worldwide (something they didn't do 150 years ago), they may be holding third-world countries back from full development. Interestingly, environmental activism may exacerbate the global economic divide.

The advocate in McNeill becomes even more apparent in the final pages. Like Marx, he notes that he “not only wants to interpret history but change it” (265). His tone is Malthusian, yet he does not make sweeping statements about end of the world. Rather, he makes a point to challenge contemporary social scientists who set national agendas but ignore environmental dynamics. McNeill makes clear that short-run benefits may entail greater losses in the long-run. In doing so, he argues that we

need to take the long-run more seriously.

Both Pomeranz and McNeill write on a global level, and it is interesting that they structure their studies around a similar time period. Comparing the two, we could see how industrialization and environmental destruction paralleled each other during this era. More specifically, while Pomeranz shows how coal and colonies benefited the West, McNeill assesses the aftermath of those factors. Historians are concerned with change through time. Thus social, economic, and cultural processes are important, but so is a knowledge of how those forces affected the environment. In McNeill's words, this is the only way that we will "understand history in the fullest context" (XXIV).