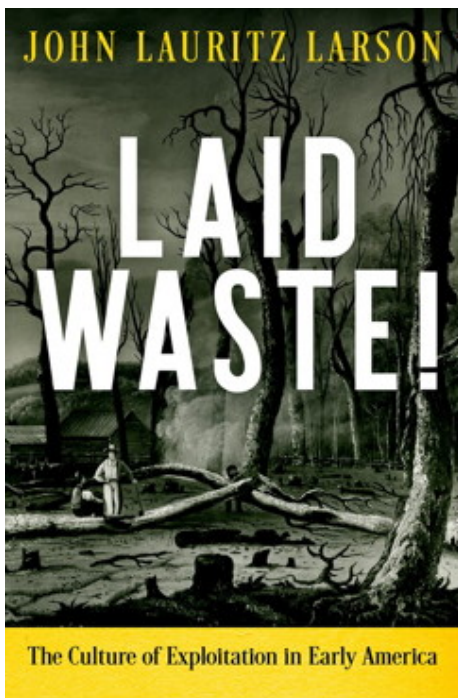


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Unmasking Progress: Beyond the Culture of Exploitation

It is no longer news that we Americans have degraded our environment relentlessly in the name of freedom and progress. The signs of an exhausted earth and the resulting social and cultural destruction are pervasive. Yet hidden in the familiar tales of how this land was conquered and transformed by British colonizers there lie other truths. A closer study of history reveals how ideas, perceptions, and choices contributed to a “culture of exploitation” that shaped and guided modernization in the New World. It is possible this same history may suggest alternative ways to approach the critical century ahead.

Laid Waste! by John Lauritz Larson tracks the construction of this culture of exploitation. Reaching back to early modern England, Larson exposes the dark side of “discovery” and “development” by settlers in the New World. Celebrating freedom from limits and constraints left behind, British settlers in North America attacked the Native populations, expropriated their abundant resources, and bound hundreds of thousands of Africans in slavery not just to satisfy their basic needs but to magnify their acquisitive desires. All the while these European-Americans crafted a triumphal narrative in which they played the leading role promoting individual liberty, enterprise and industry, technological innovation, and capitalist development. Over time the worship of individual freedom and limitless progress became so embedded in our stories that now they are seen as right, natural, and essential to our freedom and progress. Today environmental and economic conditions beg for a revision of those values, yet we find ourselves without the will or sagacity to imagine another way of life.

For three centuries modernization has been seen as the path to a better future, but the culture of exploitation that drove modernization is no more baked into the nature of progress than was the Ptolemaic model of the heavens or the pretensions of divine right monarchy. It is our cumulative choices, not natural laws, that produced this particular version of modernization. Enjoying greater wealth, better education, and more personal liberty than any people anywhere, Americans are positioned to be able to escape the gravitational pull of “things as they have been” and reach instead for “things as they could be.” With far less provocation our revolutionary forebears took such a leap in 1776 to launch the world’s first new, self-created nation. By recasting the familiar triumphal American narrative, *Laid Waste!* invites readers to claim for our future a culture of sufficiency, sustainability, and shared responsibility.

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