

Review – Profit over Peace in Western Sahara

Written by Alice Wilson

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ALICE WILSON, MAY 2 2023

Profit over Peace in Western Sahara: How commercial interests undermine self-determination in the last colony in Africa

**Edited by Erik Hagen and Mario Pfeifer
Sternberg Press, 2018**

What circumstances might lead someone to wish their country poorer than others believe it to be? Amid the climate and cost of living crises, natural resources are becoming ever more significant and contested determinants of sustainable futures. As such, any aspiration for fewer resources may seem counterintuitive—at least for those whose privileges include not living under colonization. But for colonized subjects, who face a powerful occupier that benefits from the international support of even stronger backers, the prospect of having fewer resources may be appealing.

Fears of an increase in the economic value of colonized territory motivates a woman from Western Sahara to hope that her homeland—a non-self-governing territory under partial Moroccan occupation since 1976, which is rich in fishing waters, phosphate, and terrain suitable for generating solar and wind-powered electricity—does not contain further valuable resources, such as oil for which prospectors search with Morocco's blessing. A concern with the role of natural resources in contemporary colonialism is the subject of *Profit over Peace in Western Sahara*. This woman's fears open the book's forensic, meticulously researched, and page-turning analysis of the role of natural resources in the thwarted decolonization of the people of Western Sahara.

The editors and contributors of *Profit over Peace*—journalist and activist Erik Hagen, visual artist and film-maker Mario Pfeifer, and law professor and lawyer Jeffrey Smith—agree on the importance for Morocco of natural resources in the territory. But they suggest other reasons for their value. The premise of the book is that the primary attraction of these resources for Morocco is not economic. As the contributors point out, the significant financial costs of occupation for Morocco, ranging from military budgets to subsidies for Moroccan settlers, jeopardize the chance of turning an economic profit from occupying the territory. Rather, the book argues, the greater value for Morocco of the territory's natural resources lies in the political opportunities for the Kingdom. By virtue of exploiting and selling resources, Morocco may legitimize its claims to the territory, despite its occupation contravening Western Sahara's internationally recognized legal right to self-determination.

This thesis is persuasive. Morocco has long sought out opportunities to legitimize its presence in Western Sahara—acknowledged by the UN General Assembly as an occupation. In recent years, the Kingdom has enjoyed new frontiers of successful legitimization. Its diplomatic efforts have led to an increasing number of states recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. As of 2020, they include the USA, after the Trump administration brokered a deal that saw Morocco normalize relations with Israel in exchange for endorsement of its colonial enterprise. Amid these initiatives, natural resources have presented multiple opportunities for legitimizing occupation. Their exploitation normalizes Moroccan presence in the territory, be it among companies investing in infrastructure, or multilateral trading partners such as the EU, which has tried persistently to include Western Sahara's waters in its fishing treaties with Morocco.

Yet the political value of Western Sahara's natural resources as a tool of colonial legitimation comes with a cost that *Profit over Peace* seeks both to uncover and to raise: natural resources offer a key axis of anti-colonial resistance.

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The book's five chapters chronicle the landscapes of exploitation, sector by sector, and the possibilities for resistance. Within countries that home companies taking part in resource exploitation in Western Sahara, activists target these businesses for unethical participation in illegal occupation. The book notes success stories, such as in Norway, the Netherlands, and Denmark, where such pressure has led companies to withdraw from commercial dealings involving Western Saharan resources. The book also charts email-by-email precisely how activists from *Western Sahara Resource Watch* have targeted Germany's *Siemens* for its participation in building wind-power electricity generators in occupied Western Sahara. Meanwhile, court cases contest the rights of Morocco to exploit Western Sahara's resources. The book focuses on two principal legal battles. The first is the ongoing pushback to efforts by the European Commission and the European Council to include the waters of Western Sahara in EU fishing treaties with Morocco. The second is the May 2017 South African court order to seize a cargo of phosphate from Western Sahara as its carrier transited through South Africa's waters.

Covering events to 2018, the book helpfully directs readers to Western Sahara Resource Watch for updates since then. These have included the decision of the General Court of the EU Court of Justice in September 2021 that the EU-Morocco Trade Agreement and Fisheries Agreement did not apply to Western Sahara. Thanks to the contributors' clear explanations of legal and political technicalities, the book will appeal to lay, practitioner, activist, and specialist audiences. An introduction to the conflict, including a timeline, makes the book accessible for those not yet familiar with Western Sahara. These readers, as well as those already acquainted with the dispute, will find the painstaking research, coupled with a gripping narrative exposition of each stage in legal vicissitudes, a rewarding read. It is particularly laudable that a book addressing decolonization lives up to the intellectual principles at stake through a bilingual English-Arabic text. Pfeifer's stunning images of Western Saharans, their homes, and their activism, will linger in readers' minds.

The book pairs carefully-evaluated evidence with incisive examples of and invitations for activism. The analysis highlights the need to connect activism across different sectors, addressing in the case of Western Sahara the range of economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights issues that stem from the denial of the right to self-determination. The book is part of a body of work that highlights natural resources as a frontier of the legitimization and the greenwashing of colonialism. Since its publication, the stakes of such greenwashing have only grown.

The climate crisis and volatility in energy prices have seen global interest in accessing renewable energy sources soar. This presents Morocco with new opportunities as it expands its production of renewable energies. The Kingdom can pitch renewable energy generation, including in occupied Western Sahara, as a means of meeting the demands of neighbouring European countries keen to diversify energy sources. Whatever the economic gains for Morocco in such arrangements, these initiatives offer rich political possibilities for enmeshing other countries into dependence on Morocco's occupation. Given the claims of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that it cannot assess the content of countries' climate action plans, this UN body appears troublingly unwilling to hold Morocco accountable for the extent to which the Kingdom exploits the resources of an occupied territory. The future exploitation of wind and solar power resources in Western Sahara allows Morocco to aspire to receive international applause for carrying out an occupation.

As the stakes of natural resources in Western Sahara and other colonized territories continue increasing, fears of Western Saharans that greater resource wealth in their homeland will further obstruct self-determination are a powerful indictment of global and colonial inequities. These predicaments of injustice make this book's call for, and demonstration of, resistance against colonialism in its varied forms, and especially environmental colonialism, all the more significant and urgent.

About the author:

Alice Wilson is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. Her research examines revolutions and liberation movements and their projects for social change, with a focus on Southwest Asia and North Africa. She is

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the author of *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* (Stanford University Press, 2023) and *Sovereignty in Exile: a Saharan Liberation Movement Governs* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).