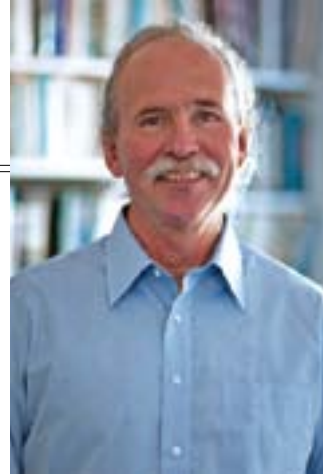


## Six Ways of Looking at Corporate Greed

Historian Richard White, the author of last year's Pulitzer-finalist *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America*, writes about corruption in the Gilded Age, the American West, Native American history, and the history of the environment. He is professor of American history at Stanford University. We asked him to pose questions about whether corporations are greedy.



**1.** Greed is one of the seven deadly sins, and these sins are human flaws of the kind that Christians think lead to perdition. We can apply them metaphorically to nonhumans, but can we do so literally? Rabbits might copulate with abandon, but we don't think of them as lustful. So can a nonhuman entity—a nonbiological entity in the case of corporations—be accused of human faults in any way but metaphorically?

**2.** American law complicates any assessment of corporate greed. Under the law, corporations have become metaphorical persons endowed with quite real and legally enforceable rights, but except in the eyes of Republican presidential nominees, a legal person is not a human being. Persons are not legally "people, too." But if corporations possess not just metaphorical but actual rights, can they possess not just metaphorical but actual human faults, among them greed?

**3.** If a corporation is judged to be greedy, what constitutes its fault? *Homo economicus* exists only to profit as a producer and to maximize utility as a consumer, but actual human beings live more complicated lives. Accord-

ing to the Christians who made greed a deadly sin, God created humans to love, honor, obey, and serve him, as the catechism says, so greed is outside God's purpose. Corporations can be created for all kinds of reasons, but business corporations exist only to make a profit. If a corporation seeks to maximize its profit, it is only doing what it was created to do. If we created corporations for the express purpose of making money, can we accuse them of greed when they excel at what we designed them to do?

**4.** We usually think of greed as accumulating excessive wealth to the detriment of others. The wealth that resulted from the corporate encouragement of smoking seems to be an example of this kind of corporate greed. Corporations sought to undermine the clear science that linked tobacco use with cancer, creating deadly addictions so that they could maintain profits, which would benefit their executives and shareholders. But in a corporation, the decisions are collective and no individual makes the decision to lie and obfuscate. If the decision is collective, isn't the responsibility collective, and isn't it the corporation that is greedy and culpable?

**5.** A corporation is a legal person, but it is composed of numerous people. Early laws chartering corporations made shareholders legally responsible for the corporation's debts and actions, which seems to indicate that, at least initially, Americans conflated the actions of corporations with the legal and moral responsibility of their owners. This would also seem to allow the conflation of individual wrongdoing—greed—and corporate actions. Did this, and does it still, allow an opening to judge corporations to be greedy? Did changes in the law erase this possibility?

**6.** Can corporations be the victims as well as the agents of greed? The men who controlled 19th-century railroad corporations were by any standards greedy and corrupt. They made fortunes by using the corporations they controlled, but they also made them at the expense of the corporations, which often went bankrupt. Was the corporation, which was both the means and the victim of such actions, greedy, or were only those who used it to loot taxpayers, workers, and investors greedy? And if a corporation can be a victim of greed, isn't it a possible corollary that it can be the agent of greed?

JESS WHITE



## Preserving the Dead

They toured for 30 years, performed more than 2,300 concerts, and invited fans to send them letters. Given the Grateful Dead's psychedelic pedigree, you might expect the letters to be colorful, and they are. But Day-Glo postcards and air-mailed harlequin artwork form only one layer in the collection of rock history curios and chronicles contained in the Grateful Dead Archive, now a permanent exhibit of the McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Archivist Nicholas Meriwether has processed a third of the original bequests from the band, including recordings, posters, videos, fliers, photographs, and a 14-foot conference table. Additional materials from band members and from former employees, associates, and collectors are being processed as they come in. The inaugural exhibit opened June 29; new ones are to be mounted annually.

Meriwether, formerly the oral historian at the the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, says the collection is defined by one-of-a-kind items: "Most emotionally resonant: perhaps a wonderful, two-page letter written by Pigpen's father, shortly after Pig [the band's original keyboardist] died, thanking the band for taking care of his son."—TOM BENTLEY



## Ask What's Not There

To better understand what we observe in the world, we need to know more about what is absent. This is a hypothesis of Estonian ecologists Meelis Pärtel, Robert Szava-Kovats, and Martin Zobel, who call the portions of species pools missing from

study sites "dark diversity."

Think of it as analogous to dark matter, the invisible mass that physicists hypothesize accounts for the bulk of matter-energy in the vast expanse of space. Dark diversity serves a similar function: "Just as dark matter is important to understanding the structure of galaxies, dark diversity is necessary to understand ecosystems," Pärtel explains.

The researchers, from the Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences at the University of Tartu, described their hypothesis in the journal *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*. They

argue that dark diversity does several things that most theories don't. It offers an evolutionary background for a local habitat and its species, specifically those that have disappeared or been displaced. It's a useful concept for understanding processes underlying diversity patterns. Most important, it can warn of current threats of extinction. That is, by reconstructing the multiplicity of organisms no longer present in a habitat, dark diversity can help scientists unlock the "restoration potential" of degraded ecosystems.

—JENNIFER HENDERSON