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Peer reviewed

Review: Profit: An Environmental History
By Mark Stoll

Reviewed by Yves Laberge
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Stoll, M., *Profit: An Environmental History*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023. 220 pp. ISBN: 9781509533237, \$35.00.

“Growth”, “Sustainability”, quest for “new markets” and “new prospects”: all these words are so interesting for capitalists! In fact, these praised terms (although not used here by the author) seem to be almost everywhere in our societies based on consumer capitalism; they are echoed as well, encouraged, and uncriticized, in the public sphere and in the mass media. And few people perceive this trend as a possible issue. A long-time Professor at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Mark Stoll’s *Profit: An Environmental History* aptly addresses a series of issues related to environmentalism, yesterday and today. In his introduction, Stoll focuses on the endless search for profit, and how this obsessive model has consistently changed consumer capitalism, the driving concept in this book (p. 8). Some economical and sociological ways of reasoning are sometimes brought in. For example, the author notes that buying and reselling one same product through different owners, at different prices, over time can sometimes have unpredicted consequences. A new item that is resold when it is used can then be resold again, many times, through a chain of successive and environmental owners, although that single item was manufactured only once: “Amazon.com exemplifies the period of consumer capitalism after the 1970s, in which selling things to consumers has become much more profitable than making them” (p. 8). This basic idea of endlessly reselling goods reappears thoroughly in Chapter 8. Drawing from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Barbara Ward’s *Only One Planet*, Stoll demarcates his book in these terms: “It is a history of capitalism that seeks to explain how capitalism changed the natural world and how the environment shaped capitalism” (p. 9).

A dense essay, *Profit: An Environmental History* is divided into nine core chapters. Even though the author is American, the book’s spectrum is international and global. The first half revisits the 17th - 19th centuries’ history of industrial development and plantation capitalism in various places in Western Europe, Haiti, and Mexico, highlighting the usual

environmental outcomes of overexploitation: erosion, deforestation, and pollution (p. 52). For most scholars, these historical portions will sound familiar, even though the author constantly concentrates on how excessive industrialization, commercialization, and the continuous search for profits can have a major impact on the environment; the example of nuclear energy coupled with its overlooked nuclear waste is an excellent illustration of these risks and hazards (p. 194).

Perhaps Chapter 8 is the most rewarding, mainly because of the emerging concepts brought by the author and combined here: “the computer revolution” (p. 210), “cheap global transportation” (p. 215), “throwaway capitalism” (p. 216), and “age of plastic” (p. 217). It makes sense to understand how all these terms are interlinked. The final, ninth chapter encapsulates everything that was suggested in the first 200 pages or so, with “the rise of the Greens” (that is, environmentalism as a social movement and as a political influence) (p. 238), and some new global issues such as Climate Change and the broader, more disturbing environmental challenge of corporate agriculture at a very large scale (p. 244). The final pages provide some solutions (such as renewable energy, but also the need for “breaking up big corporations with their tremendous economic and political power”), even though Mark Stoll’s plea insists on his diagnostic and the bold idea that profitability can sometimes become an environmental problem (p. 256).

As such, *Profit: An Environmental History* is not a formal history book with dates and names of heroes; it rather uses a welcome transdisciplinary approach (obviously centered on profits) to understand how the global environment suffers from capitalism. It intelligently mixes the social, economic, and environmental facets altogether. Undergraduates and even non-academic readers would learn from it.

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