

Greenwashing: Appearance, illusion and the future of 'green' capitalism

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Abstract

Greenwashing is a well-understood concept, describing the use of false or misleading claims and symbolism to give an impression of a company or organisation's commitment to environmental protection and sustainability. While many environmental groups use the concept widely to criticise the 'optics' strategies of organisations wanting to improve their image while maintaining a business-as-usual approach, it has largely been ignored in Geography and related disciplines. This paper argues that we need to take greenwashing seriously. It develops a broad concept of greenwashing, suggesting that the processes of obscuring social and ecological relations via greenwashing are central to the (dis) functioning of contemporary capitalism. A critical theory of greenwashing, therefore, is not simply about challenging 'bad actors', but is an essential part of a wider critique of 'green' capitalism and Sustainable Development.

KEYWORDS

ethical consumerism, green fetishism, greenwashing, sustainable development

"Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt."

(Orwell, 1949: 183)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The energy crisis of 2022/23 saw energy prices (particularly gas and oil) rise at record rates, pushing millions into fuel poverty, at the same time as oil companies received record profits. An investigation by the group [Eco-Bot.Net](#) and The Guardian found that in the eight days before BP announced profits of £7 billion for the second quarter of 2022, the company spent £570,000 on Instagram and Facebook adverts targeting UK social media users with messages promoting their involvement in renewable energy (Lewton, 2022). This illustrates a phenomenon known as greenwashing, defined by Greenpeace as a “PR tactic used to make a company or product appear environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental impact” (Das, 2022). There are lots of different forms of greenwashing, but it usually involves a combination of the following tactics: misleading or vague claims about the green credentials of an organisation or product; making token, insignificant or irrelevant gestures towards sustainability; the use of green buzzwords or imagery to give an impression of sustainability; the misleading use of certification labels or third-party endorsements; lack of evidence to back up green claims; the use of offsetting (which justifies environmentally damaging behaviour in one place whilst simultaneously placing responsibility for mitigation somewhere else); or, of course, outright lying and dishonesty (Das, 2022; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; TerraChoice, 2010). [Eco-Bot.Net](#) imagines this kind of misinformation as a “new form of pollution we can’t see clearly” that is “not in our rivers, lands or skies,” but “in our minds” (Eco-Bot Net, 2021). Greenwashing is rapidly entering the common lexicon, and indeed, is probably one of the few Geography/environment-related concepts that is well understood by the general public (see Figure 1). Perhaps this is because it is such a common practice, often very obvious to spot, and can be applied in some way to most claims about environmental sustainability.

Environmental groups like Greenpeace and others recognise greenwashing as an ‘optics’ strategy for organisations wanting to improve their image while maintaining a business-as-usual approach. Yet, this phenomenon has largely been ignored in the academic Geography and critical social science literature. Most of the research on greenwashing has been limited to business studies and marketing, in outlets such as the *Journal of Business Ethics* (Jones, 2019). It is important, therefore, to develop more critical/radical understanding of the processes of greenwashing. Most people agree that greenwashing is a bad thing. However, many of the most vocal critics (e.g. TerraChoice, 2010) are not motivated by particularly progressive intentions. Rather, false eco-friendly claims are seen as cheating the market; greenwashers are understood to be freeloaders, riding on the coat tails of the drive for environmentally responsible consumerism, and therefore as a threat to the growth of the eco-market. As such, I distinguish between narrow framings of greenwashing—or ‘greenwatching’—as pro-market environmentalism (see Bowen, 2014), and



FIGURE 1 Greenwash street poster campaign by the Bristol chapter of Extinction Rebellion. Photographs by the author (June 2022).

broad framings of greenwashing, which incorporate a wider critique of the symbolic dimensions of 'green' capitalism and Sustainable Development. Most of the literature to-date falls into the former camp. A more critical perspective, by contrast, sees greenwashing as a collective form of what Orwell (1949), in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, called 'double-think' to describe the simultaneous acceptance of two incompatible ideas; in this case the contradiction of 'market environmentalism'—in other words, that environmental crises created by markets can be solved by green markets and ethical consumerism.

This paper argues that we need to take greenwashing seriously, and that the processes of obscuring socio-ecological relations via greenwashing are central to the (dis)functioning of contemporary capitalism. To make this argument, I first draw on other parallel forms of 'washing', particularly the literature on whitewashing and pinkwashing. Debates in these areas have moved in a more critical direction than debates on greenwashing, and are therefore instructive. In particular, they show how processes of [prefix]washing individualise responsibility for change, obscure structural violence, protect powerful actors and maintain the status quo. I then apply Marx's concept of commodity fetishism to theorise how the social and ecological relations of commodities become obscured via greenwashing and green fetishism. Next, I introduce the idea of a greenwash spectrum to distinguish between those forms of greenwashing that are cynical and deliberately misleading, those that are honest but misguided (when people genuinely believe in the capacity of technology and markets to solve environmental crises), and those that are semi-conscious fetishizations (when people believe a comforting story about sustainability). Finally, I reflect on ways in which geographers can contribute to this debate.

1.1 | Pink, white and green: Perspectives on washing

'Washing' refers to exteriority, appearance and superficiality. It is about covering or obscuring the true character of a thing, to hide it behind a mirage or veneer of acceptability. Originally, the term whitewashing described the use of a mineral liquid (usually slacked lime or powdered chalk mixed with water) to colour a surface white, hiding dirt, wear or damage; or since the 17th Century, a cosmetic preparation used to make the skin look white. From the 18th Century, it took on a figurative meaning, as something "used to conceal faults or errors, or to provide an appearance of honesty, respectability, rectitude" (Oxford English Dictionary), and more recently as the process of exonerating someone or something "by means of a perfunctory investigation or through biased presentation of data" (Merriam-Webster dictionary). The synonyms of washing include to condone, discount, excuse, disregard, forgive, gloss-over, ignore and overlook. In addition to whitewashing (in its original sense) and greenwashing, a host of other prefixes have emerged to describe similar or analogous processes. These are all defined and explained in Table 1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of them, but it is worth highlighting two: whitewashing and pinkwashing. This is because the debates on these concepts have been more critical, thoughtful and conceptually rigorous than the literature on greenwashing, and are therefore instructive.

Whitewashing has been part of the common vernacular since the 1990s to show how discourses obscure the historic violence of racism and downplay the ways in which race continues to shape society. Brown et al. (2003) use the term to describe a new 'national consensus' on race in the United States. They argue that a powerful narrative emerged after the civil rights movement that the problem of racism had essentially been resolved and the US was now a colourblind society. Whitewashing in this sense is about denying that there is still an issue of structural or systemic racism and instead shifting the blame for persistent racial disparities onto individuals for not taking responsibility for their own betterment. This individualisation of responsibility is a theme that is also relevant to greenwashing and will be returned to later in the paper. Others have argued that the corollary of the denial of race is the simultaneous normalisation of whiteness and white culture (Martinez Dy et al., 2017; Paul, 2018; Reitman, 2006). As something becomes hegemonic it ceases to be seen, such that "the power of whiteness lies precisely in its ability to render itself invisible, or normal" (Gabriel, 1998, p. 2). "As an end result," Reitman (2006: 268) argues, society is "seen as colorless even though it is fully immersed in white culture." In fact, they say, "no true washing occurs at all, only

TABLE 1 Different types of 'washing', which are analogous or parallel to greenwashing.

Type	Explanation	Definition	References
Whitewashing	Denying there is a problem of systemic racism in society while simultaneously hegemonizing white culture. Whitewashing history involves narratives that obscure unpleasant or violent aspects of white colonialism while highlighting good aspects.	A process in which "everyday practices seek to deny racial politics, superimpose white culture and normalize that culture in place." (Reitman, 2006, p. 279)	Brown et al. (2003); Paul (2018); Reitman (2006)
Pinkwashing	Using cancer research/charity, and in particular the pink ribbon emblem, to improve an organisation's image, usually for commercial gain.	"A company or organization that claims to care about breast cancer by promoting a pink ribbon product, but at the same time produces, manufactures and/or sells products that are linked to the disease." (Breast Cancer Action, 2022)	Breast Cancer Action (2022); Carter (2015); Lubitow and Davis (2011)
	Using LGBTQ + to improve an organisation's image (also called rainbow-washing). Also used in a geopolitical sense to describe how nations use LGBTQ + inclusion to legitimise state-power.	"Pinkwashing refers to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) into the nation, painting the state as liberal and democratic while legitimizing violent policies towards countries and communities portrayed as less tolerant of LGBTs." (Hartal, 2020)	Hartal (2020); Ritchie (2015); Sánchez-Soria and García-Jiméne (2020); Schulman (2011)
	Making exaggerated claims about gender equality to improve an organisation's image.	"[T]he deployment of women's causes for specific national, civilizational, and political gains through the practice of pinkwashing." (Olwan, 2019, p. 908)	Ben-Shitrit et al. (2022); Olwan (2019); Orser et al. (2020)
Bluwashing	Like greenwashing, but specifically referring to water-related environmental issues.	"[B]lue is the new green – and corporations appear to be using similar 'bluwashing' tactics to obscure their effect on the world's water." (Food & Water Watch, 2010, p. 1)	Food and Water Watch (2010); Hamilton (2015)
	Organisations signing up to voluntary United Nations programmes and displaying the blue UN flag without fully adopting UN principles on human rights and environmental sustainability.	"[M]ember firms figuratively drape themselves in the blue UN flag in order to burnish their reputations and distract stakeholders from their poor environmental or human rights records." (Berliner & Prakash, 2015, p. 121)	Berliner and Prakash (2015); Macellari et al. (2021)
Sportswashing	Using large sporting events (e.g. Olympic games, football world cup, high profile boxing matches) or sports teams to improve the image of a country or city.	"[S]porting events are used to sideline critical views of a government and serve to launder its image and reputation." (Chadwick, 2018)	Chadwick (2018); Ellis (2020); Jiménez-Martínez and Skey (2018)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Type	Explanation	Definition	References
Artwashing	Using public art, often mimicking or usurping subculture art, to legitimise or popularise real estate development and gentrification.	"A process that uses artistic practices unwittingly (or not) in the service of private capital. It is the deliberate use of art as a tool to make a place more 'amenable' for private capital and the aesthetics that it currently desires." (Mould, 2017)	Mould (2017); Pritchard (2020)
Carewashing	Making exaggerated claims about an organisation's commitment to care in the context of the neoliberalisation of care. This became particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. 'clap for the NHS').	"[C]ommunication strategies designed to demonstrate how 'caring' a corporation is in ways that commonly obscure that corporation's actual destructive social and environmental impacts." (Chatzidakis & Littler, 2022, p. 269)	Chatzidakis and Littler (2022)
Wokewashing	The disingenuous use of social justice issues (e.g. race, gender, sexuality) by companies in order to appeal to consumers.	"[I]nauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice." (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445)	Sobande (2019); Vredenburg et al. (2020)
Localwashing	The legitimization of top-down power structures through appeals to local support or local participation.	"Corporate and multilateral attentions to and investments in appearing to understand, take seriously, communicate with, or valorize local knowledge, local people, local ecologies, and local epistemologies." (Murray & Jackson, 2020, p. 924)	Murray and Jackson (2020)
CSRwashing	All of the above, but specifically relating to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) claims of corporations.	"Companies whose pro-social advertisements are inconsistent with their corporate actions are engaging in CSR-washing." (Sterbenk et al., 2022, p. 491)	Sterbenk et al., 2022

pervasive camouflage that serves to naturalize racial dynamics." Despite a façade of equality and equal opportunity in western capitalist democracies, the ultimate effect of whitewashing is to oversimplify complex histories of racial inequality and obscure the fact that racial inequalities persist (Inwood & Martin, 2008).

Pinkwashing (relating to gender and LGBTQ+) has also been debated in the critical geography and social science literature. On a broad level, pinkwashing refers to claims made about LGBTQ + inclusivity by organisations that simultaneously reinforce heteronormative practices (Sánchez-Soria & García-Jiménez, 2020). Multinational companies displaying the rainbow flag as a marketing strategy during Pride Month, while maintaining business interests in countries where being gay or lesbian is a capital offence, is a good example of this. Pinkwashing has also been used in a geopolitical sense to problematise the co-opting of white gay people and issues by anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant interests, painting Muslim countries as homophobic and regressive in contrast with the West's liberal values. This debate has largely focussed on Israel/Palestine following an opinion piece by Schulman (2011), who accused the Israeli government of "a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians' human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life." This was illustrated clearly when an image was widely circulated on

social media in November 2023 of Israeli soldier, Yoav Atzmoni, standing on the rubble of Gaza City with tanks in the background, holding a pride flag bearing the message “In the name of Love”. Similarly, Puar, 2013 (2013: 337) argues that pinkwashing has become an important practice sustaining homonationalism, which they define as the “historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia.” Such a process, these authors argue, not only politicises LGBTQ + people for ends other than LGBTQ + equality whereby “‘domesticated’ homosexuals serve as ammunition for nationalism” (Gross, 2014, p. 82), but also discounts the experiences of non-white LGBTQ + people. This concept has been hotly debated, particularly in the way the pinkwashing and ‘pinkwatching’ debate has been mobilised in queer politics in Europe and North America (Gross, 2014). Indeed, Ritchie (2015: 619) argues, this has “less to do with the realities of queerness in Israel/Palestine... and more to do with the utility of pinkwashing for making all kinds of claims to queer space in the neoliberal city.” In this sense, pinkwashing becomes a way of justifying violent practices and protecting business-as-usual under the guise of cultural liberalism.

Although pinkwashing and whitewashing and the other varieties of washing identified in Table 1 are distinct, they all point to similar processes of making claims about egalitarianism, liberalism and ethical responsibility, while maintaining existing and unequal power relations. Moreover, these literatures demonstrate how different forms of washing are not simply technical or isolated instances of dishonesty, but are also collective cultural constructs that hide, obscure or downplay broader problems in society. They are about denying systemic power imbalances and often involve narratives that transfer responsibility onto individuals to create change.

1.2 | Green fetishism

“A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that, in reality, it is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”

(Marx, 1954, p. 76).

In neoliberal capitalist economies, greenwashing takes place in its most basic form at the level of the commodity—that is, it is an effort to persuade us as consumers that the things we buy and the services we use are produced and delivered in an environmentally and socially responsible way. Greenwashing, this paper argues, occurs in two distinct movements. First, the real socio-ecological relations that underpin a commodity are hidden. When I purchase a pair of jeans, for example, I can't see the fields the cotton was grown in, the water used to irrigate it, the person or machine that picked it, or the labourer who manufactured them. Second, a ‘green story’ is told about that commodity. Certain socio-ecological relations are revealed—for example, that the cotton was grown according to organic standards—and presented as the entire sum of the relationality of the commodity, such that the consumer sees those pair of jeans as ‘sustainable’ or ‘ethical’. Thus, greenwashing rests on the guarantee that consumers cannot see what hides behind the commodities we buy, and that we will accept a fetishized image presented of them.

Marx's notion of commodity fetishism is useful here in understanding how the social and ecological relations of commodities become hidden. Marx borrowed the term ‘fetishism’ from 19th Century studies of religions that involve the worship of inanimate objects as sacred, and applied it to the illusory character of commodities. This concept relies on Marx's distinction between value (which is the product of social labour—i.e. value becomes embedded in a commodity when it is produced through labour), exchange value (which is what a commodity can be purchased for) and use value (how useful a commodity is). Fetishism occurs as values are transformed into prices. We encounter commodities only in the market place, and are therefore compelled to see them only as prices and use values (i.e. what we pay for them and how we will use them), rather than as the product of labour and the transformation of nature (Harvey, 2010). In this way, fetishism obscures value. It is the illusion that we see, beguiling us and veiling the true social and ecological character of a commodity. “Value,” Marx (1954: 78-9) writes, “does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic.” In a market-based

society, this is unavoidable. When I buy a cup of coffee, for example, I might be aware that it may be the product of an exploitative relationship between land (or nature), a farmer and the global commodity market. I might also encounter a narrative about the coffee—perhaps an image of an idyllic mountain landscape or a Fairtrade label. But I cannot see the real socio-ecological relations embedded in my cup. Instead, I must encounter the coffee only as a price (how much I pay for it) and a use value (the caffeine hit I get from drinking it). Put another way, commodity fetishism is about seeing commodities as things *in and of themselves* and not seeing the network of social and ecological relations that made them.

There is a body of scholarship within the field of political ecology that considers fetishism to be an important theory for understanding the ways in which capitalism as a set of social and ecological relations is legitimised and sustained (Arboleda, 2016; Castree, 2001; Goodman, 2004; Kosoy & Corbera, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). Notwithstanding, the concept of commodity fetishism has often been overlooked or considered peripheral to Marx's work. Harvey (2010), however, argues that it is in fact central to a critical understanding of contemporary capitalism. Fetishism, according to Harvey (2010: 38), should be understood broadly as the “ways in which important characteristics of the political economic system get ‘concealed’ or confused.” It is, in other words, the world of appearance which capitalism projects (Harvey, 2013). This is perhaps more relevant now than at any other point in the history of capitalism because global commodity chains and systems of finance and trade are now so extensive and complex. In a world market characterised by such complexity, it is impossible for consumers to see the networks through which commodities are produced directly, making fetishism inevitable. Nevertheless, it is our job, through the process of critical inquiry, to peer beneath this illusion, to trace the social and ecological relations that make commodities and to decipher the hieroglyph. Marx's call to study social relations, therefore, is a call to not “fall victim to the world of appearance, which is clouded with fetishisms” (Harvey, 2006, p. 74).

This deciphering cannot take place through more ethical or conscious consumption. Indeed, as Gunderson (2014) argues, far from demystifying, green or ethical markets add a further layer of fetishism because they are based on the idea that the social and ecological injustices of capitalism can be remedied through the commodity form itself. By making appeals to consumers' conscience through the telling of green stories “individuals are forced to utilize the same unjust system to solve its own injustice” (Gunderson, 2014, p. 116). Moreover, I argue, greenwashing is a form of deliberate fetishization—or *green fetishism*. Of course, it involves the telling of a green story, but it also relies on individuals consciously and/or subconsciously believing that story. This is achieved through what Žižek (1989) calls ‘fetishistic disavowal’; the understanding that something is illusory, but nevertheless choosing or pretending to believe. Most of us understand that consumerism is not environmentally or socially benign, but it is comforting to allow ourselves to be persuaded that ethical consumerism is possible. In this sense, we can be simultaneously aware that greenwashing is taking place and accept the imaginaries of sustainability presented to us in a semi-conscious way. We thus participate in the continued legitimisation of unsustainable capitalism. This is encapsulated in the phrase “I know very well, but still...” (Žižek, 1989, p. 12)—for example, ‘I know very well that these jeans were made through an environmentally destructive process and are the product of an exploitative labour relation, but still, they are *organic cotton*.’

The concept of green fetishism, therefore, helps us build up an understanding of greenwashing as something that is: 1) a way of obscuring real conditions and instead presenting particular geographical imaginaries of nature; 2) part of the cultural legitimisation of capitalism as a system of social and ecological relations; and 3) not simply projected, but must also occur in the minds of people.

1.3 | The greenwash spectrum

One of the core arguments of this paper is that, while narrow framings of greenwashing are useful in some senses, we need to develop a broad and critical concept of greenwashing—one that encapsulates a wider critique of ethical consumerism, green capitalism and Sustainable Development. Within this broad framing there are shades of green—

not all forms of greenwashing are equal. It is useful, therefore, to think in terms of a spectrum along the axes of *intensity* and *scale*. There is, for example, a large difference between soft forms of greenwashing, such as using images of nature in advertising to suggest a commitment to sustainability, or highlighting good behaviour while playing down bad practices (which is still misleading and creates false impressions—see Parguel et al., 2015); and hard greenwashing, including illegal deception and outright lying, such as took place in the Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal (Siano et al., 2017). Yet, as argued earlier, these intensities of greenwashing are all based on the same illusion, which is rooted in commodity fetishism.

Most of the existing literature, the majority of which is in the fields of business studies and marketing, defines greenwashing in narrow terms. This literature is largely concerned with identifying the 'bad actors' of greenwashing and challenging untrue or misleading claims. Greenwashing, in this sense, is something that can be empirically identified and measured. There is, of course, a real need for this kind of work. Initiatives such as the Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitor (Day et al., 2022), which monitors the transparency and integrity of the climate pledges of some of the world's largest corporations and compares these pledges to actual performance, are really important in holding corporations to account and exposing dishonesty. The underlying principle here is that increased scrutiny of corporations will ultimately lead to more transparency and less greenwash (Marquis et al., 2016). Nevertheless, such framings are mainly concerned with how greenwashing might negatively impact the development of the green economy and Sustainable Development (Choudhury et al., 2023). Some authors, for example, have argued that the rise of green scepticism and 'perceived greenwashing' (where consumers assume greenwashing is taking place even if it is not) is damaging the reputations of 'good actors' and therefore hampering the growth of the market for green products (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Seele & Gatti, 2017). As Nyilasy et al. (2014, p. 694) contend, "disingenuous green communication constitutes severe ethical harms and hurt all corporations (even the ethical ones!) in the long run." Greenwashing and perceived greenwashing are therefore seen as a threat to 'true' green marketing and green innovation (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017).

Bowen (2014) and Bowen and Aragon-Correa (2014) argue that we should preserve this narrow definition. They distinguish between *greenwashing*, which refers to a deliberate strategy adopted by corporations, and *symbolic corporate environmentalism*, which refers to the broader ways in which corporations engage with, frame, discuss and symbolise sustainability. Where the former is entirely symbolic, the latter may lead to actual change and more sustainable business practices. For Bowen (2014: 2), "as the architects of change, firms can also influence the language used," and to dismiss all corporate environmental communication as greenwashing is to over-simplify. They suggest that, while greenwashing should be challenged, it might be worth putting up with a certain level of symbolic corporate environmentalism in order to harness the innovative capacity of corporations in pursuing sustainability agendas. By contrast, I adopt a broader understanding of greenwashing. This difference essentially reflects the debate between Sustainable Development—or green capitalism—on the one hand, and de-growth—or the critique of capitalism—on the other hand. A broad understanding of greenwashing sees sustainability as a compromise position between environmental protection and sustaining market capitalism (Ahluwalia & Miller, 2014; Miller, 2017). Sustainability rests on the notion that the ecologically destructive tendencies of capitalism can be reversed through green markets and technology—or as Swyngedouw (2010: 219) puts it, "we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation...so that nothing really has to change." In other words, greenwashing is a discursive tool—or a collective *doublethink*—to persuade us that sustainability is possible without radical political change, and is therefore an essential part of the continued legitimisation and (dis)functioning of market capitalism.

1.4 | Greenwashing, geography, power and politics

Geographers should be leading the debate on this topic, because as a discipline we are centrally concerned with the relationships between materiality and discourse, nature/society relations, governance and power, and the politics of scale. Important questions for geographers to ask include, what kind of imaginaries and narratives are produced by

greenwashing, who gets to shape these narratives and what are the power relations, and how does greenwashing shape environmental practices at different spatial scales? I highlight two of these themes below.

Scalar dimensions are extremely important, because greenwashing occurs at all levels and is deployed between and across scales. For example, individualisation has become a key part of greenwashing because the consumer is so often the target of sustainability narratives. Greenwashing always occurs in the eye of the beholder (Seele & Gatti, 2017), and the core aim of sustainability advertising and narrative is to persuade the consumer that they can make a difference through their individual choices (Gunderson, 2014). It is about giving false agency to individuals, bypassing accountability at other scales and downloading responsibility for environmental protection onto the individual consumer. One of the major challenges of this is that, while greenwashing might be very easy to identify in general (we know it when we see it), because of the level of fetishism involved it is impossible to identify specifically without extensive knowledge of supply chains and deep understanding of business practices. Jones (2019), for instance, has analysed the environmental claims made by a companies with established track records of good practice and compared them to those made by companies with records of bad environmental practices. They find that these corporate narratives are often nuanced and very difficult to establish as simply true or false, and moreover, that there is very little to distinguish good and bad companies' claims about environmental sustainability. As such, it is impossible to identify the intensity of greenwash from discourse and narrative alone, and therefore "consumers' efforts to interpret a company's environmental 'integrity' from advertising...are largely futile" (Jones, 2019, p. 729).

This raises many critical questions around governance and the networks through which greenwashing occurs. The main way in which greenwashing is currently regulated is through certification schemes. Certifications schemes are extremely heterogeneous and overlapping. Broadly, they are divided into voluntary or private certification schemes, and mandatory standards and certification. Voluntary schemes tend to be weaker, in part because they often reflect the priorities of the companies that sign up to them, and are therefore less ambitious and more tokenistic (Partzsch et al., 2019). In an analysis of over 400 voluntary third-party certification statements, Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2020) found that fewer than half resulted in any discernible environmental improvement. Furthermore, there is huge divergence between voluntary schemes, with often wildly differing criteria and results, resulting in what Hu et al. (2023) call 'the green fog'. Ultimately, Partzsch and Kemper (2019) argue that, while some certification schemes have the potential to encourage meaningful change, they ultimately reflect neoliberal forms of governance, bypassing the state and reinforcing power asymmetries between different actors.

The confusing and contradictory landscape of corporate environmental certification has led to growing calls for strong government regulation to ensure that sustainability advertising and communication is accurate and reliable (Kolcava, 2023). To address this, the European Union has recently adopted a proposed new law (the Directive on Green Claims) that will require all businesses to evidence and justify all environmental claims made about their products or services. Within this plan, responsibility is still ultimately placed on the individual, the logic being that if regulation can guarantee the rigour and reliability of the environmental claims made by companies and organisations, consumers will be "empowered to make better informed choices and play an active role in the ecological transition" (European Commission, 2023). Indeed, as Levidow (2013) has shown for the EU's mandatory sustainability criteria for biofuels, although strong mandatory certification schemes might be more robust in some senses, they can reinforce uneven power relations (particularly between Global North and Global South) and can lead to negative social and environmental outcomes.

2 | CONCLUSION

Sustainable Development has been common in the academic and policy lexicon since 1980s—and is increasingly central to the framing and sustaining of contemporary capitalism. A core part of this is the promise of green consumerism—that is, the idea that consumer capitalism can continue if consumers make the right choices. This paper has argued that these powerful ideas are sustained, at least in part, through the illusion of greenwashing. Much of the existing work on greenwashing is essentially concerned with identifying and calling out specific instances of

misleading or untruthful sustainability marketing. This is, of course, necessary and important work, and if carried out effectively might discourage such practices in the future. But it belies the more fundamental processes at work. It leaves unchallenged the deeper greenwashing narrative that free market consumer capitalism can continue broadly as before, albeit in a more environmentally considered way—a narrative that allows us to believe that Sustainable Development (with capital 'S' and 'D') is possible.

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