

## Editorial

In the last three decades, environmental history has experienced a considerable upswing – independently and in the slipstream of interest in transnational and global histories. Research no longer primarily uses national frameworks; instead, it has consistently drawn conclusions from the fact that ecological situations most often do not end at the borders of a single country, but rather extend beyond them, even if they are influenced by national legislation and the resource consumption of territorially constituted societies. In the same way, globally oriented environmental history insists on new rhythms of world history because climate and biodiversity change according to different time frames than those relating to politics and generational lifestyles. So-called Big History emphatically drew attention to this connection as early as the 1990s and promoted a non-anthropocentric narrative in which humankind enters the stage very late, after solar systems and planetary cycles had formed and the emergence of life could be observed in exceptional situations. Big History reminded us of the many precursors that colonized our Earth before humankind tried to make nature its subject. Together with powerful philanthropic funding agencies, the message of Big History was introduced into many school experiments around the world, but the mainstream of global history remained fixated on economic linkages and cultural circulations in social interactions.

With a remarkable sense for new trends in the zeitgeist, Dipesh Chakrabarty has castigated this anthropocentrism and called for a planetary perspective instead of a global history. In doing so, he makes a plea, supported by a variety of arguments, for a new focus, one that was articulated in the protests of the Fridays for Future movement and increased considerably during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Environmental history is thus transformed from one specialized discipline among many to a perspective that needs to be mainstreamed in many areas of historical scholarship, especially in global history. And it is about even more: it is not simply a dimension to be added and made more colourful through diligent empirical work, but it is ultimately about a re-evaluation of all dimensions of historical processes that takes into account the human-nature relationship. This change of perspective may seem to some like an excited overreaction to contemporary political discourses, and this would certainly not be a good motive if it were the only one. But it is not a matter of simply joining the chorus of those who (for good reasons) are concerned with climate change and biodiversity. Rather, it turns out that this change of perspective is a logical consequence of the debates about

a global history that says goodbye to conceptual Eurocentrism and opts for a multiperspective view of historical processes in all regions of the world (on water and on land). For it has long been clear that a simple repetition of the development path that parts of the Global North have followed in dealing with the Earth's resources (and especially with energy sources) is not possible. This thematic issue reports on this with the help of new research findings on the connection between ideas of development and the place that human-nature relationships occupy in them.

Three historical epochs in particular are the focus of a possible reassessment. Firstly, there is the so-called Columbian exchange, which slowly unfolded across the Atlantic on the basis of intensified relations between the Old and New Worlds. However, it cannot be understood without examining the context of East and South Asian relations with Europe, the Arab-East African region, and the west of Latin America. In recent decades, moreover, the Columbian exchange has developed from an object of Atlantic history into a genuinely global historical topic. Undoubtedly, this moment has been inappropriately exaggerated when it is taken as the starting point of any global interconnections. But it has reinforced the ideas and the political, economic, and cultural practices based on the exchange of drawing on resources from other parts of the world for one's own prosperity, thereby imagining one part of the world as a core and other parts as (semi)peripheries. The idea of global commodity and value chains receives an enormous impetus from here, as does the practice of extractivism, which is the claiming of resources that are localized far away and competing globally for them – both concepts have been judged much more critically in the anthropocene framework.

Secondly, it is about the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying racialized interpretation of differences between parts of the world's population according to their degree of domination over and exploitation of natural resources, especially those that were and are claimed for qualitatively new energy production through fossil raw materials.

Thirdly, the optimism that spread, especially in the middle third of the twentieth century, regarding the complete overcoming of natural constraints to growth comes into focus. This optimism already met with growing scepticism at the end of this period and since has increasingly proven to be a partial perspective for the benefit of a privileged minority. Accordingly, this viewpoint has faced resistance due to the fact that the promise of increasing prosperity for all proves to be deceptive and the costs of this strategy become visible.

Historians, as professional actors (and beyond their role as political citizens), have a responsibility in the current debate on the human-nature relationship. They are called upon to reconstruct how today's dominant attitudes, together with the accompanying critiques, have developed. Historians cannot determine how a change in attitudes translates into new policies, but they can advance critical reflection on them. This issue of *Comparativ* contributes to this critical reflection through case studies and their discussions against the background of concepts that have dominated debates for more than a century.

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