
Material Stories, Old and New

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AGRICULTURAL HISTORY HAS always had a somewhat complicated relationship with materiality, one that is likely to shape its reception of the New Materialism. On the one hand, it has certainly done better than most historical subfields in terms of recognizing the importance of the material world. Historians of agriculture have long known that things like drought, soil, selective breeding, insects, fungi, farm implements, agricultural outbuildings, and the like have shaped the fortunes of farmers, rural communities, and, indeed, nations. On the other hand, their acknowledgments that such things matter have not always, or even often, resulted in the kind of careful scrutiny of the ways in which things have shaped the past that the New Materialism calls for. Often, the attention agricultural historians have paid to materiality has proven rather perfunctory. Agricultural historians have long talked about soil, to take one example, but have seldom sought to understand its mechanics or integrate it as a historical actor in particularly nuanced ways. Moreover, since agricultural historians have commonly positioned farmers as the protagonists of their narratives, when the other-than-human world has crashed into those stories, it has tended to do so as an “act of God.” Drought, blight, and plague have made times tough for farming families in those histories, but the materiality of such things has mattered much less than the grit and determination of the farmers. Even so, there’s been a great deal more emphasis on the material in agricultural history than, say, in political history or economic history, even if they, too, have hugely important (and largely neglected) material connections.

In addition to this somewhat superficial engagement with materiality, agricultural historians have long proven suspicious of those material analyses they consider. To the degree that that suspicion is rooted in a lingering fear of determinism, agricultural history is hardly alone. A similar suspicion, for instance, is wrapped into the warp and woof of the historiography of the American South, where environmentally deterministic arguments once

served to naturalize slavery. But whatever the reason for it, the suspicion continues to mark large swaths of the field. The examples are too numerous to note, so I'll offer the opening plenary of the most recent meeting of the Agricultural History Society as a representative example. In his thoughtful and provocative contribution to the session, Tom Isern captured this suspicion of materialist analyses when he contended that agricultural historians should seek "to make human agents the protagonists" of their analyses of "challenging environments." Agricultural historians, he contended, needed to eschew a retreat to "disembodied factors," environmental or otherwise, in establishing historical causality if they were to avoid the mistakes of environmental historians like Donald Worster, whose study of the Dust Bowl, in Isern's estimation, afforded the natural world too much influence in the shaping of the Plains.¹

This skepticism goes back a long way. It was certainly evident in the field's initial response to environmental history, as a number of historiographic essays have shown.² Though Peter A. Coclanis's rather famous review of William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* was more pointed than most in seeing something a bit sinister—misanthropic even—in environmental history, he was not alone.³ Even materially minded agricultural historians like Jack Temple Kirby, who later embraced the field of environmental history, did so hesitantly at first. This is not to conflate the field of environmental history with material histories more generally, but given the overlaps between the two, the case of environmental history proves instructive.

The core contention of environmental history's founding generation, after all (and much of what they wrote was agricultural history after one fashion or another), was that abstracting people from the other-than-human world distorted our historical understanding of their lived experience. By ignoring humanity's real connections to the material world, scholars like Worster argued, historians were inadvertently perpetuating a notion that people inhabited an ethereal realm that had little influence on their affairs.⁴ And while Worster was the most outspoken of that generation about this, even scholars who would later depart from him (Richard White and Cronon, for instance) were producing profoundly materialist studies at the time.⁵

To be sure, their emphasis proved narrower than that of the New Materialism, focusing almost exclusively on the ostensibly natural world as it was understood through ecology and the life sciences. Nevertheless, many of those materialist strains can be seen in the New Materialism. There is no doubt that Timothy J. LeCain, who perhaps more than anyone else has been at the vanguard of the New Materialism in environmental history, and

others—almost certainly including everyone on the panel that gave birth to this roundtable—have drawn inspiration from the work of that founding generation. The chief departure point for the New Materialism in this context is found in its self-conscious engagement with the constructivist critiques of material analyses that marked the last decades of the twentieth century and, among other things, set in motion environmental history's cultural turn. A longer essay might point to the difficulties of narrating stories that elide distinctions between nature and culture. It is much easier to reject their separateness as a philosophical proposition than it is to narrate in a way that avoids recapitulating those ontological categories in one way or another. Even so, to the degree that the New Materialism might offer a path forward for environmental history, a field that got bogged down in the notion of hybridity, that self-conscious engagement melded with a renewed commitment to materiality is certainly promising.⁶ But while I'm sympathetic with many of the larger aims of the New Materialism, I am less sanguine about its value for agricultural history.

The New Materialists' rejoinder to Isern's insistence that people be privileged as the agents of history, after all, would essentially echo that of the founding generation of environmental historians. Materialists old and new will warn against the dangers of cultural determinism (which are no less real than those of environmental determinism) and agree that the best environmental history (and agricultural history) melds the ideal and the material, even if it denies the separateness of the categories. This was precisely Worster's rejoinder to his critics—appropriately titled "Seeing beyond Culture"—in the famous 1990 *Journal of American History* roundtable.⁷ And the theoretical distinctions of the New Materialism notwithstanding, I don't see how it provides a clearer path around agricultural history's longstanding suspicion of material analyses than those offered by its predecessors.

But if the New Materialism seems likely to run up against the same issues as the "old materialism" in agricultural history circles, there are nevertheless places where, leveraged properly, it might redound to real advantage. Foodways offers one such place. Take a hamburger, in which the ground beef from an Angus cow sits on a bun made from hard-red winter wheat and next to oil and salt adhered to thin strips of fried potatoes, all of which are covered with tomatoes and sugar in the form of ketchup, perhaps even with traces of residual glyphosate. The path that each individual part of the burger took to the plate has important material aspects that tend to be taken for granted. But to take just the final step as an example, often lost in studies of foodways is the fact that people choose to eat things like hamburgers—in part

at least—because the very material taste receptors on their tongues release chemicals pleasing to their brains.⁸ Agricultural historians have done a fine job of exploring the cultural factors at play in shaping foodways and have produced impressive studies tracing the commodity chains that produce that food. They have not done as good a job of recognizing that the very materiality of the food system—from field to table—has carried real consequences in shaping regional foodways and indeed the broad contours of agricultural systems. The insights of the New Materialism might offer a model for doing so.

Histories of agricultural technology represent another area where the New Materialism could be useful. Agricultural historians have done excellent work underscoring the ways in which technologies have been culturally constructed and reappropriated by rural communities in ways that have shaped the production and marketing of those technologies.⁹ They have done far less in thinking about the ways in which those technologies, as artifacts, were profoundly material. Electricity traveled through copper; phonographs played music recorded on a resin secreted by lac bugs; tractors converted specific petrochemicals into horsepower. It will not do, of course, simply to assert that such things have agency. It might be a losing proposition, in fact, to contend that they do. Here the New Materialists have an even greater task before them in persuading skeptical agricultural historians than environmental historians who, by contrast, sought merely to convince agricultural historians to situate the ostensibly natural world as an actor in their histories. Nevertheless, taking the materiality of technologies seriously might allow scholars to reframe the connections not only between rural communities and those technologies, but also between rural communities and the larger world.

Animal studies offers another obvious field where the New Materialism might reshape agricultural history. Here there might be more space to argue for agency, but I confess that, while there are some great studies along these lines, I often find them frustrating. Or maybe, more rightly, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss's now clichéd line, I find a lot of the animal studies scholarship good to think with, but less than wholly persuasive. Perhaps this is because animals often exist as abstractions in such studies, with the causal connections between hoof and soil elided by academic jargon. Some of the best studies of animals (like those of Virginia DeJohn Anderson and Mart A. Stewart, to pick two scholars familiar to agricultural historians) came before the New Materialism wielded real influence in scholarly history.¹⁰ In an article published three decades ago in this journal, for instance, Stewart successfully challenged several important studies that had rooted colonial cattle culture in various ethnic traditions. He did so by placing cattle—as

material beings capable of adapting to the new material realities of a discrete environment—at the center of the story. In doing so, he didn't embrace a deterministic line of argumentation or deny the influence of ethnic traditions in shaping colonial herding practices, but by accounting for the materiality of cattle, he offered a far more persuasive explanation than one rooted wholly in culture.¹¹ Self-consciously New Materialist studies that have proven as successful have done so for much the same reason: they have married concrete examples of the ways in which material realities have shaped the past with compelling storytelling—even if they might be more theory heavy than studies like Stewart's.¹²

In the end, theoretical frameworks are probably less important than the space they open to shape our stories in ways that more accurately reflect the experience of people in the past. It comes down, as it always has, to the stories that we tell, and how we tell them.¹³ As agricultural historians, we need to be aware of the assumptions that we build into our narratives. If we dismiss the material as ancillary, the stories we tell will reflect that—and so perpetuate the notion that humans inhabit an ethereal world of ideas and abstractions from which they assemble the meaning in their lives. The cascading environmental crises now facing us would offer sufficient reason to challenge that notion, but the more compelling reason might be an academic one: good scholarship demands it. Few subfields are better positioned than agricultural history to underscore the degree to which material things have shaped people's lives. To the degree that the New Materialism helps us produce histories that do that, agricultural historians should embrace it. To the degree it doesn't, agricultural historians might just as well pass it by.

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Notes

1. Isern, "Challenging the Idea of a Challenging Environment on the Great Plains"; Worster, *Dust Bowl*.
2. Coclanis, "Field Notes"; Stewart, "If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian"; and Hersey and Way, "Agricultural History's Agroecological Turn."
3. Coclanis, "Urbs in Horto."
4. Worster, "Doing Environmental History."
5. White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change*; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*.
6. Sutter, "World with Us."
7. Worster, "Seeing beyond Culture."

8. Cf. Gladwell, "Ketchup Conundrum."
9. E.g., Kline, *Consumers in the Country*.
10. Stewart, "What Nature Suffers to Groe"; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*.
11. Stewart, "Whether Wast, Deodand, or Stray."
12. E.g., LeCain, *Matter of History*, chap. 4.
13. Cronon, "A Place for Stories."

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