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Emily Wakild and Michelle K. Berry: *A Primer for Teaching Environmental History, Ten Design Principles*

Duke University Press, Durham, 2018, 200 pp.

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The content of history teaching reveals much about the social uses of this discipline, and for this reason, the book by historians Emily Wakild and Michelle Berry is of particular interest: based on their teaching experience, they offer a thought-provoking study of how environmental history is taught. Few specialists in this field of research have taken this approach. When William Cronon, a major figure in American environmental history, published his thoughts on the teaching of history, he did not appear to distinguish between general history and its subfield, environmental history.¹ Although from the outset, the authors of *Teaching Environmental History* underline the specificity of this historiographic field, they also offer subtle suggestions to better integrate an environmental dimension into general history teaching. Addressed to teachers in both higher and secondary education, the book is ambitious in its scope.

It should be noted from the start that the approach is based on the authors' teaching experience rooted in a context specific to the USA. They emphasise the fact that environmental history is now well established in American academia (p. 1). However, the situation is very different in Europe and France, where this field of study is emerging without yet having acquired the same prominence.² Moreover, the teaching suggestions they formulate presuppose a personal investment from students that would be hard to envisage in European establishments. Once this limitation has been taken into account, non-American readers will find that this study provides much to think about when planning their classes, adapting it to the specificities of their own institutions.

The authors' approach demonstrates a strong desire to consider the social use of history. Their reflections on teaching are therefore constructed in close dialogue with

¹See <http://williamcronon.net/researching/>.

²For the census of French environmental teaching, see: <https://leruche.hypotheses.org/3649>.

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American critical thinking. In the introduction, and then in the first chapter, the authors outline two principles that guide their conceptions of teaching. Following the reflections of bell hooks, they first state the need to devise teaching practices that involve the students in the democratisation of contemporary societies (p. 14). This tactic is embodied particularly in the desire to propose productive teaching, in other words, encouraging the students to play an active role in the construction of knowledge rather than passively receiving authoritative wisdom. History is then no longer an inert past, but becomes a resource for the present: “rather than simply being something to know, environmental history, like all good history, makes the past come alive because it provides a focused approach for engagement” (p. 7). With these ambitious goals in mind, the authors divide their discussion into three sections: “Approaches”, “Pathways” and “Tools”.

Introducing the ecosystem into history

The first section of the book suggests figuring out the possibilities of introducing natural phenomena into teaching, starting with the social facts of the students’ daily lives. The four chapters in this section are each based on a specific non-human element (from a llama to imported fruit), for which the authors offer a dual reading. The first reading is thus literal, historicising, for example, the history of domesticating certain animals. The second reading aims to be more metaphorical: the chapter “The Seeds”, for example, suggests envisaging the aims of teaching as seeds that make it possible to give more room to environmental issues in history lessons. The study of these objects is presented as an educational strategy to give students a better grasp of the ecological foundations of our societies.

Firstly, studying ordinary, non-human elements provides an opening to examine the relations forged between human societies and their ecosystems, for example, the study of the imaginary surrounding certain animals. Studying the cultural productions involving animals that are both “social network stars” and political symbols (pandas, grizzly bears, etc.) can thus become an opportunity to study the social construction of non-human elements, and more broadly, of nature (pp. 54–65). Analysing these representations can constitute a first step in understanding the genesis of policies to protect certain species while other species remain beyond human preoccupations. The authors also suggest taking the investigation into the students’ lunchboxes (pp. 13–25) to scrutinise the economic and infrastructure conditions of how the fruit they consume is marketed. Starting with a particular food, the students are asked to examine the environmental production conditions of these resources: the case of the banana, for example, sheds light on the socio-ecological effects of monocultures in certain regions.

Adopting a starting point rooted in the present should encourage students to examine the origins of our interactions with ecosystems. For this to happen, the authors underline the need to mobilise historical sources that make it possible to reconstitute the diversity of social representations of the environment and even the conflictual uses of resources or areas. To cite just one example from the propositions formulated in the book, the authors suggest gathering numerous historical texts about the same area (travellers’ accounts, inhabitants’ descriptions, etc.) to guide students towards

considering the implications of these different perspectives and grasping the origins of the conflicts of use issues in these areas.

Making history active in the present

The second section of the study (“Pathways”) suggests reclaiming themes that are both classic in historiography (energy, science, etc.) and at the heart of contemporary preoccupations. By returning to topics that are framed by historiography, these chapters formulate suggestions to shed light on the singularity of environmental history compared with approaches from economic or social history, while encouraging students to examine topics that enable them to transform their perspective of the world around them.

For this, the authors emphasise the need to adapt educational strategies to the sociology of students. Throughout the book, they underline the fact that students are very often from cities and that this social fact shapes the representation of the “non-human world” (p. 86). This is even more important when one considers that, for the generations now embarking on their initial studies, representations of ecological issues are profoundly affected by the mediation of digital tools. As an example, our relations with areas have been altered by the banalisation of aerial photographs, satellite images and tools such as Google Maps. This transformation fuels one of the fundamental questions of this book: “how do you teach a generation for whom distance really might be dead?” (p. 87).

To inspire students to look beyond the apparent evidence of an urban world from which “nature” appears to be absent, the authors suggest several strategies. First of all, they advocate long study trips to allow students to “seek[ing] a dialogue with land itself beyond the library” (p. 77). If there is no budget for taking long trips, surveys of urban sites offer opportunities to get students to examine the historical construction of these places. Monuments can thus stimulate historical reflection, challenging the representation of the past that they shape, particularly when they euphemise violence and the conflicts of use that mark certain places (p. 97). Some urban areas that may appear repellent, such as sewers or water treatment plants, can thus be used as a valid educational tool because studying them provides information about how the technical networks that influence urban life were formed.

Area-based surveys thus become a pretext to construct the questions that will then guide the teaching. The authors frequently stress the importance of following the students’ intellectual progression by getting them to write accounts. Taking the example of a trip to Peru, they explain the benefits of encouraging students to keep a log book, not only to sharpen their sense of observation, but also to raise questions that will expand the scope of the lessons (p. 75). The authors also suggest planning certain lesson sequences in which students’ essay writing can be divided into various stages over the course of several sessions. In this way, when studying the history of hydropower, the students are first of all invited to research a specific river before writing its biography, explaining the transformations incurred by its development or by the legal systems of water management (p. 102). While this strategy is applicable for classes with few students or limited time, it

may (unfortunately!) be difficult to deploy in the French or European academic context.

The social uses of environmental history

The final section of this book contains three chapters that examine the social issues of environmental history. These chapters formalise some of the discussions intermittently raised in the previous pages, reaffirming the authors' initial remarks about the need to make teaching environmental history a tool for empowerment.

One chapter is devoted to the use of digital technologies in teaching, suggesting adapting lessons for a generation accustomed to the immediacy of social networks. Documenting the omnipresence of connected devices in students' everyday lives and following on from the reflections of Donna Haraway, the book thus invites us "to cyborg our lectures" (p. 133). The authors undertake a difficult dialectic: to stimulate students' attention by using connected tools while encouraging them to develop a critical use of technology. On the one hand, the two historians strongly attest that history's methods contribute to a more valid processing of the mass of information now accessible: "when so much content is available at a click, learning becomes more about processing and making sense of information" (p. 138). On the other hand, they observe that digital tools could offer "opportunities to continue the class conversation beyond the classroom walls" (p. 137). Although we may share the authors' desire, we might also feel that this is wishful thinking: the interactive nature of these resources in no way guarantees that students will use them.

In the end, the authors suggest removing assessment from a strictly academic framework. The approach represents an echo of the empowering teaching practice championed by the authors. In a specific chapter (pp. 115–129), they propose teaching environmental history by encouraging students to conduct research on the scale of districts that raise issues about environmental justice. Thereupon, for the authors, "in teaching through project-based learning, we have the opportunity to offer our students a rigorous experience practicing the skills of research and information gathering, creative and critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, and deep communication" (p. 129).

Far from proposing preconceived educational formulas, Emily Wakild and Michelle Berry offer the fruit of reflections rooted in their own teaching experience. This book has the immense merit of inviting all historians to consider the need to integrate a material and ecological dimension into their teaching. Attesting to the importance of the social uses of history is also a very clear invitation to remember that history incorporating environmental issues deserves a place in history courses in secondary schools as well as universities.

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