The Illusory Boundary: Environment and Technology in History

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The view of nature and technology inhabiting totally different, even opposite, spheres persists across time and cultures. Most people would consider an English countryside or a Louisiana bayou to be "natural," though each is to an extent the product of technology. Pollution, widely thought to be a purely man-made phenomenon, results partly from natural processes. All around us, things from the natural world are brought into the human world. At what point do we consider them part of culture rather than nature? And does such a distinction illuminate our world or obscure its workings?

This compelling new book challenges the view that a clear and unwavering boundary exists between nature and technology. Rejecting this dichotomy, the contributors show how the history of each can be united in a constantly shifting panorama where definitions of "nature" and "technology" alter and overlap.

In addition to recognizing the artificial divide between these two concepts, the essays in this book demonstrate how such thinking may affect societies' ability to survive and prosper. The answers and ideas are as numerous as the landscapes they consider, for there is no single path toward a more harmonious vision of technology and nature. Technologies that work in one place may not in another. Nature that is preserved in one community might become the raw material of technological progress somewhere else. Add to this the fact that the natural world and technology are not passive players, but are profoundly involved in cultural construction. Understanding such dynamics not only reveals a new historical complexity; it prepares us for coping with many of the most difficult and pressing social issues facing us today.

Contributors

Peter Coates * Craig E. Colten * Stephen H. Cutcliffe * Hugh S. Gorman * Betsy Mendelsohn * Joy Parr * Peter C. Perdue * Sara B. Pritchard * Martin Reuss * William D. Rowley * Edmund Russell * Joel A. Tarr * Ann Vileisis * James C. Williams * Thomas Zeller

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