

World history, environmental history, comparative history: is the couple center/periphery useful as an analytical category? An interview with John Robert McNeill

John Robert McNeill

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Lo scorso 21 settembre [John Robert McNeill](#) ha tenuto a Bologna una lezione magistrale sulla Storia mondiale dell'ambiente dal 1900. Svoltata nell'ambito dell'iniziativa "Storia e ambiente", la lezione era incentrata sul tema della crisi ecologica innescata dall'inquinamento: tema che McNeill aveva affrontato in [Something new under the sun](#), il saggio che gli è valso nel 2000 il premio della [World History Association](#).

Tradotto da Einaudi nel 2002, quel libro ha consolidato in Italia la notorietà di McNeill come grande specialista della [Environmental History](#). Professore alla Georgetown University, da diversi anni McNeill alterna corsi sulla storia dell'ambiente con altri sulla International History e sulla World History.

McNeill ha esordito nel 1985 con [The Atlantic Empires of France and Spain: Louisbourg and Havana \(1700-1763\)](#): un'analisi della funzione strategica svolta dai due siti nell'ambito dell'Impero coloniale borbonico fino alla guerra dei sette anni. Nel 2003 è apparso [The human web. A bird's-eye view of world history](#), scritto assieme al padre [William Hardy](#), fondatore e autorevole portavoce della disciplina, autore di numerosissimi saggi tra cui il celebre [The Rise of the West](#)

(1964).

Nel 1992 [The mountains of Mediterranean World](#) ha segnato l'esordio di J.R. McNeill nella storia mondiale dell'ambiente.

Direttore assieme a Shepard Krech e a Carolyn Merchant della *Encyclopaedia of world environmental history*, pubblicata da Routledge nel 2004, J.R. McNeill è inoltre tra i curatori di opere collettive sulla storia americana (*Atlantic American Societies: from Columbus through abolition, 1492-1888*, ed. con A.L. Karras nel 1992) e sulla storia ambientale dell'area del Pacifico ([Environmental history in the Pacific](#), 2001). È da poco uscito il collettaneo [Soils and societies: perspectives from environmental history](#), diretto assieme a Verena Winiwarter.

During the 1960s and the 1970s the world historians has bitterly fought against the euro-centric approaches which had hitherto prevailed in the mainstream historiography. In the 1980s, indeed, the world history itself has seemed to search an analytical renewal. William H. McNeill has then proposed a perspective which focused upon categories such as freedom and hierarchy. What has changed in that period about the couple center-periphery as an analytical category of world history?

I suspect the main influence bringing center-periphery analysis into world history, among Anglophone scholars, was [Immanuel Wallerstein](#) whose work started coming out in the middle of the 1970s. It probably reached its maximum influence in the 1980s. I think William McNeill's vision of freedom and hierarchy and world frontiers has proven much, much less influential. Wallerstein's work has the appeal of theory, which W. McNeill's does not. Although Wallerstein's work is perhaps overly economic, that is, it places undue emphasis on economic matters.

In 1964 W.H. McNeill published a fundamental work on *The Rise of the West*. In 2003 you published with him *The human web*, another work concerning the question of western hegemony after the 15th century. At present, which are the main responses given by world historians to this question?

There are countless responses to the question of western hegemony after the XV. The two most interesting recent ones are those of [Kenneth Pomeranz \(The Great Divergence\)](#) who argues that there was no real western hegemony until 1750 or even 1850. He compares parts of China with parts of Europe, and also India, to show that standards of living were similar in all these places until 1800 or so. He has less to say about military power, for which I do not think his argument could apply. The second current response that is highly interesting is that of Jared Diamond, who argues that western hegemony is mainly environmentally determined, a result of the uneven distribution of potentially domesticable species ([Guns, Germs, and Steel](#)). It is an argument I find sensible as an explanation for Eurasian dominance in world history, but not for that of Europe and the West in recent centuries. Other authors prefer other emphases, such as institutions, unique demographic characteristics, greater freedom of information, etc. Of course none is satisfactory alone, and we have no rigorous way to decide which factors are more important than others. So there will never be any consensus on these matters.

Some Italian world historians have created a Center for comparative history (CISCOM). They have also substituted the category of the “unique time” with a method of comparative enquiry among the different periods during which different countries has reached the same degree of development. What are World History Association’s main opinions concerning the comparative approach?

I can't claim to speak for the World History Association, although I am a member of it. My impression, formed by attending WHA conferences and by reading the [Journal of World History](#), is that comparative history is very much in vogue, especially cross-continental comparisons. Comparisons that cross time periods, let us say modern and ancient history, are less popular and one rarely sees them in the pages of the JWH or at WHA conferences.

In your work concerning *The human web* you demonstrate that the virtual pattern created by internet is to affirm itself as the dominant one of the 21st century. In your opinion, is internet actually going to reduce the gap between the centers and peripheries of the world? What about the digital divide?

I wrote a little about the digital divide in the latter pages of *The Human Web*. I regard it as important in 21st century affairs, and in general a source of expanding inequality. That might well change in the decades to come, if electrification, computers, and sufficient education reaches more people – which I think is probable. But it will take decades if indeed this does happen.

In 2003 you were appointed at the Cinco Hermanos chair of Environmental and International Affairs, which concerns fields of enquiry such as main ecological matters of the modern history. Also in Italy environmental history is growing as an academic discipline. How much has this discipline increased in American Universities? Which are the most studied subjects by American environmental historians? And what are their attitudes towards the lobbies that influence U.S. conduct in international affairs such as the Kyoto accord?

I had to surrender the Cinco Hermanos chair in September, because I have been appointed University Professor, but I of course remain no less interested in environmental history. In the US environmental history is a rapidly growing specialization. There are more than 1,000 members of the [American Society for Environmental History](#)

. The ASEH has a youthful membership; at age 52 I am one of the elders. Not all these people are trained as historians, although they all have historical interests. I would guess that about half are, formally speaking, historians. The rest are geographers, anthropologists, archeologists, ecologists, lawyers, and so forth. As for subjects, there is endless variety. The most popular themes concern U.S. history: wilderness, parks, cultural 'construction' of nature, environmentalism and environmental regulation. Lastly, the great majority of ASEH members and environmental historians generally are fairly 'green' in their politics and unhappy with the current administration's environmental policies, and with most of the lobbies that influence environmental policy. I include myself in that.

You have cultivated for several years, both as professor and historian, international history and environmental history at the same time. In your opinion, how much is the category of state involved with the historical approach to the ecological phenomena?

I took part at last year's ASEH conference in [a panel devoted to this question](#) . My view is that for some kinds of environmental history, such as climate change, the nation and state are very insignificant factors. For others, such as the history of whaling regulation, the state is a crucial matter. In general, I see three main types of environmental history: material, cultural/intellectual, and political. For the last category the state is normally very important; for the first, often unimportant (but not always so). The only reliable conclusion is: it all depends on the specific topic one has in mind.

Your work *Something new under the sun* concerns the ecological crisis which is menacing our planet as a consequence of the 20th-century productive strategies. In your opinion, how useful is the analytical couple center-periphery in order to estimate the historical features of the crisis? In other words, is the 'traditional' opposition between the industrialised areas and the underdeveloped ones to be absolutely replaced by the global perspective?

I did not do much with centre/periphery analysis in that book, at least not formally. But I think one could present modern environmental history as a reflection of center/periphery, or perhaps better expressed, urban-industrial vs. rural regions. To date, this way of presenting things has not had much appeal to environmental historians; I think environmental sociologists find it more useful. As for the global perspective, I think many environmental issues require a global perspective (e.g. climate change), but that does not mean there is no room within that for center/periphery analysis. My general sense is that since the onset of industrialization some 200 years ago, the world economy and its ecology have been re-ordered with a few real centers of industrial production, economic power, and acute pollution; and a growing periphery of mines and plantations with a different order of ecological effects. That is to say, the organization of ecological center/periphery relations I think is more apparent in the industrial age than before. But I also suspect this particular format of ecological organization is eroding in the present day because of the declining importance of industrial production, which is drifting to peripheral areas and away from the economic centers.

Link

John Robert McNeill

[[figure]]figures/2006/02mcneill/02mcneill_2005_01.jpg[[/figure]]

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Foreword by Paul Kennedy

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The Lithosphere and Pedosphere: the crust of the earth

The Atmosphere: Urban history

The hydrosphere: the history of water use and water pollution

The hydrosphere: Depletions, Dams and Diversions

The Biosphere: Eat and Be eaten

The Biosphere: Forests, Fish, and Invasions

More people, bigger cities

Fuels, tools and economics

Ideas and politics

Epilogue: So what?

Alcune pagine on-line:

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Environmental History

Siti di riferimento:

European Society for the Environmental History (ESEH): <http://eseh.org/>

Bibliografia internazionale di storia dell'ambiente:

<http://eseh.org/resources/bibliography/>

Bibliografia essenziale in italiano:

M. Armiero, S. Barca, *Storia dell'ambiente. Una introduzione*, Roma, Carocci, 2003

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Introduction: Webs and history

I. The human apprenticeship

II. Shifting to food production – 11,000-3,000 years ago

III. Webs and civilization in the Old World – 3500 BCE-200 CE

IV. The growth of webs in the Old World and America – 200-1000

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V. Thickening Webs – 1000-1500

VI. Spinning the worldwide web - 450-1800

VII. Breaking old chains, tightening the new web – 1750-1914

VIII. Strains on the web: the world since 1890

IX. Big pictures and long prospects

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D. Northrup, *Globalization and the great convergence: rethinking world history in the long term*, «Journal of World History», 3/2005

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William Hardy

[[figure]]figures/2006/02mcneill/02mcneill_2005_06.jpg[[/figure]]

W.H. McNeill (Vancouver, 1917), ha insegnato alla University of Chicago dal 1947, anno in cui conseguì il PhD presso la Cornell University. I suoi primi scritti riguardarono la Grecia antica e - sull'onda dei nuovi rapporti diplomatici post-bellici - contemporanea.

Prima della guerra Spengler (*Il tramonto dell'Occidente*, 1922) e Toynbee (*A study of history*, 1933-) costituivano i punti di riferimento per quanti volessero fare storia generale delle civiltà. Entrambi basati su schemi filosofici, i lavori di Spengler e Toynbee divergevano per metodi e conclusioni – in particolare, per quanto riguardava la certezza della *superiorità* occidentale – ma erano uniti dalla certezza che le diverse aree del mondo avessero delle storie proprie, separate, prive di interconnessioni significative.

Toynbee ebbe notevole successo negli USA, e lo stesso W.H. McNeill gli dedicherà importanti contributi. Presso l'Università di Chicago, lavorava negli anni '50 anche R. Hodgson, impegnato in una ricerca sulla diffusione dell'islamismo (*The Venture of Islam*). Pubblicato postumo negli anni '70, il lavoro di Hodgson respingeva il paradigma 'separatista' di Spengler e Toynbee e la loro impostazione 'filosofica', mentre accoglieva il nuovo approccio – sollecitato dalla decolonizzazione – tendente a valorizzare i pattern di interazione e scambio tra civiltà. In questo clima prese le mosse anche la ricerca di McNeill, focalizzata sull'egemonia occidentale in quanto *problema* storiografico, e sul rapporto uomo/ambiente come punto d'osservazione principale.

Con *The Rise of the West*, iniziato nel 1957 e pubblicato nel 1963, W.H. McNeill conseguì nel 1964 il National Book Award. Nel 1996 gli è stato tributato il Premio Erasmus (prestigioso riconoscimento olandese) per la sua opera di pioniere della *world history*. Attualmente a riposo, è stato a lungo Robert A. Millikan Professor Emeritus in History.

Opere in volume di W.H. McNeill:

The Greek dilemma: war and aftermath, 1947

History handbook of Western civilization, 1953

Past and future, 1954

The rise of the West: A history of the human community, 1963

The world: its history in maps, 1963 (con M.R. Buske, A.W. Roehm)

Europe's steppe frontier: 1500-1800, 1964

A world history, 1967

The contemporary world: 1914 / present, 1967 (Roma, Casini, 1969)

America, Britain & Russia: their co-operation and conflict, 1941-1946, 1970

The Islamic world, 1973 (ed. con M. Robinson Waldman)

The shape of European history, 1974

Venice: the hinge of Europe, 1081-1797, 1974 (Roma, il Veltro, 1979)

Plagues and people, 1976 (Torino, Einaudi, 1981)

Human migration: patterns and policies, 1978 (ed. con R.S. Adams)

The metamorphosis of Greece since World War II, 1978

The human condition. An ecological and historical view, 1980 (Milano, il Saggiatore, 1993)

The pursuit of power: technology, armed force and society since AD 1000 1982 (Milano, Feltrinelli, 1984)

The great frontier: freedom and hierarchy in modern times, 1983

Myth-history and other essays, 1986

Polyethnicity and national unity in world history, 1986

A history of the human community: prehistory to the present, 1987, 2nd edition

Arnold J. Toynbee. A life, 1989

The age of the gunpowder empires, 1450-1800, 1989

Population and politics since 1750, 1990

The global condition: conquerors, catastrophes and community, 1992

Toynbee revisited, 1993

Keeping together in time: dance and drill in the human history, 1995

Introductory essay in: *The disruption of the traditional forms of nurture*, 1998

The human web. A bird's-eye view of world history

, 2003 (con J.R. McNeill)

Berkshire Encyclopaedia of World History, 2005 (senior editor)

The pursuit of truth: An historian's memoir, 2005

Transatlantic history in world perspective, in: S.G. Reinhardt, D.P. Reinhartz (eds.), *Transatlantic history*, 2006

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2. Mediterranean mountain environments
3. The deep history of Mediterranean landscape
4. Material life in the mountain environment, 1700-1900
5. Population, settlement and landscapes
6. Political economy and mountain landscapes
7. The changing landscape since 1800
8. Conclusion

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Environmental history in the Pacific

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Soils and societies: perspectives from environmental history

J.R. McNeill, V. Winiwarter (eds.), *Soils and societies: perspectives from environmental history*, Isle of Harris, UK, White Horse, 2006

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world history

Risorse on line:

H-World: lista di discussione e di recensioni: <http://www.h-net.org/~world/>

World History connected: The e-journal of Learning and Teaching:
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T. Detti, Economia, imperi, mondi: percorsi di una storia globale, 2005:
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<http://www.pbmstoria.it/dizionari/storiografia/lemmi/453.htm>

<http://www.globaled.org/issues/151/index.html> (world history e didattica della storia)

<http://www.srcf.ucam.org/worldhistory/intro.html> (introduzione al World History Workshop dell'Università di Cambridge)

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Immanuel Wallerstein

Docente alla Columbia University negli anni '60, dal 1971 professore di sociologia alla McGill University, Wallerstein è diventato nel 1999 direttore del Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilisations presso la Birmingham University.

Autore di studi sull'Africa (*The politics of independence*, 1961), Wallerstein si è a lungo soffermato sulla decolonizzazione, prima di segnalarsi come storico del capitalismo e come teorico dei "movimenti anti-sistema".

La sua opera principale, *The modern world-system*, uscita fra il 1974 e 1989, è fondata sulle categorie marxiste della lotta di classe, sugli studi di Braudel sull'economia moderna e sulla teoria dello scambio ineguale formulata da Frank per i rapporti commerciali tra paesi sviluppati e Terzo Mondo. In Italia è stata tradotta dal Mulino (*Il sistema mondiale dell'economia moderna, 1978-1995*).

Wallerstein individua nel XVI secolo le origini del sistema economico moderno, di matrice europea, che con l'imperialismo ha imposto le sue regole e gerarchie in tutto il mondo. All'interno del sistema-mondo Wallerstein enuclea i centri (rappresentati da pochi Stati), le periferie (gli Stati meno sviluppati sul piano tecnologico e industriale) e le regioni semi-periferiche.

Tra questi attori esiste una fondamentale divisione del lavoro: le periferie sono chiamate a rifornire di materie prime e beni agricoli i centri, che si caratterizzano per lo sviluppo tecnologico e produttivo. Mentre acquistano i loro beni a prezzi bassi, i centri impongono alle periferie di acquistare ad alto prezzo i beni 'superiori' da essi stessi prodotti. Quando uno Stato periferico inizia il proprio processo di avvicinamento agli standard dei centri, esso va a costituire una semiperiferia: è il caso, tra gli altri paesi, della Cina.

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The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000 ("The Princeton Economic History of the Western World")

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Jared Diamond, *Germes and Steel: the Fates of human societies*

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Journal of World History

Nato nel 1990, il «Journal of World History» è attualmente pubblicato da University of Hawai Press e diretto da Jerry Bentley, autore di *Old world encounters: cross cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times* (1993) e responsabile per UHP della collana “Perspectives on the global past”. Semestrale dal 1990 al 2002, dal 2003 il JWH è diventato quadrimestrale. Diviso in due sezioni – la prima dedicata alla ricerca -, esso ha dedicato nella seconda molta attenzione al processo di riconoscimento e istituzionalizzazione della disciplina, ai problemi metodologici e didattici, alla collocazione dei corsi nell’ambito dei curricula universitari, negli USA e in Canada.

Il primo fascicolo (primavera 1990) si apriva con una riflessione di William Hardy McNeill: *The Rise of the West after twenty-five years*, in seguito pubblicata nella nuova edizione di *The Rise of the West* (1991). Dello stesso autore, si riportava nel 1998 il testo della conferenza tenuta in occasione del 66° Congresso degli storici anglo-americani: un contributo incentrato sulla questione dei mezzi di comunicazione come categoria analitica per una storia scandita dall’apparire e dal declinare dell’egemonia prima europea e nord-americana poi.

Inizialmente concentrata quasi per intero sui paesi extraeuropei, sul colonialismo e post-colonialismo, a partire dalla terza annata la sezione di ricerca ha ospitato numerose riflessioni su questioni come la periodizzazione, ai rapporti con la storia europea e la storia americana, con la storia della scienza, con gli studi sulle religioni, con i gender studies e con la linguistica – oltre che con l’economia. Costante è inoltre l’attenzione all’apporto che la disciplina può offrire in senso politico e civile (si rinvia in particolare al n. 1/2005, contenente un forum sulla «dimensione etica e morale della world history»).

Nel n. 2/1997 è stato ospitato un forum sullo *Environmental change in British settler colonies*. Nel 2001 un lungo articolo di W.S. Atwell su *Volcanism and short terme climatic change in East Asian and world history* testimoniava dell’ulteriore affermazione degli studi sull’ambiente, mentre in quello e in altri fascicoli si notava la maggior apertura a campi di ricerca come la storia delle

relazioni internazionali, la geopolitica e il diritto internazionale (in età moderna e contemporanea) e alla comparazione.

Sito web: <http://www.uhpress.hawaii.edu/journals/jwh/>

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Energy Space Time
Houston, Texas, 16-19 marzo 2005
Annual Meeting of American Society for Environmental Histor

Sezione G, panel 42

Prometheus Unbound

Chair and Discussant: Gregory Maddox (Texas Southern University)

Johan Goudsblom (University of Amsterdam), *Fire and Civilisation*

Stephen Pyne (Arizona State University), *History with Fire in its Eye*

John R. McNeill (Georgetown University), *Something Old under the Sun:*

Fossils Fuel, Population and Geopolitics since 1600

Conferenze annuali della ASEH: <http://www.aseh.net/conferences/conference-archives>

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