

Book Review

Mah, Alice. 2022. *Plastic Unlimited: How Corporations Are Fueling the Ecological Crisis and What We Can Do About It*. New York, NY: Polity Press.

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The American Chemistry Council continues to push for broader acceptance of, and political support for, what it now calls advanced or chemical recycling of plastics—a process that typically involves dissolving or heating plastics to break them down to their original raw components.¹ The council, and, by extension, the companies it represents, argues that broad adoption of this approach would significantly reduce the need for virgin plastic, provide solutions for mixed plastics and foam containers that are impossible or uneconomic to recycle using conventional methods, and increase plastic recycling. Given the harmful impacts on human health and the environment of the manufacture, use, and inadequate disposal of plastics—and certain chemicals that many contain and that can leach from them—such goals are certainly worth pursuing.

But reasons often exist to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when the horse is saddled with claims of an idyllic future filled with plentiful and profitable plastic recycling. And as Alice Mah details in her well-researched and readable new book, *Plastic Unlimited: How Corporations Are Fueling the Ecological Crisis and What We Can Do About It*, some undeniable reasons are the motivations and track record of companies responsible for the huge boom in the manufacturing of plastics. Despite increasing efforts by some local, state, national, and even global actors (e.g., under the Basel Convention and via negotiations on a potential new global agreement), plastic production continues to rise. This is no accident, nor the innocent product of market forces. Rather, as this book details so well, a driving force behind the plastic problem is a seemingly relentless corporate push to produce more and more plastic—and then to find and protect markets.

A professor of sociology at the University of Warwick, Mah provides a clear and compelling account of how the petrochemical and plastic companies (makers and users), and their industry associations and lobbyists, have opposed oversight, regulation, and bans. Over the years, these efforts have included pushing plastic into more and more products and areas of the economy; supporting single-use consumerism; denying the negative environmental and human health effects of

1. E.g., American Chemistry Council, <https://www.americanchemistry.com/better-policy-regulation/plastics/advanced-recycling>, last accessed December 2, 2022.

plastics and certain constituent chemicals; pushing the numbering system for consumer plastics as a ruse to pretend that widespread recycling of plastics was possible or even occurring; co-opting rhetoric from potential “circular economy” environmental solutions; extensive lobbying and political activity; advertising; vigorously opposing efforts to limit or ban particular single-use plastics, including flimsy shopping bags that clog actual recycling operations; and exploiting the global COVID-19 pandemic to shore up support for, and expand the use of, single-use plastics.

Plastic Unlimited is a valuable addition to the increasing number of books, articles, and other research by social science and natural science scholars examining different aspects of the plastic problem. While it does not necessarily break new ground in terms of providing information unavailable elsewhere, *Plastic Unlimited* does an outstanding and valuable job gathering, analyzing, and contextualizing a tremendous amount of evidence regarding the near-relentless push by companies to expand and protect plastic production. Moreover, as Mah notes, this effort will likely expand if the world transitions away from fossil fuels and plastics become an even larger driver of oil demand.

What, then, can be done? In the concluding chapter, Mah reviews discussions of several broad proposed approaches to address the increasing overproduction and overuse of plastics. The possibilities include, inter alia, a potential new global treaty (called a Paris Agreement for Plastics, which is perhaps an unfortunate moniker considering the inadequacies of that accord; perhaps the Montreal Protocol of Plastics would be better); directly challenging the enablers of plastic companies and, more broadly, the global plastic political economy—including private banks, development banks, governments, and investors that help make fossil fuels and plastics less expensive via favorable and readily available loans, subsidies, and rising stock prices; establishing new policies and paradigms to push back on the perception, and, in some cases, the reality, that companies must seek growth upon growth to enhance profitability and stock prices; and enhanced producer responsibility so that the companies that manufacture plastics or use them in products become responsible for their environmentally sound management, disposal, reuse, and/or recycling. While up to date in terms of content, this final discussion does not provide the means to evaluate how to choose among these goals, nor really how they can be realistically pursued. But that is not really the point. Rather, the conclusion, as does the rest of the book, seeks to inform the reader of the broader forces at play and the actors who seek to address them and thus begin to limit the production and use of plastics.

Plastic Unlimited is a good read: well written, up to date, refreshingly concise. As such, it is excellent for course use but also a worthy resource for scholars, citizens, activists, policy makers, and journalists. Plastics are a problem. Alice Mah explains the responsibility of corporate interests in creating and expanding this problem and outlines avenues to help hold them accountable.