

Approaching the precipice? A review of *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations: Processes of Creative Self-Destruction*

Organization
2017, Vol. 24(4) 570–572
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1350508416656911
journals.sagepub.com/home/org


Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations: Processes of Creative Self-Destruction. Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. ISBN 9781107078222.

The cover of Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg's *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations* features the artwork *Insatiable* by Theodore Bolha and Christopher Davis. The image is dirty, brooding and apocalyptic. At its centre is a naked man, bent over and screaming. An industrial landscape weighs heavy on his back as black smoke pumps into the murky sky. As if about to fall to his knees and crawl, he follows a small group of wild animals all heading to a precipice, seemingly unaware of their impending doom. The image is suggestive of humankind's bleak destiny wrought at the hands of its own creation yet seemingly beyond its own control. It is an ominous and pessimistic portrayal of the effects of an insatiable industrial machine.

The cover offers a telling prelude to the book, concerned as it is with the causes of and possible solutions to the devastating changes to the environment that have resulted from industrialization. The authors identify climate change as 'the steady annihilation of our planet' (p. 2) that has been justified in the name of commerce and progress. Like its cover, the book is not without pessimism. Both paint a picture of a world in crisis with environmental devastation escalating and global warming worsening as greenhouse gas emissions accelerate. Wright and Nyberg take on the formidable task of examining how contemporary corporations have responded to climate change, asking whether that response is adequate to address 'the most significant social, political, and economic issues of our time' (p. 27). Their answer is no! The book, however, is not just doom-saying and while Wright and Nyberg lack optimism, they retain hope. What the book offers, ultimately, is an impassioned clarion call for change and an activist agenda for learning to address the environmental problems caused by industrial and corporate capitalism. Chief to Wright and Nyberg's claims is that these problems have defied a corporate solution and that if it is to survive, humanity needs to look elsewhere for answers.

In mounting its argument, the book provides a comprehensive review of the ways that corporations have acted on climate change. In so doing, part of its achievement is a descriptive analysis of central aspects of contemporary organizing as it relates to environmental sustainability. The book identifies the at times incompatible ways that the relationship between corporations and climate change is understood. Primarily, corporations are the chief producers of greenhouse gas emissions, and corporate activity is clearly positioned as being responsible for having created the climate crisis. Somewhat ironically, the authors also note that corporations are, today, being seen as the means through which climate change's devastating effects can be abetted. Corporations have thus been culturally conceived as the innovators who can develop new modes of production and service delivery that will reduce the level of emissions. Taken to its extreme, they have even been heralded

as the saviours of the climate crisis—green entrepreneurs who will lead capitalism to reverse the legacy of destruction that it has created.

Wright and Nyberg are far from naïve, and they provide a cogent critique of the idea that corporations themselves will lead the charge in reversing climate change. Indeed, a central and strongly stated premise of the book is that capitalism and environmental sustainability are fundamentally incompatible. While not dismissing the efficacy of some corporate programmes, the authors are clear in stating that the motive for corporate intervention and change rests on self-interest rather than altruism. Borrowing their turn of phrase, it is greed rather than necessity that has proved to be the mother of invention. The book argues that the greening of corporations serves the chief purposes of, *inter alia*, creating social legitimacy, maintaining labour market position and providing the basis for political lobbying.

While the book offers a systematic review and critique of climate change initiatives in corporations, the value does not stop there. What marks the book out is that it directly confronts the assumption that a solution of the climate change crisis will arise from within corporate capitalism. As per the cover art, it is the capitalist industrial complex that is the weight on humanity's back as it crawls to its own death. Turning the darling phraseology of free-market economics back on itself, the name Wright and Nyberg give to this is 'creative self destruction'. By this term, they acknowledge the irony of how the solution to the very problem caused by free-market capitalism is largely thought to be found by extending the reach of that system. In the authors' words, 'businesses have argued that the cure for the environmental ills within corporate capitalism is more corporate capitalism' (p. 29). What this obscures, it is argued, is that economic growth within a capitalist framework continues to be reliant on environmental destruction. In short, the creative reproduction of capitalism in an era of climate change is leading to the destruction of the environment while at the same time concealing that process of destruction.

In developing its argument, the book advances through nine chapters, although these can be seen as belonging to three groups. The first four chapters serve to set the scene for understating the relationship between climate change and capitalism. Chapter 1 introduces the book's central concerns as well as outlines the science and history of climate change and global warning and their relationship with corporate capitalism. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 follow by establishing the theoretical and political basis of the argument. Climate change is positioned as a contradiction that has been incorporated within capitalism, not for the sake of the environment but for the sake of maintaining global capitalist hegemony. With this incorporation we arrive at the idea of 'creative self destruction' as the path down which current responses to the crisis are leading us. Central to this, it is argued, is the way that climate change has been incorporated within business logic such that it is construed in terms of commercial risk and opportunity that can and should be managed through corporate voluntarism and self-regulation. Refusing to accept this on its own self-interested terms, Wright and Nyberg examine corporate 'solutions' as inherently political acts that serve to maintain the corporate dominance. Although a Marxist position is not developed, one is echoed in the verdict that the reason that corporations collectively engage in climate change initiative is 'to maintain the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism' (p. 74).

Turning attention away from a critique of the capitalist system in which corporations operate, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 turn their attention to the response to climate change that occur within actual corporations. It is here that the authors open up the proverbial 'black-box' of the firm so as to consider its internal machinations. While not backing down from their anti-corporate political convictions, these chapters allow the authors to justify and explore those convictions in relation to the complexities of organizational life. Indeed, it is an appreciation of the lived organizational realities and the practices of working life that lends book an important uniqueness. What this means is that the book is avowedly not a critique from afar conducted with a clarity born out of distant appreciation and

experience-free generalizations. The book is based on 5 years of extensive empirical work that involved systematic reviews of publicly available information, interviews with dozens of sustainability professionals employed in corporations, and detailed case studies of environmental sustainability programmes in five major corporations operating in Australia. This makes for an up-close, at times sympathetic, appreciation of corporations that considers them at both systemic and practical levels.

The central chapters of the book explore the contradictory logics that inform corporate action on climate change, as well as delving into the compromises between 'environment' and 'profit' that get hammered out in practice. It is through these compromises, Wright and Nyberg show, that the environment, while acknowledged, ends up being incorporated into capitalist logic by being reduced to a tradable market commodity. This makes the jobs of people in organizations charged with devising and implementing environmental programmes both challenging and contentious. The book clearly shows how corporate environment professionals, by and large, have deep personal commitments to environmental politics, such that it is they who are pulled apart between the drive for creative self-destruction and the desire for a truly sustainable future. It is within this politically saturated and emotionally charged corporate environment that the realities of corporate environmentalism are played out.

The final two chapters bring together the book's central arguments. First, it is concluded that the current, and inadequate, corporate response to climate change has been largely accepted through a process of mythologization that proffer that corporations can act in ways that are environmentally focussed, communally interested and uniquely powerful. These myths, Wright and Nyberg maintain, serve to both incorporate and neuter a critique that would push corporations out of the way as the locus of the solution to the problem of climate change. Having debunked these myths, Wright and Nyberg end with their own manifesto as to how the life-threatening phenomena of climate change should be responded to. Central here is a move to renewable energy, strengthened state intervention and corporate regulation, a radical rethinking of growth-based economics and grass-roots resistance. If there is to be a future where an insatiable appetite for fossil fuels will not lead humanity over the precipice, what is also required, the book concludes, is a cultural shift focussed on challenging corporate capitalism in the name of the environment, in the name of humanity and in the name of democracy.

In some senses, the books conclusions are not new. Indeed, part of the achievement of this work is less about radical revisions as much as building on a growing opposition to industrially created environmental destruction. The special value of the book, however, is the way that these conclusions are reached from a perspective that fully acknowledges and understands corporate capitalism from within corporations themselves. While this is a book that is deeply critical of corporations and their relationship to climate change, its accomplishment is to achieve this critique through an empathic knowledge of the internal workings of corporations. Despite this empathy, Wright and Nyberg do not in any way believe that the solution to the crisis will come from within corporations or the capitalist system they rely on and sustain. Nevertheless, and seemingly against the odds, the book does not give up hope—hope that we might be able to shed the overbearing weight of capitalism that the authors see as having brought humanity to its knees, as well as having brought it to the brink of self-destruction.

Carl Rhodes

University of Technology Sydney, Australia