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Creative self-destruction: Corporate responses to climate change as political myths

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'We have done it to ourselves and we have only begun to pay. For many commentators, this is the Faustian bargain, modernity's deal with the devil, the inevitable consequence of our material excess, our crimes against nature, our willful innocence, our invincible arrogance.' (Onuf, 2007, p. xii)

'Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.' (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1998, p. 41)

Introduction

Climate change is now all around us, evident in a procession of worsening storms, floods and droughts, and mounting scientific data that yesterday's worst-case scenario is now our best-case option. Following the record Pakistan floods and Russian drought and fires of 2010 (Trenberth, 2012), the 2011-2 record US drought (Masters, 2012), and the 2013 record Australian heat wave (Steffen, 2013), scientists now project a summer ice-free Arctic within a decade (Overland and Wang, 2013). Indeed, even the symbolic flooding of New York city, the centre of global capitalism, by 'superstorm' Sandy in October 2012 provided only a momentary pause in the US political cycle (Barrett, 2012). And yet, as GHG emissions continue their inexorable rise (recently pushing past the symbolic 400 parts per million (ppm) concentration that now dwarfs the 350 ppm climate scientists have identified as the maximum safe level to avert dangerous climate change (Gillis, 2013)), meaningful policy action to reduce these emissions appears a forlorn hope. International climate negotiations have stalled, the media downplay climate change or promote doubt in the communication of climate science, and most national green movements appear to have lost the initiative in the public policy debate over climate change response.

In this paper, we argue that a central reason for this lack of political and economic engagement relates to the uncomfortable way in which climate change demonstrates the underlying contradictions of corporate capitalism and the reliance upon a capitalist imaginary of endless economic growth (Castoriadis, 1997). Here, we engage with the motif of 'creative

destruction'; a concept originally enunciated by Marxist theorists but usurped in the twentieth century by those justifying the logic of free market capitalism (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1998; Schumpeter, 1942). Building on the insights of critical scholars (Berman, 1982; Harvey, 1990), we argue that anthropogenic climate change brings forward the contradictory logic of capitalism as an economic system reliant on the destruction of nature for its development (Schnaiberg and Gould, 1994; York, 2004). The current climate crisis reveals a process of 'creative self-destruction' in which capital accumulation has led to a cannibalistic consumption of Earth's life-support systems.

However, within this end-game of human hubris we are also witnessing an ever more imaginative exploitation of nature as corporations seek competitive advantage within an environmentally-compromised world. Just as humanity, in facing imminent collapse, should rise up and question this charade, so the myths generated by our consumer-driven society compel us to even greater fealty. While climate change exposes the contradictions of endless economic growth and resource exploitation, it also demonstrates the dynamism or 'spirit' of capitalism - how the economic system incorporates criticism and justifies the unjustifiable (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The critique of capitalism has been recuperated through profit seeking activities, new technologies and practices, as well as normatively appropriated through the labelling of products and services as 'green', 'sustainable', and 'environmentally friendly' (Chiapello, 2013).

We argue that escalating environmental destruction and the accompanying lack of broad-scale societal criticism of this destruction suggest the need for further explanations of the social acceptance of the climate crisis. In a counter-movement to Weber's ([1930] 1992) rational 'spirit' of capitalism, we suggest that capitalism now fulfils a function, a social significance, that overcomes the system's current irrationality. Through an analysis of the different ways in which corporations have responded to climate change, we identify three interdependent political myths which ground the paradoxical phenomena of creative self-destruction and support the role of corporations in addressing a climate changed future.

Firstly, we focus on the myth of *corporate environmentalism*, in which corporations are presented as active participants in the mitigation of environmental damage and promote their central role in solving climate change through technological innovation and the production and consumption of 'green' products and services. Second, we stress the myth of *corporate*

citizenship, which further develops the expansion of corporate capitalism by presenting the corporation as a civil actor best placed to determine political agendas and deliver social and environmental needs. Third, we explore the myth of *corporate omnipotence*, which portrays corporate capitalism as a superior form of economic organisation which can best solve social and environmental problems. Taken together, these three political myths support a common narrative in keeping with the tradition of Western modernity and securing a capitalist imaginary of 'rationality' and 'efficiency' that addresses political conditions in these societies (Bottici, 2007; Castoriadis, 2007). This is an appealing imaginary of human progress and technological advance in which corporations and markets are couched as saviours from the threats of nature. By contrast, we argue this social imaginary should be more aptly viewed as a tragedy of grand proportions. The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate these myths in order to illustrate their work, or function, in making our planetary suicide a rational project.

Capitalism, the environment and creative destruction

The rapid emergence of anthropogenic climate change as the central social, political and economic challenge of this century highlights a deeper conflict in the relationship between humanity and nature. While earlier projections of future threats to human development identified a growing world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion (Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens, 1972), in the last twenty years the relentless escalation in GHG emissions has led to catastrophic predictions of anthropogenic climate change (New, Liverman, Schroder and Anderson, 2011; Randers, 2012; The World Bank, 2012). These interpretations stand in marked contrast to the far more optimistic vision of neo-liberalism and market capitalism where the environment serves humanity as the basis for continued economic growth and social well-being.

Harking back to Marx's original observations of capitalism as an economic system reliant on the unending exploitation of nature (Foster, 2000), the so-called 'treadmill of production' perspective argues that economic growth and consumer capitalism relies upon continued environmental degradation (Schnaiberg, 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould, 1994; York, 2004). The destruction of the environment is then not so much an unfortunate by-product of industrialization, but rather an essential feature of the economic system. Indeed, this process of environmental destruction aligns with the broader depiction of capitalism as based upon crises and the 'enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces' (Marx and Engels, [1848] 1998 42). Later conceived by Schumpeter (1942) as a process of 'creative destruction', the

technological innovation and entrepreneurship that characterise capitalist dynamism and reinvention thus also involves the destruction of previous forms of capital accumulation and natural resources. While celebrated by free-market economists as central to economic efficiency and human progress, Schumpeter (1942, p. 139) noted somewhat presciently that:

> In breaking down the pre-capitalist framework of society, capitalism thus broke not only barriers that impeded its progress but also flying buttresses that prevented its collapse... [T]he capitalist process in much the same way in which it destroyed the institutional framework of feudal society also undermines its own.

This more critical depiction has been further developed by Berman (1982), Harvey (1990), and Castells (1996), who stress how globalization and new information technologies have extended and sped-up the process of creative destruction. Climate change epitomises the destruction evident in continued economic growth and global consumerism. A variety of writers have revealed how climate change poses a fundamental challenge to the future of human civilisation. For some this is linked to historical precedents in the collapse of civilizations (Diamond, 2005), or represented as a 'great disruption' leading to fundamental social and economic transformation (Gilding, 2011), while for others it represents a fundamental threat to the physical viability of humanity and other species as our biosphere degrades (Hamilton, 2010; Hansen, 2009; Lovelock, 2009; McKibben, 2010).

We argue that how corporations have responded to climate change epitomises a process of 'creative self-destruction' (Berman, 1982, pp. 98-104). Despite well-established and increasingly sophisticated scientific projections of the disastrous implications of escalating GHG emissions (IPCC, 2007; Mann, 2012), the global economy continues its relentless pursuit of new markets, the expansion of global consumption and new forms of capital accumulation further fuelling GHG emissions. Environmental criticism therefore '...challenges the ability of the capitalist system to guarantee the future of mankind', in that '...capitalism, by its very operation, is leading directly to destruction of our civilization' (Chiapello, 2013, pp. 73 & 74). However as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) also argue, the continuation of capitalism is in fact dependent on the recuperation and reinvention of critique. It is this interaction between capitalism and its critique that gives rise to the 'spirit' or ideological legitimacy of capitalism in any given period (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). From this perspective, criticism provides an essential function in forcing capitalism to adapt and change in order maintain its social legitimacy.

Current trends of 'green' or 'natural' capitalism, 'ecological modernism' and 'organizational sustainability' can therefore be seen as responses to ecological critique, which facilitate the limited adaptation of capitalism in a changing context (Chiapello, 2013). However, as Nyberg and Wright (2013) show, in developing compromises to criticism there is no space for a diminution of profit or reductions in company growth. Rather in the negotiation with ecological critique corporations are able to expand the principles of the market in order to avoid regulation and secure economic growth. As Willmott (2013, p. 117) argues '...the most common response to ecological critique – from politicians, media, and corporations – has been to marginalize, obfuscate, trivialize, or simply deny its concerns, and also to develop self-serving remedies (e.g. carbon trading) that may actually exacerbate the problems.' Thus, this criticism of capitalism has resulted in ever more creative ways in which the natural environment can be consumed, to the extent that humanity is now involved in an almost cannibalistic consumption of the Earth's life-support systems (Whiteman, Walker and Perego, 2013). This happens while, in the tradition of Western modernity, corporations and markets are couched as saviours from the threats of nature.

While the process of capitalism's recuperation of critique is well defined, the mechanisms involved in this process are less clear. In particular, defusing an issue of such catastrophic consequence as climate change requires a particularly powerful alchemy of discursive justification. Here we argue that the maturity of capitalism in western liberal democracies and its integration with societal institutions, results in the generation of myths that provide meaning to practices and activities beyond accumulation of private wealth and material standards, i.e. beyond the institutionalized 'spirit' or 'calling of making money' (Weber, [1930] 1992, p. 33). Following Bottici (2007, pp. 133 & 136), we define myths as 'particular narratives that answer a need for significance' and, more specifically, as the work of common narratives that address political conditions or criticism facing a society. In the sections that follow, we outline the three key myths that constitute narratives of contemporary corporate capitalism's response to climate change; the myths of *corporate environmentalism*, *corporate citizenship* and *corporate omnipotence*. We see these myths not as fictitious or untrue objects, symbols or tales, but continuous processes of saying and doing that are open to re-telling and re-doing in response to contextual socio-historical circumstances. These political myths thus have a function in grounding, or incorporating, climate change by providing recognition to our identities and experiences in consuming green products while, at the same time, offering

an obtainable 'green' and liveable future. These myths allow climate change to be perceived as manageable and provide corporations with significance in dealing with its complexity, without compromising their profits or growth.

Discussing myths thus requires discovering their presuppositions; what they are *doing*, and what those doings are doing. Rather than interrogating myths over their truth value, a political and critical evaluation of these myths requires us to look at the values at stake and the interests supported. In short, what the continuous narration of the myths serve to overcome (Bottici, 2007, p. 116). While we cannot falsify myths, we can discuss and judge their promotion of particular actions. Thus, in discussing the three identified myths relevant to understanding corporate responses to climate change, we are not looking for their meaning, i.e. whether they correspond to a particular 'reality' or not. We are interested in their workings, how they are supported, what they achieve. We will argue that the three myths of *corporate environmentalism*, *corporate citizenship* and *corporate omnipotence* render the extraordinary circumstances of climate change banal. We explore each of these myths in turn, focusing on their significance in addressing political conditions, how they create particular positions for corporations, and their effects both for corporations and society more generally.

The myth of corporate environmentalism

Social concern about the impact of human activities on the environment date back to at least the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution as the physical manifestations of industrial pollution on air, water and land became increasingly evident. While such criticism led to some regulatory constraint, in most industrialising countries the unfettered power of capital to exploit nature was rarely challenged. For instance, much early environmentalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied upon a strategy of conservation of limited areas of wilderness quarantined from the excesses of industrialisation (Guha, 2000). However, during the 1960s and 1970s, a marked shift in this pattern occurred as a second-wave of environmental advocates highlighted the causal links between environmental degradation and industrial and economic expansion. Symbolic of this shift was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) which in tracing the biological impact of pesticides on the environment, questioned the then-assumed logic of human mastery over nature and indeed highlighted humanity's embeddedness and vulnerability within nature (Souder, 2012). This deeper questioning and critique of modern industrial capitalism expanded rapidly, signified through events such as the first Earth Day in 1970, the publication of the Club of Rome's

Limits to Growth (Meadows, et al., 1972), and growing social and media attention to major industrial accidents and environmental catastrophes (e.g. the Bhopal disaster in 1984 and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989). The emergence of 'Green' political parties in Europe, Australia and other settings further highlighted the growing institutionalization of environmental critique of industrialization and capitalism more generally.

While the initial response of many corporations and industry groups was to dismiss or seek to silence such criticism, the institutionalisation of environmental concerns through government legislation and regulatory oversight highlighted a fundamental shift in social attitudes towards the environment. Within this context, an alternative approach was developed in which the environmental critique of capitalism was absorbed and reinvented as 'corporate environmentalism' (Jermier, Forbes, Benn and Orsato, 2006). Like ecological modernism (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000), corporate environmentalism promotes the idea that economic growth and ecological well-being are mutually supportive. Hence in contrast to neoclassical economic thinking in which environmental protection is viewed as a threat to business costs and profitability (Friedman, 1970), corporate environmentalism prompts companies to increase profits by improving their environmental performance; in short, 'do well by doing good' (Falck and Heblich, 2007; see also Porter and van der Linde, 1995). From its origins in the 1970s and 1980s, corporate environmentalism was re-narrated from simple regulatory compliance to a more strategic business concern (Hoffman, 2001). Indeed, corporate environmentalism has been further institutionalized through the work of new standards of voluntary reporting (such as the Carbon Disclosure Project, the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, and the Global Reporting Initiative) (Knox-Hayes and Levy, 2011), increasing investor focus on corporate environmental performance, as well as producing new managerial functions and professions such as 'sustainability' functions which further reinforce corporate environmentalism (Wright, Nyberg and Grant, 2012).

The basic narrative of this myth as it has evolved around climate change involves several key elements or events. First, while acknowledging the issue of climate change as a threat and challenge, corporate environmentalism promotes the business corporation as the central actor in responding to this threat through innovation in technologies, processes and products. Corporations promote their central role in 'solving' climate change through technological innovation and the production and consumption of new 'green' products and services. Indeed, advocates (re-)tell this message as a 'win-win' outcome in contrast to more traditional trade-

offs between profit and environmental well-being (Porter and Kramer, 2011; Porter and van der Linde, 1995). Corporations are seen not only as appropriate actors to respond to this threat but indeed, can use this as an opportunity for further profit and shareholder value. Through the creation of new 'green' products and services, businesses are not only able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions but also create a competitive advantage for themselves by embracing the new green business paradigm (Esty and Winston, 2006; Orsato, 2009). Beyond changes in business practice, as Jermier et al. (2006) note, corporate environmentalism is based on a narrative core of broader advocacy for continued economic growth and industry self-regulation as a superior response to issues such as climate change.

Viewing climate change through the myth of corporate environmentalism prompts practical actions that support and reinforce the myth. Examples of practices that become meaningful through corporate environmentalism include reducing waste, materials usage and carbon emissions through more efficient production and distribution processes, which also reduces costs and improves productivity. Hence, the decision by the world's largest retailer Walmart, to 'green' its supply chain has been reported as a significant form of environmental, as well as business efficiency (Humes, 2011). Corporate environmentalism also stresses the competitive benefits that flow from innovation and new product development aimed at new 'green' products and services which better fit environmentally aware consumers, and (disruptive) technologies that create new markets and provide a competitive advantage in a new low-carbon world. Here, examples might include the success of Toyota's Prius hybrid model car and the growth in demand for electric vehicles (Williander, 2007), or GE's 'ecomagination' strategy which aims to produce 'clean' energy and transportation technologies such as wind-turbines and more fuel efficient jet engines (Chesbrough, 2012; Lash and Wellington, 2007). In addition, developing a 'green' brand and culture are seen as important ways of better engaging customers and employees about the worth of the corporation (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004; Renwick, Redman and Maguire, 2013).

Corporate environmentalism as a political myth provides significance to our experiences and deeds in the service of continued economic growth and the expansion of consumer capitalism. While acknowledging the human contribution to the destruction of the environment through GHG emissions, deforestation and resource depletion, it also narrates a coherent plot in which the corporation is positioned as a saviour of the environment which can be sustained in the pursuit of profit. In particular, corporate environmentalism creates new roles, identities and

meaning for individuals and groups as both employees and consumers. So for example, sustainability specialists and consultants as 'green change agents' within corporations are key actors in the work on this myth through dissemination of measures aimed at building a profitable but environmentally 'responsible' business (Wright, et al., 2012). In creating a broader 'green' business culture this becomes a meaningful identity for themselves and others, both at work and home, and contributes to bridging the competing emotionologies of climate change denial and belief (Phillips, forthcoming; Wright and Nyberg, 2012). With these produced political identities, corporate environmentalism also provides meaning to actions in so-called 'green' consumption, where as consumers we can salve our guilt by choosing to consume the 'green' products promoted by 'responsible' corporations (Caruana and Crane, 2008; Luke, 1994). In this way, the problem of climate change is reduced to an issue of responsible consumption rather than the more fundamental political and institutional changes required to reduce global GHG emissions. Corporate environmentalism thereby encourages piecemeal and individualistic responses channelled through our role as ethical employees and consumers; choosing the lower emissions hybrid car over the 'gas-guzzler', the renewable electricity offered by our 'green' energy utility; or even the 'low-carbon' beverage at the convenience store (Pearse, 2012).

The consequences of this political myth are profound. In presenting corporations as best placed to respond to climate change, more substantive calls for government regulation are muted. The human response to this most pressing of political issues thereby becomes converted into a reinforcement of 'business as usual'; we can best respond not by questioning the underlying logic of our economic system, but rather by expanding what we currently do as more aware 'green' employees and consumers. In continuously reworking this narrative, corporate environmentalism reframes the need for more fundamental changes in economic and political power by limiting changes in behaviour to the consumption of token green products and services.

The myth of corporate citizenship

While the political myth of corporate environmentalism inventively converts the expansion of global capitalism into a solution for escalating GHG emissions, the myth of corporate citizenship further develops this agenda by personifying the corporation as a moral citizen engaged in the betterment of civil society. This extends beyond the normal ambit of corporate activity in the production of goods and services for a market, into the world of politics and

economic and social policy (Gond, Kang and Moon, 2011; Shamir, 2008). Here, the corporate citizen is interested not just in the narrow interests of its shareholders, but also a broader range of stakeholders such as its employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and indeed, global society as whole. Responding to climate change then is an arena in which the corporate citizen has not only a business, but also a political role to play.

The narrative of 'corporate citizenship' arose in the last several decades in response to increasing criticism of corporate activities and abuses of corporate power (Barley, 2007; Crane, Matten and Moon, 2008). Recurring economic crises, waves of downsizing and retrenchments, the outsourcing and rationalization of business activities, as well as financial and corporate scandals (e.g. Enron, World.com, Lehmann Brothers) punctured the post-war consensus of economic growth, opportunity and rising living standards. Symbolised most recently in the Occupy movement, growing income inequality and the perception of corporate greed has generated an increasingly radical questioning of the business corporation itself (Bakan, 2004). Much like the early twentieth century movement of corporate welfarism, which sought to present a more humanistic image of the corporation and its benevolent contribution to employees, communities and society more generally (Jacoby, 1997), so the recent embrace of 'corporate citizenship' seeks to defuse criticism by presenting the corporation as a morally worthy agent in the political debate about social and economic well-being. Closely aligned to associated concepts such as 'corporate social responsibility' (Carroll, 1998), corporate citizenship has become an increasingly common form of discourse in company annual reports and websites, with many of the world's major companies participants in corporate citizenship initiatives such as the United Nations (UN) Global Compact and World Economic Forum (Crane, et al., 2008). This narrative is also reinforced nationally, where the corporate citizen is invited to solve economic and political problems. For example, the British Prime Minister David Cameron recently declared:

> Business is not just about making money, as vital as it is. It is also the most powerful force for social progress that the world has ever known. It can help us to smash poverty, to raise horizons, to drive the innovations, products and services that make our lives better, longer and happier... Corporate responsibility is an absolutely vital part of my mission for this government which is to build a bigger and stronger society. (Cameron, 2012)

Indeed, the personification of corporations as civil actors became particularly evident in the United States where corporations have enjoyed many personal legal rights and conservative politicians have enunciated a belief that 'Corporations are people' (Bakan, 2004; Parker, 2011). Against a backdrop of neo-liberal economic reform, the state provision of social services was redefined as inefficient and requiring the intervention of private sector efficiencies (Crouch, 2011). This provides further space for the re-narration of the myth of corporate citizenship, in which the 'good' corporate citizen became increasingly involved in a range of social services such as education, health, public sanitation and correctional and security services. In the developing world, corporations were presented as solving political problems where the state was lacking or had withdrawn from the provision of legal and economic infrastructure (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Valente and Crane, 2010). Through the narrative of corporate citizenship the corporation becomes a vehicle for the distribution of an increasing array of social services and indeed the broader 'administration of citizenship rights' (Matten and Crane, 2005, p. 175). More specifically however, the myth of corporate citizenship provides legitimacy for increasing the scope of corporate political activity. If the metaphor of corporations as people could be accepted, then this could entail acknowledgement of a voice in political campaigning to protect their rights. As Barley (2007) notes, this recent expansion in corporate political activity has included the active promotion of self-serving legislation, corporate intrusion into and 'capture' of regulatory agencies, and the privatization of governmental functions across all levels of society.

In regard to climate change, the myth of corporate citizenship has facilitated increasing corporate political action in seeking to sway the regulation of GHG emissions. Following the blueprint of the tobacco industry, government attempts to address climate change have been marked by extensive political campaigns by corporations to shape legislative outcomes (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). This has involved direct attempts to shape public policy through formal submissions to government, lobbying of ministers and bureaucrats, media releases, interviews and conference presentations, as well as indirect activities such as building alliances with like-minded companies, industry associations, opposition politicians, think-tanks and NGOs (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). For example, Pearse (2007, pp. 227-87) documents how during the 1990s and 2000s a powerful group of corporate lobbyists representing the coal, oil, mining, and electricity industries (known as the 'greenhouse mafia') held sway in the corridors of the Australian government, arguing against international commitments to reduce GHG emissions. Such backroom influencing was supplemented by public submissions,

advertising and publicity which stressed the link between fossil fuel industries and national economic well-being (Nyberg, Spicer and Wright, 2013).

Beyond these direct campaigning efforts, corporations also developed more indirect practices to shape the climate change debate. For those companies opposed to carbon regulation, one approach has been the funding and support of proxy organisations which can influence public attitudes through organised campaigns in the media and the formation of aligned social movements (so-called 'astroturfing') (Cho, Martens, Kim and Rodrigue, 2011). In the United States, a climate change denial 'industry' has developed in which corporate funding of various front-groups such as the Heartland Institute and the American Enterprise Institute play a critical role in fostering a political campaign opposed to government action to reduce GHG emissions (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; PBS, 2012).

The myth of corporate citizenship also produces political identities and meaning to activities for ordinary citizens. Here, the narrative of corporate citizenship is continuously retold by ordinary citizens in supporting corporate voices. Thus, rather than obfuscating citizen's rights, corporate strategies encourage and provide new 'spaces' for citizenship to promote corporate interests. For example, in the political debate surrounding climate change, corporations engage in public campaigns which reached out to individuals and groups in support of their particular agendas. This provides space for citizens to work on the myth of corporate citizenship through acting as active constituents. Corporations offer, often competing, moral legitimations in dissolving distinctions between economy and society (Shamir, 2008). In Australia for instance, in framing the public campaign against the government's 'carbon tax', coal and manufacturing industry advertisements emphasised the voices of citizens such as factory workers, miners, small-business owners and consumers opposing the government's pricing of carbon emissions as a threat to their jobs, businesses, and local communities. In their stance against the government, corporations claimed they were acting for the welfare of society; voicing moral and political concerns as well as providing space and legitimacy for concerned citizens. This dialectic between corporate citizenship and incorporation of citizenship activities came full circle when the public protest against actions on climate change outside the Australian parliament echoed corporate concerns and arguments (Nyberg, et al., 2013).

The myth of corporate omnipotence

The third myth underpinning the creative self-destruction of climate change, is what we term the myth of *corporate omnipotence*. Here, corporate capitalism is portrayed as an inevitable and superior form of economic organisation, based upon rational and effective managerial tools and practices which can best solve social problems. The self-referential claims of corporations, where the only response to the crisis of capitalism is more capitalism, have turned corporate omnipotence into a myth of its own making. Here, the myth serves as an explanation to the success of corporate capitalism's development as well as the answer to its failures. The myth of corporate omnipotence stresses the inevitability of capitalism as the future, and frames the response to climate change as best dealt with through the further expansion of the market by pricing carbon emissions and further commodifying nature upon a market logic.

The origins of the political myth of corporate omnipotence have a long history, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the emergence of the modern corporate hierarchy (Chandler, 1977). Despite periodic economic crises, the apparent success of large corporations and the ingenuity of modern management became institutionalized through the emergence of a management 'profession' (Khurana, 2007), and the growth of a management advice industry in which all social and economic problems could be solved through the application of the latest management thinking (Abrahamson, 1996; Stewart, 2009). The political power of the myth of corporate omnipotence was extended through the growth of neo-liberalism, the fall of Communism, and the globalisation of markets (Bakan, 2004; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2003). The twenty-first century appeared to be an era in which corporate capitalism would provide the model for future human development on a truly global scale. However, as the recent global economic crisis has demonstrated, corporate omnipotence implies a level of forethought and vision often lacking in an economic system driven by short-term profit.

In relation to climate change, the myth of corporate omnipotence takes various forms. One dominant example has been the promotion of the expansion of capitalism through the pricing of so-called 'externalities' such as GHG emissions. As Newell and Paterson (2010) note, the embrace of a 'market solution' to climate change during the late 1980s and 1990s reflected the prevailing neo-liberal political hegemony in which markets were seen as the most efficient mechanisms for achieving economic and political outcomes. As influential studies such as the Stern Report in the UK proposed, climate change was 'the biggest market failure the world

has seen' (Stern, 2008, p. 1). The answer then lay in seeking to adjust capitalism such that GHG emissions could be priced and market mechanisms allowed to drive a shift in technology and innovation away from fossil fuels towards low emissions renewable energies. This could involve both taxes on GHG emissions (e.g. 'carbon taxes') or emissions trading schemes in which a total emissions limit is determined, and tradeable permits which make up this limit allocated to actors. Importantly, this approach focuses on governments providing the general architecture of policy and leaves the specific ways in which emissions are reduced up to companies and individuals. While initially conceived as involving both an equity and efficiency criteria, relatively quickly the former concern disappeared as proponents on both the political Right and Left focused on emissions trading as the preferred model. This was reinforced by an emerging array of financial institutions which saw an increased role for themselves in a future world of carbon trading (Newell and Paterson, 2010, pp. 25-29). Thus, while the assumptions of the existence and consequences of climate change by different corporations and industries have varied greatly, the solution by both 'believers' and 'non-believers' has been the same: more corporate capitalism.

The myth of corporate omnipotence addresses the uncertainties that the debates on climate change have brought forward. The narrative of 'rational' and 'efficient' corporate responses ensures that any response to climate change is based on corporate capitalism. For example, through the 'rational' application of 'risk management' tools and processes, uncertainty is claimed to be overcome and control over the future assured through calculation and analysis. The underlying consequences of climate change can be identified and measured by organizations in order to strategically plan for the future through industrial mitigation and/or adaptation. The uncertainty of climate change is managed through technological innovations, improving energy efficiency, or changing the constellation of the atmosphere itself through carbon capture or geo-engineering. As O'Malley (2011, p. 13) notes in regard to neo-liberal interpretations of risks '[i]ncreased uncertainty now came to mean increased opportunity for the enterprising'. The looming chaos of climate change is thus turned into an enterprising opportunity through corporate workings.

Here, the myth of corporate omnipotence is re-narrated and continued through the assumed superiority of the corporation as a rational and efficient distributor of services and goods. The introduction of government policies that mirror corporate logics ensures that responses to climate change are based on money-mediated relations between producers and consumers.

Climate change is subsequently (fictitiously) commodified into measureable and tradable 'carbons' (Polanyi, 1957). The ingeniousness of this fictitious commodity is that a stream of revenue is created for exchange that did not exist before the 'discovery' of climate change. This prompts regulatory actions of privatization and marketisation, which favour the political identity of 'enterprising' individuals. These entrepreneurial identities and activities range from ecopreneurs, such as the American businessman who recently dumped 120 tons of iron dust into the north Pacific Ocean to create an algal bloom for 'storing' carbon (Lukacs, 2012), to Australian farmers growing forests to earn carbon credits to be sold on the carbon market (Australian Government, 2011), through to governmental or privately funded geo-engineering research and enterprising (Hamilton, 2013; Klein, 2012). The state has thus not been redrawn or sidestepped. To the contrary, the myth of corporate omnipotence has ensured that states both create and assist markets to address climate change through corporate activities (Castree, 2011). These market based solutions, suggest that any unintended consequences will be dealt with as 'market failures', not as a failure of the 'market society' (Polanyi, 1957), in order to ensure that enterprising individuals continue to work and consume in a now 'rational' and 'efficient' mode of creative self-destruction.

Discussion

In the sections above we have identified the development and narration of three related myths providing a social imaginary in which the expansion of corporate capitalism is seen as the logical response to climate change. These myths are narrated by corporations, governments, the mass media as well as academia in engaging with different audiences and are continuously worked on, or re-narrated, to ensure contextualization and reappropriation to new or different societal needs. Each of these myths provides various stories with a central role for corporations in how to respond to climate change, and provide significance and a function for society in dealing with the experiences of climate change. They address the political condition brought into being by climate change and provide political identities for people to enact as employees, customers, constituents, and ecopreneurs.

These myths have of course been questioned by scholars before. However, this has often been with a focus on the particular claims of each myth, thus treating them as statements of reality. Through this process of criticism they thus become re-narrated and the significance of each political myth further perpetuated. Rather than criticizing these myths as real or unreal, we have sought to illustrate their functions and political signification; that is how the narrations

of these myths address the political condition of climate change. In this discussion, we briefly discuss the consequences of focusing on their function, rather than their claims. By unpacking the significance of these myths, social science can engage with climate change in proportion to the consequences suggested by natural sciences. Thus instead of a frontal attack on corporate capitalism, which arguably strengthens the myths, we seek to address the significance and meaning these myths provide in contemporary Western liberal democracies.

Corporate environmentalism as a claimed solution to climate change

As we have seen, the myth of corporate environmentalism offers solutions to the looming crisis of climate change through the consumption of 'green' products and services, which it is claimed will benefit both corporations and society more generally; a 'win-win' scenario. Of course, these solutions have been questioned in terms of their intentions and effectiveness. For example, environmentally 'sustainable' business claims often involve a heady dose of obfuscation or 'greenwashing' (Newton and Harte, 1997; Prudham, 2009). Hence, the high sustainability rankings of financial institutions such as banks often ignore the significant investments these companies have in high emissions resource and mining activities (Pearse, 2012). More generally, while efficiency improvements and new technologies may reduce the emissions-intensity of a particular business, this ignores how cost improvements result in increasing aggregate consumption and higher GHG emissions overall (Owen, 2011). While these critiques highlight the underlying fallacies of corporate environmentalism, such criticism has also prompted a defence of a potentially viable strategy which can be corrected through improved transparency and accountability (see for example Balch, 2012). As a result, the possibility of an improved or 'correct' form of corporate environmentalism perpetuates the myth through re-narration. However, clinging to the myth of corporate environmentalism has arguably limited our response to the creative self-destruction of consuming our way out of a crisis produced through over-consumption.

Instead of evaluating corporate environmentalism as a truth claim, we have sought to critically evaluate its function and significance as a political myth. As we have shown, the production and consumption of green products and services offers individual solutions to a collective problem. Moreover, the myth provides meaning to our continuous consumption, with consumer choice portrayed as a democratic ideal and freedom equated to private ownership. The responsibility for climate change is directed to individuals who can 'choose' to buy 'green' products if they are interested in 'saving' the environment. Corporations are

presented as value neutral providers with customers determining the products and the politics. The problem with climate change is thus not individual inaction, to the contrary, it is the continuous action of producing, distributing and consuming. It is thus arguably not enough to politicize these actions as contributors to climate change for example in distinguishing between 'brown' versus 'green' consumption. Rather we need to politicize the solutions, both individual as well as collective.

Corporate environmentalism is also significant in that it closes the cognitive dissonance between our beliefs (for example, concern over anthropogenic climate change) and our behaviour (continued production and consumption contributing to increasing GHG emissions), by suggesting that individual consumption is the solution to a collective problem (Hamilton, 2010). This suggests the need to highlight a range of alternative concepts (such as humanity, community, future generations, Earth, biodiversity) in order to face the gap between our beliefs and behaviour and the ecological violence we have unleashed. Uncovering and identifying the destructive outcomes of our economic existence serve to implicate our individual and collective will and connect our identities with the suffering of this violence (Yusoff, 2012).

Corporate citizenship as a claim for legitimacy and morality in offering solutions
While the myth of corporate environmentalism provides apparent solutions, it also demands that the central role of the corporation in responding to climate change must also be accepted as legitimate. Corporations need to be viewed as having valid claims to social and political rights. Here, the myth of corporate citizenship provides corporations with a recognized and moral role in addressing climate change. Indeed, the political myth of corporate citizenship ensures that the rather odd personification of the firm is seen as a natural state of affairs. Following this, the literature on corporate citizenship mainly discusses whether corporations can be seen as citizens or how they should act as citizens (Matten and Crane, 2005; Néron and Norman, 2008; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). No matter whether the judgement is that corporations can or should act as good citizens (Porter and Kramer, 2011; Valente and Crane, 2010), or claims that they are bad citizens (Banerjee, 2008; Barley, 2007; 2010), these discussions serve to rework the myth. Indeed, the fact that 'corporate citizenship' is a dead metaphor highlights the strength of the myth.

We suggest that beyond discussing corporate roles in deliberate democracies (Matten and Crane, 2005; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), we need to engage with the accomplishment of the myth of corporate citizenship in incorporating political and social rights. In particular, this myth provides the function of governance and political signification for corporations as legitimate and moral entities in the public debate. In their concerns, corporations appear to speak for 'the people'. They address what they construct as the political will of the people in aligning their interests with social identities. The myth of corporate citizenship thus provides an interpretive lens through which individuals and groups can make sense of climate change and the right they have in relation to their particular interpretation of climate change as a 'scam' or 'scientific fact'. Through the myth of corporate citizenship, 'the people' are given social identities of political recognition and a voice even without speaking. The significance of corporate citizenship for people then is that it provides consumption with a political identity.

The significance of this myth then relates to the way in which citizenship itself becomes subverted and acts as a surrogate to corporate interests of profit and shareholder value. As critics have noted (Barley, 2007; Crouch, 2004), this results in a growing imbalance in political power between corporate interests and other social groups and a decline in democracy as corporations are increasingly able to determine legislative and social outcomes. The creative destruction of our environment and ecology can then be justified upon the basis that what is good for the corporation is good for all citizens.

Corporate omnipotence as a claim for corporate authority as the only possible response
Beyond having a legitimate role, the third political myth of corporate omnipotence goes further in emphasising corporations as the principle models and authorities in articulating a response to climate change. As part of the broader hegemony of neo-liberalism, the corporate form is seen as the preferred model of economic organisation based on its presumed efficiency and rationality. Indeed, the claim at the heart of this particular political myth is that through their rational expertise, corporations can tame nature. Through the articulation of the myth of corporate omnipotence alternative responses such as direct government regulation of GHG emissions and mandated restrictions on specific industrial activities (e.g. the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels) are marginalised in favour of market solutions which favour corporate profitability. The logical outcome of this political myth is that any actions in response to climate change must first demonstrate a 'business case', and responses which

threaten profitable activities must be rejected. Corporate solutions thereby become the only possible solutions.

The key function of this political myth is to provide certainty in an age of increasing uncertainty. Just as the realisation of anthropogenic climate change has created turbulence and political debate, so the political myth of corporate omnipotence has sought to quell attempts at environmental regulation and assert that corporate responses and self-regulation are sufficient. The chaotic and unmanageable beast, climate change, is seen as managed and resolved through corporate rationality. Indeed, this myth supports what Szerszynski and Urry (2010, p. 2) call gradualism: '... that [climate change] is relatively slow, and that economies will be able to adjust in order to reduce them and adapt to them. Futures, it is thought, can be operationalized through the calculation and insurance of risk.' Thus, while the media refer to the uncertainty of climate change projections, the global catastrophe is only temporarily 'real' after each new extreme weather event. Soon after however, the political debate reverts to 'normality' in which the continued sanctity of business as usual and on-going economic growth are assumed.

Through the myth of corporate omnipotence, corporations have become mythical creatures; even god-like in their role as a creator of social value and model for social reorganisation. The picture is further completed with the presentation of business elites as prophets. Prophecy is an essential element in what Cassirer (1946, p. 289) identified as a 'new technique of rulership' during the twentieth century, with the most improbable or even impossible promises made. The function of this myth then is to present climate change as a problem soluble through corporate expertise. The corporation provides certainty in an age of risk, fear and uncertainty (Beck, 1992). Through their myths corporations and their narrators create a future world that allows humans to avoid sacrifices. It only requires continuous consumption, privatisation of public institutions, and trust in corporate capitalism.

Political myths and the creative destruction of climate change

Taken together these myths serve to reinforce the modern hierarchy of human mastery over nature. With the 'rational' corporation as a model, they function to deepen the bifurcation between culture and nature, symbolised in the oft-cited 'triple bottom line' of economy, society, and environment, in that order (Norman and MacDonald, 2004). Indeed these myths serve to avoid questioning this hierarchy, in that they highlight the practical techniques corporations can provide in 'solving' or 'fixing' climate change. Geo-engineering solutions such as solar radiation management, ocean fertilisation or carbon capture and storage, justify further climate change in order to stop it (Szerszynski, 2010). Moreover, the idea that we can manage or stabilize nature, diverts energy from more radical responses (Boykoff, Frame and Randalls, 2010). The implication is that we reproduce the bifurcation between culture and nature rather than question or problematize this distinction, despite the obvious observation that without an environment there can be no society let alone economy.

This capitalist social imaginary, in which a growing world population can continue to consume and rely on endless economic growth, then obscures the environmental destruction that it reaps. The physical realities of climate change, highlighted in the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as droughts, fires, floods and storms, challenge this imaginary. However, these myths shield us discursively from the looming catastrophe and ultimately highlight the creative self-destruction of our economic system, as we search for ever more innovative ways to produce and consume our ecosystem. Rather than questioning our collective suicide, these political myths provide us with justification and identities in this process.

Of course critics might argue that the whole concept of myths is somehow arcane and irrelevant in our modern, technologically-dependent society. Aren't myths after all a feature of more primitive, less-knowing societies, governed by superstition and a belief in the supernatural? However, as Bottici and Challand (2006 331) point out, our contemporary consumer society is a veritable cornucopia of myth-making:

> ...our life takes place in jungles of potential icons of a political myth. Going to the supermarket, surfing the Web, watching a film or a cartoon, or even simply walking in the streets - all of them can be acts that expose us to the work of a political myth.

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The problem here is that such mythologies are often harder to discern in that we live in a society which claims to be rational and 'de-mythologized', and 'political myths are most of the time intertwined with other kinds of discourses and tend thus to get lost behind them' (Bottici and Challand, 2006, p. 330). This highlights the important 'symbolic power' of political myths, representing an almost hegemonic ability to shape attitudes and behaviour as common-sense assumptions. In our case, to question the myths of corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, or corporate omnipotence is often interpreted as tantamount to sacrilege. Indeed, questioning the larger narrative of on-going capitalist growth and progress, which many environmentalists now do in interpreting the dramatic changes required to avoid catastrophic climate change (Jackson, 2009; McKibben, 2012), is seen by critics as the most dangerous of thinking. It is perhaps not surprising then that the most vehement opposition to even minimal forms of emissions mitigation are led by those who promote the mythologies of 'free-enterprise' capitalism (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; McCright and Dunlap, 2011). In questioning the narrative of capitalist growth and the global consumer economy, environmentalists have become the new communists – green on the outside, red on the inside!

Conclusion

We began this paper by asking why despite the growing evidence of an emerging climate crisis, humanity is so reticent to respond in some meaningful way to avert disaster? While the global and temporal scale of anthropogenic climate change make united human action difficult, we suggest there are other fundamental reasons why humanity's response has been to date so limited. In particular, the central role of corporations in the running of the global economy places real constraints upon the degree to which meaningful reductions can be made to global GHG emissions, given these firms rely upon continued economic growth and the expansion of consumer capitalism. Anthropogenic climate change highlights the underlying logic of capitalism as an economic system reliant on the use and exploitation of natural resources, specifically fossil fuels.

Despite the urgency of the threat of climate change to our future existence, we argue that a series of political myths have developed creating an appealing image of human progress which prevent any meaningful challenge to the path we are now on. These myths support a common narrative in keeping with the tradition of Western modernity; a social imaginary of capitalist 'rationality' and 'efficiency', of human mastery over nature. Climate change

therefore not only reveals the underlying contradictions of capitalism in which we are now consuming our own life-support systems, but how the advance of corporate capitalism and its associated political myths support and encourage this through ever more imaginative forms of capital accumulation in an environmentally-compromised world. Political actors, such as governments, corporations and their interests groups, and other societal actors, have continuously reinforced the myths supporting corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship and corporate omnipotence. These myths provide significance to the corporations role as a saviour of the environment, caring citizen and unquestionable authority. These myths also provide significance to peoples' experiences of climate change and how they can address the problem through innovation, consumption and calculations (risk). The 'spirit' of capitalism provides meaningful functions and significance for people's experiences and activities that cognitive tools of criticism are unable to disqualify.

Importantly, our purpose in this paper has not been to focus on the role of political myths as truth claims. Rather, we have sought to understand the purpose and process of narration through which the myths of corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship and corporate omnipotence recast the extraordinary nature of anthropogenic climate change into a mundane activity of corporate rationalisation. Our emphasis has been on critically evaluating the current capitalist imaginary to potentially give room for new and different imaginaries on how society is and ought to be. This, in turn, will hopefully prompt alternative actions and responses. While we have identified three principle political myths surrounding the role of corporations in relation to climate change, there may well be other myths at work which are more functional in their significance and hence harder to discern. Moreover, these myths are clearly inter-related and, as we have demonstrated, act to reinforce one another within the broader social imaginary of corporate capitalism as the 'natural' form of economic and social order.

In revealing the purpose and process of political myth in corporate and social understandings of climate change we aim to generate a more fundamental conversation regarding alternative human responses to this most fundamental threat to our existence. As others have noted (Gilding, 2011), in previous periods of extreme peril some societies have been able to quickly fashion new political myths and galvanise rapid changes in organisation and governance. While climate change represents a threat of unparalleled extent and complexity, there is the potential for alternative social imaginaries of human organization and engagement which

involve dramatic reductions in GHG emissions and adaptation to already locked-in climate changes. To reach this stage however, we need to be aware of the meanings of our existing myths and our current imaginings.

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