

ACM Sustainability Introductory Essay
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Because there isn't much time to revise, and because the main purpose of these essays is introductory, I have adopted a somewhat autobiographical structure to the essay, and I can't claim that the essay has a central argument. But I hope this essay presents the degree to which sustainability appears in my research and teaching, and the hopes I have for this workshop.

Sustainability is marginal to the intent of my research, although perhaps my work could be read to address some sustainability questions. In May 2003 I completed a dissertation titled "Settling for the State: Pastoralists and Colonial Rule in Southwestern Panjab, 1840-1900." This work sought to explain the formation of the colonial state as a discursive process, with a wide range of intentions and expectations for those participating in that process. Colonial state formation was particularly visible in southwestern Punjab in the nineteenth century because of its material resource use: some administrators, at least, viewed the arid upland portions of this landscape as needing the two technologies of irrigation and governance to bring both men and land under civilization. Both transformations have proven to be durable, if neither complete nor permanent; it would be difficult, though, to argue that either the precolonial circumstances or their post-colonial legacies resulted in sustainable communities. My interest in the discursive formation of structures of governance through the manipulation of the material resources of the governed has continued with some exploratory work on colonial programs of animal breeding and veterinary medicine. It is clear, in both projects, that people use material objects, particularly animals, as a kind of language through which they engage in struggles over governance.

As for teaching, sustainability is an equally marginal concern. In March 2004, I was hired for a tenure-line position in Asian history, the first time Luther College established such a position. Because of my scholarly interest in the reflexivity of the relations between the state and the material world which it claims to command, and for a number of other reasons, I offered a course called "Global Environmental History" twice as a non-catalog course. It is now offered as a catalog course, called "Environmental History," alternately by myself and my colleague Richard Mtisi, who is our department's specialist in African history. The primary goal of the course is to introduce students to the now quite broad range of topics and methodologies included in the field of environmental history. In a twelve- to fourteen-week course, we can devote as many as two weeks of class meetings to the history of conservationism, preservationism, environmentalism, and the recent promotion of sustainability as an activist (or corporate) concern—in short, a discussion of the transformation of public concern (on the part of both state and civil society) from scientific forestry and other conservationist programs (which we might call sustainable exploitation of material resources) to activist movements designed to eliminate human imprints from specified territories (including the use of human labor to kill "invasive species" introduced intentionally or unintentionally into larger or smaller localities). Sustainability as a topic of discussion in itself therefore gets limited coverage, although it lurks among the set of implications that lie just beyond the margins of the arguments of other environmental history pieces that we do read and discuss. This reflects the character of the field of environmental history as a whole, even though the number of historians working in this field is growing annually; a look at the membership of the American Society for Environmental History and its publications (*Environmental History* and its several predecessors) bears out this conclusion.¹

Beyond the field of environmental history, it would be difficult to find historical scholarship that is interested in sustainability. I might speculate that scholars interested in urban history or agrarian history might be producing pieces that address sustainability questions directly, but chances are that such scholarship would be submitted to the ASEH annual meeting, *Environmental History*, or individual seminars sponsored by institutions of higher education, rather than to the *American Historical Review*, the flagship publication of the profession.² Surely, sustainability concerns such as population growth and the policies developed to manage it appear in historical scholarship. But within the discipline the term “sustainability” is ineluctably bound to a type of political activism or corporate branding with which scholars (for a variety of reasons) do not always want to associate.

I am participating in this FaCE project for several reasons. First, I am honored that my colleagues think highly enough of me to invite me to participate; for the record, flattering one’s bureaucratic inferiors often works. Second, I hope to represent accurately the vitality of environmental history as a field to those working in other disciplines. Third, and probably most importantly, I want to encourage us to remember that critical thinking is probably the most important of the three basic skills (thinking, writing, speaking/listening) that all disciplines desire of their students, and I want to ensure that, for us and our students, sustainability is not exempted from being the object of critique. Students are acutely aware of the use of “sustainability” as a marketing brand or strategy, and it is particularly important to develop pedagogical models for critiquing sustainability in a way that does not dismiss its arguments categorically. Fourth, I want to represent accurately my departmental colleagues’ uneasiness with sustainability as a marketing brand embedded in Luther College’s current Strategic Plan. If Luther College is to be “the sustainability college,” it might logically follow that syllabi and curricula across the college should have sustainability content, in order to legitimize the marketing claim. However, such a requirement treads close to the limit of an individual faculty member’s academic freedom to teach what she feels is appropriate or necessary, within the framework of the position for which she was hired. “Sustainability” is not only a marketing brand but also a political position—or, perhaps more precisely, a moral position that requires by implication a set of political positions (e.g. on the nature of capitalism, the utility of nations or states, techniques of population control, etc.) with which faculty or students might not agree.

I hope to gain from this FaCE project the respect of my peers for Asia as not merely another set of localities to which sustainability solutions might be applied but rather the central place both for formulating sustainability questions and for documenting the struggles over how to implement sustainable solutions. I hope to gain an understanding of how other disciplines address and conceptualize environmental issues and questions, in order to encourage creative thinking about interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration.

¹ <http://www.aseh.net/>

² One significant exception is an “AHR Conversation” in a relatively recent issue: Richard C. Hoffmann, et al., “Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1431-65.