

# Book Reviews

Martin Breum. 2018. *Cold Rush: The Astonishing True Story of the New Quest for the Polar North*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press.

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Any discussion of the Arctic depends largely on perspective, and Martin Breum's book *Cold Rush* gives us the view from an often overlooked major player in the region: Denmark. While the United States discussions these days focus on the possibilities for military confrontation in the polar north, or Washington D.C. and Alaska argue over access to oil and mineral resources, Breum gives a historical view of how Copenhagen, and the not-yet-independent Greenland, see geopolitics and the environment. Starting around the year 2000, Denmark increasingly asserted territorial and exclusive economic zone rights north of Greenland along the underwater Lomonsov Ridge, and by 2014 claimed sovereignty over the North Pole seabed itself. The book was originally published in 2015 in Danish, and in English translation in 2018. Many of the events are centered around 2010–2012, which are dated now, but in a curious way. In reading a hopeful view of the future of the Arctic, starting with the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, it may be clear to many readers that Russian foreign policy changed since that time (especially post 2014), that technology such as gas fracking shifted plans for exploration, that Shell Oil's disastrous 2015 Arctic effort and \$7 billion loss tempered expectations, and that more recently shifts away from fossil fuels have accelerated. What is hopeful now would be an energy transition, not risky extraction in the far north.

Those looking for straight discussions of the politics behind the Arctic may become frustrated with Breum's long descriptions of travels in the region, of expeditions on a Swedish icebreaker to the North Pole, and historical flashbacks to previous explorers. Yet in understanding the Danish vision of the Arctic, perhaps such descriptions help in placing actions in an environmental context. The scientists feel they are just doing research, and yet there are machinations that they do not fully understand behind why they were funded. Some may feel they are extending benevolent Danish sovereignty in order to protect the environment, while environmentalists fear the same actions establish resource rights and pave the way for oil and gas drilling. Even the benevolent narratives from Copenhagen toward Nuuk (in Greenland) involve establishing Greenland as self-sufficient based on oil, gas, and mineral mining. Some analyses, including outside this book, attribute the Danish goals to trying to maintain an important link with

Greenland and the Faroes. But it is difficult to read all the descriptions of expedition histories and repeated phrases of “the Danish kingdom was expanding” and not think of Manifest Destiny and the American West, with all the baggage that entails.

The book does attempt to grapple with some of the obvious contradictions: that Greenlanders are not necessarily in favor of a fossil fuel-based economy, that they worry about undue influence from emerging great powers like China, and that the traditional military deployments (and associated environmental risks) from the United States have never disappeared. This is the same legal and political issue faced by Alaska Natives, Canadian First Nations, and Norwegian Saami; that in order to assert sovereignty and control of a territory, there had to be a visible presence of the flag and use of resources (Kuehls 1996). The book quotes a senior Danish defense official: “If suddenly, after 400 years, we are no longer present, eventually we will notice - not the day after or even a month after, but over time - that others start to ask the question: Who actually owns this place? Who has the right to this area (p. 63)?”

There are no clear answers to this question, especially in areas where no humans live, as in the Arctic Sea. Even if oil and gas are abandoned as prospects, the renewable economy requires rare earth elements. This raises the issue of mining, where areas like Greenland, Alaska, and Siberia contain the minerals necessary for any technological green revolution, and with arguably better ethical and security conditions than south-central Africa. Yet when even the Trump family openly disparaged such proposed projects, as they did with the Pebble Mine project in Alaska, environmental impacts and the role of outside corporations are legitimate concerns. In areas like Greenland, what capacity exists for effective environmental impact assessments, monitoring, and regulation? Where would the profits go, if the mining companies are all foreign-owned? Would this just offer a foothold for greater expansion of countries like China, whose Belt and Road Initiative would doubtless offer infrastructure expansion to Greenlanders, at the risk of being forever in debt to China? Who gets to decide?

Climate change has also upended many traditional concepts, as actions taken thousands of kilometers away can and do affect the Arctic, so in one sense the world has a collective responsibility for these sensitive and fragile ecosystems. Should we leave governance only to the five countries directly bordering the Arctic Sea, as in the Danish-led Ilulissat Declaration? Yet there is the practicality of wondering who will observe those values, once the ice melts more and Chinese freighters can make trans-polar navigation routes, when an assertive Russia moves military forces ever farther north, or when cruise liners take tourists into these previously inaccessible areas. The book touches on all these issues, but in a sense, but more as a narrative than a research project. Our visions of the environment depend upon how we see our histories and our futures, and this book paints an intriguing portrait of many of the individuals and remote locations overlooked in the more heated discussions of national security.

## Reference

Kuehls, Thom. 1996. *Beyond Sovereign Territory: The Space of Ecopolitics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lessenich, Stephan. 2019. *Living Well at Others' Expense: The Hidden Costs of Western Prosperity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

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“Somewhere bodies are being broken so that I can live in my shit” (91). This is the main argument of Stephan Lessenich’s book *Living Well at Others’ Expense*. Lessenich, in a clear and accessible manner, has done an in-depth analysis of the asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South and the consequences of them. He uses various examples ranging from the ecological disasters to the refugee crisis to explain how capitalist society is inherently political and extractive in nature, calling it an Externalization Society, which keeps the few chosen ones inside and the rest on the margins of the periphery.

Lessenich begins the book with a depressing ecological disaster in Rio Doce, Brazil, to prepare the reader for what to expect: various crises happening simultaneously around the world and many of us choosing to be oblivious of them. He explains that there is nothing natural about the bursting of the walls of two reservoirs containing the wastewater from an iron ore mine in Rio Doce. It was all fated right from the beginning, when the poor countries of the Global South agreed to sell their labor, their minerals, and other resources to satisfy the desire of the Global North to elevate themselves. He problematizes the situation further, discussing the distribution of wealth of the certain Nations—the “opportunity hoarding” (39) or “social closure” through terms of trade and finance and law. He warns that we live in an era of a “Boomerang Effect” (52), where nature is going to spit out what we have been throwing at it. Simply put, climate change is too big a crisis to externalize.

He discusses the Anthropocene or Occidentocene—the ecological burden of the various practices adopted by the large agribusiness corporations—China gaining momentum, and the tiny bits of plastic finding their way into the food of citizens of the Global North. He points to the irony of ethical consumerism—delivered on the same day on your doorstep.

Law, he points out, has been used to create boundaries. It is an effort to keep the dangers and diseases out of the Externalization Society. Lessenich is critical of global leadership, in which people sitting in ivory towers talk about inequality. Here, developing countries like Pakistan and Lebanon, which are host to millions of refugees, expose the double standards of the Global North. The book closes with radical ideas like the restructuring of the national and international institutional frameworks and discusses the need for collective acceptance

leading to collective empowerment. Besides this, Lessenich has continued his criticism of the Global North and the complicit nature of its citizens.

This book is an important addition to the scholarship on inequality, environmental policy, and international relations. Various themes, such as climate crisis, monopolization of travel, and the desire to “keep up with the Joneses,” have been used masterfully to highlight the comparison between the citizens of the Global South and those of the Global North. Lessenich’s dissatisfaction with Thomas Piketty’s seminal work and concerns with other indicators like gross domestic product and the Human Development Index demand serious consideration. He could have used quantitative data to strengthen his argument and could have spent more time exploring the complicit attitude of the elites in the Global South in maintaining the status quo. Future research can be built on his important work to analyze and measure inequality in both the Global North and the Global South.

Jarrige, François, and Thomas Le Roux. 2020. *The Contamination of the Earth: A History of Pollutions in the Industrial Age*. Translated by Janice Egan and Michael Egan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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*The Contamination of the Earth: A History of Pollutions in the Industrial Age* is part of the History for a Sustainable Future series, edited by Michael Egan. Translated from French, the book offers a social and political history of industrial pollution, mapping out its trajectory over three centuries. As an environmental history, the book brings together the research of modern history with government documents and scientific studies to demonstrate the growth of pollution throughout the modern age. It stretches further than an analysis of the Industrial Revolution to include the impacts of imperialism and the world wars. It also reaches beyond the West to provide a more global analysis and traces, with precision, the treatment of pollutants from the early modern age to the 1970s. The analysis includes both rural and urban treatment of pollutants, making it a comprehensive history on the topic.

Jarrige and Le Roux provide an analysis of industrialization and liberalization of environments that began in the 1700s, taking us through to the “Toxic Age” of 1914–1973. The work concludes in the 1970s, on the basis that the geographic and neoliberal distribution of the production system from that period onward deserves a volume of its own to do it justice. The authors discuss such important topics as the industrial wars, a high energy-consuming world, mass consumption, and the politics of mass contamination. They argue that, while pollutions are frequently regarded as a recent problem or one that began with industrialization,

they have been a historical constant. The authors acknowledge, however, that the reach, scale, and severity of pollutants have achieved unprecedented levels with the advent of the industrial age. Pollutions have become one of the principal concerns of our time; the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that millions of people die annually as a result of air pollution. The book also discusses how plastic has become the “seventh continent” and “our bodies have become unwitting consumers of contamination” due the use of digital products.

In the chapter “Sketches: An Ancien Régime of Pollution,” Jarrige and Le Roux compare the modern age, beginning in the eighteenth century, to the pre-industrial period. They note that, historically, pollutants were largely restricted to areas in close proximity to their source, in both urban and rural areas. Citizens were reluctant to live in industrial areas because of odors, fumes, and contaminated waters. Such problems were dealt with largely through nuisance laws that privileged health over economic development. New forms of pollution began to appear as manufacturing and urbanization grew. The nineteenth century brought the pressure of economic development, and as attitudes changed, they argue, so did policies. They maintain that “the only option was for the great industrial transformation: in a period of revolutions, legal and political evolutions rendered pollution acceptable, and even desirable” (62). This framing provides a more contextual analysis than previous works on this topic.

The authors effectively make the case that mining expanded substantially during the second half of the eighteenth century. “Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico dominated the world’s silver market, while Brazil produced 80 percent of the world’s gold extraction” (39). As part of the nineteenth-century focus on progress, industrializing nations welcomed polluting industries. During the period, industrialization was a symbol of wealth, prosperity, and the rise of a nation’s importance in the world. Common law was largely ineffective at imposing control. Nevertheless, pollutants diminished in some place as industry began to move to more suitable locations. This movement was made possible by the revolutions in rail and maritime transport. Not unlike in the contemporary age, leaders hoped that technical solutions would solve the problem of pollution. In reality, the legacy of that century is that it was a period that “accelerated and exacerbated the rebound effects and further dispersal of pollution” (176).

Jarrige and Le Roux also discuss the important topic of “Industrial Wars and Pollution.” They note that “in war, environmental protection and public health were relegated to the background as the theatre of combat—and its imperatives—took centre stage” (185). They describe how “the Great War was the first highly polluting energy and chemical conflict. The war propelled oil production from 40 million metric tons in 1910 to 100 million metric tons in 1921, while Royal Dutch Shell’s dividends multiplied fourfold between 1914 and 1919” (187). The demand for oil forced the major powers to increase their influence over the resources of the Middle East.

Ultimately, *The Contamination of the Earth* adds to the expanding debate about our global ecological crisis and our awareness of the influence that

politics and economics have over that crisis. The book demonstrates that the history of pollution should be viewed at least partially through political and economic lenses. Thus, the work offers many lessons for the coming decades in which government policies on greenhouse gases, in particular, will be critically important to the fate of humanity. Jarrige and Le Roux remind us that “pollution is above all a social and political fact, that relies on the ideas of progress that must be discussed at the time of mass contaminations” (331).