

Environmental History of Migration (EHM): its roots and most recent developments. An interview with Marco Armiero[†]

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1. Together with Richard Tucker, you edited the volume *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* (2017) which represented the first attempt to merge the history of migration and the history of the environment. What were the works that inspired you while establishing EHM as a research field?

To tell you the truth, when I started there was not much around on the environmental history of migrations. I would say that noticing the scholarly gap was a great incentive to start reflecting on the issue. As John McNeill (2003) argued in a review essay on the state of environmental history, migration was an unexplored theme in the field. When I began to think of a project on the environmental history of Italian migration, it was easier to find literature on migratory fish or birds than humans.

I would also say that the inspiration to work on the environmental history of migrations came from personal reasons rather than scholarly suggestions. The stories of my Aunt Maria in Brazil (2019) were an amazing incitement for my intellectual curiosity. I should confess that my idea to work on Italians in America was instrumental to my own migration strategies. I was at a point in my career when I wanted to leave Italy – a project on migration was both mirroring my aspiration and providing the perfect justification for it.

It was only later that I discovered some important works that would have a deep impact on my research on migration and the environment. Without any doubt, New Western History provided me with fresh and powerful tools to interrogate the relationships between newcomers and the environment. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the New Western History school was born in reaction to mainstream Western History: it was deeply connected to environmental history through scholars such as Donald Worster, Richard White, and Bill Cronon. In particular, I remember voraciously reading Patricia Nelson Limerick's volumes *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987) and *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (2000). Both volumes helped me to integrate migrants' stories with the environmental stories of the places where they settled. They also opened up a methodological box about how to recover the voices and experiences of migrants in relation to the environment. Indeed, I discovered very

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soon that if there were few studies on migration and the environment, it was not only because scholars missed the issue but also because the sources were difficult to find. Don Mitchell's *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (1996) and Linda Nash's *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (2006) were the other two books that have had a deep influence on my development of an environmental history of migrations. Mitchell and Nash were instrumental in widening my attention from the impact of migrants on the landscape to the inner environment of migrants' bodies, or, in other words, to explore the metabolic relationships in which migrants were included, often in subaltern positions. Similarly, Alan Kraut's work (1994) on the connections between migrants and public health has been instrumental in my elaboration of the environmental history of migration.

Of course, I should list here many more scholars who have worked on the topic, including Valencius (2002) and Chiang (2009), but perhaps an interview is not the right venue for such a comprehensive literature review. Instead, let me close by saying something which I hope might be of interest beyond the environmental history of migration: that is, that it is often better to look for inspiration in unexpected places, for example a novel. In my case it was Melania Mazzucco's *Vita* (2014); a TV series like *The Sopranos*; or the stories of an old aunt, like my *Zia Maria*. Keeping your ears open to the challenges of the present is, of course, the best source of inspiration for a scholar who wishes to research the past thinking about the present.

2. If you had to explain what 'the environment' is in EHM, how would you define it? How could scholars approach the history of migration from the perspective of the environment?

I have often repeated that the environment where migrants settled, or just passed through, has never been 'just natural'. Rather, it is always a blend of power relationships in which race, class, and gender intertwine with the ecologies and histories of places. For this reason, I have suggested speaking of socio-ecological formations rather than environments, trying to make clear that for me it is an illusion to separate the social and the environmental in the histories of migrants.

When I need to explain this idea, I often resort to the history of the 1930s US Dust Bowl and the massive internal migration it caused. As Donald Worster, one of the founders of environmental history, explained in his 1979 volume on the Dust Bowl, the storms destroyed the farming economy of the Great Plains, pushing hundreds of thousands of people away towards California and the East Coast. Was this, then, a textbook example of environmental-induced migration? Following Worster in his analysis, it seems clear that the Dust Bowl was not only a natural fact, but a product of a set of socio-ecological relationships through which capitalism, soil, technology, water, the market, banks, work ethos, and wind mixed together, producing an ecology of environmental disruption and human migration.

I would caution you about thinking in terms of migrants meeting/affecting natural environments because if you think of a 'natural' environment, you run the risk of naturalising the socio-ecological relationships which are embedded into those environments. Consider, for instance, the stories of the Italians arriving in the Mississippi delta at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. I am quoting the rich research done by Amoreno Martellini (1999). Considering the environmental history of migration does not mean looking only at mosquitoes, malaria, floods, and soil. I believe we need to unpack the socio-ecological relationships which were made up of mosquitoes and peonage, of soil and the post-Civil War society. What the Italians met was not a 'natural' environment, because the Mississippi delta was a socio-ecological space in which race, class, and history were inextricably imbricated into the ecologies of places and people. Similarly, when we explore the ways Italians have shaped the environments in which they

settled, I believe that we should keep in mind that those transformations were also embedded into socio-ecological relationships. For instance, when Secondo Guasti transformed a ‘sandy place’ into a vineyard in California, he was not just planting vines but also arranging class and race relationships through the making of new socio-ecologies.

In the introductory essay to our 2017 volume, Richard Tucker and I proposed three approaches to the study of the environmental history of migrations, which I believe are also pointing at diverse ways to conceive the environment. The assertive approach explores the ways in which migrants have marked the environments where they settled through their cultures and work. The constructivist approach guides researchers to interrogate the diverse understanding of the environment brought by migrants. The embodied approach invites us to trespass the borders between external and internal natures, looking at metabolic relationships between migrants’ bodies and the environment.

3. Which themes do you find to be the most compelling and yet to be explored in EHM?

EHM is just at its beginning. As always with a new field, there are immense new possibilities for exploration. I believe that the path opened by Colin Fisher (2015) on the access/use of public parks by various groups of migrants is extremely fertile because it questions the familiar assumption that only the elites were culturally equipped for appreciating the environment. Heather Goodall and colleagues (2009) have conducted similar research for Australia, uncovering the diverse ways in which groups of migrants have negotiated their relationships with urban parks. This line of inquiry intercepts research done on some xenophobic or even openly racist trends present in some strands of environmentalist discourse. There have been several works on this theme, mainly those by Park and Pellow (2011), Rome (2008), Warren (1997), and Hartman (2004), but I believe that there is much more to unearth. It would be crucial to uncover these toxic stories of environmentalism, especially if we aim to dismantle similar narratives in the present. It would be interesting to revisit the environmental history of multi-ethnic cities without ignoring the histories and contributions of migrants’ communities.

With regard to Europe, I think that looking at the histories of migrants could finally bring issues of environmental racism and injustice into our environmental history. I have always had the impression that European environmental historians have thought of environmental justice and racism as a US problem or perhaps something going on in the Global South. Uncovering the environmental histories of migrants’ communities in Europe will contribute to detecting the patterns of unequal distribution of hazards and amenities. I believe that your dissertation, Daniele [Valisena 2020], on Italian miners in Wallonia, is going precisely in that direction.

Perhaps another theme I would like to see further researched is that of the transient nature of migrations. So far, we have mainly worked on the places where migrants have settled in a more or less stable manner. What still stays almost invisible are the environmental histories of the migration routes, of transient accommodations, and the recursive moving between one place and another.

4. The present combination of current climate change issues and globalisation is exacerbating contemporary migratory flows, creating a new legal category, that of climate refugees. How do you think that studying past migratory events in relation to environmental factors can help enhance our understanding of the present moment?

In the last decades, the debate on climate change has raised a growing concern regarding the possibility of massive migrations due to environmental disruption. The scientific debate has shifted

to popular culture, with movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow* depicting hordes of climate refugees (although that specific movie has the merit of flipping the familiar narrative, implying that US citizens will become climate refugees in Mexico). Some predictions have been repeated so many times that those numbers have entered the mainstream discourse, although the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has stated that it is impossible to predict how many people might migrate due to climate change. On this topic, I stand with those scholars who are quite critical of the category of climate migrants (Bettini [2013] and Baldwin [2017], for instance). I completely understand the need to think of legal instruments to protect migrants and I can see that the legal recognition of environmental causes as a push factor can be critical. Mine is, instead, an intellectual and political argument.

My insistence on socio-ecological relationships implies a reluctance to separate the environmental from the social. As the case of the US Dust Bowl demonstrates, people may run away from drought and storms, but this does not mean that those were only ecological facts. Isolating the environmental (or climatic) causes from the rest conceals more than reveals what is occurring on the ground. Historian Angus Wright (2017) has provided an enlightening case-study that well illustrates my point. The Brazilian region of O Sertão has always been affected by massive emigration towards the coast and the big cities: governments and experts have explained this phenomenon with reference to the cyclic droughts that hit the region, and consequently have focused their efforts on fighting against them. Wright does not diminish the relevance of cyclical droughts but he asks why all the other causes of emigration were not even considered, including the plantation economy, which was negatively affecting both the environment and the workers. Oddly, for the Brazilian elites it was easier to change the climate – that is, to do something about the drought – than the system. I am not against recognising climate, or more broadly the environment, as a good reason to give a refugee status, but politically speaking I cannot understand why poverty could not be an equally legitimate motif.

History, and actually all the humanities disciplines, can be extremely relevant in changing the narratives around the so-called migration crisis. Yes, the *so-called* migration crisis, because I still think that it is more a xenophobic or racist crisis rather than a migration one. Consider, again, the Dust Bowl case: the ‘Okies’, this was the derogative nickname given to the Dust Bowl migrants, who were subjected to harsh forms of discrimination. Against a widespread sentiment of hate and scorn, there was a cultural mobilisation that aimed to humanise those migrants through the photographs of Dorothea Lange, the stories of J. Steinbeck, the songs of Woody Guthrie, or John Ford’s cinematic transposition of Steinbeck’s novel.

Indeed, to humanise a problem, to transform a discourse on an alleged migration crisis into the stories of human beings with their dreams, feelings, and pains, we need humanities tools, such as arts, storytelling, visual representations, music, and the like. I believe that this is the kind of work that the environmental humanities – at least the socially committed and politically engaged environmental humanities – should do. From the point of view of historical disciplines, I believe that their main contribution would be to demystify some mainstream narratives about the causes and effects of migrations related to the environment. In popular discourse, it is often said that migrants globalise local problems by moving them elsewhere. History can well explain that migrants’ problems are generally global in the first place, or, to be even more specific, that the socio-ecological problems causing migrations are the products of policies and lifestyle rooted far away from the places most affected by those problems. Even limiting our attention to climate change, it is demonstrated that the countries most affected by its consequences are also those which have least contributed to it. Reminding people of the colonial debt and the history of predatory extraction of resources is always a good exercise in a Global North which seems to forget too easily that its wealth was built on the systematic impoverishment of the rest of the world.

Finally, history can help to denaturalise some clichés about migrants and environmental disruption. For instance, I have brought to my class a collection of racist and discriminatory statements against migrants, asking the students to guess when, where and against whom they were produced. Or, I have shown pictures of people in line to receive emergency supplies like water, read a passage from a migrant's diary and asked who could have written those words. These can also be destabilising exercises. The mainstream narrative can be quite reassuring, repeating to us that migrants are the radical others, that environmental disruption can occur only on the other side of the global divide, and that those are not our stories. And then, history can reveal that the racist sign on the door was talking about 'us', that the people in line are citizens of the Almighty United States of America, just those sitting on the wrong side of the racial divide in the aftermath of a hurricane, and that the diary is from a relative of one of the students, because migration is everybody's history.

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