Corporate oxymorons

Peter Benson · Stuart Kirsch

Abstract   This article examines the promotion of corporate oxymorons that conceal the harm caused by corporations to people and environments. They are part of a larger set of strategies used by corporations to manage or neutralize critique. They often pair a desirable cover term such as *safe* or *sustainable* with a description of their product, for example cigarettes or mining. Repetition of the resulting contradictions—*safe cigarettes* or *sustainable mining*—renders the terms familiar and seemingly plausible. We suggest that the analysis of corporate oxymorons provides a valuable entry into the anthropology of capitalism.

Keywords   Capitalism · Corporate oxymorons · Language · George Orwell · Mining · Politics of resignation · Tobacco

Corporate oxymorons are a vivid and dangerous part of the contemporary world. Consider the safe cigarette myths of big tobacco, the attempt to reposition energy companies as green amidst climate change debates and questionable claims about sustainability made by the mining industry. Across multiple settings, multinational corporations have strategically turned to a language of social responsibility to legitimize corporate activities with negative human and environmental consequences. They use idioms of ethics, health, environmentalism, and corporate responsibility to conceal the contradictions of capitalism and promote business as

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usual. One of their key strategies is the form of neologism we call the *corporate oxymoron*.

We credit George Orwell (2003 [1949]) with calling our attention to the power of language to reduce the possibility of critical thinking, which we see embodied in new corporate slogans and public relations campaigns. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the authors of Newspeak, the fictional language of the state, created compound terms that combined contradictory assertions. Orwell referred to the acceptance of such terms as *doublethink*. A memorable example is President Reagan's introduction of the *Peacekeeper Missile* in 1982. This kind of oxymoron is formulated and deployed to annul the implication that something may be harmful. In Orwell's book, the state sought to make alternative thoughts impossible through tactical appropriation and juxtaposition of key terms rather than overt censorship. Many of these terms were euphemisms that "mean almost the exact opposite of what they appeared to mean" (Orwell 2003: 306).

In a similar way, Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987) emphasize the power of language to filter reality. Their concepts of "coding" and "over-coding" refer to the attribution of meanings and values to particular words by governments and corporations. These institutions often use handy figures of speech to encapsulate the ideologies and worldviews they espouse. The resulting figures of speech often become colloquial through their promotion. Examples include the substitution of such phrases as *collateral damage* for civilian casualties, *extraordinary rendition* for the illegal transfer of prisoners across national boundaries, and *enhanced interrogation* for torture. These terms come to seem natural, obscuring their ideological dimension (see Barthes 1972). This is what happens when keywords are "over-coded" (Deleuze and Parnet 2002). A particular keyword or figure of speech becomes dominant at the expense of alternative narratives and a critical understanding of the history of coding and over-coding itself. For example, Anderson's (1983) description of map-making demonstrates how the over-coding of a territory in keeping with nationalist ideologies leads to a naturalized sense of geographical connection and uniformity. Along these lines, postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard (1983) and Lyotard (1988) describe the fetish quality of language, in which keywords become simulacra or empty signifiers, and semantic realities become completely divorced from social realities. For example, political campaigns choose slogans that seek to promote a particular image of the party, such as the label "compassionate conservatism", even though the slogan may be contradicted by the party's agenda or policies (see Luntz 2006).

Like states, corporations also deliberately manipulate language to engage with their critics and limit government regulation. Anthropologists have described how neoliberal market reforms and international free trade agreements benefit corporations by reducing regulation and permitting the flexible organization of production and commodity chains around the world. However, anthropologists have paid less attention to how the realm of images, language and culture remains crucial to the operation and relatively unfettered expansion of multinational capital. The corporations discussed in this Forum—including BHP Billiton, Chevron, DuPont, and Philip Morris—claim to meet societal needs and enhance the public good more efficiently and effectively than the state. Such language ignores bad corporate actors

who harm people or the planet and unabashedly produce uneven geographies of accumulation, inequality, and suffering in the name of increased shareholder value. Much like governments, these corporations claim to play a beneficial and indispensible role in making healthier communities, cleaner environments, and better functioning economies and societies. Through public relations and advertising, corporations have become adept at promoting these messages.

The contributions to this Forum unpack the slogans and public relations campaigns used by corporations to shape the political environments in which they operate. These slogans are part of a larger set of strategies pursued by corporations to manage or neutralize critique: corporations promote doubt or ambiguity concerning the harms they cause (Davis 2002; Michaels 2008), borrow and co-opt the discourse of their critics, adopt the rituals of audit culture (Power 1994), in which monitoring substitutes for reform, and acquire symbolic capital through strategic investments in the academy. Anthropologists are well positioned to document and analyze the paradoxes that underpin these claims and practices. Ethnographic research can reveal the social, health, economic, scientific, informational, and environmental quandaries—and even catastrophes and crises—that corporations help make. Anthropologists can provide a critical perspective on how corporate oxymorons are legitimized at multiple levels, often with government support, despite their contestation by various social movements. The papers presented in this Forum take corporate oxymorons in various industries as entry points into critical ethnographic and theoretical engagement with how contemporary capitalism operates on local and global scales.

Corporations play a critical role in what elsewhere we call the *politics of resignation* (Benson and Kirsch 2010). Following Žižek (1989), we refer to a structure of feeling prevalent in late modernity that is characterized by a tendency toward cynicism in political life. This widespread discontent reflects a feeling that people have no real political choices. The politics of resignation is a powerful enabler of contemporary capitalism because it legitimizes corporate power as either inevitable or largely immovable. Corporate oxymorons foster resignation because they seemingly invite skepticism while simultaneously promoting acceptance of the very phenomena that seem problematic. Literary critic Northrop Frye describes how advertising "says what it does not wholly mean, but nobody is obliged to believe its statements literally. Hence it creates an illusion of detachment… even when one is obeying its exhortations" (Frye 1967: 26). In the same way, corporate oxymorons are a particular type of branding (see Foster 2008) that conveys a political message intended to ease the mind of an otherwise critical consumer.

Corporate oxymorons thus have two sides. When a positive cover term is paired with the original literal term, as in the combination of *safe* and *cigarettes*, or s*ustainable* and *mining*, there is a tacit acknowledgment by the corporation that a problem exists, hence the new formulation. Yet this process usually ends up constraining critique because repetition of the conjoined phrase renders it familiar and plausible, despite the inherent contradiction, much like the doublethink of Newspeak.

Corporate oxymorons are like figure-ground reversals: they call attention to one term while obscuring the other. What makes a corporate oxymoron perversely

effective is that the cover term works to conceal the harmful implications of the literal term. Conversely, the literal term neutralizes potential critique by acknowledging that this is just a figure of speech. Hence, the cover term *peacekeeper* in *Peacekeeper Missile* ironically justifies increasing the capacity to wage war by claiming the desire to promote peace. Of course, no one denies that missiles are involved. The oxymoron also suggests that this particular relationship between war and peace is normal and even desirable, and thereby deflects consideration of alternative political relations or defense strategies.

Corporate oxymorons promote a politics of resignation by suggesting that some degree of corporate harm is ordinary, acceptable, and perhaps even necessary. One of the risks doublethink posed to the state was "the danger theoretically existed that in using Newspeak words one might remember their original meanings" (Orwell 2003: 385). We hope that this Forum will promote critique of contemporary capitalism by unpacking, deconstructing, and challenging corporate oxymorons and the public relations campaigns they facilitate. Understanding how corporate oxymorons function is needed to assess the role of corporations in bringing about and sustaining harm to humans and environments. Such understanding can emerge from anthropological analysis of how corporations strategically engage with critique and promote new corporate oxymorons to contain it. Such investigation should be an indispensible part of future directions in the anthropology of capitalism.

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