



Challenging the saga of corporate climate champions

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review of

Wright C. and D. Nyberg (2015) *Climate change, capitalism, and corporations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (HB, pp. 265, £69.99, ISBN 978-1-107-07822-2; PB, £21.99, ISBN 978-1-107-43513-1)

Context

Man-made climate change is a reality. Droughts, floods and typhoons caused by global warming have been experienced around the globe. In *Climate change, capitalism, and corporations*, Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg explore corporate responses to the changing climate. Importantly they look at how multinational corporations adapt, affirm and reinvent their role in relation to the threats of climate change. The authors intend to 'outline the *processes* though which corporations are shaping humanity's response to the climate crisis' aimed at ultimately affirming the status quo [23; emphasis in original]. Not without shuddering fascination they look at the innovative ways in which corporations manoeuvre to satisfy the multiple demands of government regulators as well as increasingly green-minded employees and consumers. Crucially it is Wright's and Nyberg's contention, that corporates are moulding their responses to climate change in their own image; i.e. conforming to the logics of consumerism and economic growth. The authors' inquiry goes beyond a study of corporate reporting and critical secondary literature. Interestingly, they have complemented their analysis with interview material conducted with corporate executives as well as sustainability managers.

The authors leave no doubt that they perceive climate change as the single biggest threat to humanity. It seems no coincidence that the book is devoted to the authors' children. Climate change is not around the corner, but actually already affects all of humanity. Wright and Nyberg start off listing fatal climate events in the past decade that must directly be linked to changing weather patterns. Hurricane Sandy hit New York City in 2012, two years after Russia experienced the worst heat wave in history. The bottom-line being that if climate change even affects superpowers, the message should be clear to everybody of the need to act. Consequently the question becomes: why not then study government's responses to climate change? Why studying corporations?

Corporations form the backbone of today's neoliberal variant of capitalism. Their 'power and agency' [14], Wright and Nyberg suggest, is worthy of diligent analysis in many respects. Importantly, corporations' economic muscle dwarfs the GDP of many middle-income countries. They show that a relatively small club of economic entities among which corporations rank high is responsible for the larger part of global emissions. Not surprisingly companies such as BP, Gazprom, Chevron and Royal Dutch Shell score highly among global polluters. These companies take on very complex roles in society that Wright and Nyberg aim to flesh out.

Corporations act as innovators. Self-appointed green gurus from the business world with the likes of Richard Branson have suggested that corporate solutions can fix the climate. For companies, climate change bears both risks and multiple potentials to make money. 'Green' can be the driver of marketing strategies as well as the trigger for waste reduction in supply chains. Obviously there is the criticism of 'greenwashing' that looms over these efforts but notwithstanding this reservation, corporations insist that their responses to championing the climate crisis are key.

The corporate fix

Wright and Nyberg see the corporate fix to climate change much like the attempt to square circles. To their mind the corporate drive to expand markets and hence to fuel consumerism goes down to the very core of the problem. The paradox here is that corporate capitalism destroys the very nature that ensures its survival. By burning fossil fuel with ever-greater speed, corporations come to be the gravediggers of nature they ultimately rely on. As the subtitle of the book suggests, contemporary capitalism exercises a form of creative self-destruction. The same way capitalism has destroyed the remnants of feudal society, its destructive force has now turned against itself. Instead of at least slowing down

on fossil fuel consumption, deep-water oil drilling, tar sand processing and coal and seam gas drilling are portrayed as the harbingers of accelerating destructive forces. Initiatives to fertilize oceans or suck carbon out the atmosphere cloud the urgency of genuine solutions to climate change. [13]

Borrowing from Boltanski and Ciapello (2005) they advance that corporate capitalism has found ways to incorporate critique. Carbon pricing is reducing emissions to ‘one single commodity’ [38] no matter where they originate. To these ends ‘gas-guzzling four-wheel-drive vehicles are seen as equal to those of a company that builds wind farms’ [38-9]. Carbon trading schemes are part of strategies of what Wright and Nyberg call ‘corporate environmentalism’. Corporate environmentalists suggest that a profit-driven economy and a healthy environment are not mutually exclusive. ‘The image of “green” or “natural” capitalism proposed through corporate environmentalism and business sustainability promises no conflicts and no-trade offs’ [41]. Advertising the opportunities of win-win solutions, corporations have managed to reverse the trend in the 1970s and 80s towards more governmental regulations. Corporations successfully lobbied for a voluntarist approach to save the environment. The story goes that risk of climate change is best managed if corporations adhere to the market mechanisms only.

As much as corporations are successful in preventing regulation they are also impacted by climate change. Unpredictable weather conditions can potentially destroy or delay operations. The authors however highlight the business opportunities of a warming planet. Corporations anticipate physical risk by utilizing climate models, developing emergency plans for extreme weather events and other ways to predict unprecedented weather fluctuations. Wright and Nyberg show for instance how insurance companies draw on weather forecasts to consequently declare catastrophe-prone areas as ‘uninsurable’ [55].

Proactive risk management is not limited to physical damages. One of the most daunting threats for corporations is reputational loss. In the day and age of brand value, reputation becomes an invaluable asset. In order to prevent reputation loss companies have started spearheading public debates to advocate corporate responsibility. NGO representatives in fossil-fuel companies bear witness to the incorporation of adversaries. Risk becomes something to be managed as it is inevitably “out there” and need only be “found” and “captured”; and once this has been achieved, of course, the next step is to exploit it’ [62].

This debate lays bare the multiple alliances of corporations aimed at co-opting or lobbying crucial decision-makers. The authors illustrate the corporate muscle by pointing at former US-president Bush’s close ties to the oil lobby [81]. Beyond the

more obvious coalitions, Wright and Nyberg also refer to corporate financing of think tanks, and astroturf organizations taking a tokenistic stance towards climate change.

Birth of the office activists

Green corporate discourses do not solely have the function of marketing products better, but also aim at responding to the demands of employees who increasingly call for 'green' and 'sustainable' workplaces (sometimes even at the expense of lower pay). To illustrate this point the authors come up with a typology describing employees' relation to climate change. They distinguish between the rational manager, the change agent and the committed activist. While rational managers acknowledge climate change, their primary preoccupation is the economic wellbeing of the company. Change agents show high commitment to a sustainable corporate culture. Therefore they actively work on schemes to promote waste reduction in the office or promote less air travel among colleagues. But only the committed activist is prepared to categorically say 'no' if she feels that her green value system is under assault. Some committed activists even leave their corporate career for the sake of political and community activism behind [131].

Ultimately climate change is also a battle for the hearts and minds, or '*ideological battleground*' as Wright and Nyberg put it [162; emphasis in original]. Therefore multinational corporations take emotions very seriously. Looking at the examples of advertisements of car manufacturers the authors note how the struggle against climate change is increasingly linked to upbeat messages. Car manufacturers portray buying the right vehicle with low emissions as a positive contribution to save the climate.

Wrapping up their argument, Wright and Nyberg show how corporations have invested in different myths to stand their ground in the face of green critique. At the heart of the mystification lies corporate omnipotence. The latter entertains the idea that 'rational expertise businesses have at their disposal is somehow capable of taming nature' [171]. In reality corporate expansion accelerates creative self-destruction.

No way out?

In a final chapter, Wright and Nyberg reserve a little less than five pages to the search for alternatives. While the prior reflexions seem even repetitive at times, the search for alternatives is sketchy at best. The authors' alternatives entail the

de-commodification of nature, finding a new language to ‘disrupt’ [192] rampant climate change and more citizen involvement. These propositions are not spelled out at great length and are therefore hardly worth mentioning. The book closes with a call for positive messages as ‘Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr taught us’ [194]. This message is somewhat surprising in a book that leaves little room for positive messages. A bit like a happy ending in a distressing movie that you really would not have expected. But leaving the dramatic composition of the book aside, one wonders what is really new here? *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations* has a lot in common with Naomi Klein’s *This changes everything* (2014). While Klein also focuses also on governments’ and corporations’ implications in climate change, Wright and Nyberg look at corporations through most of the book as actors in their own rights. This bears the risk of reducing the multiple influences of entrepreneurial thinking in climate debates to the initiatives of the private sector. It is fair to say that governments with neoliberal inflections also push for market solutions in the face of the climate crisis. This crucial insight from Klein’s book remains understated in this book.

Another reservation with regards to the book is its very stance on nature. Throughout the book the authors rely on a notion of nature (or, better: the destruction thereof) that separates it entirely from society. In Nyberg and Wright’s understanding, humans act *upon* nature. Organized humans working for corporations and stand outside of nature inflicting harm on the planet. Nature in *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations* is construed as the passive tap for extraction and sink for waste. This distinction between society and nature is with little doubt an operative binary today as Jason Moore (2015) notes. Nevertheless to accept the nature (without humans)/society (without nature) binary bears the risk of contributing to the ecological rift the authors lament. Moore therefore suggests convincingly studying ‘nature through capitalism’ and ‘capitalism through nature’. He emphasizes a co-production of human and extra-human environments. With regards to Nyberg and Wright’s book this view can help achieve a more dialectical view on the co-creation of the way corporations work through nature and nature works through corporations. The book perpetuates a view that sees humans depleting and looting the planet (what we effectively do), disregarding the way humans are a part of this nature.

Despite these complaints the authors manage to come up with a wide array of different corporate strategies with regards to climate change. Corporate responses to climate change seem to be a rendition of General Giuseppe Garibaldi’s: ‘things will have to change in order that they remain the same’ – corporations have to remain versatile and incorporate critique in order to pursue unsustainable growth and the commodification of nature. Scholars interested in

the organization of climate change will find a rich resource for ideas and references in this well-researched book. The contribution should help to bring debates around climate change and corporate critique to the centre stage in organization studies.

references

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