



## Methodological and Ideological Options

## A tragedy of intangible commons: Riding the socioecological wave

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## ABSTRACT

The socioecological discourse has recently gained strong attention. Suddenly, most firms now try to engage quickly with precarious issues because consumers demand an attitude toward our grand challenges, not merely products anymore. Starting from neo-institutionalist critiques, which dominate the corporate green and social-washing discourse, this essay argues from a largely neglected perspective by drawing attention to the impacts on the longstanding pioneers of socioecologically valuable business practices. Almost no research to date has illuminated the phenomenon whereby pioneering firms lose their unique selling propositions because others are ‘riding the wave’ and reaping where they have not sown. By applying a resource-based argumentation, the idea of a tragedy of intangible commons is unfolded to explain what made this phenomenon possible and why it could even occur.

## 1. Introduction

Renowned environmental scientists’ recent conclusions about the consequences of “our present policy of laissez-faire in reproduction” (Hardin, 1968, p. 1244) are becoming tougher. As Lenton et al. (2019, p. 595) noted, the “stability and resilience of our planet is in peril.” Ironically, our present policy of production is anything but laissez-faire. Embedded in a capitalist economy, firms compete by striving for supranormal profits, gaining quick benefits based on short-term outlooks, outsourcing intolerable working conditions, and low wages to poor developing countries with weak social protection. In a nutshell, firms externalize costs—ones “that are not [even] understood, measured, or declared” (Dyllick and Muff, 2016, p. 163)—to the future and/or unknown.

As long-term social vehicles to divide labor and allocate resources, the typical firm-like organization is a central building block of society’s architecture and thus central to attaining a viable reproduction of our societies’ livelihood. In search of recurring patterns to describe, reconstruct, anticipate, and finally explain human beings’ behavior within such ‘collective actors’ organization scientists once shaped the core insight that any congruence between stating, acting, and actual intending of (and in) organizations is rare rather than normal. Firms construct this incongruity sometimes deliberately in the form of *facades*.

Applied to present societies’ socioecological transformation, such misleading organizational behavior is commonly known as *corporate greenwashing*, which Lyon and Montgomery (2015, p. 244) defined as a

broad “umbrella term for a whole family of behaviors that induce people to hold overly positive views of an organization’s environmental performance.” However, as the socioecological discourse continues to differentiate, green and socialwashing<sup>1</sup> practices continue to evolve. In other words, better-informed addressees require more sophisticated (see Kassinis and Panayiotou, 2018) and more subtle corporate green and socialwashing practices to keep the facades working.

Studies on the (more or less) intended effects of green and social-washing on consumers are numerous (see Gatti et al., 2019, pp. 5–6). The current research discourse, however, reflects the unintended impacts of corporate greenwashing mainly from two directions (e.g., Lyon and Montgomery, 2015; Gatti et al., 2019): on the executing firms themselves, where scholars examine how such practices affect the consumers’ buying behavior and pay off at all, and (rather subordinated) on society and other somehow involved stakeholders, where scholars wonder if green and socialwashing undermine the general trust in corporate practices at what consequences? The present inquiry adds a new perspective by asking how it may impact socioecological pioneers. The essay starts with a brief outline of the current green and social-washing debate (focused on facades) and the evolution of the corresponding corporate practices, develops a resource-based argumentation to explain the phenomenon of the erosion of the pioneers’ unique selling proposition, and finally sheds light on what made this outcome possible, and why it occurs by unfolding the idea of a *tragedy of intangible commons*.

In contrast to the conventional innovation paradigm, where

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<sup>1</sup> Socialwashing is a counterpart to greenwashing and addresses the firms’ treatment of individual human beings and society.

pioneering work is tightly coupled to the ‘first mover’ advantage, this essay emphasizes the unique quality of socioecological pioneering work that neither creates sustained competitive advantage nor exclusive innovation rents to refinance R&D costs but instead minimizes or even eliminates the externalization of costs. By addressing socioecological pioneers in the subject of corporate green and socialwashing, the ingratitude of the capitalist system for those who have staked their own survivability for the survivability of our entire species ought to be transparent. The elaborated tragedy demonstrates the importance of learning to appreciate the protracted and unrewarding work of the socioecological pioneers, as their own room for maneuver is restricted by nature, even though they have painstakingly laid the foundation for fundamental societal reforms toward natural and social sustainability.

## 2. All that glitters is not gold: socioecological facades

According to Fleming et al. (2013, p. 340), corporate social responsibility (CSR) may be understood in three ways: first, as “undesirable [...] given the profit imperative of the firm”; second, as a “panacea for taming the negative externalities of business enterprise”; and third, as “an ideological tool designed to cloak (or ‘green wash’) an otherwise uncaring corporation in the garb of ethicality and environmental friendliness.” This last view, which this paper relies on, is rooted in the sociological neo-institutionalism formulated by Meyer and Rowan (1977), with a conceptual separation of organizations’ words and deeds. The *decoupling of words and deeds* enables organizations to protect their operating core against contradictory requirements via the construction of legitimacy facades. Bromley and Powell (2012), meanwhile, detected a shift of decoupling practices toward *means* and *ends*, since attention increasingly directs to the enactment and measurement of means, even if those are loosely coupled with its actual goals. In this view, “the most highly rationalized organizations may also be the least instrumental” (Bromley and Powell, 2012, p. 518). *Hypocrisy*, by contrast, is one type of decoupling survival mechanism with a far more instrumental character.<sup>2</sup> Brunsson (1989) argued that organizations use *talk*, *decisions*, and *actions* in separate ways, depending on the challenges they face. The discrepancy between the three should not be understood as a problem for the organization; rather, such a discrepancy enables firms to meet different stakeholders’ expectations simultaneously, for instance, by using euphemisms in CSR reports to subtly address different stakeholders at the same time (see La Cour and Kromann, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Against this essentially cunning perspective, some researchers have emphasized the performative qualities and effects of corporate green and socialwashing. Bowen (2014), for instance, focused on the symbolic sphere of corporate environmentalism and observed shared meanings and representations. Christensen et al. (2013, p. 378) distinguished between hypocrisy as *duplicity*, “when an organization is involved in fraud or seeks to hide an unpleasant truth behind pleasant words,” and hypocrisy as *aspiration*, “when an organization, in order to stimulate action, incants a wished-for future, pretending that this future (or parts thereof) already exists.”

Instead of seeing the gap between words and deeds as “aspirational talk,” serving as “a *transitional* or preparatory stage toward a better organization” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 384), the present inquiry advocates for a longitudinal perspective in which the essential question is *when* a firm begins to commit to certain aspirations. For this reason, the following section clarifies what socioecological facades are and why they have appeared so recently when the escalating socioecological issues involved have been known for decades.

<sup>2</sup> An amusing collection of hypocrisy-based analogies to CSR (prosthesis, cosmetic, and others) can be found in Christensen et al. (2013).

<sup>3</sup> As well the gap between a firm’s communicated conduct, mission, or vision statement and the actual business routines has already been discussed at length and empirically observed (e.g., Mirvis et al., 2010; Christensen et al., 2013).

### 2.1. The rise of socioecological facades

The decoupling of words and deeds (or, as well, means and ends) does not necessarily produce facades. The term *facade*, commonly associated with architecture, describes the exterior, the visible outward appearance, and asserts neither anything about nor implies any binding congruence with the interior. If a firm’s public appearance raises socioecological expectations that do not coincide with its actual (inner) practices, then we may speak of facades. Such facades emerge in reciprocal evolution of market actors and organizations, however, neither emergently nor randomly.

Fontenelle (2015, p. 645) described organizations as “producers of consumers” in light of the rising marketing activities of the 1980s, when “consumption management began to inform production.” The polarity appears to be inverting, however. Consumers today are, to a considerable extent, producers of organizations. While “the determination of use-value by exchange-value is an inherent characteristic of capitalist organization” (Knights and Morgan, 1993, p. 228), the increasing substitution of exchange value with socioecological value indicates a demand-pull effect toward more reasonable business practices. Gabriel et al. (2015, p. 630) also recognized this pendulum swing when they noted “a substantial movement to change the two-actor show [workers and managers] into a three-actor show.” The consumer, as the newcomer, now asks for more details on *how* firms realize their purpose beyond merely purchasing their products. And in doing so, “the consumer, a character whose whims, habits, desires and practices are no longer seen as ‘impacting on’ the activities of managers and workers from the outside, but increasingly as defining them” (Gabriel et al., 2015, p. 630). Even more: NGOs as a fourth actor type increasingly entering the stage and play meanwhile a crucial role in the pursuit of collective interests. Their activism can be understood as an alternative way for societies to “rebalance public and private interests” (Daubanes and Rochet, 2019, p. 209). They pressurize firms even beyond consumers’ individual levels of “satisficing” (Simon, 1956, p. 136) by investigating how firms truly act. NGOs are not for profit and are established to mobilize critiques, reveal issues, influence negotiations, and certify social, humanitarian, environmental, and developmental contributions. Even though NGOs can mitigate greenwashing (see Kim and Lyon, 2015), they also risk (unintentionally) supporting firms in exactly doing that, for instance, when they are engaged in multi-stakeholder initiatives (see Partzsch et al., 2019).

The creation of facades thus relies on firms’ perceived necessity to fulfill their given outer expectations, which derived either from a failed attempt to comply or the path of least resistance to continue as before, i.e., pursuing supranormal profits. In addition to the firms’ perceived necessity, facades presuppose (1) an *external interest* in the interior, (2) a certain degree of *transparency*, and (3) a demand side that seriously seeks to assert its *aspirations*. All three are discussed in more detail below.

First, prior to the socioecological attention wave of the last decade,<sup>4</sup> too few potential customers cherished interests beyond technical, esthetical, and prestigious product features. Continuing business as usual meant essentially ‘more gain with no pain.’ Any improvement that did not contribute to the products for sale led to more costs and higher prices, followed by a diminished competitive advantage (see Perrow, 1997). The socioecologically advanced firms of this period may be

<sup>4</sup> Meuer et al. (2020) reconstructed a dramatically increasing publication curve of scholarly papers on corporate sustainability from 2009 to 2017, as did fairly similar de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) and Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos (2014). Lyon and Montgomery (2015) found a corresponding trend for corporate greenwashing. Numerous milestones in politics and society can also be referred to, including the ‘2 °C Paris Agreement’ (2015), the UN’s ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (2015), or the international movement ‘Fridays for Future’ that began in 2019.

presumed to have had a serious orientation toward social well-being and the preservation of nature since the legitimized externalization of costs would have been more profitable and subsequently also more prosperous for the firms' development.

Second, prior to the rise of the Internet, social media, aggressive NGOs, and socioecologically investigative journalism, a firm's prosperity or even survival (depending on consumers' selection criteria) was primarily constituted through the *what* expressed in the form of products. Almost only products and services constituted the interface to the consumers. Facades only became necessary and indeed became widespread through increased transparency. Ironically, however, social media simultaneously reduces corporate greenwashing by increasing the likelihood of backfire due to misleading self-promotion (see Lyon and Montgomery, 2013). Suitably high transparency can eradicate greenwashing and may motivate genuine firms to engage even more (see Wu et al., 2020).

Lyon and Montgomery (2015) provide a comprehensive collection of recent greenwashing mechanisms, including selective disclosure, cheap talk, incomplete comparisons, and implied superiority, that appear virtually everywhere in a variety of shapes, including deceptive certifications and labels, empty green claims, counter-intentional policies, late joined public voluntary programs, misleading narratives, or visual imagery. However, increased transparency, the Internet's long-term storage and dissemination function, more informed consumers, and NGOs that are interested in *how* firms act have led to an enormous potential for damage (in the form of 'shitstorms') to the firm's image when misleading facades are unmasked. This urged firms to develop new qualities of corporate green and socialwashing. Thus, firms have made progressive use of the high complexity and information overload of socioecological matters that have emerged due to the sudden and comprehensive discourse that our society has recently faced. Consumers are evidently not able to judge the adequacy of emitted tons of CO<sub>2</sub> to produce a good or the proportion of highly advertised green packaging compared to the brown product inside or the necessity and consequences of using certain chemicals. They are even overwhelmed by the variety of certification programs and labels. As a result, firms learned to act more carefully in socioecological terms and developed facades that are more subtle and much more effortful to unmask. Such *relational facades* are not grounded on false claims or "vicariously" selective disclosures belonging to the suppliers (see Pizzetti et al., 2021) because, here, words and deeds remain congruent. They can only be unmasked in comparison to competitors or an in-depth analysis of what might have been possible (e.g., suffered opportunity costs), as with Jones (2019), who proposed a more relational view in comparing greenwashing practices at the three (micro-meso-macro) levels of products, firms, and industries for a critical analysis. But in that case, we run the risk of confusing cause and effect: relational analysis only became necessary because greenwashing practices today increasingly materialize with relational qualities.

From an analytical perspective, the challenge for social scientists to unmask green and socialwashing becomes even tougher since "hypocrisy cannot be an *explicit* strategy. To announce hypocrisy is self-defeating" for firms (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 385) that compete in a capitalist system with one another for a greater share of the market, similar to users that compete "with one another for a greater share of the [free-for-all] resource to the detriment of themselves, the resource, and society as a whole" (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975, p. 713). Disproportionality is not just more challenging to expose but also to be sanctioned.

Third, if consumers or NGOs are dissatisfied with a firm's socioecological attitude, they can sanction the firm by redirecting their purchasing power, which has increasingly become evident since the wave has accumulated (see de Jong et al., 2018); or the latter, by redirecting their mobilization power for boycott, which can lead to enormous pressure. In turn, firms receive an impetus to change their way of doing business through consumers' demand and societal resistance. A more

reflexive consumption behavior that involves changing decision preferences in the consumers' choice of products, however, could only influence the design and the product assortment, not (or at least only constrained) changes in *how* products are created, with all the related consequences for the environment and society, since *how* firms realize what they offer is not (or only partly) reflected in product and service characteristics or hidden behind facades. 'Sustainable and fair,' as non-protectable terms, dominate contemporary branding practices, for instance, expressed in corporate missions, product names, or even just green color-coded.

Such (empty) phrases are widely used, from the industrial bakery that is 'deeply rooted in the region' and the fossil energy corporation telling some of its 'sustainability stories' to the mass producer of brown consumer electronics that merely concentrate on 'packaging made of recyclable and compostable grass fibres.' Such *selective disclosure* (or "discursive closure"), where "some characteristics are emphasized, while many aspects are neglected or marginalized," ranges up to bare branding hypocrisy, where any "connections between the branded ('hypocritical') image and the organization's operations are practically lost" (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018, pp. 261–262). Consequently, it will be even more difficult for consumers to distinguish between a capitalist and a utilitarian mindset, between 'maximum-minded' firms (referring to the primacy of profit), and 'maxim-minded' firms (referring to the primacy of reason).<sup>5</sup>

## 2.2. Distinguishing between 'fecalchemists' and pioneers

This paper proposes a distinction between *fecalchemists*<sup>6</sup> and *pioneers*. The former apply a socioecological maxim only in the form of facades, including those that become 'fair and sustainable' after attention, and markets have grown over-proportionally, with Samuelson's (1954, p. 389) words in "hope to snatch some selfish benefit." Pioneers, in contrast, developed their serious socioecological attitude, comparable with Landrum's (2018) "(very) strong sustainability" stage, even prior to the emergent pervasive socioecological narrative.

For those pioneers of maxim-minded business practices—those who moved decades ago "from business-as-usual to 'true business sustainability'" (Dyllick and Muff, 2016, p. 157) and had to undertake far more effort to pave new paths in unfamiliar territory, to which little purchasing power was directed 20 years ago—sustainability has long been deeply rooted in the "higher-order organizing principles" (Kogut and Zander, 1992) guiding organizational behaviors and decisions.

If we employ this distinction, an almost entirely neglected consequence of the sudden and excessive socioecological movement becomes apparent: the uniqueness and the perceived actual moral superiority of genuine pioneers are eroded with each additional firm that reaps where it has not sown. The value of longstanding pioneering work degenerates dramatically, like that of any currency whose volume grows disproportionately.

## 3. A tragedy of intangible commons

While some scholars have primarily discussed whether CSR practices should be treated as merely a "rational myth" (Boiral, 2007) or indeed have the potential to stimulate sustainable transformation (see Christensen et al., 2013; Bowen, 2014), the 'sustainable and fair' claim

<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon that present advantages are more valuable for a single firm than the potential (and hardly quantifiable) consequences for the preservation of everyone's livelihood in the distant future corresponds to Böhm-Bawerk's (1923, p. 247) general principle of *time preference*: "the element of uncertainty, which is the cause of a lesser value being put upon particular classes of future goods."

<sup>6</sup> A portmanteau of 'feces' and 'alchemists': in this case, those who try to turn sh\*\* into gold, so far without success.

hyperinflates and increasingly turns into an empty phrase serving as fodder for growth-generating marketing campaigns, performance-enhancing corporate identity programs, and customer-binding brand designs. CSR contributes to ritualistic consumption and creates symbols that increasingly become “valuable resources for consumers’ identity construction” (Bertilsson and Rennstam, 2018, p. 261). Consequently, socioecologically ambitious pioneering firms are forced to embark on novel and more radical measures once again to differentiate them from those fecalchemists that are gradually gaining ground. As Boiral (2007, p. 128) noted:

“...organizations seem to have considerable margin for manoeuvre in the way they actually integrate the standard requirements (...) This internal margin for manoeuvre is likely to encourage the development of ceremonial behaviour and a superficial conformity that transforms the standard into an organizational myth rather than a genuine tool for improving environmental management.”

Indeed, studies have found that corporate greenwashing practices can regrettably work (e.g., Barrage et al., 2014; Du et al., 2016; Berrone et al., 2017; Kassinis and Panayiotou, 2018).<sup>7</sup> For instance, in the case of poor environmental performance, organizations’ visibility tends to increase; increasing (issue-)visibility, in turn, can generate external pressure through shareholders or activists and thus increase selective disclosure (see Kassinis and Panayiotou, 2018), which is a self-reinforcing ‘vicious circle.’

### 3.1. Low-hanging (not sustained) competitive advantages

A firm that is conceptualized beyond their property rights of excludable private goods, as with Wieland’s (2014) “nexus of stakeholders,” involves the continuous flux between consumers, employees, suppliers, communities, capital investors, non-governmental organizations, and even with nature, understood as “the Terrestrial as a new political actor” (Latour, 2018). Precisely alongside these exchange relationships of legitimacy and resources is the margin for maneuvers to externalize costs and thus the potential for a tragedy of intangible commons. To survive, firms must fit the requirements of the economic system in which they are embedded—that is, the competitive realization of their specific purpose in the capitalist system of Western societies. Rigid firms risk being replaced by more adaptable, faster organizations with more innovative and now as well greener products. The markets in which firms operate, the rivals against which they have to compete, and the resources they need to compose are all subject to continuous flux. According to Barney (1991, pp. 105–106, emphasis added),

“...not all firm resources hold the potential of sustained competitive advantages. To have this potential, a firm resource must have four attributes: (a) it must be *valuable*, in the sense that it exploit[s] opportunities and/or neutralizes threats in a firm’s environment, (b) it must be *rare* among a firm’s current and potential competition, (c) it must be *imperfectly imitable*, and (d) there cannot be *strategically equivalent substitutes* for this resource that are valuable but neither rare or imperfectly imitable.”

Such sustained competitive advantages can be found in a myriad of varieties; for instance, grapevines at a winery are subject to particular soil conditions and weather influences, affecting the wine’s taste, whereas geographically rare, equivalent substitutes are hardly possible. The computer algorithms of search engines and language translators provide dedicated search results, but they are usually too complex for

<sup>7</sup> If studies conclude that „greenwashing contributes [only] to the perceived environmental performance of an organization,” but does not lead to an “increased purchase interest,” then may because CSR is still not a decisive purchasing criterion and not because “it is a useless, myopic strategy” (de Jong et al., 2018, p. 100).

perfect imitation; pharmaceutical firms can simply patent their drugs, thus forcing others to costly explore alternative solutions.

First, however, suppose now that firms differ from others in terms of their attitudes rather than their products. Adopting such an attitude means preferring not to choose the more lucrative but morally reflected and sustainable option in decision making, evaluating strategies not for gained market shares but for socioecological appropriateness, and having an outward appearance that is not adjusted to society’s expectations but is consistent with an organization’s actual behavior. But filling the often-criticized “moral emptiness of corporate capitalism” (Kazmi et al., 2016, p. 8) does not prevent firms from being crowded out, with both maxim and maximum-minded firms competing in the same economic system with the same rules applying for both.

But what happens if a resource suddenly increases in value but does not meet Barney’s (1991) criteria above? This case’s apparent implications by no means lack empirical evidence: since consumers increasingly demand not only products but also attitudes, firms simply switch their espoused beliefs and values. From a resource-based view, as one of the diverse theoretical perspectives on CSR (see Frynas and Yamahaki, 2016), it follows, in line with McWilliams and Siegel (2001, 2011) and Frynas (2015), that a firm’s attitude cannot lead to sustained competitive advantages. In competitive economic settings, a firm’s socioecological attitude is exposed to be *imitated*, is no longer *rare*, and thus (economically) *depreciates*. Even if genuine socioecological attitudes root in *path-dependent, causally ambiguous, and socially complex* processes, as is with Barney (1999), needed for the creation of particular capabilities that are difficult to imitate, the *unique historical conditions* before the wave in the discussed particular case piled up provided anything but not a “cost-effective way” to create (those socioecological) unique capabilities.

Second, suppose that firms applied those socioecological maxim-minded attitudes far ahead of recent spotlights on sustainability. First-mover advantages have long been discussed in management science; in technological matters, “imitation costs are lower than innovation costs in most industries” (Lieberman and Montgomery, 1988, p. 47). In contrast to socioecological pioneers, however, “innovators enjoy an initial period of monopoly that is not available to imitator firms” (Lieberman and Montgomery, 1988, p. 47). They can even safeguard their innovation rents with patents. Attitudes, in contrast, do as less constitute “resource position barriers” (Wernerfelt, 1984, p. 173), as “the characteristics of the asset accumulation process,” including time compression, mass efficiencies, and interconnectedness brought in by Dierickx and Cool (1989, p. 1504) constitutes the creation of facades.

In short, those firms that have practiced their business as a resource for all of society and nature, even prior to the socioecological wave becoming evident, are ironically those that now must ‘pay’ with their unique selling proposition: a *tragedy of intangible commons* evolves.

### 3.2. “Picture a ~~pasture~~ posture open to all”<sup>8</sup>

The capitalist defense logic of the growth imperative rests upon the assumption that a firm that “intends only [its] own gain” would also promote “the public interest,” according to Smith’s (1937 [1776], p. 423) idea of the “invisible hand.”<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that recent studies have found the opposite (see Overall, 2016), this claim also obviously fails to correspond to the deteriorating problems we currently face.

Even though Hardin’s (1968) seminal essay about “The Tragedy of the Commons” has been strongly criticized for conceptual issues (e.g., Aguilera-Klink, 1994; Gardiner, 2001; Frischmann et al., 2019), the core message behind the catchphrase he expressed is central to our

<sup>8</sup> In reference to Hardin (1968, p. 1244)

<sup>9</sup> Albeit this common notion is may not entirely congruent with his actual meaning (see Aguilera-Klink, 1994).



argumentation. Hardin (1968, p. 1244) supposed that “in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons,” depletion, congestion, or even destruction of resources would be the result, as “each [would be] pursuing his own best interest.” Even though this core message has often been restricted in its validity (e.g., Ostrom, 1990; Worden, 2010), it has also been proven again and again to be true (e.g., Ohler and Billger, 2014).

The present inquiry points to another type of tragedy of the commons: each firm derives benefits from riding the socioecological wave, while the worth of decades of longstanding pioneers’ socioecologically reasonable contributions and moral superiority is suddenly blurred. Practicing reasonable business is, as with evidence of the current excessive green and socialwashing, imitable. Such practices lead not to sustained competitive advantages but to a depletion of the pioneers’ uniqueness and, in general, to societal trust in serious corporate practices that are shared among all firms. Put differently, immediate and sole advantage accrues to free riders, but with delayed and shared disadvantages for all since the supposed self-recovery potential of society appears biased.

Two crucial qualities define *common-pool resources* (CPR): such resources are *non-excludable* and *rivalrous*. CPRs are usually understood as (tangible) natural or human-made resource systems (e.g., fishing grounds, grazing areas), of which “to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits” would be costly (Ostrom, 1990, p. 30). The use of public goods, unlike CPRs, does not necessarily influence the potential for others (see Dietz et al., 2002, pp. 4–5); if appropriators subtract resource units from a commons system, however, then those units are logically no longer available to the others. Thus, a crucial problem with CPRs is the likelihood of free riding because appropriators (persons or firms) cannot (or cannot easily) be excluded from CPRs and their benefits (see Ostrom, 1999, p. 498). They are enticed “not to contribute to the joint effort, but to free-ride on the efforts of others” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 6). To a certain extent, this behavior may still be negligible, but if “all participants choose to free-ride, the collective benefit will not be produced” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 6). Particularly CPRs under open-access with “free and unregulated access” (Aguilera-Klink, 1994, p. 224) are exposed to the free-riding problem.

Applied to the intangible resource of serious socioecological aspirations embodied in the firms’ attitudes, the property of *non-excludability* (or at least a low degree of excludability) means that each firm can abruptly adapt its facades, consisting of greenwashed corporate values, mission statements, and visions, to emerging ‘green’ consumer demands, for instance in the form of phrases like ‘respectful treatment of nature,’ ‘fair working conditions,’ ‘regionally hand-crafted,’ as well even more subtle and indirect in the form of credit cards made of wood or the adornment with presuppositional technical quantities. Consequently, consumers can hardly distinguish between pioneers and fecalchemists.

The second property, that of rivalrousness (or at least a high degree of rivalry), means that espoused beliefs and values—so to speak, greenwashed attitudes—are rivalrous because each additional firm that suddenly paints its facades green exhausts the uniqueness of serious socioecological pioneers’ attitudes just as they are gaining a sustained competitive advantage. Even if the imitator is, in contrast, not a greenwasher but a latecomer who seeks to become a genuinely green and fair firm (which is difficult to verify), the value of the pioneering frontload, nevertheless, erodes—even if nature and society would benefit in this case. So, the question arises whether and how the latecomer would have changed at all if the pioneers had not paved the way and how consumers can be enabled to appreciate and recognize longstanding pioneers. Put differently, if commons are not only arranged but are even defined by society’s institutionalized “commoning” (see Euler, 2018), then what design of commoning would stimulate appreciation for longstanding work on the future of nature and society? Even though “the greediest (...) would gain—for a while” (Hardin, 1998, p. 682), in the end, we all have to live with the waves’ consequences of the resulting erosion and marginalization effects.

### 3.3. In search of socioecological pioneers’ appreciation

However, is an intervention against this tragedy even possible? And if so, by whom: the greenwashers, the governments, the consumers, or the pioneers? That an appeal to the individual *greenwashers’* sense of reason not to adorn with borrowed plumes (i.e., to accept the competitive disadvantage and not to build green facades anymore) would not be of much success in a system of mutual crowding out is already at the core of the essay. Tragically, the individual incurs no ‘fail-to-appreciate’ costs. *Governmental* intervention, in contrast, may reduce greenwashing through more stringent legislation on disclosure obligations in case of such intangible commons, however, even though with other prospects of success compared to, for instance, privatization at tangible commons. Governmental efforts ought to be directed toward informed and reflexive citizenship since the *consumer* behavior of the citizens could be a crucial dimension for learning to appreciate the conceptualized intangible CPRs. The problem, however, is that the resources’ value does not rest in the resource itself but in the observer. Thus, the observer, in this case, the consumer, would first have to be aware of the value of those who played a substantial role in initiating socioecological transformation and who started to build the foundation for a society’s fundamental reform. Even more, this value would have to exceed the “selfish benefit” of alternatives, despite the impossibility of being materialized in objective product characteristics. Moreover, this value would probably appear reasonable for consumers only once the issues have already become critical to themselves. But then, in turn, the situation might have already become so precarious that there is hardly space left to ask for who pioneered and who only joined late or even washed merely green—another irony unfolds.

The *pioneers’* room for maneuver to protect their USP (unique selling proposition) against erosion is confined to the stimulation of the consumers’ reflexive thinking, as they can influence the consumer’s value system only to a minor extent in terms of whether being a pioneer would be decisive for the individual customer. They could only respond to the upcoming relational facades through a fact-based and creative communication of their early socioecological efforts in relation to the others. They are, anyway, forced to use more radical measures (for instance, with more proximity to activists) to distinguish themselves once again from fecalchemists, assuming transparency is high enough to hinder the fast following of the latter (see Wu et al., 2020). This powerlessness is a crucial element of the tragedy.

## 4. Conclusion and an urgent call for further research

The picture drawn in this conceptual essay shows that the survival logic of capitalism, a “new spirit of capitalism” in the sense of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), absorbs criticism and defies intervention once again. As stated above, “*being committed to having an intention* [is not equal] with actually *having the intention*” (Searle, 1989, p. 546; or see Taylor and Cooren, 1997, p. 424 and Christensen et al., 2013, p. 382). Too many firms ride the wave and try to convert unsustainability and “moral emptiness” (see Kazmi et al., 2016) into competitive advantages, even increasingly with sophisticated facades that are more challenging to unmask, especially those with relational qualities. Thus a “fundamental extension in morality” (Hardin, 1968, p. 1243) is all the more important to struggle against a tragedy<sup>10</sup>—especially because appreciation can hardly be coerced, as discussed above.

This paper extends the ongoing discourse that ranges between the pessimist view of CSR as a tool to renovate the legitimacy-building

<sup>10</sup> Advice such as to “invest in impression management efforts that tout their firm’s commitment to the natural environment or initiate low-cost environmental initiatives” (Bansal and Clelland, 2004, p. 101) when it might be useful under certain conditions, illustrate that normative implications of social sciences still have potentials to offer as well.

facades of firms without fundamental change and the optimist view of CSR as “raw material for (re)constructing the organization” (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 376). From a theoretical view, the idea of the tragedy of intangible commons explains the devaluation of longstanding pioneers due to the rapidly increasing ‘green and socialwashing as usual.’ From a moral view, the paper implicitly argues beyond the negative impacts on society’s trust in corporate practices but points to the appreciation of pioneering work.

In brief, as society and nature benefit from socioecological pioneers, all (in the role of consumers, researchers, or even fecalchemists) should be interested in appreciating pioneers and exploring ways to incentivize their early, much more uncomfortable, and change-stimulating efforts. Scholars may feel encouraged to contribute research on how pioneers that have successfully transformed their serious attitudes into strategic resources can maintain their competitive advantages when attitudes are obviously easy to imitate? How could pioneers regain the value of their early, much more uncomfortable, and much less incentivized but maxim-minded work? How could pioneers authentically communicate the early adoption of their socioecological attitude? Or, put differently, how can consumers be enabled to distinguish pioneers from fecalchemists?

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The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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