PROTEST INC.

THE CORPORATIZATION OF ACTIVISM
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The Corporatization of Activism

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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.”

**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.\(^4\)