Making Climate Change Fit for Capitalism:

The Corporate Translation of Climate Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

As the impacts of climate change become more evident and extreme weather events threaten communities and ecosystems, so the role of implicated industries and corporations have come under growing critique. In response to calls for dramatic decarbonization, a growing political response has been to downplay the role of emissions mitigation and emphasise local forms of climate change adaptation. In this paper, we explore the example of corporate responses to the catastrophic coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef during 2016/2017 and the process of corporate political activity which encouraged a shift in public debate from climate mitigation to adaptation. Our paper shows how corporations create a hegemonic 'common sense' view of politically contested issues and how interests are politicised and enacted in public debate. Through these actions, corporate solutions and self-regulation become accepted as the logical response to the climate crisis. Despite the worsening impact of climate change, corporate responses ensure the maintenance of business as usual.

Corporations are key players in the construction of political responses to climate change. This is evident in the fossil fuel industry's support of an organized climate change denial movement (Dunlap & McCright, 2011) as well as more progressive corporations' calls for emissions mitigation (Hoffman, 2007). However, as the climate crisis has worsened with extreme storms, floods, droughts and wildfires threatening communities and populations, political responses have increasingly shifted from climate mitigation to climate adaptation (IPCC, 2014; Sovacool & Linnér, 2016). This growing policy focus on climate adaptation provides further space for corporations to influence climate strategies and policies. Understanding how firms engage in societal climate change adaptation is critical for developing policies and mobilizing citizens to limit suffering.

In this paper, we explore how corporations politically engage in the shift from climate mitigation to climate adaptation. We do this through a detailed analysis of corporate responses to the catastrophic coral bleaching events on Australia's Great Barrier Reef (GBR) during the summers of 2016 and 2017. These climate-induced extreme weather events resulted in the death of around half of the Reef's shallow water coral (Hughes et al., 2018), and represented an existential threat to the Reef tourism industry and major population centres along coastal Queensland. Our findings show how following the first bleaching event businesses and government downplayed the severity of the threat and denied the link to climate change. However, a second bleaching event the following year forced businesses to accept the impact of climate change while defending the importance of fossil fuel extraction and use. In responding to the threat of climate change, implicated industries sought to shift the political emphasis from emissions mitigation to the need to adapt to the on-going threat of coral bleaching and the potential demise of the Great Barrier Reef. The paper explains the politics leading to corporate philanthropic

measures which were framed as encouraging great 'resilience' of the Reef to future climate change, while consciously rejecting proposals to limit or constrain fossil fuel extraction and use.

Our paper makes three central contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on corporate political activity (CPA) by showing the corporate creation of a 'common sense' view of politically contested issues and how interests are politicised and made real in public debate. This extends exchange-based theories of CPA (see e.g. Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004; Lux, Crook, & Woehr, 2011) by explaining how corporations influence the political arena or hegemonic formations within which politics take place. Second, this separation between the 'politics' of CPA and 'the political' contributes to the discussions on hegemony within organization and management theory (OMT) (Levy, Reinecke, & Manning, 2016; Nyberg, Spicer, & Wright, 2013) by detailing the political dynamics underlying the production of hegemony. Finally, we argue that the corporate construction of climate adaptation provides further insight into the concept of 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2007), in which the 'impossibility' of a radical decarbonisation of the global economy in order to avoid climate collapse is translated into local practices which maintain business as usual (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). This contributes to the broader debate on the role of corporations in addressing societal concerns by showing how corporate solutions and self-regulation become common sense. This, we conclude, has disastrous consequences for the possibility of both mitigating the worst effects of climate change as well as adapting to a climate changed world.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CORPORATE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Recent research has revealed the central role that corporations and business interests have played in the creation of an organized climate change denial movement (Dunlap & McCright, 2011). Through marketing and public relations, political lobbying and the creation of politically conservative think-tanks and social movements, major fossil-fuel corporations such as ExxonMobil and Koch Industries have made the denial of anthropogenic climate change a cornerstone of conservative political policy within the United States and many other countries around the world (Brulle, 2014; Supran & Oreskes, 2017). Political responses to climate change have only become more central as the climate crisis has worsened and in response implicated industries and corporations have presented themselves as 'caring corporate citizens', concerned about the environmental challenges humanity faces and promoting technological and profitable 'solutions' (Nyberg et al., 2013; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). This political positioning of business typically rejects policies which constrain business growth and profitability (such as mandated prohibitions on fossil fuel use or the taxing of carbon emissions), and rather emphasizes voluntary corporate initiatives which promote environmental benefits while also satisfying a business case (Jermier, Forbes, Benn, & Orsato, 2006). While the mitigation of carbon emissions is highlighted in corporate proposals for increased eco-efficiency, carbon neutrality and waste reduction (Dauvergne & Lister, 2013; Wright & Nyberg, 2015), for those industries wedded to fossil-fuel extraction and use, an increasingly powerful corporate discourse has been to highlight alternative proposals for climate adaptation (Linnenluecke, Griffiths, & Winn, 2013).

Climate adaptation represents a spectrum of responses aimed at reducing the vulnerability of ecological and social systems to climate change impacts including, the regeneration of natural ecosystems and community preparedness (Wise et al., 2014), as well as more radical philosophies

of 'deep adaptation' (Bendell, 2018). However, to date most discussions of climate adaptation have been framed within existing neoliberal policy regimes which critics argue has resulted in: the growing expansion of corporate interests within the regulation of public assets; the marginalisation of community and civic interests in adaptation decision-making; growing social and economic inequality; and potentially increased environmental harm (Sovacool & Linnér, 2016). Indeed, as Klein (2007, 2014) has argued this neoliberal variant of climate adaptation has resulted in a form of 'disaster capitalism' in which corporate and political elites exploit crises as opportunities for the imposition of profit-maximising policies which further worsen the position of vulnerable communities. Thus, through CPA, corporations and industries have taken part in constructing a hegemony – a consensual stability of dominant groups (Levy et al., 2016) – where the continuation of fossil fuel exploration and local 'solutions' promoting corporate interests are seen as natural and inevitable. This is achieved by corporations articulating aligned interest and identities with other groups and actors within society (Nyberg et al., 2013).

CPA INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY AND RESPONSES

CPA generally refers to 'deliberate firm action intended to influence governmental policy or process' (Getz, 1997, pp. 32-33). This can be *direct* by providing (a) information to political decision makers (e.g., through lobbying, testifying and commission reports) and (b) financial incentives (e.g., through campaign or party contributions), or *indirect* by (c) building coalitions and public support for a particular policy preference in influencing public policy (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). This latter form of CPA includes mobilizing people for or against policy positions or political actors (Murray, Nyberg, & Rogers, 2016). For example, corporations and industries might employ public relations firms to organize covert 'astroturfing' operations (i.e., fake grassroots

movements) to encourage citizens to support corporate positions (Walker & Rea, 2014). This is evident in how companies opposing carbon regulation fund and support proxy organizations in order to influence public attitudes through organized campaigns in the media and the formation of aligned social movements (Nyberg et al., 2013). This legitimizes the corporate position and puts pressure on governments in terms of how they address climate change.

Direct CPA is well-documented and explained through the exchange of money or information for policy preferences (Hillman et al., 2004) or social connections (Lawton, McGuire, & Rajwani, 2013), with recent meta-analysis suggesting that direct CPA is positively related to firm performance (Lux et al., 2011). The workings of indirect CPA are more complex and based on the politics of constructing a coalition of common interests (Levy et al., 2016). Corporations as dominant actors in society convince subordinate groups that it is in their best interests to adopt a particular position (Gramsci, 1971). For example, Levy and Egan (2003) illustrate how the oil and automobile industries employed CPA to initially defend their hegemonic position against the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions by building a dominant coalition within industry and challenge the science of climate change. This secured a powerful coalition with conservative politicians. These industries then shifted emphasis towards a discursive approach arguing a win-win position aligned with the dominant market ideology. This latter approach achieved an even broader alliance in building (rather than defending) a hegemonic position, resulting in very modest emissions targets. These industries thus fortified a dominant alliance or 'historical bloc' of consensual legitimacy supported by government and influential NGOs (Levy, 2008; Levy & Egan, 2003).

Levy and Egan (2003), and similar studies (Murray et al., 2016; Nyberg et al., 2013; van Bommel & Spicer, 2011) convincingly demonstrate how corporations employ CPA to construct

hegemony. However, as Nyberg et al. (2017, p. 148) note, this 'mainly takes the politics into account, not the playing field in which politics take place'. That is, they show how actors construct hegemony, but not how the existing political order or reified social reality informs the politics. Without taking the instituted society into account, politics is reduced to 'a set of supposedly technical moves and neutral procedures' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 34). In accounting for the political playing field in the case of hydraulic fracturing of shale gas (fracking) in the UK, Nyberg et al (2017) show how the constituted neo-liberal political regime gives precedence to the market over all other forms of evaluation. By aligning fossil fuel exploration with taken for granted principles in society, there is no need to convince the population of the benefit of fracking. Thus, actors and groups in society do not need to agree with hegemonic positions in order to take them for granted as 'the reality'.

While not extensively explored, what Nyberg et al (2017) refer to as 'political regimes' and Levy et al (2016) conceptualize as 'value regimes' are based on an analytical distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. The former are the strategies, practices, discourses and institutional devices that seek to stabilize a certain order, while the latter refer to the stabilized order or political arena in which politics is played out (Levy et al., 2016; Nyberg et al., 2017). 'The political' privileges certain actors, practices and values, which limits what can be 'realistically' said and done. For example, the multinational corporation is a privileged actor with financial practices and monetary valuations of a range of goods that support corporate involvement and solutions. The political ground is contingent upon the politics continuously instituting it and hegemony established when actors 'forget' that the ground is not natural or fail to imagine an alternative. It becomes 'common sense' that the market can deal with climate change, corporations

are the most meaningful actor to address climate change concerns, and alternative politics is viewed as 'unrealistic'.

The possibility that it can be otherwise is the basis for a post-foundational position and, following Laclau (1996) and Mouffe (2005), the ontological foundation of the political is antagonism (rather than, for example, freedom or deliberation). Any identity, or even coalition, is based on a difference, an 'other' or exclusion (Mouffe, 2005). For every 'we', there is a 'they'. This opens up the potential for new coalitions and political orders, with the political both contingent and constitutive (Laclau, 1996, p. 90). The political is contingent in that it lacks a final grounding and could be otherwise, and constitutive, in that the political institutes social relations and hierarchies. In investigating the contest of fracking in the UK, Nyberg et al. (2017) make a distinction between those discursive strategies that are made (i) from constituted positions and hierarchies in arguing for or against fracking, and (ii) those discursive strategies that institute the social sedimentation of hierarchies and values. This debate illustrates the antagonistic foundation of the political and shows how the political arena only allows for certain politics, which in turn, reinforces the political arena.

It is within this political dynamic that corporations engage in climate change mitigation and adaptation. The analytical distinction between the politics and the political assists in explaining how certain practices become realistic, which actors are excluded, and why certain solutions are favoured. Climate change politics takes place in an absent (i.e. unchallenged and ungrounded) political arena of unequal relations and hierarchies made present (i.e. constituted and grounded) by authorizing certain practices and excluding others in addressing climate change. Considering how climate change challenges the continuous expansion and growth of corporate capitalism

(Wright & Nyberg, 2017), we are interested in the processes of how emphasis is shifted from mitigation to adaptation when climate change threatens local industries and communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research context

The GBR is made up of over 2,900 individual reefs and 900 islands and is located in the Coral Sea off the coast of north Queensland. It is the world's largest single structure made by living organisms and extends over 2,300 kilometres with an area of about 344,000 square kilometres. The Reef's size and scale make it one of the most recognised ecosystems in the world, having been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1981 as one of the 'seven natural wonders of the world' (McCalman, 2013).

During the Australian summer of early 2016, the GBR suffered an unprecedented severe coral bleaching event as a result of a major El Niño weather pattern and a global trend of warming ocean temperatures resulting from climate change. Bleaching results from exposure of coral to unseasonal warm water temperatures (around 1 to 1.5° Celsius above the seasonal maximum mean temperature). In these circumstances, corals become heat stressed and expel the algae (single celled zooxanthellae) that live within their tissues and provide them with food, leaving the white coral skeleton. In extreme bleaching events most corals will fail to recover and die. The 2016 bleaching event caused the death of two-thirds of corals along a 700km northern section of the reef – the single greatest loss of corals ever recorded on the reef (Hughes et al., 2017).

The following summer of 2016/7 resulted in a further coral bleaching event, this time effecting corals in the mid-section of the Reef where reef tourism is primarily located. This

unprecedented back-to-back bleaching meant affected corals had little chance of recovery and the extended range of the two events meant that around two-thirds of the Reef had now been affected by coral bleaching, with the most severe impacts occurring in the northern and central sections of the Reef (Hughes & Kerry, 2017). Media reporting of the bleaching events resulted in significant political and community debate not only within the affected coastal communities of tropical north Queensland, but also nationally and internationally with the Australian Government already sensitive to a potential UNESCO listing of the GBR as endangered and growing social opposition to proposed new mega coal-mines in the nearby Galilee Basin.

Data collection and analysis

In exploring corporate and political responses to the coral bleaching events, we undertook a detailed qualitative study of media coverage and conducted interviews with key informants. This involved the collection of all media articles published on the coral bleaching events during 2015-2018 from a range of local (north Queensland), national and international newspapers and media outlets. This was supplemented by statements, videos and reports from tourism and mining industry associations, local and national politicians, local chambers of commerce, environmental NGOs and environmental activists. In total over 1200 documents were collected (see Table 1). To supplement the media and textual data, we also conducted 34 interviews with key informants during 2017/8. These included senior representatives from the marine tourism industry, airlines, state and local politicians, local industry representatives, marine and coral reef scientists, dive instructors, as well as national and local environmental campaigners. All interviews were recorded and transcribed (see Table 2).

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

The combined document and interview data was imported and coded using the qualitative data analysis software *QSR NVivo*. Through a process of 'open coding' (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), we combined segments of text reflecting similar wording or activities into first order categories, resulting in the classification of over 100 primary nodes. These nodes represented actors (e.g., 'politicians', 'tourism operators', 'industry associations', 'community groups'), discourses (e.g., 'loss', 'mortality', 'denial', 'adaptation', 'resilience'), phenomena (e.g., 'coral bleaching', 'ocean temperatures', 'fluorescence', 'currents') and practices (e.g., 'advocacy', 'partnerships', 'research', 'protests').

In a second stage of analysis, we used second-order or axial coding to search for patterns and relationships within and between the first-order categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). One key theme that emerged from this process was the way in which businesses and politicians enlisted a range of discourses and practices that sought to deflect and downplay both the severity of the bleaching events and human-induced climate disruption as its central cause. Using an abductive approach to data and theorizing, we engaged with the theoretical literature on CPA to understand how the coalition of industries and government shifted the emphasis from mitigation to adaptation.

By applying the concepts of politics and the political to the process over time, we identified four different stages in the corporate political response to coral bleaching. First, an initial reactive phase in which government and the mining and tourism industries questioned scientific statements as to the extent and severity of coral bleaching, the link to climate change, and in some cases, denied the issue altogether. While this reactive politics was possible in the aftermath of the initial bleaching event, the second bleaching event the following summer undermined established

politics. In a second phase of political action, implicated industries sought to defend the fossil fuel hegemony by emphasizing climate change as a global issue which Australia was powerless to effect and the centrality of the resources industry and coal mining exports for national economic prosperity. This defence of hegemony continued into a third phase in which government and industry shifted the focus of public debate from climate mitigation to adaptation based upon a broader market ideology in which corporate solutions provided the best response. Here, government elevated the role of business as a key stakeholder in shaping the political response to this climate change impact. Finally, in a fourth phase this broader market ideology found expression in a range of proposed corporately-funded adaptation measures in which the issue of climate change and emissions reduction was largely ignored, and the existing hegemony of fossil fuel use maintained.

FINDINGS

Coral bleaching and the politics of doubt and denial

While the declining health of the GBR had been an on-going source of political debate for many years (Australian Government, 2015; Milman, 2015), the worst coral bleaching event in the Reef's history in February 2016 led to a renewed focus on the threat of climate change and Australia's role as one of the world's largest exporters of coal and gas and highest per capita carbon emitters. Coral bleaching attracted widespread media attention with both local and international newspapers outlining the dire future for the Reef accompanied by images of bleached and dying coral (Innis, 2016; Slezak, 2016b). Environmental campaigners emphasized the link between coral bleaching, climate change and coal mining through a growing nationwide protest against a proposed mega coal mine by the international conglomerate Adani in the nearby Galilee Basin. The Adani

Carmichael mine would become not only Australia's largest coal mine but also open-up the Galilee coal basin as a significant new source of global carbon emissions. For the growing #StopAdani movement, coral bleaching and the future of the GBR became central themes at protests for drastic mitigation measures around the country (Krien, 2017).

Business and government responded by seeking to downplay the severity of coral bleaching and the link to climate change. The tourism industry's early reaction was to seed doubt about the extent of bleaching and promote tourism growth. As the head of the North Queensland tourism association proclaimed after news broke of the first bleaching event:

'…the Reef is actually coping very well under the current circumstances. If you look at all of the tourism operations ... a majority aren't experiencing any significant bleaching at all. In fact, visitors continue to enjoy beautiful reef environments under the current circumstances.' (Bateman, 2016)

This corporate position was echoed in local newspapers and conservative media outlets which suggested the focus on coral bleaching was alarmist and being used by climate change activists to pursue political objectives. The discussion of the Reef thus fed into the on-going divided politics in Australia over climate change. For instance, at the launch of a government-funded community Reef website, conservative radio commentator Alan Jones criticised environmentalists and rejected the severity of the bleaching:

'The global warming alarmists will stop at nothing…They want to talk about climate change and shut down everything…Like much associated with the global warming hoax, truth was the casualty….The Barrier Reef's fine – there are any number of

reputable entities who will be looking after it and making sure it continues to be fine and looked after.' (Slezak, 2016a)

Implicated industries such as coal-mining, supported this denialist position by downplaying the link between coral bleaching and climate change. For instance, in advisory meetings for the federal government's new Reef 2050 Plan, Queensland's peak mining body argued that '…the Plan should continue to focus on actions to support coral resilience but should not deal with direct action to address climate change'. This supported the national narrative of Australia as a mining country, with the peak mining body stating that 'There is a difference between coal burning and coal mining and QRC's position on the latter is mining itself is not a large contributor to climate change'(Rebgetz, 2017).

At the same time, both state and federal governments sought to deflect criticism linking coral bleaching to climate change by re-emphasising their commitment to the Reef as a national icon but also to coal mining, emphasising the latter's contribution to national economic prosperity and regional employment. The hegemonic coalition between levels of government and implicated industries (tourism and mining) was evident in that there was no perceived contradiction between continued fossil fuel expansion and climate change. In March 2017, the Queensland Premier and the mayors from eight regional electorates undertook a highly publicised trip to India to signal their support for the opening of the Adani coal mine in Australia (Bennett, 2017). The federal government also acted as a strong backer of the Adani mine, with the Deputy Prime Minister arguing the development of the Galilee Basin would be a 'cash cow' for Australia and 'directly employ about 3000 people, with a further 10,000 indirect jobs' (Barlow, 2017).

During the public debate following the 2016 bleaching, the dominant coalition of industry and government engaged in reactive politics by denying the link between coral bleaching and

climate change, attacking the motivation behind the criticism, and promoting current tourism and mining practices. Politics remained tied to a business as usual agenda. The political arena was absent in that there were entrenched political positions arguing for and against action on climate change. Corporate political actions emphasised building a broad coalition of industries that supported Australia's economic interests and dismissing the protesters as ideologically driven and factually inaccurate.

Nature bites back: Acknowledging climate change and defending hegemony

Nevertheless, the unprecedented recurrence of coral bleaching the following summer in February/March 2017 challenged the hegemonic positions of the mining and tourism industries in relation to climate change and forced a reassessment of their responses. As one tourism industry insider outlined:

> 'I went into a meeting with most of the big tourism operators and GBRMPA [Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority] in early Feb and the data looked horrific…I think there was a sea change at that moment in that room where the key players went "oh f*ck, this is not a one-off!"' (Interview #10)

Tourism operators increasingly acknowledged climate change as a key threat to the future of the Reef. The politics had shifted and climate change now became a concern for these industries.

However, the role that Australia should play in mitigating emissions was qualified through reference to the global nature of climate change and the claim that Australia contributed a modest component of total global greenhouse emissions. As one Reef tourism spokesperson argued, 'If we were going to be really accurate, we can stop all coal mining, we can decarbonise Australia's

economy and we affect the world by one to two per cent.' (Interview #27). Government and industry also explicitly rejected claims that coral bleaching and threats to the Reef should limit the expansion of new coal mines like the Adani project. As one Cairns business leader reasoned:

> If they don't get the coal from us, they'll find it in another coal mine somewhere else right, in Indonesia or Brazil or wherever… But you don't link a mine and the prospect of 5000 jobs to the death of the Great Barrier Reef if that's opened. This is the dilemma that we face in this debate about coral bleaching. (Interview #13)

Thus, the physical impact of unprecedented back-to-back coral bleaching events forced governments and businesses to acknowledge that climate change now threatened the future of the world's largest coral reef system. However, such statements excluded acceptance of emissions mitigation measures which challenged existing business models. The expansion of coal and gas extraction would continue upon the excuse that if Australia did not export these resources, other countries would. Indeed, the common-sense view of the importance of mining now required active defence and corporations and industry associations became more vocal in protecting the continuation of mining on the familiar grounds of jobs and growth. As the CEO of the state's peak mining association declared in response to growing protests to the Adani project in 2017: 'The [coal] sector continues to be a mainstay of employment and economic growth in Queensland, ensuring that every Queenslander benefits from this great industry' (Queensland Resources Council, 2017). This was a view echoed by editorials in regional newspapers where the threat of coral bleaching was rejected in favour of the economic benefits of a possible new coal boom: 'The community has been on its knees for a very long time, waiting for the next big thing to help it up off the canvas…coal is not dead, Adani is not the devil and the Great Barrier Reef won't die if we extract coal from the Galilee' (Tomlinson, 2017).

Moreover, for the tourism industry, continued growth was viewed as essential for regional economies and corporate profitability. Again, corporate political strategies emphasised the defence of existing business practices. For instance, for the airline industry, highly reliant on the GBR as a key marketing icon, mitigation measures were limited to programs through which customers could pay a small levy to contribute to carbon offsetting measures, and the promotion of potential biofuel additives which might lesson the emissions burden in the future (Pond, 2016). As an executive from one of the major airlines outlined: 'Aviation is not going away. The predicted growth rates are astronomic...it's not our desire to see people flying less.' (Interview #20)

As a result, the dramatic reductions in carbon emissions required to avoid the destruction of fragile ecosystems like the GBR challenged dominant political and economic assumptions of business growth and profitability. Following the second bleaching event, the debate shifted from the politics of climate change, to shoring up the hegemony of taken for granted assumptions around jobs and growth. Thus, when challenged the political became present requiring both defence and reproduction. This excluded any notion of climate mitigation hampering economic growth. However, if mitigation was not possible then a vision of the future needed to be crafted within which the political threat of climate change could be contained. For government and corporate elites this involved the emerging discourse and practice of climate adaptation.

Reinforcing hegemony by building a discourse of adaptation and resilience

For government and industry, the idea of climate adaptation and building resilience to climate impacts was immediately appealing as it promoted local, small-scale measures which demonstrated concern and tangible action in response to the negative media attention generated

around coral bleaching. The discourse around 'proactive' and 'practical' responses to coral bleaching was embraced by corporate Australia which became increasingly involved in the public debate over the future of the Reef through philanthropic and advocacy activities.

In particular, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, a charity consisting of the executives of the country's largest corporations, became the favoured choice for government funding for the Reef, with a grant of $440 million in mid-2018 directed to the organisation over traditional academic research and regulatory organizations (Rebgetz & Gartry, 2018). While critics noted the irony of an organisation run by executives from major fossil fuel companies seeking to limit the impact of climate change, the Foundation's Chairman (a former Managing Director of oil giant Esso) argued their role was to improve the Reef's ability to adapt and not to advocate for emissions reduction: 'while the world works to tackle climate change on a global scale, there are many things we can and must do to build the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef right now' (Rebgetz & Gartry, 2018). Here, the coalition between levels of government and different industries became clear in its emphasis on local adaptation, rather than mitigation.

The Foundation stressed its role in fund-raising within corporate Australia and encouraging public education about the Reef. This included hosting corporate retreats at luxury reef resorts (Ludlow, 2018), employee-engagement programs and a website promoting the organization's conservation projects. As the Foundation's strategy document outlined, donations could help partner companies 'drive employee engagement, position them as an employer of choice, and contribute positively to reputation scoring or social licence to operate' (Smee, 2018). One example of this was the national airline Qantas, which in a global alliance with entertainment giant Disney promoted its involvement in reef rehabilitation to its customers framed around the animated movie *Finding Dory* (Frame, 2016).

These political activities reinforced the hegemonic coalition by promoting corporate friendly practices within the dominant market ideology. Adaptation plans emphasised corporate reputation and 'social licence', with business engagement with reef conservation justified upon an essentially economic logic. In a widely reported analysis in 2017 commissioned by the GBR Foundation, accountancy firm Deloitte estimated the 'economic, social, icon and brand value' of the Reef at $56 billion, generating $6.5 billion dollars in revenue per annum and providing up to 64,000 jobs in reef tourism, fishing and associated activities (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). Justifying this economic exercise, the report authors noted that 'At a time when the global natural environment is under threat from the pressures of humankind, particularly climate change, it has never been more important to understand the value of nature.' The monetisation of the Reef in the language of the market thus provided the justification for further corporate involvement, albeit limited to small-scale local adaptation measures which neatly skirted around the fundamental issue of radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and the end of fossil fuel extraction and use.

Thus, the reinforcement of the dominant coalition of business and government explicitly excluded mitigation efforts. Corporate strategies instead emphasised the monetary value of the reef and the jobs that the industries supported. The political direction then turned towards activities and practices within this clear hierarchy of values and the importance of business and corporations to 'save' the reef through their promotion of local adaptation practices.

Corporate environmentalism and the politics of climate adaptation

The focus on adaptation allowed business and government to return to the politics of what should be done within the dominant logic of a continued expansion of fossil fuel extraction and use. A powerful discourse within this discussion was the idea of building the Reef's 'resilience' in the

face of future climate threats. The concept of 'resilience' within ecology management emphasises the capacity of natural systems to both resist shocks and disasters and recover and rebound quickly from them (Nature Conservancy, 2018; Standish et al., 2014). For business-funded groups like the GBR Foundation and governments, the idea of building the Reef's resilience to climate change impacts like coral bleaching was immediately appealing as it promoted a positive message that recovery was possible based around local action irrespective of broader climate change dynamics. This was contrasted with a focus on climate change and the mitigation of carbon emissions which was framed as 'doom and gloom'. As a spokesperson for the peak reef tourism body outlined at a Senate inquiry into climate change impacts:

> 'Bleaching is not new to the Great Barrier Reef. It's happened before, and it's bounced back. We've had cyclones before, and the reef's bounced back. The talk these days should not be about trying to save the reef, it should be more about assisting the reef to recover. That needs to be the message that gets out there. We've got to get rid of the doom and gloom and say we want to be proactive. We're going to help. We want to help the reef recover.' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 26)

Building the Reef's resilience found practical expression in a broad range of local initiatives that attracted government and corporate funding and support. These included projects aimed at improving coastal water quality and limiting sediment run-off and agricultural pollution from nearby rivers, new techniques to control the coral-denuding Crown-of-Thorns starfish, and reef restoration projects including reconstruction of cyclone-damaged reef complexes and coral farming (Great Barrier Reef Foundation, 2017). As a senior airline executive argued of his firm's involvement in one such a program:

'So the idea of being able to sort of click your fingers and fix climate change is not available to us. But here you have a major threat to the health and resilience of the Reef [sediment control] that you can take off the table. So that was attractive. So we put our energies into that partnership.' (Interview #21)

In the aftermath of the second bleaching event, reef tourism operators even floated the idea of an engineering response to lessen future coral bleaching by pumping cooler ocean water onto selected tourist reefs. While dismissed by marine scientists as an impractical 'band-aid solution', the proposal won government funding for a pilot program of so-called 'reef havens' involving underwater fans to better circulate water on popular tourism reef sites (Knaus, 2017). Other proposals for improving reef resilience included research into coral farming, potentially breeding or genetically engineering 'super corals' which could better withstand warmer ocean waters, coral shading, as well as potential geo-engineering responses such as cloud brightening (Great Barrier Reef Foundation, 2017; Van Boom, 2018).

Importantly, the government and industry promotion of resilience and adaptation occurred within the dominant ideology of market capitalism which was absent from discussion within the political arena. This restructuring of hegemony also incorporated new actors and subject positions for citizens to play into. For instance, while a number of leading marine scientists continued to publicly criticise the government over its failure to address climate change (Gannon, 2018), the shift of government research funding towards corporate charities like the GBR Foundation led other researchers to embrace the Reef adaptation agenda (Braverman, 2017). Corporate-funded charities also promoted the idea that citizens could help to 'save the Reef' by purchasing 'green' products and committing to avoid the use of plastic bags and straws, and reducing their food waste (McKinnon, 2018). As one tourism-sponsored charity website declared, 'United we will inspire

collaboration and collective impact on a global scale. From ditching single-use plastics to citizen science and world-leading research – everyone has a part to play.' Thus, while acknowledging climate change as the key threat to the Reef, these appeals sought to enlist the public via social media as concerned consumers rather than politically active citizens pressuring government for meaningful emissions mitigation.

The political process of shifting from mitigation to adaptation

Our analysis of the corporate responses to the coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef established four distinct phases: i) the reactive politics of doubt, ii) the defence of the political constitution, iii) the institution of the political, and iv) the proactive politics of solutions. Theses phases show how hegemony is implicitly reproduced through the politics of interpretation and action when the hegemony is not challenged – phases (i) and (iv), while explicitly defended and instituted when the assumptions underlying the hegemony are challenged – phases (ii) and (iii). Our analysis thus shows the different aspects of politics in explaining the shift from mitigation to adaptation.

In the initial phase, industry and government employed the familiar tactics of denying or seeding doubt about the link to climate change. This is the reactive politics witnessed elsewhere in discussions around climate change, where industry claims uncertainties around climate change and questions whether events can be confidently linked to global warming (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). These tactics represent politics, whereby a consensus is established through what appears to be free and rational discussion amongst individuals and groups of different opinions. The public debate is considered free, in that the underlying political order – the political – is not considered, and rational, given the emphasis on arguments about how to

interpret events. In this first stage of response to a material climate impact, corporate activities were focussed on the demobilization of the population by seeding doubt about the impact and re-emphasising the status quo.

However, with the second bleaching event, the materiality of climate change undermined the politics and the effects could no longer be contained within the political debate (Nyberg & Wright, 2016). Coral bleaching became a challenge to the constituted political order and CPA changed in order to defend the hegemony. Here, the political strategy included emphasising that climate change is a global (rather than local) issue (e.g. continued reference to Australia's 'small' contribution to total global carbon emissions), and highlighting the importance of the resources sector and coal mining for the Australian economy in terms of royalties, revenue and jobs. Existing business practices were shored up within the coalition of industry and government, and emissions mitigation (in the form of constraints on thermal coal export) were presented as failing to make economic sense (e.g. if Australia doesn't export coal, another country will). The political activities in the public debate reproduced a common sense view of a global world with nations dependent on a strong economy. Certain commodities and values were defended.

The defence of the hegemony was followed in a third phase by shifting the discussion from climate mitigation to adaptation and a focus upon ways to improve the Reef's 'resilience', which as critics have noted 'seems to fly in the face of any anticipatory action, instead scientifically justifying forms of inaction' (Braverman, 2017, p. 12). This was done by reinforcing the market ideology through corporate solutions to climate change concerns. Here, government and industry actively campaigned for 'practical' solutions based on corporate practices to ensure that the hegemonic positions of implicated industries were instituted. The shift to adaptation shored up the

political ground by establishing corporations and industry associations as key players in responding to climate change.

The last phase in the politics of the Reef (until the next bleaching event) involved returning to the politics of discussing different activities in response to climate change. This involved a form of proactive politics aimed at proposing a range of local adaptation measures. The ground for this discussion – the political – was disavowed in addressing climate change through economic rationality (Wainwright & Mann, 2015). Through this process, the issue of reducing carbon emissions (mitigation) was sidelined and emphasis was placed on better coping with the physical impacts of climate disruption that were now seen as inevitable (adaptation). Alternatives to corporate solutions were rarely discussed and the assumptions underlying the politics were ignored.

Together these four phases explain the process of moving from mitigation to adaptation as the dominant response to climate change. While the findings are unique to this particular case, the four phases in the process can assist in explaining climate change responses elsewhere. For example, during California's recent record-breaking wildfires the initial political response was to question the link to climate change before shifting the emphasis to local responses such as better forest management (Fuller, 2018). Similarly, political leaders downplay the link between climate change and increasingly severe hurricanes and floods, while promoting the benefits of privatised disaster relief and better local preparedness (Newkirk, 2018). This focus on local adaptation to climate impacts is of course happening at the same time as business and governments promote the neoliberal agenda of weakening environmental protections and opening up new regions of the world for fossil fuel extraction (Klein, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Despite the existential threat that climate change poses to natural ecosystems and human society more generally, fossil fuel use continues to increase. Indeed, despite over thirty years of international climate change negotiation, fossil fuel consumption continues to break new records (Saxifrage, 2017). This raises the question of why our technologically advanced civilization continues it suicidal path (Kolbert, 2006)? A key factor underpinning such 'creative self-destruction' is the way in which dominant economic and political elites maintain the hegemony of fossil fuel use as the engine of economic growth (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Our focus in this paper has been to explore the political process through which this hegemony is constructed and maintained in the face of obvious material threats. Our case study of the corporate political response to coral bleaching on the GBR suggests a four-phase process of hegemony maintenance or political grounding. By explaining the political process of shifting from mitigation to adaption, we make three general contributions.

First, our analysis of corporate political responses to coral bleaching on the GBR contributes to existing understandings of CPA by demonstrating how major corporations and their political allies create and maintain a 'common sense' view of climate change response. This was achieved through an on-going process of reactive politics, defending hegemony from critique, shifting the agenda and then proactively engaging with politics through proposed 'solutions'. Within the hegemony of market capitalism only certain activities make sense. Climate change mitigation by prohibiting new coal mines (and taxing carbon emissions) was presented as unrealistic and pointless, with industry representatives arguing that Australia's emissions on a planetary scale were limited and that the nation depended on the economic value of coal mining. When challenged, the political required reproduction and was shored up by industry associations and government.

With mitigation not an option within corporate capitalism, responses shifted to local adaptation. New practices, products, and discourses were developed to feed into the politics of reef adaption and resilience. CPA focussed on convincing the public of the familiar 'win-win' discourse of corporate environmentalism in which business would provide leadership and innovation and citizens could 'save the Reef' by purchasing products and voicing their support on websites and social media. These solutions favoured certain actors over others, with adaptation practices defined within the acceptable boundaries of the dominant economic system.

This is indirect CPA that emphasizes building and maintaining a hegemonic bloc of actors that defend and reinforce a political ground privileging corporate actors and neoliberal political policies. Fragmented corporate actors that participate individually in politics come together when hegemony is directly challenged (Nyberg et al., 2013; Walker & Rea, 2014). Despite their power, corporate interests can lose political battles in the politics of interpretation and action, but unifying threats to corporate hegemony ensure that the coalition of business interests unite to defend the political ground. Corporate power in society is then best illustrated by the unquestionable business logic driving public policy, rather than the outcome of particular policy debates. The political ground gives corporate narratives and arguments credibility in politics over public policy (Murray et al., 2016). Analytically separating politics from the political demonstrates how constituency building occurs on political grounds where the overlap between corporate and public interests are taken for granted (Nyberg & Murray, 2017) – it is established as common sense.

Second, our analysis builds on the analytical distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' in explaining how hegemony is constituted. Through politics, CPA mobilizes resources to coerce or manipulate other actors' interpretations and actions. This is the episodic focus on particular events or activities within CPA (Hillman et al., 2004; Lawton et al., 2013). These episodes also

challenge or reproduce a social order grounding the episodes – the political. This is the systemic form of domination that ensures that the social order appears inevitable and natural (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). When this order and relations are challenged the public debate takes different forms, with CPA supporting rationalities, hierarchies, and values (Nyberg et al., 2017). This ensures that any form of discussion or deliberation in response to climate change occurs within a taken for granted political regime (Levy et al., 2016; Nyberg et al., 2017). We can thus differentiate between the often overlapping corporate campaigns to i) influence particular public policy by direct influence such as lobbying (Lux et al., 2011) or indirect strategies such as coalition building (Murray et al., 2016), and ii) constituting a political ground where certain arguments of lobbyists make sense and actors interests are amenable to corporate interests (Nyberg et al., 2017).

Finally, our study sheds light on the role of 'disaster capitalism' in the political economy of climate change. Environmental catastrophes are increasingly exploited by economic and political elites to further expand neoliberal agendas of privatisation, corporate deregulation and the marketisation of social relations (Klein, 2007, 2014). As demonstrated in the case of coral bleaching, climate change impacts paradoxically provide further spaces for the expansion of the very neoliberal policies that have created the climate crisis. Here, the movement from climate mitigation to adaptation allows for an expansion of corporate interests in the determination of climate response. For vulnerable communities reeling from record-breaking storms and floods, wildfires, droughts or the destruction of local ecosystems, the political response refuses to countenance the dramatic decarbonisation required to avert worsening climate impacts and rather advocates the expansion of corporate and market 'solutions' which facilitate further emissions growth (Sovacool & Linnér, 2016; Wright & Nyberg, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef provides a rather bleak picture; while coral reefs bleach and entire ecosystems are endangered, our corporate and political masters fiddle with local adaptations and 'band-aid solutions'. Moreover, the policy shift from mitigation to adaptation ensures that fossil fueled corporate capitalism can continue unabated. On a global scale, this is evidenced by increasing corporate responses to climate change *and* growing global greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, while there is plenty of societal action in response to climate change, what is missing is meaningful action.

The growing policy shift from climate mitigation to adaptation is problematic for several reasons. First, this movement towards focusing on better adapting to climate impacts does not address the problem and can even be seen as diverting attention and funding from much-needed mitigation measures such as decarbonization and renewable energy. Second, this form of climate adaptation is firmly based on corporate entrepreneurism and individual action. These ideas obscure the ideological and political contents of adaptation (Wainwright & Mann, 2015). We are not suggesting that climate adaptation is pointless; just that it needs to be combined with a substantial focus on dramatic emissions mitigation. This points to the obvious problem of the unequal distribution of responsibility and consequences in terms of those actors who benefit from continued fossil fuel extraction and consumption, compared to those who suffer the consequences and do not have the resources to adapt to future climate change impacts.

However, the analytical separation between politics and the political does provide some possibilities for meaningful mobilization in response to climate change impacts. It is clear from our case that policies around individualization and marketization of climate change responses are futile since these strengthen the current dominant hegemony. Local adaptations require demands

for mitigation. While we have painted a bleak picture in this paper, we must also deny the impotent fantasy of catastrophe and confront climate change with mobilization of boycotts, divestment and blockades that challenge the existing political hegemony.

Table 1: Summary of document source material

Description	# of documents
National media reports (TV, newspapers, magazines and news websites)	487
International news media	363
Local Queensland news media	347
Corporate, environmental and regulatory documents	36
Total	1,233

Table 2: Semi-structured interviews

Interview #	Respondent description
1	North Queensland politician (Cairns)
2	StopAdani activist (Cairns)
3	Sustainability consultant (Cairns)
4	GBR academic researcher (Townsville)
5	Program Director, environmental NGO (Sydney)
6	StopAdani activist (Cairns)
7	Organiser, environmental NGO (Cairns)
8	CEO, reef tourism organisation (Cairns)
9	Editor, regional newspaper (Cairns)
10	CEO, marine tourism organization (Cairns)
11	StopAdani activist (Cairns)
12	Dive instructor and StopAdani activist (Cairns)
13	CEO, industry lobby group (Cairns)
14	Organiser, StopAdani (Cairns)
15	Marine and reef scientist (Townsville)
16	Marine and reef scientist (Sydney)
17	Organiser, environmental NGO (Whitsundays)
18	Marine and reef scientist (Sydney)
19	CEO, environmental NGO (Sydney)
20	Organiser, environmental NGO (Cairns)
21	GM Sustainability, airline A (Sydney)
22	Sustainability leader, airline A (Sydney)
23	Policy Director, environmental NGO (Sydney)
24	Group environment manager, airline B (Sydney)
25	StopAdani activist (Cairns)
26	MD, marine tourism industry group (Cairns)
27	MD, GBR research organization (Cairns)
28	MD, Reef tourism company (Cairns)
29	Organiser, GBR conservation group (Cairns)
30	CEO, local industry association (Cairns)
31	Organiser, environmental NGO (Cairns)
32	CEO, Reef conservation organization (Cairns)
33	Dive instructor, Reef tourism company (Port Douglas)
34	Marine researcher and entrepreneur (Cairns)

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