

## Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue 'Foucault, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Sustainability' Villadsen, Kaspar; Lundberg, Johannes

*Document Version*  
Final published version

*Published in:*  
Sustainability

*DOI:*  
[10.3390/su15065110](https://doi.org/10.3390/su15065110)

*Publication date:*  
2023

*License*  
CC BY-ND

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Villadsen, K., & Lundberg, J. (2023). Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue: 'Foucault, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Sustainability'. *Sustainability*, 15(6), 1-11. Article 5110.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su15065110>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us ([research.lib@cbs.dk](mailto:research.lib@cbs.dk)) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 18. Sep. 2024



Editorial

# Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue: 'Foucault, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Sustainability'

Kaspar Villadsen <sup>1,\*</sup> and Johannes Lundberg <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark<sup>2</sup> Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark; johannes@cas.au.dk

\* Correspondence: kv.bhl@cbs.dk

At first glance, Michel Foucault might appear as an unexpected companion for a Special Issue on the themes of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability. Foucault never considered the concept of CSR or corporate sustainability, and he did not comment on the global, ecological crisis, which was already imminent at the end of his life in the first half of the 1980s, although he did not live to see the current loss of biodiversity or escalation of global warming. Furthermore, while Foucault came close to the theme of humanity's unsustainable exploitation of nature when he analyzed the historical emergence of biopolitical optimization of individuals and populations, he never considered the possibility of absolute extinction of the human species or the global ecosystem. In broad strokes, Foucault's work is about how people have been governed, how divisions have been drawn between those considered 'normal' versus the 'abnormals', and how people have governed themselves according to certain moral codes. It is tempting to side with Samuel IJsseling who declares that Foucault made a serious omission, since he did not discuss the risk of our habitat's elimination caused by humanity's over-exploitation of nature. Instead, IJsseling suggests taking inspiration from Martin Heidegger's critique of metaphysics with its representation of nature as a mere resource for human exploitation: 'Foucault misses a profound analysis of metaphysical thinking that, as representation, domination, verification, and control, risks the danger of ending in a catastrophe' [1] (p. 424).

Within the last decades, two strands have dominated the debate on the underlying causes of the ecological crises. On the one hand, there is the critique of our limited metaphysical conception of nature, grounded in a strict division between culture and nature, which allows us moderns to place ourselves in a superior position to nature and animal life. This critique has been advanced by Hans Jonas [2], Bruno Latour [3], Jane Bennett [4], Kate Raworth [5], and Jason Hickel [6]. On the other hand, the latter intellectual strand has been contested by Marxist studies, including John Bellamy Foster [7], Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg [8], Andreas Malm [9], Nancy Fraser [10], and Matthew Huber [11], who argue that metaphysical speculation on nature risks pushing our attention away from the real cause of over-exploitation of nature, namely modern capitalism. The main drivers towards ecological disaster essentially lie, they argue, in the economic structures. These structures propel an ever-increasing exploitation of Earth's ecological systems due to hierarchical governance structures, the 'mute compulsion' of the market [12], and the 'metabolic rift' between the planetary boundaries and the economic imperative of profit maximization [7].

Metaphysical inquiry and analysis of economic structures of the devastation of nature are both pertinent in and have informed the academic debate on CSR and corporate responsibility (as reflected in our brief discussion below). Yet, despite the lack of fundamental concerns and doomsday proclamations regarding ecological crises in Foucault, this Special Issue will demonstrate how Foucault's analytical frameworks are useful for the analysis of issues related to CSR and corporate sustainability. Overall, we propose that Foucauldian studies have the potential to conduct complex analyses of structural ecological challenges



**Citation:** Villadsen, K.; Lundberg, J. Guest Editors' Introduction to Special Issue: 'Foucault, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Sustainability'. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 5110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15065110>

Received: 3 March 2023

Accepted: 7 March 2023

Published: 14 March 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

by exploring the contextual *interlinkage* of discourses (including metaphysical conceptions of nature), political and economic power (including hierarchical governance structures and exploitation), as well as techniques and institutions in their historical situatedness. More precisely, the contributions to this Special Issue inquiry into diverse elements related to CSR, corporate sustainability, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investment principles. They carry out this work by using Foucault's work on archaeology, genealogy, economic reasoning (particularly of neoliberalism), self-techniques, and dispositives.

While Foucault eschewed epochal denominators, such as Heidegger's 'the modern age', Foucault's analytics is fully capable of analyzing in empirical detail how resources and natural phenomena are continually constructed and reconstructed as discursive objects. Hence, if we take nature, which earlier was often defined as an independent sphere distinct from human society, we note how nature increasingly figures as the 'environmental resources' of the capitalist system. As Arturo Escobar writes: 'No longer is nature defined and treated as an external, exploitable domain. Through a new process of capitalization, effected primarily by a shift in representation, previously 'uncapitalized' aspects of nature and society become internal to capital' [13] (p. 326). The quote indicates how discourses are interwoven with governance and economic structures, and thus, instead of speaking of 'limits to growth', the discourse of 'sustainable development' extends the interests of capitalization and commercial exploitation into new areas of nature and human life, promising that these resources will be managed both efficiently *and* sustainably.

In this context, we find it worthwhile to repudiate a recurrent, yet to our minds undue critique, of Foucauldian scholarship. Noticing a troubling simultaneity between constructivist thinking and the limitless exploitation of nature, Thomas Lemke writes: 'the increasing acceptance of "anti-essentialist" thought may perfectly well be in harmony with a political rationality that tries to incorporate the last residuals of "nature" in the flexible paradise of neo-liberalism—but only to renaturalise this very form of society as some naturally given' [14] (p. 14). However, while Foucault has sometimes been labeled a constructivist, an anti-essentialist, and even an exponent of neoliberalism, his comprehensive analyses of history in its irreducible reality place him at a distance from such hasty portrayals. The contributors to this Special Issue use Foucault's thinking to carry out detailed, empirical studies of the discourses, techniques, and institutions that give shape to the development of CSR, corporate sustainability, and ESG, considering how these developments address the rising ecological crises.

Having indicated some broader potentials of applying Foucault to ecological-societal-governance questions, we will now outline the developments of CSR, corporate sustainability, and ESG in order to specify how Foucault's work can be of analytical relevance to their development. Next, we proceed by reviewing recent Foucault-inspired literature that address these doctrines. Finally, we present the contributions to this Special Issue, which exemplify five main Foucauldian approaches and apply them in studies of a range of contemporary issues surrounding CSR, corporate sustainability, and ESG.

## 1. From CSR to Corporate Sustainability and ESG

What do we mean today when we talk about the concepts of CSR, corporate sustainability, and ESG? In which contexts have these contentious doctrines evolved? And how is Foucault's work relevant in this regard?

In today's global economy, CSR and corporate sustainability have become ubiquitous, self-evident business concepts, and yet critics often claim that their progressive promises of transforming capitalism towards more responsible practices remain unfulfilled. The aspirations linked to the CSR concept implied that corporate responsibility should involve economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions, generating major changes in corporations' societal role. However, critical observers conclude that the original aspirations of the CSR concept for substantial changes in business practices have largely been disappointed [15–18]. For instance, Richard Marens [16] notes that early CSR had 'the labor question' as its main concern, centering on issues such as income distribution, regulation

for the betterment of workers' conditions, and the protection of collective bargaining. These critical concerns were gradually pushed into the background as CSR was increasingly identified with issues of business ethics and management strategy. The loss of critical transformative potential was, observes Marens, particularly due to the wide acceptance of the argument that corporations' voluntary CSR is to be preferred over legal regulation [16] (p. 57).

Today's shortcomings of the promises of CSR and corporate sustainability can be elucidated by tracing the two concepts' history. Simon Brooks [17] describes how the CSR concept was originally coined in the 1950s with an emphasis on morality and ethics. When CSR was first coined in 1953 by Harvard Bowen [19], an explicit link was forged between social morality and ethics, on the one hand, and corporate business practice, on the other. However, after Milton Friedman's [20] seminal argument, most notably advanced in 1970, that CSR is justifiable only based on economic performance, the emphasis on morality receded during the following decades. Brooks [17] (p. 605) argues that CSR's critical potential was washed out by way of 'the obsession' in the CSR discourse with 'the performance link', which meant that CSR was caught up in an economic straight-jacket. In line with this account, Shamir [15] argued that CSR's original, radical potential was wiped out in step with its appropriation by mainstream corporate business management; a process through which CSR has become 'de-radicalized'. Questioning the claim of a loss of CSR's 'original' progressiveness, Kristian Steensen and Kaspar Villadsen [18] use Foucault's genealogy to explore CSR's historical inspiration from Christian social ethics of the late 19th and early 20th century. Given this inspiration, argue Steensen and Villadsen [18] (p. 924), the CSR concept could hardly fundamentally challenge corporate capitalism, as it emphasized personal ethics and 'brotherly love' as the key to industrial peace—a social gospel legacy, which helped steer the discourse on corporations' social responsibility away from fundamental challenges to corporate capitalism.

These points resonate with more general critiques within CSR studies of the CSR's concept's failure to reflect on its own structural delimitations as well as its exact borders and criteria [21], the anthropocentric narrative of CSR, which disregards the intrinsic value of nature [22], and the role played by the broader 'culture' surrounding a given CSR policy [23].

While CSR denominates corporations' ethical profiles and policies, 'corporate sustainability' focuses on 'the embeddedness of firms in larger systems, and their roles in stabilizing or eroding these systems' [24]. However, given that corporate sustainability is a relatively new term, being increasingly used in academia as well as among managers, its definition has varied significantly. To alleviate this lack of clarity, Johannes Meuer, Julian Koebel, and Volker H. Hoffmann [24] identified 33 different definitions and then deducted two definitions, first, a broad, lenient definition: 'a firm's attempt to respond to environmental and social issues'. Furthermore, second, a narrow, stringent definition: 'a bundle of activities fully integrated into a firm's overall strategy that contribute effectively to the welfare of current and future generations through protecting and enhancing the resilience of the biosphere, social equity and cohesion, and economic prosperity.' Crucially, in their analysis, all definitions range between a higher or lower level of integration of sustainability into core activities, the ambition of objectives and plans for realizing these objectives, and specificity of sustainable development. Thus, they argue, uses of corporate sustainability should be evaluated according to how (well) these three dimensions are addressed.

Peter Fleming, John Roberts, and Christina Garsten [21] observe that since the financial crisis in 2007–2008, the proliferation of CSR policies and concepts happened in tandem with a growing critique of the potential of CSR, and they identify this as a rising 'CSR cynicism'. This tendency has been broadly paralleled by the emergence of the term corporate sustainability. According to Seray Ergene, Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, and Andrew J. Hoffman [25] corporate sustainability became the dominant managerial paradigm around the mid-2000s. Corporate sustainability was intended to indicate the inclusion of environmental and social concerns, yet, Ergene et al. observe that 'this new conception reinforced

the managerial priorities that privileged economic growth, and suggested that sustainability could be achieved by corporate strategies and “sustainable” or “green” growth’ [25] (p. 1322). Hence, corporate sustainability seems to reinforce certain of the disconcerting tendencies related to CSR described above.

When studying CSR and corporate sustainability in the context of our contemporary, increasingly financialized, corporate world [26–28] it is pertinent to pay attention to the growing influence of ESG (environmental, social, and governance) investment principles. As corporations increasingly rely on finance from investors, corporate CSR strategies are expected to accommodate the interests of investors—including stock prices, dividends, and risk profiles—articulated in investors’ ESG investment policies. In 2022, conservative American politicians criticized large asset managers, notably BlackRock and Vanguard, for promoting ‘woke’ politics via their ESG policies. This instance could indicate a rupture in the neoliberal approach to CSR: On the one hand, conservatives invoke Friedman’s famous call for corporations to stay out of political and ethical questions (‘the business of business is business’). Yet, on the other hand, the increased role of ESG fits with a neoliberal tendency to displace the state’s responsibilities by extending the market logic to new domains. As an example of this latter movement, Daniela Gabor [29] has proposed that development policies increasingly is tailored to meet investors’ needs rather than the needs of states’ or communities, which is pushed by what she terms the ‘Wall Street Consensus’. This is, but one example of how CSR and ESG questions intersect with finance in curious and decisive ways today.

Whether CSR and corporate sustainability will play a significant transformative role in addressing the urgent issues of our time is an open and decisive question; issues that include global climate change, deforestation, growing social inequality, corporate economic crime, ensuring healthy labor conditions, and respecting the rights of children, women, ethnic and sexual minorities. We hence approach CSR and corporate sustainability from a broad perspective, which means that, apart from research focused on these concepts specifically, we will also address several related themes, such as accountability, transparency, sustainable education, limitations in Foucault’s framework, and more.

The concepts of CSR and corporate sustainability can be situated at the intersection of politics, economics, and morality. How the concepts evolve and are implemented results from power struggles over competing knowledge claims. Given that Foucault is a major thinker of the interplay of power and knowledge, he offers relevant analytical resources for grasping the complexities involved in modern debates on corporations’ broader social and environmental responsibilities. Foucault [30] famously rearticulated the relationship between power and knowledge. He said that where a field of knowledge is established, power is always at play, and, conversely, there is no exercise of power that does not involve the production of knowledge. This Special Issue sets out to use a variety of resources derived from Foucault’s authorship to analyze the concept of CSR as well as the related notions of corporate sustainability and ESG. To situate this task, we review, in the next section, the current state of the art of Foucauldian studies into CSR and corporate sustainability.

## 2. Foucault Inspired Research on CSR and Corporate Sustainability

Despite what we believe are obvious analytical potentials in Foucault for studying corporations’ social and environmental responsibility, his work figures relatively rarely in research on these issues. However, in the last two decades, a growing stream of research on diverse aspects related to corporate responsibility inspired by Foucault has appeared. This nascent research has particularly focused on the effects of power related to terms such as CSR, sustainability, transparency, and ESG, using Foucault’s genealogy, his discourse analysis, or his notion of the dispositive.

To proceed chronologically, in an early contribution to the field, Timothy Luke [31] analyzes the concept of sustainable development as an ‘ideological construct’, suggesting that this concept increasingly works to cover up modes of existence that are neither

sustainable nor developmental. The sustainable development concept underpins everyday practices of design, exchange, and production, but it also serves the requirements of political government. Sustainability goals, argues Luke with reference to Foucault, transform all of the planet's life as 'endangered populations', that become objects of a range of new tactics and techniques developed by corporations and state administrations. Ron Wagler [32] explores Foucault as a perspective on consumer culture and environmental degradation. In contemporary society, commercial advertising should be understood as a 'technology', which creates a culture of over-consumption. This technology induces subjects with the 'truth' that over-consumption of goods and services entails positive benefits for the consumers. However, Wagler suggests that our present also holds the seeds of a 'Foucauldian environmental ethic', whereby the self-reflective subject recognizes the limits of the global ecosystem and adopts sustainable consumption. In her work on pension investment management and ESG, Darlene Himick [33] focuses on the technique of relative performance evaluation (RPE). First Himick undertakes a Foucault-inspired genealogy of the historical emergence of RPE, and next she offers a critique of its present-day usage as a means of compensation and control. She argues that compensation practices in the pension investment industry still remain tied to relative performance results, which constitutes a barrier to incorporating ESG principles in pension investment management. In their book, 'The End of Corporate Social Responsibility: Crisis & Critique', Peter Fleming and Mark T. Jones [34] situate CSR within the broader context of late capitalism. Their book takes the assumption that large corporations, for the most part, essentially pursue profit maximization, and CSR initiatives are just another means to this end. Fleming and Jones argue that CSR does not challenge or undermine unsustainable corporate practices; instead, they analyze CSR as an 'ideological practice' that sustains such practices. They draw upon Foucault's concept of bio-power and its relation to the neoliberal expansion of the market sphere to suggest that 'life itself (or bios)—lifestyles, tastes, the body, sexual relations, and underground trends of social innovation occurring outside the dictates of the business life' [34] (p. 90) becomes enrolled in corporations' profit-seeking.

Moving up to the last decade, in their recent study on sustainability standards and certification, Laura Silva-Casteñada and Nathalie Trussart [35] apply Foucault's notion of the dispositive in an analysis of 'The Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil'. The latter is a multi-stakeholder initiative, in which civil society organizations reinterpret, contest, correct, and reconstruct the formal knowledge of sustainable palm oil. Silva-Casteñada and Trussart understand these processes as instances of resistance, whereby advocacy networks draw new lines of power. They use Foucault's concept of dispositive while highlighting the disruptive as well as the stabilizing lines that compose a dispositive. In his article, 'Responsible Investment: ESG and the post-crisis ethical order', Stefan Leins [36] examines the belief that the ethical order of the market represents a norm-free domain constituted by information seeking, information processing, and rational calculation. Drawing upon Foucault's work on neoliberalism Leins shows that financial markets represent an ethical order, which colonizes other social spheres and issues. ESG can be understood from this perspective, since it has succeeded in absorbing critiques of capitalism, such as the concerns voiced by Occupy Wall Street, into new valuation practices. Leins concludes that ESG is part of a 'post-crisis ethical order' that absorbs social contention and hostile attacks on capitalism while creating new speculative opportunities and profit.

Finally, Steen Vallentin and David Murillo [37] have also recently offered a revisionist analysis of the CSR concept. Against the widely held claim in critical CSR scholarship that CSR is a crystallization of neoliberal ideology, Vallentin and Murillo lay out a more complex relationship between CSR and the liberal tradition. Inspired by, among others, the work of Foucault and his contrast between classical liberalism and neoliberalism, they describe the different ideological positions that constitute the scholarly CSR debate today. Distinguishing between embedded liberalism, classical liberalism, neoliberalism, and re-embedded liberalism, Vallentin and Murillo demonstrate how these streams engage in 'battles of ideas' over the meaning and breadth of CSR as a concept. Mario Abela [38] also

finds inspiration in Foucault in his study of changes in sustainability reporting, which takes the assumption that the concepts underpinning reporting are neither universal nor timeless. Instead, focusing on the period 2015–2022, Abela suggests that the nature of the corporation increasingly is constructed to fit with the needs of accounting, the notion of users is narrowed from stakeholders to shareholders, which means that accountability slips away from decision-making. Leading global businesses have helped bringing about a discursive shift in CSR and sustainability reporting away from impacts on people and the planet to profit or ‘enterprise value’. Abela thus argues that it is crucial to pay close attention to concepts as they carry with them a set of beliefs and values that become ‘mainstream’, and hence, no longer open for contestation but accepted as timeless ‘facts.’ Finally, Peter Fleming, Richard Godfrey, and Simon Lilley [39] deploy Foucault’s notions of biopower and the security dispositif to conceptualize business logistics. They focus on how today’s capitalism relies on the fast and efficient movement of diverse commodities across the globe, which also entails securing these commercial circulation movements against risky and undesired entities, including unregulated flows of illegitimate people, information and finance, counterfeits, drugs, and weapons. The technology of business logistics is central to securing the circulation of bodies, materials, and information. Fleming et al. conclude that Foucault’s notions of biopower and security hold further potential for studying urgent problems in today’s global economy such as pandemics, mass immigration, endemic supply chain problems, and the appearance of increasingly sophisticated surveillance technologies that separate ‘legal’ citizens and workers from ‘illegal’ ones.

These above studies testify to a tendency in recent scholarship to generate timely and critical insights regarding CSR and corporate sustainability. Scholars have used genealogical and archaeological approaches to question dominant assumptions within CSR and to specify the discursive formations within the CSR-field. Other researchers have carried out studies of techniques and dispositives to highlight how certain measurements, standards, rhetoric, and public communication have emerged from struggles between different actors involved in defining and redefining CSR and ESG. Finally, some academics have provided studies of the CSR concept’s history and of techniques for implementing ESG, discussing these developments in relation to specific neoliberal ideas and the liberal tradition broadly. We see these endeavors as highly promising, and we believe that there remain untapped potentials and avenues in Foucault’s authorship that our Special Issue will further explore. The next section briefly outlines our contributions.

### 3. Foucault’s Analytics and the Contributions to the Special Issue

In this Special Issue, we apply a broad perspective on corporations’ extra-financial responsibilities, inspired by Foucault’s extensive work, including subsequent Foucauldian scholarship and governmentality studies. Overall, Foucault’s thinking can help in inquiring into the set of institutions, discourses, and techniques that make up what he termed ‘the conditions of possibility’ for modern phenomena such as sexuality, discipline, the economy, or, in our case, CSR and sustainability. The contributions to this Special Issue focus not only on corporations’ responsibilities in relation to the wider society, but also address a series of related themes, such as accountability, corporate sustainability, risk management, ESG standards, divestment, investor-company relations, transparency, green-washing, climate change, the environmental impact of business, and more. We will now outline how the contributors to this Special Issue make use of five specific analytical resources in Foucault’s work to study themes related to corporations’ social and environmental responsibilities.

First, Foucault developed his *archaeological method* [40], also known as Foucault’s discourse analysis, in order to describe the conditions that make possible specific statements at particular historical moments. Foucault set out to analyze discourse as an independent object, and, in order to do so, he sought to reconstruct a body of anonymous rules, specific to time and space. He termed such a body of rules a ‘discursive formation’, which conditions what texts, concepts, and statements that can be formulated. A discursive formation is a system of references, explains Foucault, ‘on the basis of which coherent (or incoherent)

propositions are built up, more or less exact descriptions developed, verifications carried out, theories deployed' [40] (p. 200). Importantly, a discursive formation is not an immobile, constraining structure that forces speakers to abide by a set of fixed rules. Objects such as 'madness', 'the state', or 'sustainability' are not stable and naturally given entities since they are conditioned by the body of evolving rules that enable them to form discursive objects at particular historical moments.

Research inspired by Foucault's 'archaeology' can trace how the discourses on CSR, sustainability, and ESG have emerged in different regions, sectors, and national contexts. It can describe how 'sustainability' is produced as a discursive object within the discourses on CSR and corporate sustainability, focusing on which knowledge forms, concepts, accounts, problems, and environmental factors are articulated in the demarcation of sustainability. ESG could be analyzed as an extension of the concept of CSR, and it could be examined how the ESG doctrine sustains or breaks with the CSR discourse. In other words, this would be a study of discursive continuities and discontinuities between CSR and ESG discussions around responsible investment principles. Henrik Sørensen's and Kaspar Villadsen's contribution to this Special Issue uses Foucault's discourse analysis to describe the emergence of ESG-related concepts. They combine discourse analysis with corpus linguistics methods, analyzing how 24 Danish large-cap companies articulate ESG terms. The data material in Sørensen's and Villadsen's article comprises Danish companies' annual reports, in which they communicate their ESG efforts. On this basis, the authors discuss companies' 'tactical use' of ESG terms, and they consider which role the embrace of ESG terms plays in the moral image of joint-stock companies.

Tony Sandset and Eivind Engebretsen, in their contribution to this Special Issue, analyze the emergent discourse of sustainable healthcare education (SHE). They argue that SHE can be understood as a new governmental strategy that serves to guide the conduct of medical students and healthcare teachers toward specific aims. In this strategy, sustainability figures as a key concept, which positively calls for a global engagement in health that transcends beyond ensuring the health of the singular patients. More problematically, in Sandset's and Engebretsen's assessment is that SHE risks responsabilizing doctors and students to assume the limitless task of fostering human and planetary health, which means a transfer of responsibility for the achievement of 'sustainable health' from the state to individuals. The discourse of sustainable healthcare education can have the effect of assigning responsibility for the achievement of sustainable healthcare to individual doctors and ultimately patients. At the same time, the challenge of implementing structural reforms that address environmental issues as well as the issue of how to finance a well-functioning healthcare sector is pushed into the background, even if both are essential in ensuring equality in health for all.

Second, Foucault's *genealogical method* [41] traces how present institutions and governance principles, for example, CSR, have emerged from past struggles, social strategies, and accidental events. Genealogy takes as its basic premise that history is a site of evolving struggle, particularly struggles over divergent interpretations, which the development of the CSR and ESG discourse clearly displays. When defining genealogy as a method, Foucault says that history does not reveal any identical meaning residing in concepts, values, or subjectivities. Instead, genealogy is the history of struggles around interpretations, including substitutions, displacements, and disguised conquests. Foucault says:

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history. [41] (p. 86).

Genealogy shows thus the contingency of all interpretations, insofar as the interpretations that come to rule in history depend on specific games of power. Hence, when the



genealogist inquirers into an interpretation, what he/she reveals is not a fixed meaning but yet another contingent and historically situated interpretation.

Relevant objects of genealogical inquiry include struggles around definitions of responsibility, sustainability, accountability, transparency, and more. Such genealogies can inquire into contestations around how concepts should be defined, how social actors clash in such contestations, and how proponents of CSR, corporate sustainability, and ESG mobilize concepts and normative premises from economics, jurisprudence, moral philosophy, environmental science, and more. Johannes Lundberg's contribution to this Special Issue takes inspiration from Foucault's genealogical approach in studying the discourse that conditioned Danish pension funds' decisions regarding Shell. Lundberg pursues the assumption that agency theory's 'Truth Regime' has affinities with Danish pension funds' decisions regarding investment in the company Shell. Taking a genealogical perspective, Lundberg shows that the rationalities of present-day pension investing can be better grasped by recovering the historical emergence of predominant assumptions within the theory of corporate finance, in particular those pertaining to the relationship between investors and firms.

Genealogical studies inspired by Foucault may also inquire into the dynamic interplay between power and resistance. Foucault insisted that power is always 'reversible', since resistance against (capitalist) power can itself begin to constitute a new form of domination, and hence no concept is intrinsically progressive or liberating. We encourage further studies following this premise. Such investigations could examine how demands, notions, and initiatives (such as CSR, corporate sustainability, or ESG) which respond to the negative effects of capitalist production either succeed in forging new policies and business practices or, conversely, become co-opted by the capitalist order, becoming integral to that order itself.

Third, Foucault analyzed neoliberalism in his 1979-lecture series [42], focusing on two forms of neoliberalism: German post-war liberalism and the liberalism of the Chicago School. Of particular relevance to contemporary debates on CSR are the arguments by American neo-liberals that re-defined the social sphere as understandable through economic principles. They advanced the idea that the efficient work of rational-economic action in a system of competition should not be limited but supported by governmental regulation, which is an idea that underpins arguments for corporations' and consumers' voluntary responsibility and which generally supports arguments against legal intervention into business practices. How neoliberal assumptions, models, and financial risk management concepts are mobilized in debates over the legitimate extent and enforceability of CSR principles is another relevant question for this Special Issue.

William Morgan pursues this line of inquiry in his contribution 'Finance Must Be Defended: Cybernetics, Neoliberalism, and Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG)', where he analyses the neoliberal reasoning which underpins CSR and ESG. Morgan makes the case that ESG cannot be understood simply as an economic risk management strategy. Rather, invoking Foucault, ESG can be better grasped as an expression of a special financial heuristic. Morgan pursues this proposition through a genealogical reading of Friedrich Hayek's late writings on cybernetics, arguing that, just like in cybernetics, present-day financial agencies value information feedback as the main way to preserve order. Morgan's analysis indicates that the key problems in the world of finance are viewed as problems of information feedback rather than problems ensuing from the interaction between finance and 'external' factors. Case in point, the climate crisis has been viewed as a problem of financial risk management, rather than a problem, which must be understood and dealt with on its own terms.

Fourth, Foucault's later authorship from the early 1980s, often termed his 'ethical turn', brought Foucault back to techniques of self-formation in Greco-Roman antiquity. There, Foucault discovered a 'technical' notion of ethics less defined by submission to universal moral codes and instead focused more on the self's work upon the self. Foucault's 'ethical turn' in the early 1980s did not signify a departure from political issues, but a re-conception of politics as ethical politics. Ethics is political, argued Foucault, in the sense that our self-fashioning involves what we are willing to accept or want to change in ourselves as

well as in our circumstances: '[T]here is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself' [43] (p. 252). Perhaps, the urgent issues of our time call for developing another form of ethics than models rooted in legal frameworks and Christian morality. The emergence of responsible consumers, climate-conscious youths, 'freeganism', and dumpster diving could be analyzed with inspiration from Foucault's work on ethical self-formation.

Timothy Luke's contribution to this Special Issue, 'Investment and Rapid Climate Change as Biopolitics: Foucault and Governance of the Self and Others through ESG', suggests that ESG investment offers individual subjects a new adaptive 'technology of the self'. The general turn towards ESG investing, argues Luke, reflects a new political sentiment arising from individuals' reflections about ethico-political thought and action in relation to capital investment. The growing attention to ESG factors by financial managers displays a recognition among individuals and institutions that the essential point of resistance to political power (or commercial power) is one's self-relationship.

Fifth, the concept of 'the dispositive' has recently been introduced into Foucauldian scholarship as a highly promising analytical resource [44,45]. A dispositive can be defined as a historical configuration, which connects a series of discursive and non-discursive elements such as laws, practices, and techniques [46]. Dispositives are thus configurations that interlink practices, techniques, and knowledge modalities. The concept designates a propensity in knowledge production and governmental practice, as well as a 'dispositionality' in how institutions emerge and transform [44]. The dispositive allows analyzing how our modern practices, for example, risk assessments or divestment decisions, are conditioned by particular dispositives. Foucault [47] suggested that the dispositives of law, discipline, and security are particularly important as responses to thorny governmental problems such as crime, infectious diseases, and labor unrest. Current problems such as climate change, environmental degradation, and extreme inequality could be analyzed as straddling between these deep-rooted governmental frameworks of calculation and intervention.

Studies of CSR and corporate sustainability inspired by the dispositive can focus on the techniques that establish criteria used by CSR and ESG rating agencies in their assessment processes, including the criteria for what should be measured and how to measure it. Such studies could also focus on the dispositives that condition what can essentially be defined as CSR, 'sustainable' versus 'unsustainable' investments, 'Paris-aligned' ESG criteria, 'good governance', and firms' 'socially responsible performance'. Foucault's notion of the security dispositive is particularly suited for studying the uses of financial models and technologies used in the management of risk and uncertainty related to environmental disruption, catastrophes, and scarcity. This path is developed in Darlene Himick's contribution entitled 'When aging and climate change are brought together: Pension plan divestment and a changing dispositive of security'. Following recent years' growing debates about divestment from carbon-intensive corporations, Himick analyzes the case of pension funds' adoption of climate concerns in their investment decisions. Particularly, Himick investigates the process of the New York State Common Retirement Fund's decision in 2021 to divest from seven oil sands companies. Deploying the notion of the security dispositive, Himick examines how change occurs within the existing dispositive, i.e., how divestment had to be integrated into the existing governance arrangements. Her analysis shows that the understanding of risk acted as the 'operator' that both maintained the existing investment function and made it possible to alter governance arrangements to include climate concerns.

Finally, Jeremy Tauzer offers a critical discussion of Foucault's 'tool-box' in relation to CSR and the corporation, which seeks to push Foucault's framework beyond its parameters by extending it with hermeneutics. Whereas Colin Koopman and Tomas Matza [48] depict Foucault's conceptual toolbox as consisting of overall tools engaging in delimited fields with specific results of research, Tauzer proposes that Foucault's work builds upon a multidirectional hermeneutics: the tools might affect the results of research, but the results of the research also affect his conceptualization of the tools. Advancing this proposition,

Tauzer argues that the multilayered nature of the corporation (being both embedded in and different from the state, having various stakeholders “within and without” the corporation, etc.) will benefit from a reinterpretation of Foucault’s concept of the dispositive. Whereas dispositives can capture broader tendencies within discourse and politics, e.g., security or discipline, the description of how heterogeneous elements are linked up can also be applied to distinct institutions—such as corporations. While Tauzer thus illuminates the applicability of Foucault’s framework in studies of the corporation and CSR, Tauzer also finds that the CSR discourse contains a “hermeneutic spaciousness”, which is insufficiently captured by traditional Foucauldian discourse analysis. As such, Tauzer’s article shows how a hermeneutical renovation of Foucault can inspire future research into the rhetorical tactics and power dynamics in corporate communication, specifically, and the CSR discourse, broadly.

In short, we welcome the reader to take inspiration from these promising contributions. We also hope that this Special Issue will help advance further Foucault-inspired studies on corporations, finance, and related, urgent questions of contemporary politics, business ethics, and how to safeguard the environment. As the horizon of the future is disguised in the twilight, we call for Foucauldian studies to spread their wings.

**Author Contributions:** The editorial is a result of a thoroughly collaborative work in which both K.V. and J.L. have drafted, developed, and revised all parts of the text. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Ijsseling, S. Foucault with Heidegger. *Man and World* **1986**, *19*, 413–424. [CrossRef]
- Jonas, H. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1985; ISBN 978-0-226-40597-1.
- Latour, B. *Politiques de la Nature*; La Découverte: Paris, France, 2004; ISBN 978-2-7071-4219-1.
- Bennett, J. *Vibrant Matter—A Political Ecology of Things*; Duke University Press: Durham, UK, 2010.
- Raworth, K. *Doughnut Economics*; Random House Business: London, UK, 2017; ISBN 978-1-84794-137-4.
- Hickel, J. *Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World*; Random House: Manhattan, NY, USA, 2020.
- Foster, J.B. *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*; Monthly Review Press: New York, NY, USA, 2000; ISBN 978-1-58367-012-5.
- Malm, A.; Hornborg, A. The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative. *Anthr. Rev.* **2014**, *1*, 62–69. [CrossRef]
- Malm, A. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*; Verso: London, UK, 2016.
- Fraser, N. *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—And What We Can Do about It*; Verso Books: Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2022; ISBN 978-1-83976-123-2.
- Huber, M.T. *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*; Verso Books: Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2022; ISBN 978-1-78873-388-5.
- Mau, S. *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*; Verso Books: Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2023; p. 325. ISBN 978-1-83976-346-5.
- Escobar, A. Construction Nature: Elements for a Post-Structuralist Political Ecology. *Futures* **1996**, *28*, 325–343. [CrossRef]
- Lemke, T. Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique. In Proceedings of the Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, MA, USA, 21–24 September 2000; University of Amherst: Amherst, MA, USA, 2000; pp. 21–24.
- Shamir, R. The De-Radicalization of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Crit. Sociol.* **2004**, *33*, 669–689. [CrossRef]
- Marens, R. Recovering the Past: Reviving the Legacy of the Early Scholars of Corporate Social Responsibility. *J. Manag. Hist.* **2008**, *14*, 55–72. [CrossRef]
- Brooks, S. CSR and the Strait-Jacket of Economic Rationality. *Int. J. Sociol. Soc. Policy* **2010**, *30*, 604–617. [CrossRef]
- Steensen, K.Q.; Villadsen, K. From social gospel to CSR: Was corporate social responsibility ever radical? *Organization* **2020**, *27*, 924–942. [CrossRef]
- Bowen, H.R. *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*; University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, IA, USA, 2013.
- Friedman, M. The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits. *New York Times Mag.* **1970**, 122–126. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business-is-to.html> (accessed on 1 March 2023).
- Fleming, P.; Roberts, J.; Garsten, C. In search of corporate social responsibility: Introduction to special issue. *Organization* **2013**, *20*, 337–348. [CrossRef]
- Schuler, D.; Rasche, A.; Etzion, D.; Newton, L. Corporate Sustainability Management and Environmental Ethics. *Bus. Ethics Q.* **2017**, *27*, 213–237. [CrossRef]

23. Dobers, P.; Springett, D. Corporate social responsibility: Discourse, narratives and communication. *Corp. Soc. Responsib. Environ. Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 63–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Meuer, J.; Koelbel, J.; Hoffmann, V.H. On the Nature of Corporate Sustainability. *Organ. Environ.* **2020**, *33*, 319–341. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Ergene, S.; Banerjee, S.B.; Hoffman, A.J. (Un)Sustainability and Organization Studies: Towards a Radical Engagement. *Organ. Stud.* **2021**, *42*, 1319–1335. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Krippner, G.R. The financialization of the American economy. *Socioecon. Rev.* **2005**, *3*, 173–208. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. *Assetization: Turning Things into Assets in Technoscientific Capitalism*; Birch, K.; Muniesa, F. (Eds.) MIT Press: London, UK, 2020.
28. Braun, B. Asset manager capitalism as a corporate governance regime. In *American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2021; p. 270.
29. Gabor, D. The Wall Street Consensus. *Dev. Chang.* **2021**, *52*, 429–459. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; Allen Lane: London, UK, 1977.
31. Luke, T.W. Neither Sustainable nor Development: Reconsidering Sustainability in Development. *Sustain. Dev.* **2005**, *13*, 228–238. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Wagler, R. Foucault, the Consumer Culture and Environmental Degradation. *Ethics Place Environ.* **2009**, *12*, 331–336. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Himick, D. Relative Performance Evaluation and Pension Investment Management: A Challenge for ESG Investing. *Crit. Perspect. Account.* **2011**, *22*, 158–171. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Fleming, P.; Jones, M.T. *The End of Corporate Social Responsibility: Crisis and Critique*; Sage: Cornwall, UK, 2012.
35. Silva-Casteñada, L.; Trussart, N. Sustainability Standards and Certification: Looking Through the Lens of Foucault’s Dispositif. *Glob. Netw.* **2016**, *16*, 490–510. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Leins, S. ‘Responsible investment’: ESG and the post-crisis ethical order. *Econ. Soc.* **2020**, *49*, 71–91. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Vallentin, S.; Murillo, D. Ideologies of Corporate Responsibility: From Neoliberalism to “Varieties of Liberalism”. *Bus. Ethics Q.* **2022**, *32*, 635–670. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Abela, M. A New Direction? The “Mainstreaming” of Sustainability Reporting. *Sustain. Account. Manag. Policy J.* **2022**, *13*, 1261–1283. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Fleming, P.; Godfrey, R.; Lilley, S. Conceptualizing Business Logistics as an ‘Apparatus of Security’ and its Implications for Management and Organizational Inquiry. *Hum. Relat.* **2022**, 00187267221110458, (published early online). [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Foucault, M. *Archaeology of Knowledge*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2002.
41. Foucault, M. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In *The Foucault Reader*; Rabinow, P., Ed.; Penguin: Harmondsworth, UK, 1984; pp. 87–90.
42. Foucault, M. *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*; Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, UK, 2008.
43. Foucault, M. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*; Picador: New York, NY, USA, 2005.
44. Raffnsøe, S.; Gudmand-Høyer, M.; Thaning, M.S. Foucault’s dispositif: The perspicacity of dispositive analytics in organizational research. *Organization* **2016**, *23*, 272–298. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Villadsen, K. “The Dispositive”: Foucault’s Concept for Organizational Analysis? *Organ. Stud.* **2021**, *42*, 473–494. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Foucault, M. The Confession of the Flesh. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*; Gordon, C., Ed.; Pantheon Books: New York, NY, USA, 1980; pp. 194–228.
47. Foucault, M. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2007.
48. Koopman, C.; Matza, T. Putting Foucault to Work: Analytic and Concept in Foucaultian Inquiry. *Crit. Inq.* **2013**, *39*, 817–840. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.