

Rhetoric in Scandinavia

Retoryka w Skandynawii

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RECENZJA/REVIEW

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Review/recenzja: Erik Bengtson and Oskar Mossberg, *The Virtues of Green Marketing: A Constructive Take on Corporate Rhetoric*, Palgrave Macmillan Cham 2023¹

Much rhetorical research in the Nordic region has a strong foundation in the rhetorical tradition dating back to Aristotle (sometimes even predating him), even when researching phenomena unfolding contemporarily with crises and opportunities that the wise men of Athens and Rome could never have imagined. Researchers who write from this traditionalist standpoint explicitly or implicitly argue that classical rhetoric holds timeless potential for understanding and improving society. *The Virtues of Green Marketing: A Constructive Take on Corporate Rhetoric* by Swedish scholars Erik Bengtson and Oskar Mossberg aligns with this trend. The book (published open access) proposes that we not only see the limitations in green marketing (that is, a company's public branding efforts in sustainability and climate contexts) but also the possibilities for a more virtuous business rhetoric for the common good. Through ten chapters, one devoted to three cases, the authors argue that a green marketing rhetoric informed by the ideals of Quintilian, Cicero, and Isocrates about the good speaker can push modern consumer society in the right direction in current and future climate and environmental crises.

Bengtson is a rhetorical scholar at Uppsala University as well as lecturer at Södertörn University. His research activities have an impressive range, including climate rhetoric, AI-based language models, and more theoretical discussions of the concept of *doxa*. Oskar Mossberg, also employed at Uppsala University, conducts research in law, including environmental and climate marketing, and the connection between law and rhetoric. The book thus draws on both authors' fields of expertise, and it also incorporates various research fields such as economic and sociological theory and marketing studies in an interdisciplinary approach.

1. This review is a version of the Danish original translated by the author, published as: Olsen, Frederik Appel. (2023). "Den konstruktive grønne retoriks pris." *Rhetorica Scandinavica*, 27(87), 89–94. <https://doi.org/10.52610/rhs.v27i87.308>. This translation is published with permission from *Rhetorica Scandinavica*. <http://rhs.retorikforlaget.se>

However, it is primarily rhetorical theory that drives the project; the focal point is “the rhetorical characteristics and functions of the particular type of communicative act that we call green marketing” (p. 5). The book is, therefore, an appeal to society at large stressing the need for rhetorical perspectives on green marketing since such perspectives offer a normative (and thus potentially constructive) framework for society’s communicative processes. In other words, although the book aims to inform and develop legal frameworks for the treatment of green marketing, it is primarily rhetorical theory that is brought to the fore as a constructive influence for such developments.

Initially (after a creative prologue where we meet the fictional consumer John – “as much of a liberal capitalist as the next one” (p. vii) – conveying his experiences with green marketing, and a dramatic case of a coma), the authors present the constructive framework of their project in chapters 1 and 2. Research on companies’ green promises to consumers and citizens has often focused on so-called greenwashing, i.e., these companies’ more or less intentionally misleading statements on the many ways that they fight for the planet’s climate, even when the opposite is true. Bengtson and Mossberg’s project deliberately deviates from this trend in an attempt to present what they call a constructive approach, where they outline some overarching principles for good green marketing as an alternative to merely criticizing the bad. They outline two ways in which a company’s green marketing can have a positive impact on the green transition: by providing genuine and transparent arguments about the company’s contribution to the green agenda and by anchoring the green agenda in the public discourse by communicating and promoting it (regardless of the actual substantive contributions of the companies). If there are such things as “greenwashing sins” – which the authors do not deny – the implication must be that there are corresponding green marketing virtues. Thus, the criticism of greenwashing’s sinful vague language implies a virtuous precise language, and the sinful presentation of misleading and often self-invented sustainability labels implies an authentic use of genuine expert endorsements, etc. In chapters 3 and 4 the authors offer an account of institutional theory and connect it with rhetorical theory to examine how climate change can be seen as an institution through which companies can gain legitimacy in their marketing practices. Chapter 5 introduces the potential contributions of the rhetorical tradition to marketing analysis and practice with the introduction of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian’s rhetorical thinking. Subsequently, Chapter 6 proposes how this overarching rhetorical-traditional approach informed by institutional theory can assist the constructive shift from the sin registry of greenwashing to a virtuous vision for sustainable marketing. Chapter 7 briefly outlines the implications of this approach for the field of law.

Like the lists of greenwashing sins presented here, the authors also list rhetorical marketing virtues and corresponding analytical principles for a constructive green marketing rhetoric. Thus, Chapter 8 includes five principles for rhetorical “virtue criticism,” and Chapter 9 offers a loosely structured and exploratory application to three cases, namely eco-labels, the fashion industry, and the energy industry (all in a Swedish context). The common denominator for this approach is that it finds its normative rhetorical foundation in Isocrates’ conception of rhetoric as a means to achieve the common good, Cicero’s presentation of the good speaker’s display of virtues to an audience (such as *decorum* and *prudencia*), and Quintilian’s ideals for a rhetorical education of the individual citizen. However, the authors consider Aristotelian rhetoric to be untenable because, according to them, it represents a cynical and instrumental paradigm for rhetoric. The book’s concluding Chapter 10 looks ahead with a desire for more constructive research in this area.

The Virtues of Green Marketing thus aims to provide a framework for the analysis of marketing in a society where profit is not necessarily to be seen as antithetical to a green transition, and in which capitalism can be used for good, as long as companies are properly guided to make the right (rhetorical) choices and encouraged to become virtuous democratic actors in the market. Including forays into marketing law and institutional theory, this is the core rhetorical motivation for the book: to act as a defense against pervasive cynicism in the usual criticism of Big Oil, fast fashion, and other major (and heavily climate- and environmentally damaging) actors in our time.

I have a different perspective on rhetoric, the climate crisis, and capitalism than the authors. Therefore, I have fundamental objections that largely stem from differences in critical orientation and temperament. Instead of delving deeply into this, it is perhaps more rewarding for the reader to note that this book is written for a reader of liberal political persuasion and with a fundamental sense that green marketing rhetoric, which is built on positive interpretations of the rhetorical tradition in line with liberal democratic norms of public discourse, can offer a way forward in the climate emergency. This is not to say that the authors have an explicit ideological agenda with the book, which is broadly addressed to “those interested in applying the perspective introduced in their own work as analysts of green marketing, producers of it, or as policy makers” (p. 10). The authors also do not reject a research focus on greenwashing as illegitimate but rather paint such a focus as insufficient. In this context, they present the following caveat: “(Note that we do not exclude the possibility of a sustainable form of market economy)” (p. 15). This parenthesis precisely reveals the opening towards a liberal market-based democracy that permeates the book’s perspective. The usefulness of the

book, therefore, depends on the type of critic or producer of green marketing or policy-maker who reads it.

If the reader accepts the book's rhetorically traditionalist foundation, they will, however, still encounter problems. As already noted, the book clearly distances itself from rhetorical thinking inspired by Aristotle. However, the interpretation of Aristotle's rhetoric as outright nihilistic (p. 37) is somewhat unfair. In Scandinavian rhetoric, there has been a strong tradition of a democratic and constructive version of Aristotle's rhetoric. The authors do not incorporate this tradition but simply note that Aristotle's rhetoric is simply cold and instrumental and, therefore, not suitable within the book's constructive and ethical framework. Several issues stem from this. Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca and Chaïm Perelman, for example, are similarly disregarded when the authors of *The Virtues of Green Marketing* problematize the *New Rhetoric's* distinction between a particular and universal audience because it operates within an Aristotelian rhetorical paradigm (p. 81). However, Aristotle's rhetoric can be interpreted and used in various ways, as the New Rhetoric project precisely demonstrated in the middle of the 20th century. Not only a more comprehensive perspective on Aristotle's rhetoric, as it has been used and interpreted in recent times, but also modern rhetorical research dealing with consumption, climate, global markets, and similar contemporary topics, could have provided some welcome nuance to green promises and their potential virtues in an affectively charged consumer society in a climate crisis. Such an application of more recent rhetorical theory could also refine the authors' interpretation of constitutive rhetoric, which, like Aristotle's, is oversimplified and does not add much to the analytical framework. For example, the authors state that they understand the audience for green marketing as constituted solely in the marketing text (p. 85) – seemingly contradicting their anti-Aristotelian stance – only then to move on to modern marketing research's segmentation theory on consumer groups; a move seemingly contrary to this radical text-centric constitutive principle. Such a constitutive-theoretical expansion of the book would make sense in an examination of how advertising campaigns (co)construct identities and desires, rather than just respond to them, even in a sustainability context. Unfortunately, such inquiries are not pursued. In this regard, the focus on Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian appears to be constricting, not only because recent research actually dealing with rhetoric in the capitalist consumer society is neglected, but also because “the Aristotelian paradigm” is misrepresented, making the traditional perspective meager and less nuanced than it could have been.

Another unfortunate misrepresentation is the critical position presented as an opposing framework to the authors' position within “the constructive turn”. In just four pages in the book's second chapter, “critique” is largely dismissed, and

“constructiveness” is positioned as a more meaningful alternative. It is claimed that a focus on criticism aligns with a Platonic “(...) historically rooted criticism of rhetoric, where rhetoric is viewed as either powerful manipulation or mere flowery (...)” (p. 15). However, it could just as well (perhaps better) be said that this criticism of criticism rests on the tradition that has rejected rhetoric as an illegitimate discipline since Plato. To “be constructive,” the rhetorician must identify the “good” green marketing. The critical strand in rhetorical research, and academia more broadly, however, fundamentally revolves around a deep critique of the constitution of the human world, which never rests on a stable and eternal core, à la Plato’s eternal forms. To equate main currents in rhetorical criticism with Plato’s criticism of rhetoric misunderstands that this critical tradition explicitly opposes such Platonian essentialisms. In the interpretation of the constructive turn presented in this brief chapter, it quickly appears as if the authors see criticism as purposeless because criticism must be “negative.” Such a dismissal overlooks the fact that good criticism serves a purpose beyond itself. Instead, it appears to me that the authors view the willingness to work with a structure as positive, and therefore, good, while pushing back against the structure as negative, and hence undesirable. In short (and somewhat polemically), the authors seem to have bought the product “constructiveness” a bit too expensively and sold “criticism” too cheaply. Critics also desire a better world, and the book’s ambition to “contribute to a transition toward a more sustainable society” (p. 3) is shared by critical research. Despite remarks that the constructive should complement the critical (e.g., pp. 130-131), this treatment remains incomplete and thus misinterprets the critical project throughout the book.

This tendency to define the book’s virtue-analytical rhetorical framework by distancing itself from other parts of the tradition (especially Aristotle) and other approaches to corporate and climate rhetoric (critique) ultimately flattens the “constructive” program presented as its alternative. This becomes particularly clear when later in the book the authors examine specific cases involving clothing and energy companies. While the examples are well chosen, readers may rightly question the value of the analysis because it is haunted by the vague constructive traditionalism built up in the preceding chapters. For instance, the authors lament that the energy policy debate is too polarized: “it is almost as if they were arguing over which is the best hockey team, rather than participating in an open-ended, intellectually honest deliberation over the relative merits of different energy sources” (p. 124). They highlight aspects of various energy podcasts as positive because they contain a more virtuous deliberation. However, to accept this analysis, one must view the political debate as a semi-technocratic deliberation rather than a political struggle of interests. Consequently, readers may be left with

the impression that the book's constructive project ultimately reverts to bourgeois norms of public discourse, which rhetorical research has problematized for decades, even within traditionalist perspectives. This is a legitimate standpoint to take, but it could usefully be expanded and related to modern problematizations.

A strength of *The Virtues of Green Marketing* is its examination of the various eco-labels that are increasingly found on everyday consumer items (pp. 96-107). Here, the interplay between rhetoric and law comes meaningfully into play in a relatively thorough exposition of the functions and expressions of these labels. A section like this leaves one with the wish that the authors had started there, that is, with an exposition of how green marketing unfolds in a contemporary context of sustainability crisis in consumer society. With *The Virtues of Green Marketing*, Bengtson and Mossberg have correctly identified a need to address marketing in the context of climate and sustainability within a rhetorical framework. Future research and educational contributions addressing this need will, therefore, be incorporating the book as part of the overall framework. The book invites an important conversation, and the authors do call for further research examining the complex functions of green marketing in the energy market (p. 134). On the other hand, the book's disciplinary focus raises concerns for the field. Perhaps what the book illustrates most profoundly is that starting from conventional interpretations of the rhetorical tradition and canon (with or without Aristotle) risks running into the roadblock of our times? Cicero and Quintilian could not predict climate and environmental crises in a global capitalist context but those of us still alive are forced to seriously confront them, even if that makes us seem negative.

Bibliographic information

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Erik Bengtson, Oskar Mossberg

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