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

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Despite the dire implications of anthropogenic climate change, societies have failed to take comprehensive action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A major reason for the lack of social and political engagement on this issue is the way in which political myths function to overcome the contradiction of environmental degradation and endless economic growth. Through a qualitative analysis of Australian business responses to climate change, we outline how the myths of corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, and corporate omnipotence absorb and adapt the critique of corporate capitalism while enabling ever more imaginative ways of exploiting nature – a process of 'creative self-destruction'. Rather than seeking to falsify these myths, we explore how they are supported and what they seek to achieve – the work *of* myths. Revealing the nature of current political myths in relation to climate change is, we argue, a necessary first step to constructing alternative imaginaries.

Keywords: climate change; climate politics; corporate environmentalism; political myths; creative destruction

Introduction

Humanity's impact upon the environment has become increasingly evident with the threat now posed to various 'planetary boundaries', including climate change, biodiversity loss, changes to the nitrogen cycle, ozone depletion, and ocean acidification (Rockström *et al.* 2009, Whiteman *et al.* 2013). The dominant factor underlying such environmental degradation has been our species' economic and technological inventiveness, such that we now have the power to change fundamentally the very nature of our atmosphere and ecosystem, with likely catastrophic effects (Anderson and Bows 2008). However, the precarious nature of our environmental situation also highlights the underlying contradiction of a capitalist imaginary of endless economic growth (Castoriadis 1997). Harking back to Marx's original observations of capitalism's reliance on the unending

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exploitation of nature (Foster 2000), the current destruction of the environment is not so much an unfortunate by-product of industrialisation, but rather an essential feature of our dependence upon continued economic growth and the expansion of consumption (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994, York 2004). This process of environmental destruction aligns with the depiction of capitalism as based upon crises and the 'enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces' (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998, p. 42). Later conceived by Schumpeter (1942) as a process of 'creative destruction', the technological innovation and entrepreneurship that characterise capitalist dynamism also involve the destruction of previous forms of capital accumulation and natural resources.

Here, we explore the social acceptance of escalating environmental destruction through the example of corporate responses to climate change. Following Hulme (2009), we attend to the imaginative idea of climate change as a social construction, separated in our analysis from the reality of a physically changing climate resulting from increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This allows us to investigate how the idea of climate change is appropriated to justify corporate capitalism further. To explain this, we draw upon political theories of myth (Flood 2002, Bottici 2007) to analyse how corporations engage in the production of narratives that justify the continuation of a process we characterise as 'creative self-destruction' (see also Carroll and Teo 1996).

Based on a qualitative analysis of how corporations engage with climate change, we identify three interdependent political myths that support the role of corporations in addressing climate change: corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, and corporate omnipotence. Within the myth of corporate environmentalism, corporations are presented as active participants in the mitigation of environmental damage and promote their key role in solving climate change through technological innovation and the production and consumption of 'green' products and services. The myth of corporate citizenship presents the corporation as the civil actor best placed to determine political agendas and deliver social and environmental needs. Finally, the myth of corporate omnipotence portrays corporate capitalism and marketisation as the only viable response to social and environmental issues such as climate change.

Taken together, these three political myths support a common narrative – a capitalist imaginary of 'rationality' and 'efficiency' that addresses political conditions in society (Bottici 2007, Castoriadis 2007). Our analysis demonstrates the dynamism or 'spirit' of capitalism – how the economic system incorporates criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Through these political myths, critiques of capitalism are 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). This is an appealing imaginary of human progress, supported by objects, practices, and identity projects for promoting corporations as saviours from the threats of nature. Rather than falsifying these myths, our aim here is to evaluate them critically in order to bring forward their significance in addressing climate change.

We are not suggesting that these are the only myths or ways of viewing climate change (see, e.g., Hulme 2009), but within the context of the business world, these are dominant framings that aim to overcome the contradiction of environmental degradation and endless economic growth. Thus, the myths highlight the problematic intersection between environmental decline and economic growth.

The critique of capitalism and the political functions of myths

Environmental criticism '...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 and 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 'organisational 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. Willmott (2013, p. 117) clarifies this position by arguing that '...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.

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 magnitude as climate change requires a particularly powerful alchemy of continuous 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; that is, beyond the institutionalised 'spirit' or 'calling of making money' (Weber [1930] 1992, p. 33). Following Bottici (2007, pp. 133 and 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.

We see myths not as fictitious or untrue objects, symbols, or tales that can be falsified, but continuous processes of saying and doing that are open to retelling and redoing in response to particular sociohistorical circumstances. Blumenberg (1985) refers to the work *on* myth to suggest the continuous narration in (re) producing, (re)interpreting, and (re)transmitting myths to address the changing circumstances in which they operate. The myths are political in that they have a function in guiding individuals, groups, and societies by providing significance in addressing political conditions and experience (Bottici and Challand 2006). Myths assist in coping with 'scary problems' (Esch 2010, p. 361), such as deep-sea fishing (Malinowski 1948), the 'war on terror' (Esch 2010), the 'clash of civilizations' (Bottici and Challand 2006), genetically modified foods (Lieberman and Gray 2007), and, in our case, climate change. They reduce complexity in providing narratives that shape political experiences and activities.

Myths ground events and things by providing directions of what to do; where things are going (Bottici and Kühner 2012). They validate certain actions and preclude others (Bottici and Challand 2006, Esch 2010). In this sense, myths are self-reinforcing as determinations to act according to their own narratives. Myths are also grounded by producing identities, or rather identity projects, which subjects can recognise and narrate through interactions (Bottici 2007). The myth becomes part of who we are, what we believe, and how we act, made possible through the plasticity of myths in coagulating with individually different identity narratives to produce significance for particular experiences and activities. The work on myths in guiding experiences and grounding activities can take place in a range of discursive activities such as, words, images, symbols, objects, and practices. Indeed, our current 'mediatised' marketing society provides ample opportunity for political myths to be persuasive (Bottici and Challand 2006).

Discussing myths thus requires discovering their presuppositions; what they are *doing*, and what those doings are doing – the work *of* myths (Blumenberg 1985). Rather than interrogating myths over their truth value, a political and critical evaluation of these myths requires us to examine what the continuous narration of the myths serves to overcome (Bottici 2007, p. 116). In discussing myths, 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 narrated, and what they achieve. In our case, we are interested in how corporate narratives address and appropriate the problem of climate change in order to overcome the discrepancy, or gap, between environmental decline and economic welfare.

Research study

In exploring the role of political myth in the creative self-destruction of the environment, we draw on an extensive study of Australian business responses to climate change conducted during the period 2010–2012. This involved the collection of a range of qualitative data, including interviews and documents from 25 corporations in the resources, energy, manufacturing, transportation,

Table 1. Case study organisations.

Case	Description	Interviews	Project focus
BankCo	Financial services (36,000 employees)	10	Changes to institutional lending based on government pricing of carbon emissions.
EnergyCo	Electricity and gas production and retail (1500 employees)	13	Redesign of company processes for cost implications of government mandated carbon emissions price.
GlobalCo	Global manufacturer (5600 employees)	9	Manufacture of more sustainable industrial products including renewable energy and more efficient industrial equipment. Branding as a 'green' company.
InsureCo	National insurer (12,700 employees)	10	Development of extreme weather risk analysis, pricing insurance policies re: future climate-change impacts.
MediaCo	Media company (8000 employees)	15	Culture change initiative aimed at GHG emissions reduction, improved efficiency, and 'carbon neutral' status.

finance, and retail industries. From this initial sample, five companies were selected as further case studies, and a more detailed analysis was undertaken of their responses to climate change, including further interviews with senior and operational managers and relevant documentation such as sustainability and annual reports, submissions to government, shareholder briefings, climate-change presentations, and policy documents (see Table 1).

Our analysis of these diverse data focused initially on the specific climate-change practices companies had developed, informed by the broader discourses which underpinned these initiatives. In coding the collected data, we identified the particular positioning of corporations, markets, and capitalism in responding to the discourse of climate change. Thus, our theoretical use of the concept of political myth followed from our initial empirical analysis of the qualitative data. Here, we identified three key political myths that were evident in our data, which we termed corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, and corporate omnipotence. In the following sections, we outline what each myth involved in terms of its basic narrative, objects and practices, identity projects and meanings, and broader significance.

The myth of corporate environmentalism

The concept of 'corporate environmentalism' has developed over the last 40 years in response to increasing social criticism of corporations' environmental impact (Hoffman 2001, Jermier *et al.* 2006). Rather than resisting or simply complying with environmental regulation, corporate environmentalism promotes

the idea that economic growth and ecological well-being are mutually suppor-tive, and that companies need to engage with environmental issues as a key strategic concern; in short, they can 'do well by doing good' (see also Porter and van der Linde 1995, Falck and Heblich 2007). Indeed, corporate environment-alism has been institutionalised through 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, and the creation of specialist sustainability functions within major corporations (Wright *et al.* 2012).

Within our data, the basic narrative of corporate environmentalism involved several elements. First, while most of the businesses we studied acknowledged the issue of climate change as a threat and challenge, they emphasised their central role in 'solving' climate change through technological innovation and the development of 'green' products and services. For example, we encountered airlines which promoted their innovation in 'climate-friendly' biofuels, financial institutions devel-oping 'carbon farming' initiatives for rural communities, and even brewing compa-nies developing 'carbon-neutral' beer! Second, viewing climate change through the myth of corporate environmentalism also prompted practical actions that supported and reinforced the myth. Examples of practices that become meaningful through corporate environmentalism included more efficient production processes and reduced costs through limiting waste, materials usage, and carbon emissions (see also Dauvergne and Lister 2013). As one sustainability consultant noted:

> It's about efficiency, resource efficiency, energy efficiency. That's what we would describe as the 'low hanging fruit', reduce your energy and waste. It saves you money and it's good for the environment, which is a business case.

Corporate environmentalism also stressed the competitive benefits that flowed from innovation and new products that appealed to environmentally aware consumers and new markets. GlobalCo, for instance, had redesigned its corporate identity and branding around its leadership in the manufacture of 'green' indus-trial products, including wind turbines and more efficient industrial equipment. As a senior manager noted, 'It's all about recognising that this change is happening in the world and taking a leadership position to be able to leverage from the opportunities that come out of it'. In addition, developing a 'green' brand and culture were also seen as important in engaging customers and employees about the worth of the corporation. As another manager noted:

> ...we've now got groups of employees suggesting new ideas and it's great for employee buy-in and it's great from an HR perspective of the employee value position … You can get the best people without paying best dollars.

Moreover, corporate environmentalism provided significance to individuals' experiences in the service of continued economic growth and the expansion of

consumer capitalism. In particular, corporate environmentalism created new roles, identities, and meanings for individuals and groups as both employees and consumers. For example, sustainability specialists and consultants were characterised as 'green change agents' within their organisations, disseminating measures aimed at building a profitable but environmentally 'responsible' business. At MediaCo for instance, a company-wide culture was developed which stressed how employees could make small changes to their work and family lives to reduce their carbon footprint:

> Climate change is about all of us. Everyone can contribute by changing what we do by One Degree, in lots of ways, every day. Together these actions will help us all change the future of the planet. (MediaCo, internal poster)

These types of objects and symbols provided meaning and identity recognition to actions in 'green' consumption, where, as consumers, our guilt is salved by choosing to consume the 'green' products promoted by 'responsible' corporations (Luke 1994, Hobson 2013). As FinCo publicised, 'we will play a pivotal role helping our customers, employees and the broader community shift to this low-carbon economy'. In this way, climate change becomes mainly an issue of responsible consumption, which 'pushes' more fundamental political or institutional changes to the background.

Advocates presented this message as a 'win–win' outcome, creating 'shared value' in contrast to the traditional trade-off between profit and environmental well-being (Porter and Kramer 2011). Importantly, these claims appeared to counter more fundamental criticisms of economic growth and consumer capitalism. Through the creation of 'green' products and services, businesses claimed they reduced GHG emissions and created a competitive advantage for themselves by embracing the new green business paradigm (Esty and Winston 2006, Orsato 2009). Indeed, corporations could use this as an opportunity for further profit. As the CEO of one company acknowledged, 'I'm going to be real frank here – we're not doing this to save the planet. That's not the driver. We're industrialists'.

The myth of corporate citizenship

Building on the agenda of corporate environmentalism, the myth of corporate citizenship personifies the corporation as a moral citizen engaged in the betterment of civil society. This extends beyond the normal ambit of corporate activity in producing goods and services for a market, into the world of politics (Shamir 2008). Here, the corporation is seen as acting not just in the narrow interests of its shareholders, but a broader range of stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers, communities – indeed, global society as whole. Against a backdrop of neo-liberal economic reform (Crouch 2011), the 'good' corporate citizen has become involved in the distribution of an increasing range of social

services, including education, health, public sanitation, and correctional and security services. In the developing world, corporations are seen as the prime means of solving social problems where the state is lacking (Valente and Crane 2010, Scherer and Palazzo 2011). Closely aligned to associated concepts such as 'corporate social responsibility', corporate citizenship has become a common form of discourse in company annual reports and websites, with many of the world's major companies participants in initiatives such as the United Nations (UN) Global Compact and World Economic Forum (Crane *et al.* 2008). More specifically, the myth of corporate citizenship provides legitimacy for increasing the scope of corporate political activity. As Barley (2007) notes, this has included the active promotion of self-serving legislation, corporate intrusion into and 'capture' of regulatory agencies, and the privatisation of governmental functions across all levels of society.

In regard to climate change, the myth of corporate citizenship highlights the political role of corporations in shaping climate policy. In our data, there was a strong consensus amongst managers that business was leading the fight to reduce GHG emissions. Companies presented themselves as role models which embodied many of the ideal practices and innovative capabilities required to ensure the well-being of present and future generations. As one corporate advertisement proclaimed, 'Yes, we are an oil company, but right now we're also providing natural gas, solar, hydrogen, geothermal, because we live on this planet too'. Often such a stance was framed within the business discourse of a 'win–win' outcome for business and society, what one manager characterised as 'building a better world and a better business at the same time'. In sustainability reports, web pages, and other documentation, corporations promoted their own voluntary initiatives as the best response to climate change. Corporate legitimacy was hence claimed through self-regulation, marketing, and public relations.

In industries such as coal mining, this involved a political campaign to resist the regulation of carbon emissions while at the same time promoting the industry's investments in new technological 'solutions' to climate change such as carbon capture and storage (CCS). Marketed under the label of 'NextGenCoal', this was seen by industry managers as an example of the benefits of corporate innovation. Politically, fossil-fuel industry groups advocated for greater government assistance in bringing their preferred technologies to market, while rejecting government regulation of carbon emissions that might restrict their industry or favour competitors in renewable energy industries. Against a background of political controversy over the appropriate government policy towards carbon emissions reduction, corporations engaged in explicit campaigning to shape policy outcomes through formal submissions to government, lobbying of ministers and bureaucrats, media releases, interviews and conference presentations, and alliance building with politicians and think-tanks. Companies and industry groups also undertook advertising and media campaigns that stressed the link between fossil-fuel industries and economic well-being (Nyberg *et al.* 2013). As the coal industry association

argued in its campaign against 'carbon pricing', 'Coal is vital to Australia's prosperity … it's our largest export earner, over $55 billion last year' (ACA 2009).

Importantly, the myth of corporate citizenship also produced political identities and meaning for ordinary citizens. So, for example, in framing the public campaign against the government's 'carbon tax', coal and manufacturing industry advertisements emphasised the voices of 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. This provided space for citizens to work on the myth of corporate citizenship as active constituents. Indeed, in numerous organised protest rallies against the 'carbon tax', these citizens re-emphasised the discourses of regulation threatening jobs and increasing the cost of living (ABC 2011). The narrative of corporate citizenship was thus retold by ordinary citizens.

The myth of corporate omnipotence

The third myth underpinning the responses and appropriation of climate change we termed '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. Corporate omnipotence serves as an explanation for the success of corporate capitalism's development, as well as the answer to its failures. In particular, it stresses the inevitability of capitalism as the future, and frames the response to climate change via a market logic, through the pricing of carbon emissions and further commodifying nature.

In relation to climate change, the myth of corporate omnipotence takes various forms. One example has been the promotion of the expansion of capitalism through the pricing of so-called externalities such as GHG emissions (Spaargaren and Mol 2013). As Newell and Paterson (2010) note, the embrace of a 'market solution' to climate change during the late 1980s and 1990s reflected the prevailing hegemony of neo-liberalism in which markets were seen as the most efficient mechanisms for achieving economic and political outcomes. In the framing of climate change as 'the biggest market failure the world has seen' (Stern 2008, p. 1), the inevitable response became one of pricing GHG emissions so that market mechanisms could drive a shift in technology and innovation away from fossil fuels towards renewable energies. This could involve the creation of emissions trading schemes in which a total emissions limit is determined and tradable permits allocated to actors. Here, government would provide the general architecture of policy, leaving the specifics of emissions reduction to corporations (Newell and Paterson 2010, pp. 25–29).

Mirroring this broader pattern, the political battle over climate change in Australia has revolved around attempts to introduce an emissions trading system

and investment in renewable energy (Garnaut 2011, Nyberg *et al.* 2013). Corporate political responses have varied from a rejection of climate science and the promotion of 'business as usual', through to businesses advocating the need to price carbon emissions upon a market logic. As a result, even companies which were progressive in their recognition of climate science remained wedded to 'solutions' which framed climate change as amenable to market solutions and managerial expertise. For instance, at BankCo, significant efforts had gone into the identification of new market opportunities arising from emissions trading and 'carbon pricing'. As one senior manager explained:

> Our commercial response in the institutional bank has got four prongs. One is carbon trading. Two is education and capacity building. We need all of the relationship managers, sales guys, FX traders, everyone to have an understanding of what's going on. The third is integrating carbon risk into our credit systems, processes and policies, which is an ongoing piece of work. The fourth is customer solutions. Renewable energy investment, which is massive, and integrated carbon solutions – what do customers need in response to this?

Within the finance and insurance sectors, the discourse of 'risk management' was a recurring theme in justifying the business response to climate change. At InsureCo, for instance, rapidly escalating claims following a series of record-breaking floods, storms, and bushfires led the company to build a specialist internal group of scientists and actuaries to price the climate-change risk of its insurance products better. As a manager explained:

> We're all about understanding risk and anything that can impact financial returns. It's an acknowledgement that external factors have a direct impact on financial returns and good performance management of these sorts of dimensions of performance generally correlate to good financial returns.

The narrative of 'rational' and 'efficient' corporate responses reinforced the idea that the only possible response to climate change relied on the existing logic of corporate capitalism and neo-liberalism. The introduction of government policies that mirrored corporate logics ensured that responses to climate change were 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. Moreover, through the 'rational' application of 'risk management' tools and processes, uncertainty was claimed to be overcome and control over the future assured through calculation and analysis. The myth of corporate omnipotence therefore presented the uncertainty of climate change as manageable. Indeed, climate change became an enterprising opportunity. 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).

Table 2.   Functions of corporate political myths regarding climate change.

	Corporate environmentalism	Corporate citizenship	Corporate omnipotence
Basic narrative	Corporations as saviours of the environment	Corporations as moral and caring 'citizens'	Unquestionable authority of corporations and 'market forces'
Objects and practices	'Green' products and innovations	Political activity and lobbying	Calculations and valuation of nature as commodities
Identity projects	Individuals as 'green' consumers and employees	Individuals as corporate constituents	Individuals as 'ecopreneurs'
Significance	Justifies continuation of consumption and economic growth	Justify the moral legitimacy of corporations	Provides certainty that corporations and markets will 'solve' climate change, business as usual will not be threatened

Discussion

The purpose of our analysis has been to identify the key political myths narrated by corporations and corporate actors in responding to climate change, and identify the purpose and significance of these myths. Rather than assessing these myths as real or unreal, we have sought to illustrate their function and political signification; i.e., how the narrations of these myths address the political condition of climate change. While the key features of each myth are distinguished in Table 2, they are interdependent and overlapping in supporting a broader imaginary of corporate capitalism. For example, portraying corporations as environmental saviours legitimises their roles as citizens informing regulation that mirror the logics favouring corporations. Their overlapping significance thus provides a dominant orientation, a social imaginary (Castoriadis 1987), for how we see, understand, and act in society to address climate change.

Corporate environmentalism as a claimed solution to climate change

As we have seen, the myth of corporate environmentalism stresses how companies in undertaking voluntary reductions in their GHG emissions and producing 'green' products and services offer solutions to climate change. While critics highlight the potential for 'greenwashing' and hypocrisy (Pearse 2012), this criticism prompts further adaptation of corporate environmental mythology through re-narration. So, for example, the limitations of earlier forms of corporate environmentalism are seen as remedied through improved transparency and accountability (see, e.g., Balch 2012).

The significance of this political myth is profound. In presenting corporations as best placed to respond to climate change, alternatives to address climate change, such as, government regulation, are subdued. The human response is thus converted to a reinforcement of 'business as usual'; we can best respond to climate change not by questioning the underlying logic of our economic system, but rather by expanding what we currently do as 'green' employees and consumers (Schlosberg and Rinfret 2008). Moreover, the myth provides meaning to our continuous consumption, with consumer choice portrayed as a democratic ideal, and freedom equated to private ownership. Corporate environmentalism closes the cognitive dissonance between our beliefs (concern over climate change) and our behaviour (continued production and consumption contributing to GHG emissions) by suggesting that individual consumption is the solution to a collective problem (Hamilton 2010). The responsibility for climate change is thus directed to individuals, with corporations presented as value-neutral providers.

In narrating the myth of corporate environmentalism, humanity's response to climate change is limited to consuming our way out of a crisis produced through over-consumption. This, however, misses the point that it is not enough to politicise these actions – e.g. choosing between 'brown' versus 'green' consumption – rather we need to politicise the solutions, both individual and collective. 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.

Corporate citizenship as a claim for legitimacy and morality in offering solutions

While the myth of corporate environmentalism provides apparent solutions to climate change, the accompanying myth of corporate citizenship provides corporations with a recognised and moral role in addressing this issue. Indeed, the fact that 'corporate citizenship' is a dead metaphor highlights the strength of the myth. In the ongoing debate about whether corporations can or should act as 'good' citizens (Valente and Crane 2010, Porter and Kramer 2011), or claims that they are 'bad' citizens (Barley 2007, Banerjee 2008), the myth is further reworked and reinforced, such that the strange personification of the firm is now seen as a natural state of affairs.

Beyond discussing corporate roles in deliberative democracies (Matten and Crane 2005, Scherer and Palazzo 2011), we need to engage with the way corporate citizenship incorporates political and social rights. In particular, this myth provides the political signification of corporations as legitimate and moral entities in public debate. Corporations appear to speak for 'the people', 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 stating 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, via consumption. The significance of corporate citizenship for people then is that it provides consumption with a political identity.

In this way, citizenship itself becomes subverted and acts as a surrogate for corporate interests of profit and shareholder value. As critics have noted (Crouch 2004, Barley 2007), 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 self-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. Indeed, the claim at the heart of this particular political myth is that through their rational expertise, corporations can tame nature. Alternative responses, such as direct government regulation of GHG emissions and mandated restrictions on the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, are marginalised in favour of market solutions which favour corporate profitability. The state is thus not redrawn or sidestepped; rather, the myth of corporate omnipotence ensures that states both create and assist markets to address climate change through corporate activities (Castree 2011). The logical outcome of this political myth is that any actions in response to climate change must first demonstrate a 'business case', and those which threaten profitability must be rejected. Corporate solutions thereby become the only possible solutions.

The political myth of corporate omnipotence has sought to quell attempts at environmental regulation and assert that corporate responses and self-regulation are sufficient. 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, the political debate reverts to 'normality'.

Indeed, 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 sacrifice.

Political myths and the creative self-destruction of the environment

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 stabilise nature diverts energy from more radical responses (Boykoff *et al*. 2010). The implication is that we reproduce the division between culture and nature rather than question or problematise this distinction, despite the obvious observation that without an environment there can be no society, let alone economy.

This capitalist social imaginary then obscures the environmental destruction that it reaps. The physical realities of anthropogenic 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 self-destruction, 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? And yet as Bottici and Challand (2006, p. 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.

These mythologies are often harder to discern in a society that claims to be rational and 'de-mythologized' (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. To question the myths of corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, or corporate omnipotence is often interpreted as tantamount to sacrilege, 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 (Jacques *et al.* 2008). 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

Despite the growing evidence of an emerging climate crisis, there is little sign that humanity will yet respond in a meaningful way to avert disaster. While the global and temporal scale of anthropogenic climate change makes united human action difficult, we suggest there are other fundamental reasons why humanity's response has been 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 corporations 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.

We argue that the political myths we have identified create an appealing image of human progress that prevents any meaningful challenge to our current path. These myths support a common narrative; a social imaginary of capitalist 'rationality' and 'efficiency', of human mastery over nature. Climate change not only reveals the underlying contradictions of capitalism, 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 other societal actors, have continuously reinforced the myths supporting corporate environmentalism, corporate citizenship, and corporate omnipotence. These myths provide significance to the corporation's role as a saviour of the environment, caring citizen, and unquestionable authority. They also provide significance to people's 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 here 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 interrelated myths of corporate

environmentalism, corporate citizenship, and corporate omnipotence recast the extraordinary nature of climate change into a rather mundane issue of corporate rationalisation. Our emphasis has been on critically evaluating the current capitalist imaginary to provide room potentially 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 (see, e.g., Hulme 2009).

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. As others have noted (Gilding 2011), in previous periods of extreme peril, some societies have been able to fashion new political myths quickly 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 organisation and engagement that involve dramatic reductions in GHG emissions and adaptation to already locked-in changes in climate. To reach this stage, however, we need to be aware of the meanings of our existing myths and our current imaginings.

Acknowledgements

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