In a well-written, clear work, Frank Uekötter asks us to rethink how we craft the field of global environmental history. Despite the increasing awareness of today’s environmental crisis, there is not a global consensus about how to address it precisely because experiences, both of the problem and of solutions, have historically differed. Uekötter calls for a new approach to environmental history to better understand this situation, arguing for a nonlinear narrative to help avoid hierarchical models that too often prioritize some viewpoints while marginalizing others.

To produce a history that avoids these pitfalls, Uekötter argues that we should approach environmental history as a giant vortex to better appreciate the inherent chaos, unpredictability, and perspectives of a global world. Metaphors are tricky things, as much dependent on the reader’s interpretation as the clarity and precision of an author. But Uekötter’s metaphor largely succeeds. It reminds us that complicated historical context matters, and this includes examining issues such as the unintended consequences of proposed solutions and the interplay between local and global forces in environmental history. Uekötter carries his vortex metaphor into his writing. The various sections of the book, and at times even the details within the chapters, can skip around, but Uekötter defends this by arguing that he wants his readers to experience a sense of dynamism that evokes the power of the nonhuman world while understanding how people retain an agency to make choices and affect the environment.

Still, there is a coherency to the work. The book is organized into eight parts, each with five chapters, ranging from 1500 to 1970, although the bulk of work deals with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a deliberate time frame designed to explain the creation of the contemporary world. Instead of singular examples, Uekötter provides a wealth of details across forty chapters with the goal of each chapter to explore the main idea of the section rather than a specific event. Structure is necessary for a book, but Uekötter invites readers to jumble the book’s organization by providing alternative groupings to the chapters at
the end of the introduction. Indeed, within each chapter, Uekötter draws out connections to other sections of the book. By carefully providing examples that are short and focused, but also ones that are often less well known and linked with each other, Uekötter crafts a compelling argument that connects individual issues to each other as well as the wider significance of each part in novel ways.

Part 1, labeled “Essentials,” examines the changes in resource allocation, and how the global economy has been transformed. Uekötter’s focus on providing a nonlinear narrative is immediately apparent. The chapters cover silver mining at Potosi, sugar production, the development of new infrastructure with the Canal du Midi, the emergence of sustainable forestry, and how to deal with the waste of industrialization through the details of shipbreaking in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in the 1960s. Instead of delving only into an explanation of the environmental effects, the disparate examples focus also on how these new commodities were obtained, mobilized, and helped to continually redefine global economics.

Part 2, titled “Appropriations,” looks at how resource allocation was made possible through state and institutional support, with chapters exploring how land titles often wrested control away from local peoples; how breadfruit failed as a staple crop because of ideas of social status; how guano became a global fertilizer that opened the doors to a new industry; how whaling became a major commercial venture; and how the United Fruit Company controlled an entire market through a global capitalist enterprise. Uekötter convincingly argues that these power structures were controlled by Western institutions. In doing so, these chapters demonstrate how such commodities evolved through a complicated interplay of government, commercial, and individual interests.

In part 3 “Irreversible,” Uekötter investigates not only how new scientific and environmental ideas emerged, but also how public understanding of these issues often drew upon dramatic images of the idea, if at times only a stereotype of that concept. In chapters discussing the extinction of the dodo, the problem of cotton monoculture with the boll weevil, the erosion of the Little Grand Canyon, the invasive species of the cane toad, and the extraction of oil in the US-Saudi Alliance, Uekötter shows that symbols often become the issue, directing resources and agendas. There are clear environmental issues to understand in each chapter, yet the section also deciphers how political considerations as well as how a public learned and reacted to new information framed responses that were often either inadequate or led to a different problem. For example, the development of insecticide to fight the boll weevil did not resolve the problem of cotton monocultures but led to an insecticide industry; the cane toad was imported to protect sugarcane but its effects as an invasive species were less studied. Uekötter reminds us that science is socially produced and often constrained by the way a problem is conceptualized; solutions often produce their own problems.

Part 4, “Technology Takes Command,” investigates how the new type of power produced by modern technology is interwoven through politics and society. Here chapters focus on attempts to combat the pollution of London smog, the piece-meal attempts to improve urban sanitation with the toilet and water closet, the emergence of industrial Chicago’s slaughterhouses, the technological and industrial choices that led to new chemical fertilizers such as synthetic nitrogen, and how air conditioning went from a luxury to a necessity that redefined life in some areas. The chapters all help explain not only how these technologies became global, but also how their effects differ according to local context. Class, geography, and historical experiences all shaped how a technology has been used as well as its results.

Part 5, “Ruptures,” perhaps best evokes the essence of the book, both in its strengths and weak-
nesses. It is a section “about the environmental history of what was not meant to happen” (p. 310). Uekötter provides chapters on the complex responses to cholera outbreaks; the Baedeker guidebook and how tourism contributed to pollution and resource depletion; how Gandhi’s Salt March became a global symbol; the 1970 Tokyo Resolution, which called for reframing fragmented environmental issues as part of a global crisis; and the responses to the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake, which involved domestic politics as much as humanitarian impulses. Although these are significant events, Uekötter argues that they defy their historical contexts. The chapters seemingly do not fit together, yet Uekötter wants us to realize that these events may be difficult to fully explain but became “disruptive forces” that created historical change in part due to the intersection of state policies and public reactions (p. 317).

In part 6, “The Final Reserves,” Uekötter explores a shift in how modern societies managed their resources through a nice selection of global examples. These chapters include the creation of Kruger National Park, the global use of Eucalyptus, the development of hybrid corn, the erection of the Aswan dam, and the myth of the rice-eating rubber tree. The section balances the decisions of states and corporations with the actions of and effects on local peoples to help illuminate the tensions behind new policies and the debate about how resources should be used versus managed.

The seventh part, “The Age of Catastrophe,” focuses on the period between the two world wars and how total war shaped economic and social policies while bolstering authoritarian governments, all of which had a profound effect on environment. It is, as Uekötter acknowledges, the most Eurocentric part of the book, covering the Holodomor, the famine in Ukraine in the 1930s; the Pontine Marshes and how fascist Italy reclaimed land to produce food and strengthen a specific type of people; the Chemurgy Movement, an attempt to craft a new economy where chemistry refashioned the agricultural industry; the Autobahn, which created a new model of state funding and maintenance of road infrastructure; and the Pine Roots campaign, in which Japan attempted to fashion jet fuel from pine needles by mobilizing its last available resources. These political decisions sharpened debates about the environment, but even these did not produce uniform or singular responses.

The last part, “The Great Entrenchment,” deftly examines how consumerism and environmentalism emerged simultaneously and as products of an industrial world. Crucially, Uekötter points out how these concepts have been understood and experienced differently across the world. His examples are: the development of factory farmed chickens; Lucky Dragon no. 5, a Japanese ship exposed to fallout from atomic testing that became a symbol against nuclear pollution; the widespread use of DDT and the complicated reasons behind the decline in its use; the Torrey Canyon oil spill, pictures of which became global symbols of a wider problem; and the varied emergence and use of plastic bags across the world. The chapters stress that these were not local issues but involved all of humanity, yet how people experienced or responded to them differed. After all, are disasters such as the Torrey Canyon oil spill singular events, products of a neglected system, or situations that have to be lived with and endured? Consumerism and environmentalism drew power from a global awareness, but local experience changed the priorities of addressing them.

The book is a thoroughly researched synthesis that at its best reassesses the field of global environmental history. Examples from more recent time periods tend to work better, and to be fair Uekötter acknowledges this. The work itself nicely provides a global perspective, even as the chapters reveal how much more scholarship can be done in non-Western regions. Despite its length and scope, this is not a textbook. While many chapters may
work well in an undergraduate course to stimulate discussion, the book is aimed more at practitioners of environmental history. It does not intend to cover every issue but rather to understand the formation of the contemporary world by stressing the necessity of examining a multiplicity of voices and actors while capturing the very messiness of history.

Uekötter’s main idea for scholars to write complicated, nonlinear histories is a good one—it reminds us of the need to rethink how we frame and thus understand historical issues. But this is also a book that directly entangles history with contemporary problems and concerns. In doing so, Uekötter raises new questions and ways to think about global issues. It is not just a book that urges us to produce better histories, but also one that invites us to wrestle with how environmental history is a lived experience.

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