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Greening the Media

Greenwashing the Earth

What is 'green' and why is it such a pesky concept?

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In 1986, Jay Westerveld checked into a motel chain, no doubt tired from his travels.

As he settled into that room on the road, a room we all know so well, perhaps he encountered tired old towels and sheets. Or maybe they were brand spanking new and fluffy that just beg you to bury your head in them.

Whatever else Westerveld found, they were towels. And he noticed a promise that came with them. Again, it's something we're all familiar with.

The promise can take many forms. Today's hotel chains are keen to showcase their sense of corporate social responsibility and ideas of the triple bottom line ('people, profit, planet') are widespread.¹

Thirty years ago, Westerveld's "hosts" had a save-the-towel movement via a card that read: "Save Our Planet: Every day, millions of gallons of water are used to wash towels that have only been used once. You make the choice: A towel on the rack means, 'I will use again.' A towel on the floor means, 'Please replace.' Thank your for helping us conserve the Earth's vital resources." The card featured the green arrows that signify recycling.²

We've all seen this—shrouding corporate cost-cutting in verdant colors.

Westerveld decided to give it a name—greenwashing.

We think it's time to look at what the word 'green' really means. If it is the stuff of everyone from Friends of the Earth to the Hilton chain, does this coy little word really mean anything any more?³ Or rather, does "green" mean so many things that it has lost specificity?

It can signify displeasure, even disgust. For example, "he turned green" or "it's ludicrous to have green lawns in LA." But the meaning of the term is more complex than that. It is simultaneously serene, beneficial, disturbing, corrupted, radical, and conservative: green consumption, green certification, new (green) deal, and greenwashing.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, the word 'pollution' was in vogue to explain environmental hazards. Both a ubiquitous and a local sign, it seemed to be everywhere, yet isolable. The problems it described occurred when particular waterways, neighborhoods, or fields suffered negative externalities from mining, farming, or manufacturing. The issue was how to restore these places to their prior state: pristine, unspoiled, enduring. Pollution was about corporate malfeasance, governmental neglect, and public ignorance, and how to remedy their malign impact. It could be cleaned up if governments compelled companies to do so—and would soon be over, once those involved understood the problem.

But when greenhouse gases, environmental racism, global warming, and environmental imperialism appeared on the agenda, 'pollution' reached beyond national boundaries. It threatened the very Earth that gives and

sustains life, and did so in demographically unequal ways.

A word was found to describe the values and forms of life that encompassed a planetary consciousness to counter this disaster, as per the utopias of world government that had animated transnational imaginations for decades: “green” emerged to displace the more negative and limited term “pollution,” signifying both new possibilities and a greater and more global sense of urgency.

Today, it can equally refer to local, devolved, non-corporate empowerment, or to international consciousness and institutional action. “Green” environments are promoted as exercise incentives, encouragements for consumers to use quick-response codes, ways of studying whether plants communicate through music, attempts to push criminology towards interrogating planetary harm, gimmicks for recruiting desirable employees, and techniques for increasing labor productivity.⁴

The term is invoked by conservatives, in the plain sense of conserving the status quo. They emphasize maintaining the world for future generations. But it is also used by progressives, to explained the need to break with the present. They stress forward-looking anti-capitalist, multicultural, feminist perspectives about those future generations.

“Green” may highlight the disadvantages of technology, as a primary cause of environmental difficulties, or regard such innovations as future saviors, via devices and processes yet to be invented that will alleviate global warming.

It can favor state and international regulation, or be skeptical of public policy. It may encourage individual consumer responsibility, or question localism by contrast with collective action. It reflects left-right axes of politics yet argues that they should be transcended, because neither statism nor individualism can fix the dangers we confront.

Clearly, this odd little word, which annoyed Jay Westerveld in his monadic hotel room all those years ago, keeps being productive.

Whilst the term is just as available for malicious distortion as it was in the 1980s, the goal it refers to remains our best hope of planetary survival. But that doesn’t mean it can be permitted open and unchecked use, to provide greenwashing cover to exploitative polluters—after all, these businesses put themselves in the court of environmental justice when they declare their green intentions.

We don’t need a green semantics police. But we do need to contest greenwashing and hold so-called green corporations to the highest standards of environmental protection. Or what’s a heaven for?⁵

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