

ECOPOLITICS PODCAST: Additional Pedagogical Resources (Episode 14)

Episode 14: Corporate Social Responsibility

Overview: Greenwashing, or legitimate Corporate Social Responsibility? Dr. Hamish van der Ven (McGill) helps us understand these concepts before walking us through two case studies.

Key Takeaways

- Corporate Social Responsibility is a broad term that includes various sets of responsibilities and actions taken up by corporations. It may include environmental, social, and other changes to business practices.
- Corporate greenwashing is when a company exaggerates or lies about their environmental credentials or impact. Avoiding greenwashing requires corporations to “avoid making sweeping generalizations” about their positive impact (Dr. van der Ven, 6:20-7:03).
- While there are reasons to be skeptical about some corporate actions, there are also opportunities for genuine social and ecological benefit from corporate action, particularly since corporations play such a large role in global commerce. As Dr. van der Ven cites, there are instances where “Coke is literally more important than the United Nations” in terms of its reach and impact.

Discussion Questions

1. This episode suggests that what we view as greenwashing is affected by our positionality. How does your own positionality shape what you interpret to be greenwashing vs. genuine responsible eco-behaviour by corporations?
2. What do you think about the idea, articulated by Dr. van der Ven, that the level of scrutiny an eco-label is likely to receive in the marketplace, and the company’s motivations for change, are both important to determining whether the claims associated with that label are likely to be credible?
3. What kinds of opportunities and challenges do large corporate actors hold for positive ecological transformation?
4. Should it mainly be the role of the individual consumer to educate themselves about corporate eco-action and greenwashing, or the responsibility of the state in regulating sustainable corporate practices and false eco-advertising?

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Learn more about our Guest

Hamish van der Ven

- <https://hamishvanderven.com>

Select articles, books and videos

- Bullock, G. and **van der Ven, H.** 2020. "The Shadow of the Consumer: Analyzing the Importance of Consumers to the Uptake and Sophistication of Ratings, Certifications, and Eco-Labels." *Organization & Environment* 33(1): 75-95.
- Singer, A and **van der Ven, H.** 2019. "Beyond market, firm, and state: Mapping the ethics of global value chains." *Business and Society Review* 124(3): 325-343.

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- Patagonia. "Why Regenerative Organic? Part 3: What we're doing (and Why)" Youtube. June 29 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sfxp7eKuETo>
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Learn more about Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, and Greenwashing

- Jaworska, Sylvia. "Change But No Climate Change: Discourses of Climate Change in Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting in the Oil Industry." *International Journal of Business Communication*. 55, no. 2 (2018): 194–219.
- Knezevic, I. (2016). "Making wise food choices: Food labelling, advertising, and the challenge of becoming an informed eater." In *Food Studies: Critical Perspectives (2nd Ed.)*. Koc, M., J. Sumner and A. Winson (Eds). Don Mills: Oxford University Press Canada, p. 139-152.
- Whitfield, Ronald., and Jeanne M. McNett. *A Primer on Sustainability: In the Business Environment* First edition. New York, New York (222 East 46th Street, New York, NY 10017): Business Expert Press, 2014.
- Waldman, David A., Günter K. Stahl, Donald S. Siegel, Deborah E. Rupp, and Abigail McWilliams. *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility: Psychological and Organizational Perspectives*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2019.