

A Company Presents Itself to the World

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As we all know, environmental breakdown is rooted in capitalism's quest for perpetual growth. According to O'Connor (quoted in Büscher et al 2010/2013, p. 3) the "environmental crisis has given liberal capitalist society a new lease on life." He continues: "Now, through purporting to take in hand the saving of the environment, capitalism invents a new legitimization for itself: the sustainable and rational use of nature". "Those who hold the power and they are not all heads of state, see themselves as saviours of the world, and offer the population the opportunity of becoming their clients" is how John Berger has referred to such cognitive dissonance. Critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics are employed to scrutinize a powerful corporation's website. This company produces and distributes food globally. The story it presents to the world maintains that it protects animal welfare, the environment and people, among other things, in all its operations. The language it employs on its corporate websites will be subjected to close analysis.

Keywords: agribusiness, discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, greenwashing, sustainability

Introduction

These ecocritical principles frame the following remarks. Ecology, like medical science, studies relationships that sustain life and preserve the ecosystems that life depends on. Ecolinguistics (Alexander/Stibbe 2014; see also Alexander, 2009) is concerned with the role of language in forming, maintaining, influencing or destroying relationships between humans, other life forms and the environment. Ecolinguists study groups of humans and how they coordinate their practices and world-views using discourses—particular ways of talking about, writing about, representing, and, ultimately, constructing or reconstructing reality.

The Coming of Woke Capitalism

I start by discussing the notion of "woke capitalism". To quote what Dunn (2021) wrote: "the PR company Edelman identifies 'cause marketing'—taking a position on an issue wholly unrelated to your business—as one of the more effective ways to shift units".

In his monograph, *Woke Capitalism: Democracy Under Threat in the Age of Corporate Righteousness*, Carl Rhodes, states (2022): "with its growing use in English vocabulary from the mid-2010s, it did not take long for the term 'woke' to be applied to corporations who publicly supported socially progressive causes" (pp. 7-8).

Rhodes justifies why he wrote his book (2022): "Rather than being the death knell of capitalism, might business becoming woke serve to extend the power and reach of capitalism in deeply problematic ways?" (p. 11).

He says “woke capitalism needs to be opposed and resisted on democratic grounds because it allows for public political interests to become increasingly dominated by the private interests of global capital” (Rhodes, 2022, p. 11).

So, in keeping with contemporary language usage let us ask how “woke” is this company I shall be looking at?

A Company’s Individual Angle on Woke Issues

I consider some of the issues this giant private, multinational, agribusiness company Cargill claim to be responding to in keeping with their core values and guiding principles in their 2020 Annual Report. A main issue is that of equal opportunities and being against racism.

In their annual report they state: “For Cargill, this includes confronting systemic racism, using our voice to push for policy changes that will end racial disparities and protect everyone in our communities, and taking action to mitigate bias within our own company and ensure we reflect the communities we serve.”

And in this context of widespread ‘wokeness’ Cargill assert in their 2021 Annual Report that: “racial injustices—including the murder of George Floyd in our headquarters community of Minneapolis shortly before the start of the fiscal year—made it clear the status quo was not acceptable.”

To contextualize such assertions we can bring in Larry Fink, the billionaire head of the investment management company BlackRock. Writing in his ‘2019 letter to CEOs: profit & purpose’, he claims: “Unnerved by fundamental economic changes and the failure of government to provide lasting solutions, society is increasingly looking to companies, both public and private, to address pressing social and economic issues.”

Already in 2018 Fink had been promoting the same clear message: “Society is demanding that companies, both public and private, serve a social purpose.” Fink says that “[s]takeholders are pushing companies to wade into sensitive social and political issues—especially as they see governments failing to do so effectively.”

The Business Roundtable (2019), America’s most influential lobby group of corporate leaders, retreated from its longstanding position that corporations exist principally to serve their shareholders.

There are similarly stated claims made by Cargill. But a reality check can cause us to have some doubts. Consider the NGO Corporate Accountability Lab’s website where we find the 2020 post that highlights certain corporations that publicly support Black Lives Matter and yet continue to disregard Black and Brown lives throughout their supply chains. Among others they cite as repeat offenders Cargill.

Staying with the Corporate Accountability Lab’s report, we find the following: “Since 2001, Cargill and other major chocolate companies like Nestle have promised to end child labor in their cocoa supply chains. And yet, it is estimated that more than two million Black children are still working under dangerous conditions in the West African cocoa sector, which produces most of the world’s cocoa. Many of these kids have been trafficked and are forced laborers.”

A class action was brought by former forced child laborers in the Cote d’Ivoire cocoa sectors before a US court of law. But the Supreme Court found that Nestlé and Cargill were not liable for human rights abuses on the farm in an 8-1 decision.

A further example of insincerity on Cargill’s part comes from their sacking workers who were members of a union. According to the International Union of Food (IUF) (2021) “The most recent firings at Cargill’s starch

factory in Bursa-Orhangazi, Turkey, concern 14 blue collar production workers. These workers were dismissed in 2018 while exercising their fundamental right to organise a union.”

In Cargill’s own Commitment on Human Rights, they state, “[w]e take guidance from the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the International Labour Organisation Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.” And yet, in Turkey, Cargill refuses to live up to the standards that it publicly claims to respect.

It is interesting to consider how popular Cargill actually is among its customers, especially farmers who make up a sizeable chunk of these. The recent remarks on Cargill by a US farmer on the AgTalk farmers’ chat forum (3/3/2022) throw sharp light on how he sees the company as being lost and not knowing what they want to be. These are his comments: “It almost seems to me they are ashamed of their roots in Agriculture and want to be this ‘woke’ corporate entity that doesn’t have to deal with farmers on an individual basis.” He concludes in a critical and scathing fashion.

“Company was once run by farm boys that didn’t go back to the farm and today is run by kids with master’s degrees in business. MBA’s that understand algorithms, but don’t understand we are still a relationship-based business, where today’s screwing might affect your future business model. Their animal protein business is a money printing press, but they don’t have to deal with individual farmers much. Very interesting the direction this company heads as the family goes to the sidelines.”

Cargill and Sustainability

At a meeting of the land use and forest sustainability advisory panel in November 2020 (Cargill, 2020b), we can read:

“CEO MacLennan emphasized that sustainability is the most pressing issue for the food and agriculture industry, for this decade and beyond. To reinforce this, Cargill has integrated sustainability into the company’s corporate strategy, which was discussed and approved by the board of directors. MacLennan also acknowledged that Cargill cannot solve the world’s greatest sustainability challenges on its own. Meaningful progress will require active participation across the supply chain.”

Like many other companies, Cargill draws on the weak sustainability model of sustainable development; they construct ‘sustainable development’ as a synergy between the company’s economic goals, environmental protection and community involvement.

Cargill don’t give an exact meaning of ‘sustainable development’ in their reports. They assert that they are advancing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, but do not state how.

The Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group Mighty Earth recently took a stab at identifying the ultimate bottom-feeder in environmental governance and decided to award the dubious honour to Cargill, the agri-food giant. Mighty Earth’s 7,000-word report is especially scathing in regard to Cargill’s role in vast deforestation in Brazil by farmers from whom it buys massive amounts of soybeans (which largely become livestock feed).

Cargill stoutly defends itself against Mighty Earth’s charges. It noted in a statement that it donated almost US\$60 million to charities in 54 countries and has agreed to a zero-deforestation commitment over a period of time in its cocoa, palm oil and soybean supply chains. “It’s hard to hear,” Ruth Kimmelshue, the company’s chief sustainability officer, told the New York Times. “It doesn’t feel very good.”

In their article Wright, Olenick and Westervelt (2021) comment: “The nation’s worst polluters managed to evade accountability and scrutiny for decades as they helped the fossil fuel industry destroy our planet”.

One name they single out as The Destroyer is the CEO of Cargill, David MacLennan. As they say, Cargill, a global food corporation, has a profit model based on rainforest destruction caused by soy and beef production, particularly in the Amazon.

There are many members of the US public and activists who continue to call out Cargill’s destruction of the rain forest in South America through their commercial dealings. In September 2019 even Fox News carried a story of a rally against Cargill:

“A group of protesters was out Thursday to call on companies to stop practices they say are having negative effects on the Amazon rainforest. A group of 50 showed up to the Minneapolis Institute of Art—an organization that Cargill and the Cargill family has supported.”

The group held up a poster on the march which changed a slogan Cargill used in one of its annual reports ‘Cargill Helping the world thrive’ to ‘Cargill Helping the world burn’.

The group says “The bigger message is these giant multinational corporations need to be held accountable because the connection between climate change and industrial agriculture is clear.”

Talk about Traceability of the Supply Chain: A New Mantra

In the 2020 Annual report Cargill also talk about traceability of the supply chain: “Transparency along the supply chain is necessary to continue improving sustainability outcomes, and so we are investing in traceability solutions”.

In the Unearthed Greenpeace (2021) report we find much evidence that contradicts this section: Isabel Figueiredo, a Cerrado ecologist at the Institute for the Society, Population and Nature in Brazil said: “There is no direct connection between what they say and what they promote in the plantations.”

Glenn Hurowitz, the CEO of the environmental organization Mighty Earth, said that he was sceptical of claims that soya supply chains were too complex to properly monitor, given that Mighty Earth has in the past presented Cargill with clear examples of deforestation in their supply chain.

The tolerance of Cargill and other agribusinesses of the violent deforestation of the Amazon can be seen on the programme ‘Weltspiegel’ of the German TV broadcaster ARD. They showed footage in 2019 in Brazil’s Cerrado Region. Greenpeace Brazil and accompanying journalists were caught up in the May 2019 raid, witnessing first-hand the aggression used against local people.

In the report Cargill claims: In our cocoa business, 50% of the sustainable beans in our direct supply chain are now traceable back to the farm.”

As Mighty Earth say: “Like soya, the cocoa trade has driven the destruction of forests.

Analysis of ‘Sustainable Development’ and ‘Sustainability’

This section investigates the textual usage and the ‘content’ of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’ in Cargill’s 2021 Annual report, using a concordancing software program, compiled by Laurence Anthony, downloadable from his web site <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>. First a routine

quantitative analysis is undertaken employing the computer-based concordancing programme. After this a qualitative analysis of certain lexical items in selected concordances can be undertaken.

The adjective ‘sustainable’ occurs 15 times, ‘sustainably’ once. The noun ‘sustainability’ occurs 5 times. The ‘sustainab*****’ group is thus made up of 21 words. They thus constitute 1,44 % of the text. A not inconsiderable sum.

The broader co-texts of ‘sustainab*****’ are interesting, precisely because the collocates, sometimes ‘economy’, ‘growth’, ‘development’, at others ‘way’ and the co-texts, turn out to be referring sometimes to the economy, once to the environment ‘water management’, but mostly to business matters.

A look at the co-texts of ‘sustainable’ is helpful.

Co-texts of sustainable

Table 1

The Co-texts of ‘Sustainable’

Co-text 1	And throughout the year, the unfolding reality of climate change in real time created urgency to build a more sustainable economy, including in food and agriculture.
Co-text 2	Smart, sustainable growth \$134.4 billion in revenues, a 17% increase
Co-text 3	We acquired a specialty beauty ingredients company that will allow us to provide more sustainable, nature-derived solutions to the world’s leading beauty brands.
Co-text 4	Across our portfolio, we are focusing our innovative energy on finding more sustainable ways to bring customers, consumers and society the goods they need.
Co-text 5	We are committed to achieving sustainable water management in all priority watersheds by 2030.
Co-text 6	Achieving sustainable development for the world’s people will require collaboration around shared values.
Co-text 7	Cargill launched Sea Further Sustainability, an initiative that will help them produce healthy, nutritious fish with feed that is more sustainable.
Co-text 8	To help end deforestation in our soy supply chains, we committed \$30 million to create the Land Innovation Fund for Sustainable Livelihoods.
Co-text 9	4.1 million Global attendance at our farmer trainings for sustainable agricultural practices since 2017, with a goal of 10 million by 2030
Co-text 10	Cargill and Heifer International have expanded our Hatching Hope partnership to Kenya, with the initial goal to improve nutrition and incomes of 10 million people through sustainable poultry production.
Co-text 11	Our purpose is to nourish the world in a safe, responsible and sustainable way.
Co-text 12	Our purpose is to nourish the world in a safe, responsible and sustainable way.
Co-text 13	As we drive progress against these areas, we’ll do so by engaging, empowering and advancing sustainable practices across farm and field, because we believe agriculture is how we’ll deliver.
Co-text 14	As the world joins in advancing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, we believe that many of the solutions to the challenges we’re facing can be found in the very place our food system begins: Agriculture.
Co-text 15	We’re also driving progress on priorities that safeguard our planet and help ensure we’re operating our business in a sustainable way.
Co-text 16	By empowering farming communities, protecting land and regenerating our soils, we’ll nourish this growing population – safely, responsibly and sustainably.

The text makes the usual corporate appeals to authority, when in co-text 14 we find “As the world joins in advancing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals,” as if the allusion is self-explanatory.

The semantic prosody surrounding ‘sustainable’ contains the positively loaded or associated items, sometimes known as ‘purr-words’ as left collocates, ‘achieving’ (twice) in co-texts 5 and 6.

Further words with a positive ring to them like ‘commitment and committed’ are shaded light grey (co-text 8). Then in co-texts 13, 14, 15 and 16 there are standard corporate purr words “we drive progress against these

areas, we'll do so by engaging, empowering and advancing", "in advancing", "We're also driving progress on priorities that safeguard our planet and help ensure we're" and "By empowering farming communities, protecting land and regenerating our soils".

On three of the 12 webpages which make up the 2021 Annual Report the term 'sustainability' occurs 5 times in all.

Table 2

The Co-texts of 'Sustainability'

Co-text 18	Boosting salmon sustainability
Co-text 19	As demand for seafood grows globally, salmon farmers want to protect the oceans that support their livelihood. In response, Cargill launched Sea Further Sustainability, an initiative that will help them produce healthy, nutritious fish with feed that is more sustainable. We aim to help salmon farmers reduce the environmental footprint of their fish by 30% by 2030.
Co-text 20	Our BeefUp Sustainability initiative is working with farmers and ranchers to cut emissions from our North American beef supply chain 30% by 2030.* Projects launched to date will reduce or sequester an estimated 1.7 million metric tons of CO ₂ e through outreach to 1,600 producers and some of our largest customers.
Co-text 21	Our approach to sustainability
Co-text 22	Our global sustainability strategy sets clear priorities based on the most material issues to our business. We identified Climate, Land & Water and People by evaluating the environmental, social and economic impacts of our diverse business and supply chains.

The labels and names Cargill gives many of its projects and initiatives resonate with euphemisms or wordplay: e.g. 'The Cargill Cocoa Promise' and 'Hatching Hope partnership' (co-text 18). And here we also have 'Sea Further Sustainability, an initiative' and 'Our BeefUp Sustainability initiative'.

There is no doubt that the environmental impact is enormous. Livestock farming has a vast environmental footprint. It contributes to land and water degradation, biodiversity loss, acid rain, coral reef degeneration and deforestation.

Cargill's Large Negative Impact on the Natural World

On a page of their website Cargill states: "Our poultry business is committed to conducting all aspects of operations with absolute integrity. For us, sustainability is a comprehensive endeavor that stretches from farm to fork. We are working to minimise the impacts of our operations and supply chains, all while respecting the animals in our care and enriching the communities where we live and work".

Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT), a Chicago-based nonprofit sued Cargill, Inc. ("Cargill") for misleading consumers by representing that its Honeysuckle White and Shady Brook Farms turkey products are environmentally friendly, and that the turkeys are treated humanely and raised by "independent family farmers."

Perhaps Cargill's largest negative impact on the natural world (Mighty Earth n.d.) is its role in driving the destruction of the world's last remaining intact forests and prairies.

As Francis Vergunst and Julian Savulescu write (April 26, 2017): "Meat production is highly inefficient—this is particularly true when it comes to red meat. To produce one kilogram of beef requires 25 kilograms of grain—to feed the animal—and roughly 15,000 litres of water. Pork is a little less intensive and chicken less still." ... "Feeding grain to livestock increases global demand and drives up grain prices, making it

harder for the world's poor to feed themselves. Grain could instead be used to feed people, and water used to irrigate crops.”

According to Unearthed. Greepeace (2020) Cargill has also violated various US environmental laws in recent years.

Mighty Earth, the environmental NGO, documented these infractions, along with many more, last summer (n.d.) and declared Cargill to be “the worst company in the world”—in response to which the Cargill CEO, David MacLennan, made pledges regarding deforestation.

Returning on to co-text 22 in the 2021 annual report, Cargill include land, climate and water in their global sustainability strategy.

“In the past, Cargill has focused on its direct operations, but its new approach to water management looks outside the factory, mixing strong science-based targets with a local perspective, all backed by a commitment to regenerative agriculture.”

Inequalities are present in every country lacking safe water and sanitation—a fact neglected by Cargill.

Cargill and Its False Solutions for the Climate Crisis

On the occasion of COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, the civil society Brazilian Human Rights organization Terra de direitos (in English ‘Land of rights’) published a devastating critique of Cargill’s green cover-up or greenwashing strategies in the name of sustainability. In Brazil Cargill is very present especially in the cities of Santarém and Itaituba, in the state of Pará. The company installed a seaport almost 20 years ago.

In the eyes of Terra de direitos Cargill has failed to acknowledge the role of indigenous peoples, quilombolas, as well as other traditional communities when it comes to protecting the environment. (A *quilombola* is an Afro-Brazilian resident of *quilombo* settlements first established by escaped slaves in Brazil.) Instead, the Brazilian Human Rights organization precisely characterizes Cargill’s greenwashing.

And with the company’s arrival in the territory a series of human rights violations in the surrounding communities took place. These were not consulted about the seaport’s installment as established according to Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

In Terra de direitos’ straightforward words: “To greenwash and conceal the damages against the community, the land, and the overall planet under the sustainability card is one of Cargill’s goals.” They quote Cargill’s slogan of “nurturing the world in a safe, responsible, and sustainable manner” and comment that “This statement functions as a sort of guiding slogan for the mechanisms that are used to clean Cargill’s image.”

Families have been suffering from the spread of soy production and the use of agrochemicals. “According to reports from indigenous people, the community’s main riverbed was silted for farming, and families do not use the water anymore because they fear agrochemical contamination. The crops and trees in these families’ houses are also being more attacked by insects and plagues, which are now concentrating on indigenous areas, where agrochemicals are not used.”

Cargill is using traceability tools (see section 4 above) as another greenwashing instrument where the company intends to show consumers how their products are produced. Furthermore, Cargill will not state, that the soy produced and exported by Brazil is transported through a seaport that was built on top of an archaeological site and sacred indigenous territory.

To conclude this report by Terra de direitos, we see that the greenwashing mechanisms employed by Cargill are based on a company policy, whereby the company presents itself in a façade to society as being a friend and protector of the environment. “Battling against false representations of the world” may at times seem a hopeless task (to quote Berger 1982/ 1985, p. 276) but the Brazilian Human Rights organization Terra de direitos (in English Land of rights) takes the maxim seriously.

Or in connection with the land-grabbing that Terra de direitos also mentions, we could again quote the English writer John Berger (2011, pp. 104-105) who long ago phrased it neatly: “Finally the theft by agro-business corporations, closely linked to global food retailers, of the initiatives once taken by those who worked the land: decisions about crops, varieties, seeds, fertilisers, the species of animals to breed, etc.—Once these were local, pragmatic decisions; today the corporations supply the producers and dictate what is to be produced. Global agriculture is becoming prepackaged—with the aim of turning the whole of nature into a commodity.”

Conclusion

The discussion of Cargill’s producing and trading food globally is framed within a set of ecocritical principles. This position unearths Cargill’s claim to be operating in a safe, responsible and sustainable way as highly misleading. Instead we find that Cargill engages in green cover-up or greenwashing strategies to downplay its destructive effect on the environment.

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