

Greenwashing: the capitalist corruption of reflexivity

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This critical review looks at the process of 'greenwashing' and applying theories of contemporary society. Greenwashing is defined as a tactic of public relations, involving a company presenting itself as more environmentally conscious than it is in practice. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is increasingly being incorporated into businesses ways of operating (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). CSR refers to corporations taking into account social issues and the implications of their practices on society. I aim to examine to what extent the notion of CSR is authentic in relation to impact on climate and use examples of greenwashing practices to assess this and will focus primarily on practices of energy companies.

First, a look at the incompatibility of capitalist/neoliberal values and meaningful solutions to the climate crisis is provided. From this, Beck's theory of risk society will be explored to examine how reflexive modernity has resulted in society becoming more environmentally aware, specifically in relation to how businesses have used reflexivity as a way to keep the reflexive consumer on side. Lastly, theories of the information society are explored in relation to society's desensitisation to images and information on climate catastrophe and how this has contributed to lack of action.

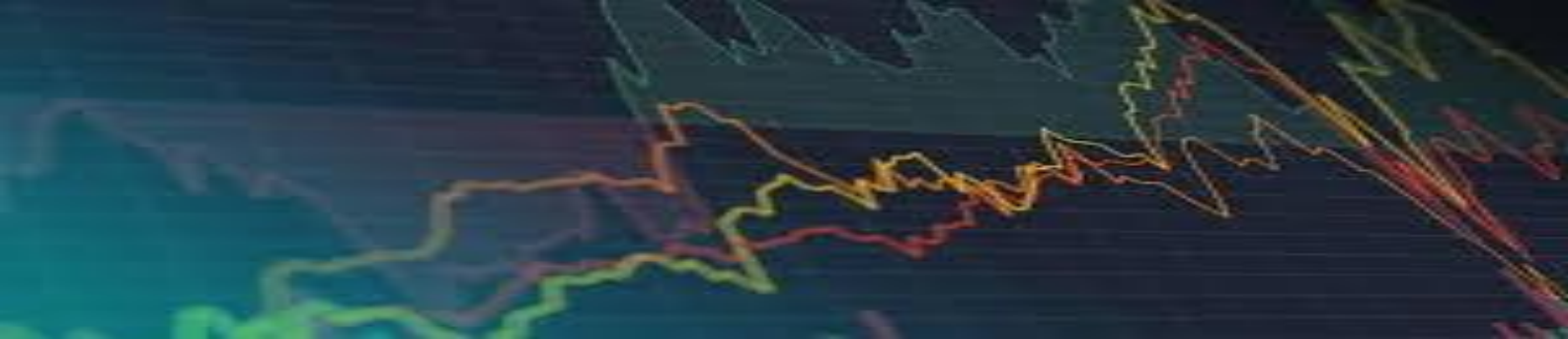
Naomi Klein's (2015) *'This Changes Everything'* is influential in exploring the incompatibility of capitalism and climate justice. Klein (2015, p.60) writes that 'trade trumps climate', using the example of Ontario's successful initiative to move away from coal, towards renewable energy.

Successful that is until Japan and the EU took issue with terms of the programme that violated free trade agreements. Klein lists multiple renewable energy attempts that have been taken down by other nations over accusations of violating free trade. As both climate and free trade agreements continued to be made through the 1990s and early 2000s, it was clear that trade would always win in a situation where the two interests clash. Enforcement and penalties of breaking the agreements were weak under climate but a genuine threat under trade. It seems entirely nonsensical that in a society where we have been

warned of the catastrophic, irreversible effects of climate change, nothing seems to come before profit. Prioritisation of free markets is a core value of neoliberalism.



An example of the way in which neoliberal values have placed responsibility for climate action onto the individual is BPs creation of the carbon footprint. The term was invented as an advertising strategy (Solnit, 2021.) Individuals are able to calculate their own carbon emissions with the aim to cut down. This is a form of greenwashing as it tells the individual consumer that they are the problem when, in fact, oil giants such as BP pose a far greater threat. The idea of the individual being able to conquer all is central to the ideology of neoliberal, capitalist society. However, the climate crisis cannot be solved through individual action alone. In order for real change to be made, a drastic restructuring of societal structures is necessary. Capitalism can go on unchanged if responsibility is shifted to the individual.



After establishing the viewpoint that possibilities of climate justice are limited under capitalism, I will now look at how corporations are using the notion of reflexivity, demonstrated through greenwashing, to allow consumers to continue buying into capitalist economy under the pretence that corporations care about climate. A reflexive modern society can be described as a society with self-awareness. Ulrich Beck is a reflexive modernist who believes we are living in an extended period of modernity.

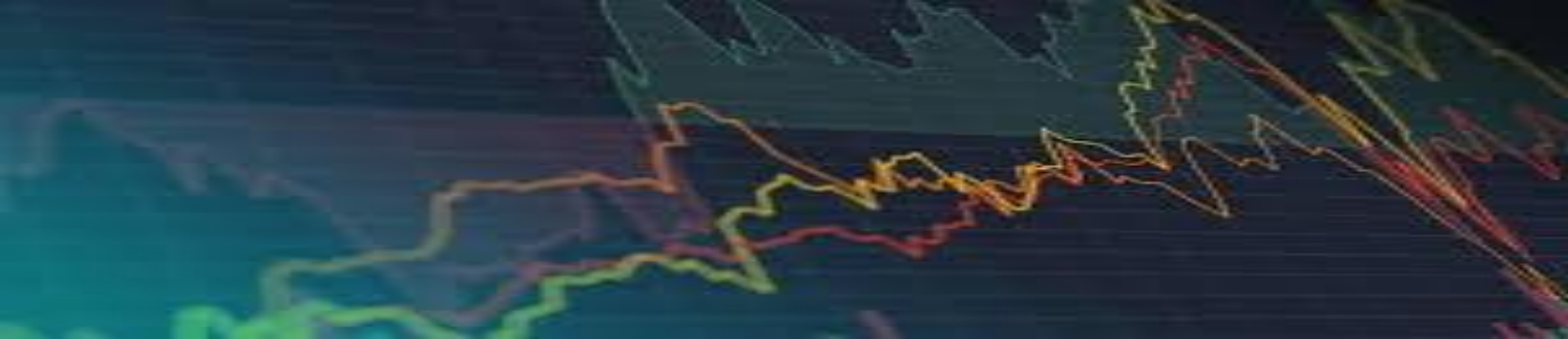
Beck (2015) argues that growth is no longer the central concern of society. He states that society has progressed to a point where we now face the consequences of modernity, Beck sees risk as a consequence. Reflexivity is the idea that from modernization processes, we are now faced with 'goods' and 'bads', and from the bads, comes a reflexive society. According to Beck, bads become a positive force as they lead to a change in social thinking. Beck highlights the idea that events such as natural disasters cause production of goods as they make people aware of the side effects of modernity. He calls them an 'emancipatory catastrophe' (Beck, 2015, pp.75-88.)

Here I apply Beck's theory of risk society to greenwashing. I also look at how the concept of emancipatory catastrophism can be applied, and whether greenwashing can be used as a contradictory example to it. Beck highlights that from modernisation, threats now come from internal forces as opposed to external. We are the problem, and in reflexive modernity, we are aware of this. Therefore, as consumers we are, supposedly, more conscious of our consumption habits, what we buy and the services we use. In capitalist society, companies need to keep the

consumer consuming. Therefore, businesses need to appear to be reflexively responding. This is where green washing comes in, the process of making a company appear to be tackling their environmentally damaging practices and replacing them for 'green' ones. It has been argued that the scale on which change needs to occur requires a complete re wiring of our capitalist economy (Adler, 2022). Capitalist institutions are not likely to favour this idea. Therefore, in order to keep the consumer on side, businesses engage in greenwashing to appease the reflexive consumer while continuing business with little change. I suggest that although Beck's theory of reflexive modernisation can be used to describe the state of awareness in social attitudes and consciousness, reflexivity has been corrupted, commodified, and warped by corporations who have vested interests in ensuring consumers carry on consuming at the cost of the planet, through the process of greenwashing.



Oil giant Shell is an example of a corporation using reflexivity to present itself as 'green' when in fact it is having disastrous environmental implications, as is any company continuing to extract and sell fossil fuels (Monbiot, 2019.) Shell's website states, 'From electric vehicle charging to renewable electricity for your home, Shell is giving customers more low-carbon choices and helping drive the UK's energy transition.' The customer is made responsible and Shell claim they are a driving force in the renewable energy transition. In reality, the company is still committed to sourcing new gas and oil with no intention of decreasing production. Shell is neither in line with or intending to reach net zero targets, it goes against the Paris agreement, and wants to grow fossil gas business (ClientEarth,



2021.) Investment from Shell into renewable energy is dwarfed in comparison to investments in fossil fuels. As *ClientEarth* put it the 'gaps' in the climate pledges made by shell allow for practices the company would rather try to hide to continue. Shell present environment as being at the forefront of their thinking, however, this is clearly far from true.

Despite greenwashing being a process of misinformation, in the information society (IS) I argue that as consumers we have access to sources that criticise and shed light on this misinformation. This leads to questioning, are we as consumers happy to accept greenwashed marketing despite awareness that what we are consuming isn't authentically green? Webster presents the idea that there are multiple different ways of defining the IS. He defines five key developments:

technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural. Webster's core idea is that 'information/knowledge is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days' (Webster, 2014, p. 8)

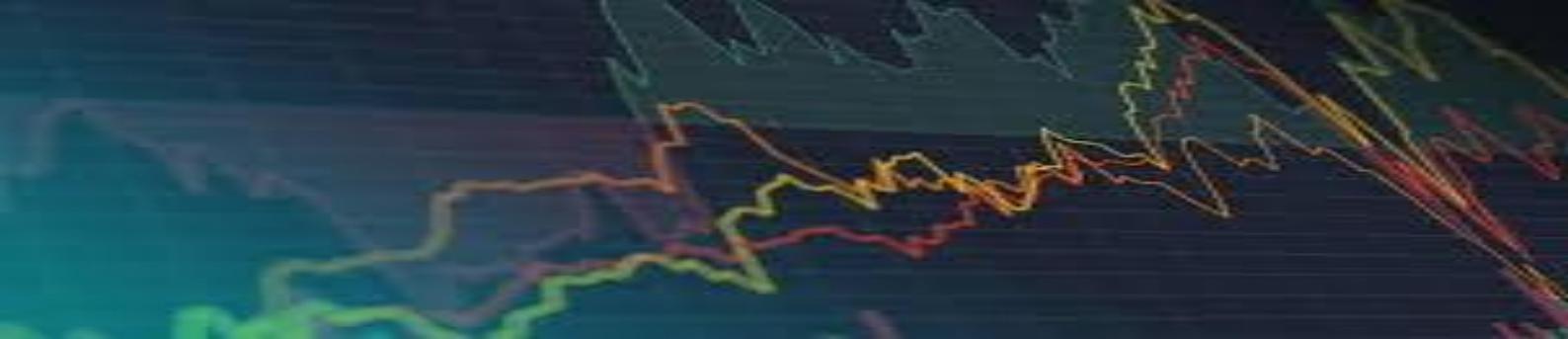
Technological developments are particularly significant in many IS theories. The internet is seen as a revolutionary system that allows constant access to unlimited sources of information. The internet is also linked with the spatial definition of IS. Networks like the internet mean that society is no longer constricted by space. It doesn't require physically travelling to a location to see images of climate change induced disaster, for example. Smith (2022) argues that engagement with media has enabled a 'superficial' interaction between people and climate change. Smith talks about the catharsis people experience when they engage with content tackling climate change. They feel their engagement with this content is in itself tackling the crisis. Consumption of greenwashed products or services is an example

of this process. When a consumer buys an item of clothing labelled as 'green' or consumes energy from a company profiting from fossil fuels but branding themselves as striving towards net zero, their climate anxiety is alleviated. Smith (2022, p. 4) links this to consumer culture; in capitalist society climate catastrophe is 'packaged as a consumer product'. This suggests that there are also limits to the extent to which consumers can be described as reflexive. Despite constant access and exposure to information about the climate crisis, we still participate in destructive behaviours.

Through this critical review I have been confronted with the phenomena and contradictory nature of modern societies reaction to its biggest threat. The detrimental impact of greenwashing is that it draws upon the reflexive awareness of modern society and uses it against itself. More alarmingly, it allows the consumer to feel catharsis, despite awareness of the consequences of their consumption.

From individual's fixation on a 'carbon footprint' conjured up by an oil and gas company, to claims from Shell to be driving the change to renewable energy, it is clear that climate anxiety is being fed on by corporations and turned into a marketing strategy at the ultimate cost: the planet. I conclude with the suggestion that the claim of reflexive modernity as an accurate description of contemporary society is naïve. Can reflexivity be claimed when capitalism sees climate catastrophe as a commercial opportunity? Just as society under capitalism cannot be deemed as truly reflexive, perhaps as consumers we are also too comfortable with our consumer lifestyles to be motivated to change, even when the stakes are so high. In order for a difference to be made, collective, radical change is needed.





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