

PETER DAUVERGNE & GENEVIEVE LEBARON



P[®]OTEST INC.

**THE CORPORATIZATION
OF ACTIVISM**

Protest Inc.

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The Corporatization of Activism

PETER DAUVERGNE AND
GENEVIEVE LEBARON

polity

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CHAPTER ONE

Where are the Radicals?

Over the last two decades activist organizations have increasingly come to look, think, and act like corporations. You may well find this claim upsetting. Yet we go even further, arguing that the corporatization of activism is deepening and accelerating across all causes and cultures. Rarely now do “career” activists call for a new international economic order, or a world government, or an end to multinational corporations. Only a select few on the fringes, in the words of Greenpeace cofounder Bob Hunter, still struggle to “mindbomb” the world to form a new “global consciousness.”

More and more activists, especially those toiling inside large advocacy organizations, are instead speaking in market-friendly language. They are calling for a gentler capitalism – for fair trade, for certification, for eco-markets. The buzz is about the aid of rock stars and the benevolence of billionaires. Solutions to global problems involve campaigns for ethical purchasing: to brand social causes and sell feelings of “doing good” to the “cappuccino class.”

Without a doubt most activists still want to speak truth to power. But nowadays they are entangled in this power. Unthinkable a few decades back, partnerships with big-brand companies – Walmart, McDonald’s, Nike – are now common, even expected. The global WWF Network of activists, as just one example among many, receives funding from and works closely with the Coca-Cola Company. WWF leaders do not hide the reason for joining forces. “Coke,” explains Gerald

Butts, who at the time was the president and chief executive officer of WWF Canada, “is literally more important, when it comes to sustainability, than the United Nations.”¹

A Coca-Cola World

Why is this happening? Why is corporatization affecting some advocacy organizations more than others? What are the consequences for the nature and power of activism? The answers, as we reveal, are complex, with many activists fighting back. Still, looking across the surface of global activism, we see three processes that are interacting with markets and politics to corporatize activism: the securitization of dissent (chapter 3); the privatization of social life (chapter 4); and the institutionalization of activism (chapter 5).

Together, these interlocking processes are reconfiguring power and resistance globally, as firms engage social forces through corporate social responsibility, as governments cut social services and devolve authority to companies, as consumerism spreads, and as states suppress public dissent. The result is a seismic shift in the nature of activism worldwide. Not only are more and more corporations financing and partnering with activist groups, but activists are increasingly communicating, arguing, and situating goals within a corporatized frame. And more and more activists are seeing corporate-friendly options as logical and effective strategies for achieving their goals.

This does not mean that activists have capitulated to corporations: corporate malpractice continues to draw their ire. Within every movement, many activists *are* challenging the values and institutions of capitalism. And many examples exist of successful efforts to slow or reverse corporatization. Worldwide, both organized and spontaneous uprisings remain common too, with social media tools such as Facebook

and Twitter rallying hundreds of thousands of people to oppose rigged elections, decaying dictatorships, and corporate pillage. If anything, because social unrest tends to cluster and come in waves, in the future we would expect even more – and larger – public protests as the world population rushes toward 10 billion people, as communication technologies and economies continue to globalize, and as citizens react angrily to the hardships of an ever adjusting world economy.

Nonetheless, although it is a contested, uneven, and in no way inevitable process, the overall trend, we argue in this book, is toward a corporatization of activism, where the agendas, discourse, questions, and proposed solutions of human rights, gender equality, social justice, animal rights, and environmental activist organizations increasingly conform with, rather than challenge, global capitalism. Some of this reflects self-censorship under threat of government audits, business retribution, and the pressures of austerity; but much also arises from self-evaluation by activists of what is feasible and what is effective.

Working for the Establishment

The corporatization of activism is not a simple business takeover of activism. Business is seeking out advocacy organizations for legitimacy and marketing opportunities. But activists are courting companies for funds and partnerships with as much, if not more, enthusiasm.

Their eagerness is understandable. Partnering with business is enhancing the influence of advocacy groups *within* ruling political and economic institutions. Activists are gaining seats on corporate boards and at international negotiating tables. And they are raising more funds to run even more programs. Without a doubt, access to the real corridors of power remains highly restricted. Still, compared to those outside of the establishment, activists on the inside are more

likely to be able to shape corporate governance or prod a policy reform.

A natural desire for influence, then, partly explains why so many advocacy groups are readily, even keenly, embracing corporatization. Advocacy groups are using this influence to do much good. Achieving this good requires a big sacrifice, however: groups must work within the confines of global capitalism and put aside thoughts of transforming the world order.

One consequence for world politics is that activism is now less “radical” than it was forty or fifty years ago, at least in terms of demanding systemic and far-reaching change. Another consequence, as we document in chapter 2, is that, with each passing year, activist fundraising, projects, and goals are becoming more entwined with corporate interests. Unraveling corporatism from activism is getting progressively harder. Meanwhile, the corporatization of activism is marginalizing more critical ideas and people.

The intensity and speed of this process is stronger within the global North and among large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with home offices in Western Europe and North America than among community-based, grassroots, and bottom-up movements in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, or Latin America. Across both the global South and the global North, many community groups and grassroots movements are resisting and rejecting corporatization; nevertheless, corporatization is altering the context within which such groups organize, raising the financial and legal stakes of tactics such as direct action. Those NGOs striving to reform capitalist institutions seem especially prone to corporatization. At first this finding may seem counterintuitive. Yet, in many ways, it is perfectly logical given the power of capitalism to assimilate criticism and dissent. Multinational corporations are keen to partner with large, global NGOs in particular, not only to mold the nature of criticism and pressure but also to legitimize

business growth, gain efficiencies and competitive advantages, and earn profits.

Once again, the story here is not one of firms coopting or duping activists. Only a rare few activists are selling out for Fleet Street salaries or jet-setting lifestyles.² Just about all are dedicated, and they deserve praise for sacrificing income and professional status to work for a cause they believe in. Most genuinely want to make things better: to stop deforestation in South America or help those with HIV/AIDS. Let us be crystal clear. Our book is not waging a war on activists; nor is it a lament for the activism of the 1960s or 1970s. We are sounding a loud alarm, however, about the consequences of the corporatization of activism for the possibilities of transformative change in world politics.³

From Protest to Activism

The long history of public uprisings is not just one of rebellions and revolutions against tyrants. Nor is it just one of grand symbolic protests, such as the dumping of tea into Boston Harbor in 1773 to spark the American Revolution. Seemingly trivial and often forgotten protests can combine for lasting influence, as E. P. Thompson reminds us in his article “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.” Thompson reveals how, as the English commons were enclosed and the numbers of landless peasants grew during the takeoff of capitalism in the eighteenth century, “crowds” in times of hunger would on occasion storm a baker’s shop and demand a lower price for bread. Such action was not only a reaction to soaring prices and hunger. The crowd was defending the customs and rights of the community – thus enforcing the boundaries of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” behavior. In this way, individuals drew on the “moral economy of the poor” to restrain the profit impulse of capitalists.⁴

Crowds still wield startling power today, as is proved by the Arab Spring uprisings beginning in late 2010 and, in a different way, the worldwide protests following Occupy Wall Street in 2011. Student protests in Britain in 2011 and Quebec in 2012–13 also expose the rage of many of even the world's best-off youth. Nothing suggests much, if any, corporate control or influence over these kinds of protests – most people, for instance, credit the anti-corporate organization Adbusters with launching the Occupy movement.

We are not arguing that such protests are corporatized. Nor are we suggesting that public protest as a form of political action is waning. Nostalgia in the West for the 1960s (just think May 1968 in Paris) leads some writers to portray this period as the heyday of popular protest as a political tool. Yet protest recurs across generations, with the intensity rising and falling over time. Protests remain common today. In many countries, even Western ones such as Germany, we have seen *more*, not fewer, protests since the 1960s.⁵

Much of this popular protest survives for only a few days or weeks – after perhaps it is crushed by the police or the military, or perhaps after protestors reverse a rigged election. Our focus is not on the first days or weeks of a protest but rather on what happens after activists start making consistent and repeated claims, with long-term strategies and formal organizations. It is during this process of sustaining a campaign for change that we see activists, especially over the last decade, coming under the increasing influence of corporations, consumerism, and capitalism. Like so many governments, many activists have come to accept the value of opening economies to private investors, deregulating state services, legalizing private property and land ownership, “freeing” up trade, and allowing markets and corporations to “self-regulate.” It is in this globalizing market economy that we see activists partnering with big business, moderating strategies, and advocating

for market solutions. It is here that we see what was once *Protest* become *Protest Inc.*

What is Activism?

Most “protestors” are activists, and many belong to, dip into and out of, or later join a social movement – for civil rights or global justice or human rights; for sustainability or animal rights; for gender equality or gay and lesbian rights. A few people no doubt join protests in search of friendship or thrills or mischief, with no real political purpose. But most protestors are (or soon become) *activists*, making claims and pursuing a public goal.

Activism, as we define it, includes protests; yet most activism emerges out of and takes place between protests. Activists seek change that at least to some extent challenges the established order. Some want better treatment of animals or people or nature. Others want to cure a disease or lessen poverty or promote development. The degree of change called for varies widely. So do the tools. These can range from poetry to strikes to blockades to running a nonprofit organization.⁶ Some analysts prefer to focus the concept of activism exclusively on unrest such as Occupy Wall Street or on grassroots networks such as the World Social Forum or on advocacy campaigns such as the ones to end whaling and child labor. Doing so, however, misses much of the world’s behind-the-scenes, quieter efforts of activists, which arguably comprise the bulk of today’s activism.

So understood, activism does not need to begin life as a protest; nor does protesting ever need to be part of it. Activism requires sustained collective action with a political purpose: to stop strip mining of indigenous territory; to prevent human rights abuses; to stop trade in endangered species; to block college tuition hikes. Individual action to change personal conditions, such as a sustained protest about one’s own salary,

does not qualify as activism. Nor do the actions of organizations born out of the private sector and family philanthropy, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Also beyond our definitional scope are neo-fascist, racist, and terrorist groups. Conflating “racism” or “terrorism” with “activism” (so, for instance, terrorism becomes an example of “radical” activism) would do an extreme disservice to understanding the changing nature of today’s global activism.

The tactics of activism as we define it can be theatrical and playful – singing in solidarity, banging pots and pans, a gay pride parade – or revolve around hunger strikes, occupying city squares, lawsuits, or hacking the Internet. Or they can focus on educating citizens or fundraising for research. For us the tactics can also involve violence: burning cars, smashing windows, self-immolation. The common thread is a collective challenge of the priorities – and often the authority – of companies and states. Thus, in our meaning, the tactics of activism always have a political purpose, however small.

Our broad understanding of activism has the advantage of allowing us to capture a great diversity of civic action and reaction across all social movements. Concretely, this lets us include in our analysis a wide range of advocacy groups, from the World Social Forum, Greenpeace, and Amnesty International to the United Way, the Nature Conservancy, and Susan G. Komen for the Cure. Defining activism so inclusively does have a downside: it softens the meaning to embrace groups that accept, and in some cases are even part of, prevailing power structures. Yet any narrower meaning would miss too much of the story of the corporatization of activism.

Scholarship on activism is vast and deep, mapping important differences among organizations, coalitions, and grassroots movements across time, campaigns, and settings (among other factors). We take a different tack, treating activism as a single category and analyzing the processes of

corporatization in broad strokes. Our goal is to evaluate what is happening to the capacity of activism as a whole to transform the world order. Surprisingly few people are discussing this; our hope is to spark a much bigger conversation.

The Politics of Corporatization

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” social theorists Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have both quipped at different times. Mark Fisher extends this idea in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* to explore the power of capitalism to present itself as the only viable economic order.⁷

To some extent the corporatization of activism is a symptom of capitalism. Or, put differently, it reflects what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) saw as a reason why so many of the downtrodden were not rebelling a hundred years ago: for the masses, the rules and customs of the ruling powers had become “normal” and “natural,” even “common sense.” Capitalism today continues to contort what people think is true and workable – what Gramsci called the “limits of the possible.”⁸ Only some things even appear changeable. Gramsci’s insight helps to explain the how and why of the ever growing sway of business thinking, markets, and individualism.

Understood in this way, the process of corporatization is not only about activists taking on the organizational and managerial practices of a company – budgets, staff, oversight boards, and a corner office for the CEO. It is also more than just corporate sponsorship and financing. Corporatization involves the politics of social activists internalizing a belief in the value of corporate responsibility, deregulation, and privatization. It entails treating donations as investments and supporters as shareholders. And it includes coming to accept the

status quo as normal and seeing markets and corporations as natural.

Anti-corporate activism certainly continues in many places, particularly among grassroots groups.⁹ But signs of the corporatization of activism far outweigh signs of anti-corporate activity. Telling is the rapid increase since 1990 in formal partnerships between NGOs and “Big Oil,” “Big Brands,” and “Big Pharma.” So too is the increasing trust among activists that consumer labels and certification can make trade “fair” or “ethical” or “sustainable.” Many activists are also turning to celebrities and billionaire benefactors to support campaigns, setting aside worries about runaway consumption or appalling inequality.¹⁰

Another sign of the corporatization of activism is the growth of corporate-style “fundraising,” where, although it may be admirable, the “cause” has come to be defined by branding and advertising. Samantha King’s 2006 book *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (as well as the 2012 documentary) reveals this dynamic at work in the case of fundraising for cancer research by Susan G. Komen for the Cure. Barbara Ehrenreich, author of the article “Welcome to Cancerland,” is pointed in her critique of what Komen has done to the activism of women with cancer: “We used to march in the streets. Now you’re supposed to run for a cure, or walk for a cure, or jump for a cure, or whatever it is.”¹¹

Many other NGOs are also branding and marketing “problems.” Some aim to reach Western consumers in particular, telling them they are “saving the world” through compassionate consumption. Such campaigns are raising billions of dollars. Yet they tend to do far more to encourage consumption rather than any deep change, a point that Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte’s 2011 book *Brand Aid* explicates especially well.¹² Such campaigns can end up “selling” the suffering of others and marketing feelings of empathy rather than

necessarily doing good in any broad sense. And they can shift the focus of “change” to superficial matters, shoring up capitalism and shifting responsibility for improving the world to individuals and away from corporations and states.

Corporatization, then, is not a straightforward process of firms and markets colonizing ever more of the world. One trend is clear, however: the process has been intensifying since the 1980s, reinforced by the securitization of dissent, the privatization of social life, and the institutionalization of activism.

Securitization

States worldwide are increasingly policing the line between “civil” and “uncivil” society, funding groups that are more cooperative while stifling those that are more critical. At the same time, politicians and government officials are portraying protests as a threat to public order and national security. This reframing of challenges to state authority as a security threat gained momentum following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Soon afterward, social justice and environmental groups with no connection to terrorism were facing tighter security and scrutiny.

In the wake of 9/11, activists pulled back from any action that the media might depict as “fanatical.” Seemingly daily suicide bombings across the Middle East and Africa and further terrorist attacks – the 2002 bombings in Bali, the 2004 Madrid bombings, the 2005 London bombings, the 2008 Mumbai shootings and bombings, the 2013 hostage killings in Amenas (Algeria), and the 2013 Boston marathon bombing – have kept activists wary. Over this time the political climate for activism has darkened. Governments have revised and passed laws to boost state powers to spy on activist groups and suppress demonstrations. And presidents and prime

ministers now talk of “eco-terrorists” and social saboteurs – language and images that weaken the message and legitimacy of groups that are challenging, rather than partnering with, a government or corporation.

The American government has been leading the charge to securitize activism. Homeland Security is supplying funds and the Pentagon is donating tanks and machine guns to police departments. With military training, police are now using combat equipment and tactics to contain and subdue protesters. Meanwhile, to prosecute “rioters” and “vandals” and “anarchists,” the FBI’s counterterrorism division is raiding homes to collect evidence and prosecutors are subpoenaing activists to testify in front of grand juries.

The American government response to the Occupy movement is telling. Homeland Security and the FBI infiltrated protest camps, and police launched military-style raids to demolish camps and arrest thousands across the United States. Police in riot gear tear-gassed and clubbed protesters; in Lower Manhattan, police even conducted a military-style nighttime raid on protestors in Zuccotti Park. “What is most worrisome to us is that the line that has traditionally separated the military from civilian policing is fading away,” explains Timothy Lynch, director of the criminal justice project at the Cato Institute. “We see it as one of the most disturbing trends in the criminal justice area – the militarization of police tactics.”¹³

America is far from alone in cracking down on public protest. Just look at Spain’s harsh reaction to direct democracy rallies in 2011–12 or at Greece’s similar response to anti-austerity protests in 2012. Strict security measures are now put in place for most public events, from hosting the G20 to holding the Olympic Games. A 50,000-strong force of army troops, police, and private security kept the public “safe” during the 2012 London Olympics, aided by an electric fence