

Section 3

History, Education,
and Practical Applications

A Green History of the World

1994R

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The discipline called history has, until recently, been identified more or less closely with the history of human societies since the time of the invention of written language. An important distinction is that between “historiography” and “historical research.” People doing historical research may concentrate for many years on the causes of a particular event or the development of an institution, for instance a university, through some hundred years. But the most well-known historiographers have tried to furnish written history of a whole society, or even a “world history.” As may be easily understood, the thick books pretending to cover the history of human societies or of humanity through thousands of years are not based on solid research. But they have had, and will continue to have, great influence.

They are written from different points of view. A recent book has the title *A Green History of the World*.¹ This is something new and something that deserves our attention. Its author, Clive Ponting, is a genuine historian, not an environmentalist dabbling in history writing. It is excellent that the title says “a history,” not “the history” because we may expect many attempts by professional historiographers to write human history with extensive reference to the environment.

The collapse of civilizations has for a long time been a favourite study of historians, and the author of “a green history” of course emphasizes the environmental *causes* of collapse. How historians avoid the pitfall of pointing to one single cause of collapse is instructive. And even if we are convinced that bad relations with the environment must be considered one of the causes, a historian will show the immense complexity of the causes involved. The book under consideration starts with a seven-page account of the salient features of the human civilization on Easter Island. A few quotations will illustrate the complexity. He writes:

It is not known how many settlers arrived in the fifth century but they probably numbered no more than twenty or thirty at most. As the population slowly increased

the forms of social organisation familiar in the rest of Polynesia were adopted. The basic social unit was the extended family, which jointly owned and cultivated the land. Closely related households formed lineages and clans, each of which had its own centre for religious and ceremonial activity. Each clan was headed by a chief who was able to organise and direct activities and act as focal point for the redistribution of food and other essentials within the clan. It was this form of organisation and the competition (and probably conflict) between the clans that produced both the major achievements of Easter Island society and ultimately its collapse.²

Here the author points to a certain form of *organization and competition* as a cause, but only as a preliminary remark. The islanders erected huge statues well known from Thor Heyerdahl's book, *Aku-Aku*.³

. . . at the time of the initial settlement Eastern Island had a dense vegetation cover including extensive woods. As the population slowly increased, trees would have been cut down to provide clearings for agriculture, fuel for heating and cooking, construction material for household goods, pole and thatch houses and canoes for fishing. The most demanding requirement of all was the need to move the large number of enormously heavy statues to ceremonial sites around the island.⁴

At about 1550 the population reached its peak, about 7000, and there were over 600 huge stone statues.

Then, when the society was at its peak, it suddenly collapsed leaving over half the statues only partially completed around Rano Raraku quarry. The cause of the collapse and the key to understanding the 'mysteries' of Easter Island was massive environmental degradation brought on by deforestation of the whole island.⁵

Here the author points to a different cause, deforestation, but evidently he does not see a contradiction between this hypothesis concerning causes and his remark on page 3. Complementary causes!

On page 3 the author mentions the causal strength of competition. It was a competition between the many clans to erect statues. As the number of clans grew, the fierceness of competition grew as well. With no such increased competition, the number of statues would have remained small.

Increasing scarcity of timber caused an inability to erect any more statues and this

must have had a devastating effect on the belief systems and social organisation and called into question the foundations on which that complex society had been built. There were increasing conflicts over diminishing resources resulting in a state of almost permanent warfare. Slavery became common and as the amount of protein available fell the population turned to cannibalism.⁶

The first quotation from page 6 suggests that slavery and a state of almost permanent warfare were results of diminishing resources, not the other

way round. The introduction of slavery marks a dreadful increase of hierarchy and domination by humans over humans. It is not suggested that that caused ruthless domination over nature and diminishing resources as a result. There is in the seven-page report no indication that pronounced hierarchy and domination between people go together with pronounced effort to dominate nature.

. . . at the very time when the limitations of the island must have become starkly apparent the competition between the clans for the available timber seems to have intensified as more and more statues were carved and moved across the island in an attempt to secure prestige and status.⁷

Extraordinary cultural ambitions, and attempts to secure prestige and status seem to go hand in hand.

Suppose historical sources were rich enough to write a 700-page account of the collapse of the human society on Easter Island. One may expect that it would be able to take into account hundreds of factors of causal relevance. One would get a more realistic view of the overwhelming complexity of causal relations. But this cannot be used to undermine the efforts to pick out a small number of factors, such as deforestation, technology, and population. In general, it pays to focus on factors that we believe we have a chance to influence. Perhaps population increase is often left unmentioned because it may be considered to be outside of control.

I have only referred to seven pages out of the 407 pages of the text by Clive Ponting. But those seven pages clearly reveal the importance of studying the past. The disregard of our impact on the ecosystems is not a speciality of industrial societies. It started in the remote past, as can be learned from other books. Hunters and gatherers were not as innocent as we may want them to have been. History warns us, but it also teaches us how some societies did *not* destroy the available resources.

Notes

¹ Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

² Ponting, 3–4.

³ Thor Heyerdahl, *Aku-Aku, the Secret of Easter Island*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958. Translated from the 1957 Norwegian original *Aku-Aku: Paskeöyas Hemmelighet*.

⁴ Ponting, 5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 7.