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## **The Pervasiveness of Corporate Authority: Repertoire of Actions, Material Effects, and Democratic Challenges**

**By Sara Angeli Aguiton, Marc-Olivier Déplaude, Nathalie Jas, Emmanuel Henry, and Valentin Thomas**

A few years ago, Gary Younge, a journalist with *The Guardian*, asked: “Who’s in control – nation states or global corporations?” (Younge 2014). As far as he was concerned, the answer was clear: transnational corporations had succeeded in severely limiting the “ability of national governments to pursue any agenda” to the point of seriously threatening the exercise of democracy. State weakening in favor of very large corporations is nothing new. It has been regularly observed by committed observers and social scientists for several decades. The characterization of the political power of corporations and their capacity to reorder the world not only in its economic but also in its social, environmental, and political dimensions nevertheless remains highly topical. An understanding of “the nature, dynamics, and impacts of corporations and the power they exert within contemporary capitalism” (SPERI 2019) and therefore of how “the global economy functions and shapes people’s life chances” (*ibid.*), remains today a crucial issue for the social sciences.

Drawing on different literatures, ranging from research on business associations and “global governance” to that on the social production of ignorance or on “corporate crime”, we wish to contribute to existing work on the capacity of corporate actors to govern and administer the world. We analyze corporate actors not just as actors that influence policy, but as actors who have acquired an unprecedented capacity to transform and shape the social world. Operating in numerous social spaces and mobilizing a wide range of strategies, they have acquired a power to act that extends far beyond mere spaces of regulation and government. We will use two related concepts to take account of this power: “pervasive powers” and “corporate authority”. The concept of the “pervasive powers” of large corporations and industries relates to the idea of diffuse and generalized powers that have both macro and micro dimensions. The concept of “corporate authority” aims to describe what these diffuse powers produce: the growing social and political legitimacy of corporate actors, imposing specific material and normative orders that compete or hybridize with those of states.

In the first two sections of this chapter, we will present research that has sought to analyze the political power of corporations, from the study of corporate elites to that of the role that private actors play in global governance. In the third section, we develop the concepts of “pervasive powers” and “corporate authority”, which are at the heart of this chapter. This will lead us, in the fourth section, to highlight the importance of the “corporate repertoire of actions” when considering the diversity of the work done by corporate actors to consolidate and perpetuate their power. In the fifth section, we focus on the material dimension and the irreversibility of their actions. Then in the final section, we return more broadly to what these forms of power do to democracy.

## **Corporate elites, corporations, and the state**

Corporate power is a classic subject of analysis in sociology and political science. An initial Marxist-inspired set of works focused on the individuals who make up the business world and the networks in which they operate. In this research, corporate power is analyzed as class power. It has as its origin C. Wright Mills' seminal study of the "power elite", defined as the coming together of "those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences" (Mills 2000 [1959], 18). For Mills, the study of the places where the different fractions of these elites interact (clubs, professional associations, philanthropic organizations, government commissions, etc.) is of decisive importance, because they allow their members to define common interests. Among them, those who run major companies exert a growing influence supported by the development of states' capacities to intervene.

Mills' study has fueled a vast body of sociological research on economic elites, some of which uses formal network analysis tools (Denord et al. 2020). This research has focused on "interlocking directorates", which consists in senior executives of large companies sitting on the boards of other companies. Such practice has been described as essential when building the cohesion of economic elites and their social and political power (Carroll 2004; Domhoff 1970; Domhoff 2013; Scott 1997; Useem 1984). This research was renewed in the 1990s in relation to the emergence of a "transnational

capitalist class” (Carroll 2010; Sklair 2000). It continues to analyze the power of the business world as a class power, defined as the capacity to monopolize a large share of the profits generated by labor. The accumulation of wealth by business leaders and the professionals who work for them is thus seen as the main marker of their power. Finally, this literature argues that the power of corporate elites is even more important in as much as it is considered legitimate in the rest of society. Researchers have thus underlined the symbolic work carried out by certain categories of professionals who, on behalf of these elites, fulfil the function of organic intellectuals (in the Gramscian sense): consultants, business lawyers and academics from law, business or management schools thus play an essential role in the constitution of a hegemonic power – i.e., a power that is recognized as legitimate and which is rarely contested (Carroll 2004).

Focused on individuals and their networks, this research tells us little about the companies as such or about their strategies and policies. This is the subject of another body of work, rooted more in political science, on the relations between firms and their organizations (business associations, entrepreneurs’ clubs, think tanks, etc.) on the one hand, and public authorities on the other. Some authors have analyzed these relations as the “capture” of certain administrations or regulatory agencies by economic actors who have succeeded in orienting their activities to their benefit (Huntington 1952; Carpenter and Moss 2013). However, other works have offered a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between the business world and government, in terms of “co-production”. This is what Marlène Benquet, Paul Lagneau Ymonet, and Fabien Foureault propose in this book, taking as a case study the creation of a tax exemption favorable to private equity in France in the 1990s. Focusing on conflicts within both financial communities

and public administration, they document the way in which the French government and certain financial actors co-produced a regulation that benefited the private equity sector in order to transform the structure of the French financial sector. More generally, this chapter emphasizes the important role that governments play in the construction of markets and in the processes of concentration and economic influence, whether in Europe, North America or more recently in Asia and South America. The power of states and the power of the large companies whose development they support go hand in hand (Wilks 2013). Alongside these works that demonstrate the close interconnection between states and corporate actors, other literatures have sought to characterize the power that companies exercise, by situating themselves on a global scale<sup>1</sup>.

### **“Private authority” and “corporate power” in global governance**

The question of the power exercised by private actors is crucial for another body of research, which is at the crossroads of the field of the analysis of international relations, international political economy, and the study of global governance. This research examines non-public actors and questions their capacity to perform functions that are a priori reserved for states or international organizations, such as the definition and implementation of public policies at national, international or global levels. There are two trends: research that approaches this power through the concept of “private authority” and research that considers it from the angle of “corporate power”. These two approaches are based on the observation that, since the end of the Cold War, there has been an erosion of the capacity of states to perform certain functions due to the

combined effect of several factors: increasing globalization, the development of international organizations, the concentration of large corporations, the financialization of the economy, the implementation of (neo-)liberal policies, and for some authors, the acceleration of communication and trade made possible by technological transformations. In both streams of literature, it is a matter of highlighting and analyzing the non-state actors who participate in the construction of global governance, and the institutional, social and geographical spaces in which these actors operate, or the instruments they have at their disposal.

The notion of “private authority” took shape during the 1990s (Cutler et al. 2003). Private authority is defined as an assemblage of “institutionalized forms or expressions of power”, the legitimacy of which is based on the fact that there is “some form of normative, uncoerced consent or recognition of authority on the part of the regulated or governed” (Hall and Bierstecker 2002, 4). It is therefore a question of understanding how private actors and organizations – and not only states – gain rule-making authority (Cashore 2002). This research distinguishes between different forms of private authority, including “delegated” and “entrepreneurial” forms. Delegated forms of private authority function as transfers of competences from states to private actors (Hall and Biersteker 2002; Green 2014), while entrepreneurial authority is directly constructed by corporate actors (as evidenced by the contemporary proliferation of the voluntary norms and standards that they adopt). Corporate organizations have become producers of private rules that they impose as being legitimate, to such an extent that they now exercise independent rule-making authority (Cutler 2003; Flohr et al. 2010;

Green 2014). The case of ISO standards is a good example of this trend (Clapp 1998; Graz 2019).

The authors who share this perspective have long insisted on the blurred boundaries that exist between “public” and “private” authorities and the interdependencies between the two (Strange 1991; Clapp 1998). Some therefore use the term “hybrid authority” (Andonova 2010) to designate this blurring, which can be found, for example, in the construction of standards, in the control of their implementation or in certain types of device such as public-private partnerships. In addition to examining the actors and instruments, some research focuses on the need to situate the multi-sited spaces where “private authority” is produced and implemented. Yet, this body of literature takes into consideration a very wide variety of private actors that does not refer exclusively to companies: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational organizations (especially those that build and administer private standards or international treaties), and even religious, criminal or terrorist organizations. Research that mobilizes the concept of “private authority” thus tends to consider economic actors as private actors among others.

Conversely, research that adopts the perspective of “corporate power” focuses its analyses on transnational corporations. It sees multinationals as actors capable of exercising political power in the same way as states. Some authors have considered transnational corporations as contributors to the construction and implementation of global governance, alongside states and transnational organizations, and sometimes other types of private actor (Flohr et al. 2010). Others have sought not only to specify



the modalities of corporate intervention in certain global governance mechanisms, but also to analyze their economic, social, environmental or health effects on the sectors concerned (Clapp and Fuchs 2009). More recently, researchers have defended the idea that “big business has developed a profound structural power position on the global scale” (Babic et al. 2017, 21) and have called for the development of research that makes it possible to account for the nature, modalities of exercise and effects of this power (Milker 2018; SPERI 2019). This power is conceived as being not only economic but also highly political. Depending on the situation, it may be juxtaposed with, interact with, or even surpass that of the most powerful states or international organizations.

### **The pervasiveness of corporate authority**

Just like research on the place of corporations in global governance, we wish to focus on corporate actors – by which we mean first and foremost large corporations. We consider these large companies in all their diversity, in the sense that they are not necessarily controlled solely by private actors. Due to their strategic importance they can be the object of state participation, as in the mining or armament sectors. Some companies are even wholly owned and controlled by states, such as Chinese state-owned enterprises (Lin et al. 2020). In various western countries too, certain industrial sectors have been developed and structured under state impetus. In this book, the chapter by José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez illustrates this phenomenon by showing how the autarkist policies of the Francoist state led to the creation of a pesticide industry in Spain.

However, in this book, “corporate actors” not only refer to very large companies and industries. We believe it is also necessary to take into consideration a wider range of corporate actors. We therefore refer not just to economic actors that control a large volume of activities on a local or global scale, but also to those which provide them with services or expertise (audit firms, brokers, asset management consultants, public relations firms, etc.). To these may be added organizations responsible for defending or promoting corporate interests (business associations, think tanks, philanthropic organizations, lobbyists, NGOs, law firms, etc.), along with a whole range of individuals who hold strategic powers within these entities. This variety is illustrated in this book by Nathalie Jas’ chapter, which shows the diversity of organizations and mechanisms through which the French pesticide industry promoted its interests in the 1950s. To take the polymorphism of corporate actors seriously also means taking into account their complexity. Corporate organizations often rely on extremely elaborate systems that include subsidiaries, specialist services, subcontractors or alliances with other organizations. The deployment of these systems on an international scale is an important source of power for the companies that build and dominate them, to such an extent that some have acquired capacities for action that exceed those of many states (Babic et al. 2017; Bohme Rankin 2014).

Unlike research on corporate power, we believe it is important to underline the systemic nature and multiple forms of the power exercised by corporate actors. To this end, we propose the notion of “pervasive powers”, which refers to the idea of dynamic and multi-sited powers – hence the use of the plural. Diffuse and generalized, they can be

observed at both the micro and macro levels and contribute to the production of worldviews. They influence public decisionmaking, regulation, and expertise, as well as the technological horizons of a given society. These powers also leave visible traces at the local level. They are thus exercised both “from above” – in regulations, values, and discourse – and “from below”, right down to the materiality of objects. This is the case, for example, of “Terminator” transgenes invented by Delta & Pine Land (later bought out by Monsanto), which are used to sterilize genetically modified plants and thus force farmers to buy seeds from Monsanto every year. These powers are not only exercised over public authorities. They are in fact deployed by companies to mobilize a wide variety of resources in a range of spaces such as regulatory arenas, courts of law, influential professional circles (journalists, academics, teachers, etc.), and NGOs. The construction and maintenance of networks that extend beyond the business community is thus a core activity of corporate-funded foundations and think tanks, as Thomas Depecker, Marc-Olivier Déplaudé, and Nicolas Larchet demonstrate in their chapter in this book, with the example of a foundation created in France in the 1970s by major food companies in response to growing criticism of industrial food.

Finally, the accumulation of these powers leads to the institutionalization of what we propose to call a corporate authority, i.e., a power that corporate actors claim to be legitimate. The institutionalization of corporate authority is the result of a long historical process, which can be traced back at the very least to the seventeenth century, with the creation of charter companies that developed through support from states wishing to strengthen their trading posts and better exploit their colonies (Stern 2011). This process developed progressively, growing through organizational innovations such as the

development of joint stock companies from the nineteenth century onwards (Barkan 2013; Robé 2011). We see three reasons for using the notion of corporate authority, which we distinguish from that of private authority. Firstly, corporate authority is claimed and exercised by powerful economic actors (unlike NGOs), that have a legal existence (unlike mafias or terrorist organizations) and which are explicitly profit-oriented (unlike religious organizations). Public authorities grant them a privileged status, anchored in public policies that benefit them socially, economically, and politically. Secondly, these corporate actors have developed considerable influence over the production of rules, be they public or private (Cutler et al. 2003). Their authority is such that coalitions of corporate actors, associated with states, have succeeded in obtaining the establishment of private governance systems (such as international arbitration tribunals) that operate on a global scale and which are often very restrictive for states. In the financial sector, for example, private transnational institutions and processes in global investment and financial regimes “constitute a form of private transnational authority, performing governance functions usually attributed to states and to public authorities” (Cutler 2019, 61). In this sector, it is “private transnational experts” who “craft the legal foundations that advance and secure the expansion of capitalism as the common sense of our time” (ibid.). Finally, through their economic activities and, more often than not, the support of states, corporate actors have acquired a capacity to act on the world and transform it. This transformative capacity for transformation is not only exercised through their influence on the production of public or private standards and rules; their activities also contribute to defining “the who-gets-how-much justice and freedom and economic security” (Strange 1993, 102), thus profoundly shaping the world in its environmental, material, social and political

dimensions. These activities also contribute to the construction and diffusion of the categories through which we understand the world. In so doing, corporations contribute to the creation and perpetuation of a world of which they claim to be a vital, even beneficial, component (McGoey 2015).

Nevertheless, like all forms of authority, corporate authority is never definitively acquired. It can be challenged not only by actors who criticize and oppose this form of government of conduct (Bartley and Child 2014; Robinson 2013), but also by states, whose interests may diverge (Dubuisson-Quellier 2017). Corporate strategies for market development, capture or accumulation sometimes encounter difficulties in the field, due to the reluctance of various human and non-human actors to adopt a market-scheme (Angeli Aguiton 2019). If we have taken this fragility into account, it does not mean that we relativize the deep asymmetries between actors (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006) and the role of corporations in perpetuating or even aggravating inequalities (SPERI 2019; OXFAM 2020). In considering that the pervasive powers of corporate actors may be contested, we defend the idea that in order to self-perpetuate itself, corporate authority requires a whole range of resources, efforts, and technical and organizational innovations.

### **The corporate repertoire of actions**

Corporate actors are constantly working to preserve or consolidate their authority. In order to reflect the wide variety of activities that this work involves, we propose the

notion of “corporate repertoire of actions”. Taking the concept from Charles Tilly (1978), Michel Offerlé proposes to use the notion of repertoire of actions to “grasp the set of instruments that those with the means of production and economic management can collectively use to assert and defend their interests” (Offerlé 2009, 63). We draw inspiration from this approach, albeit with one important difference: the concept of repertoire that we use here includes both individual and collective actions. It brings together all the tools and modes of action that corporations mobilize to develop their activities and defend their interests, whether through mediation by other organizations or not. In presenting five dimensions of this repertoire, we do not aim to be exhaustive, but to describe the different facets, generally cumulative, according to which corporate strategies can be deployed.

The first dimension of the corporate repertoire of actions concerns a wide range of strategies designed by corporate players to make themselves indispensable to many other actors (economic actors, public authorities, consumers, etc.). It is a question of acquiring, to varying degrees and over the long term, a position of structural power that enables a corporation to impose its conditions on its partners or to make any public challenge or attempt at regulation very difficult if not unthinkable (Crenson 1971; McGoey et al. 2018). These strategies are often embedded in firms’ industrial policies, such as those aimed at gaining a predominant position in a productive system so as to control the activity of other economic actors and impose the firm’s own conditions on them (Elmore 2015). We must also consider strategies that consist in developing knowledge, norms, tools and infrastructures (private standards, software, machines, logistics systems, etc.) and making them vital to many other actors (for an example

concerning the financial sector, see MacKenzie and Pardo-Guerra 2014). To these strategies we might add those aimed at acquiring a critical size, at the scale of a town, region or state, making it possible to obtain special advantages from public authorities (subsidies, tax exemptions, rescue plans in the event of difficulties, etc.). Or those that consist in making oneself essential at the financial level, especially to governments: financing political parties or public facilities, making donations to international organizations or to charitable associations, etc. (Evertsson 2018; McGoey 2015).

The second dimension of this repertoire lies in the uses of knowledge and the zones of ignorance that surround it (Déplaude 2015; Henry 2017). Companies might argue that they have expertise in their field of activity, either to reject or reduce the scope of any external control, or to disqualify any other form of expertise or knowledge that does not meet the canons of “sound science” as defined by them (Ong and Glantz 2001; Krimsky 2003). They can also keep to themselves data that might harm their business if published (on the toxicity of a chemical substance, the risks associated with a financial product, etc.), or communicate only part of it to regulatory authorities (Michaels 2008). More broadly, companies might use strategies designed to maintain a certain level of vagueness or ignorance about their activities and products in order to avoid unfavorable regulatory measures (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). The most powerful firms invest considerable resources to this effect, resources likely to bias the production of the knowledge on which regulatory authorities rely (Sismondo 2011; Vogel 2013; Michaels 2020).

The third dimension of the corporate repertoire of actions lies in the relationship with the law. This involves a wide range of practices, from official forms of lobbying through which corporate organizations seek to influence the production of legislation, to the use of illegal means (corruption, fraud, extortion, etc.). The latter have been described and analyzed by the literature on white-collar and corporate crimes (Pontell and Geis 2007). Between these two extremes, there is a vast grey area, corresponding to practices that take advantage of loopholes or ambiguities in the law, the limited capacities of oversight bodies, and the opportunities offered by the existence of different legal systems or levels of regulation. These practices are not simply the work of a few “rogue” firms; they are common in the business world but are rarely sanctioned (Tombs and Whyte 2015; Gobert and Pascal 2011). Governments often support these strategies to varying degrees, for example when they choose to ignore certain offences or to not enforce existing laws<sup>2</sup>. For Barak (2017), neo-liberal deregulation policies have even been accompanied by the development of these practices, which are tolerated in the name of economic development. In other words, the use of illegality and the exploitation of gray areas of the law are systemic in nature and are part of many corporations’ repertoire of actions.

The fourth dimension of the corporate repertoire of actions lies in the various forms of violence that companies use to consolidate or defend their activities. This dimension does not entirely overlap the third, despite its similarities: it includes strategies that range from acts of denigration or harassment of opponents to actions that harm their physical integrity – including murder – or the use of abusive legal procedures such as SLAPPs, i.e., strategic lawsuits against public participation (Global Witness 2017; Pring



and Canan 1996). These actions do not only target actors external to the firms, but can also be directed at their employees or those of the administrations in charge of regulating them in order to obtain their submission or their eviction, which some authors qualify as intellectual suppression (Martin et al. 1986; Henry 2012; McGoev 2012).

The final dimension of this corporate repertoire of actions relates to the degree to which these actions are visible or invisible. A number of studies have underlined the fact that companies have easier access to regulatory arenas and to holders of political power, thus allowing them to assert their interests in confined settings (Wilks 2013). As part of “quiet politics” (Culpepper 2011), decisions taken in private, non regulatory arenas – such as company boards of directors – can also have considerable economic, social or environmental impact without the elected officials and populations concerned having to express an opinion. However, corporations can also vociferously invest public space to make their views heard and influence public debates, as seen with neo-liberal and climate-sceptic think tanks, generally financed by large corporations or their owners (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Medvetz 2012). Even actions based on intimidation and violence require a minimum of publicity in order to be effective: beyond their immediate effect on the individuals or organizations targeted, they can be analyzed as “acts of power” (Crenson 1971, 177), through which the reputation of their alleged perpetrator may be strengthened.

This outline of the corporate repertoire of actions requires amplification. Firstly, the types of action that corporations are likely to mobilize within this repertoire vary

immensely, depending on the economic, social and political characteristics of the countries in which they operate. What is possible for a large company in a Central American state or in Southeast Asia is probably not possible in the United States and vice versa (Fortun 2001; Bohme Rankin 2014). Companies know how to adapt to the social and political configurations proper to each country (Bartley 2018). Secondly, as we have already mentioned, large companies are complex organizations, with a wide range of structures (local, national, international, by function, by sector, etc.) and forms of representation. This gives them two advantages. On one hand, it allows them to easily adjust their strategies to suit each regulatory framework and to rapidly adapt to measures that are not favorable to them (Clapp 2010). On the other hand, this organizational complexity means that companies' strategies are still only known to some of their employees or managers, the others remaining unaware of them or only having access to scraps of information. These forms of ignorance, which are to some extent strategically organized (McGoey 2012), are also what keep companies going, allowing employees to continue to work for them without feeling that they are betraying their values, even when their employer resorts to illegal or violent practices. Thirdly, as other research has already clearly pointed out, companies do not produce these strategies on their own. They do so with the help of specialist companies: lobbying and public relations firms, law firms, companies specialized in scientific writing, intelligence or private security companies, etc. (Oreskes and Conway 2010; Walker 2014; Laurens 2017; Boulier 2019). Delegating the design and implementation of corporate strategies to these actors helps to circulate knowledge and know-how and to unify the corporate repertoire of actions. Fourthly, it is important to take into account the temporality of these strategies: contrary to a common view whereby companies are

above all subject to the short-termism of investors or financial markets, we defend the idea that they often have long-term strategies, using resources that they constantly adapt. This is what is demonstrated in Stève Bernardin's chapter in this book, based on an analysis of the strategies implemented in the 1960s and 1970s by American insurance companies to promote and defend their conception of road safety, particularly against attempts to deregulate the automobile sector.

In short, by using the notion of the corporate repertoire of actions, we wish to underline the variety of strategies that large corporations employ to reinforce their economic and political power. Unlike what is defended in Marxist- and Gramscian-inspired research on corporate elites, investments in the field of ideas – for example through the action of think tanks and foundations – are just one strategy among many. The control exerted by corporate authority is based on multiple mechanisms, including the production of ignorance, illegalism and violence. These actions can produce irreversible effects that help to embed corporate authority in the materiality of beings and things: this is an essential aspect of its pervasiveness.

### **Materiality and irreversibility**

The exercise of corporate authority also affects the very materiality of the physical, biological and social world, producing forms of irreversibility. The notion of “irreversibility” should be understood here in both senses of the word, both socio-political and material. It is not only a lock-in of the expectations of different

organizations (Borup et al. 2006) and of the framing of social issues, but also a material irreversibility, when living beings and environments are forever marked by the choices made by corporate actors (Boudia et al. 2018).

These material effects can be seen in the monopolization of numerous spaces for the benefit of industrial projects – a classic illustration of the power of large companies and of states that support their projects in order to develop their territories (Scott 1999; Ferguson 2005). Authoritarian decisions, violent repression against the populations that resist them and the circumvention of environmental regulations are often at stake. This was the case, for example, at Notre-Dame des Landes, in France, where an international airport was to be built on a wetland and where various communities were experimenting with alternative lifestyles – and whose resistance eventually succeeded in undermining the project. The case of the Amazon region, where primary forests are deforested and burned to free up land for intensive agriculture, logging, and livestock farming, is also symptomatic of these corporate and state practices. This stranglehold can take different forms, such as bioprospection (Hayden 2004; Foyer 2010), extractivism (Ferguson 1999; Kinchy et al. 2018), the patenting of life by GMO seed producers (Glover 2010) or the capture of human biological material by the pharmaceutical industry (Lafontaine 2014). Such occupation of the world invites us to think about the concrete ways in which large corporations control the environment and life.

Large companies also help to build new material, social and geographical orders. The territorial expansion practices of manufacturing or service industries – and the infrastructures they require – can thus be observed throughout the world. It is primarily

industrial goods that materially organize the world. For example, the industrialization of certain commodities, as was the case for agricultural goods produced in the area around Chicago in the nineteenth century, led to a reorganization of the entire metropolitan territory to allow for the agronomic standardization, transportation, storage, and marketing of such commodities (Cronon 1991). Similarly, the characteristics of oil as a source of energy have profoundly transformed the metabolism of societies, its liquidity and transportability allowing extraction, refining and consumption sites to be located thousands of miles away. The materiality of oil has thus made it possible to reorganize production relations to benefit energy companies, in particular by allowing them to free themselves from the power that miners held over the coal extraction system (Mitchell 2011). Corporate intervention is also measured at the scale of the infrastructures that allow goods to circulate. Here, one might think of the private logics that govern the construction of cities and transport infrastructures, which perpetuate inequalities in new material arrangements (Winner 1980; Graham and Marvin 2001; Anand 2006). These transformations concern not only heavy infrastructures, but also the service economy, which is a central driver of the hegemony of global cities (Sassen 1991). In an extremely concrete fashion, financial and banking services, insurance groups and the digital industry are reorganizing the physical arrangements necessary for the circulation of information (Carnino and Marquet 2018; Angeli Aguiton 2021). Major digital and financial companies are discreetly digging their undersea networks (Starosielski 2015) and erecting pylons on mountains or in the middle of deserts so that high-frequency trading waves may reach other international marketplaces as quickly as possible (Laumonier 2019). The material hold exerted by large corporations thus has significant irreversible effects on the physical, biological and social world. Furthermore, this hold

can lead to mutually reinforcing lock-in effects, as in the case of infrastructural embedding processes (such as when computer networks are built into the base of freeways) or in the case of obduracy, when the irreversibility of technological choices and material arrangements feeds path dependency on a social, economic or political level (Hommels 2005; Guthman 2019).

Finally, irreversibility is undeniable when we look at the toxic residues of past industrial infrastructures, buried or forgotten, and often invisible to the inhabitants and new users of these contaminated spaces. Environmental health issues are tragic markers of these irreversibilities. For example, entire residential neighborhoods are sometimes built on former industrial sites where pollution remains hidden and unknown to the public (Frickel and Elliot 2018), often leading to poor and racialized populations being exposed (Pulido 2000). The materiality of the pervasive powers of large companies is also crucial to the management of health risks and environmental destruction. Industrial activities produce a toxic world and are associated with modes of government that make them possible (Boudia and Jas 2014 and 2019). In the case of occupational health risks for example, industrial actors become involved in the field of expertise and scientific knowledge in order to establish their power over administrations and trade unions (Henry 2017; Markowitz and Rosner 2002). Industrial routine also has crucial material consequences. Health and chemical sectors have built global markets for their molecules that circulate, combine together and accumulate in bodies and environments. Our understanding of intoxication processes – and therefore of the complex material effects of these technoproducts – has been considerably broadened by taking into account endocrine disruptors, the chronic effects of low doses of chemical substances, and the

iatrogenic effects of certain molecules circulating massively throughout pharmaceutical markets. These material residues and toxic traces require the social sciences to renew their conceptualization of risk (Boudia et al. 2018; Fortun et al. 2016), and to document the way in which environmental justice movements challenge these dangers (Allen 2003). Market logics nevertheless persist in a toxic world, with new extractivist practices developing from what was previously considered waste (Hecht 2018).

### **When corporate authority challenges democracy**

Finally, corporate authority has serious effects on the values we associate with democracy. In order to understand them, we must bear in mind that the changes to corporate power described in this book echo those that have taken place in democratic states. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the idea that companies' modes of organization are more efficient than those of states, and that public action must integrate these ways of operating has thrived in public administration. This phenomenon has been described as the emergence of a corporate state (Wilks 2013), particularly in Great Britain and the United States, where corporations have acquired a key role in policy making and in the delivery of public services. The privatization of nationalized companies, recourse to subcontracting in public services, public-private partnerships, new public management or technical standards defined by the private sector (ISO, Codex Alimentarius, etc.) are thus all examples of "business-like" instruments that have become central to the daily functioning of democracies (Raco 2013). From this perspective, states can see companies as the yardstick for new forms of government, not only in the sense that they

delegate public service missions to corporations, but also in that these partnerships transform ways of governing and the objectives pursued by public authorities (Sint Maarten 2011). Institutions over which public authorities do not exercise any authority also constitute new means of action for large firms in their relations with states. This is the case of arbitration tribunals, the role of which is central to the application of major transnational trade agreements (Dezalay and Garth 1996; Sweet and Grisel 2018).

Corporate authority thus affects the way democracies function, in several ways. Firstly, democracy can be seen as a form of governmental regime based on a set of institutions and procedures that ensure the representation of citizens (through universal suffrage in free and competitive elections), the accountability of elected officials and of the administration, the independence of organizations that set up counterweights (the judiciary, expert agencies, etc.), and the effective enforcement of the law. In this formal acceptance of democracy, the regime provides citizens – in principle at least – with easy access to the locations where deliberations and the exercise of power take place and offers the possibility of recourse if there are breaches of the law. In France for example, the courts, parliamentary sessions are public spaces accessible to each and every citizen. However, corporate authority challenges this accessibility. The pervasive powers that corporations implement very often consist in using dedicated channels to access spaces of power, creating places and institutions that are difficult to access and lacking in visibility, with no participation from outside audiences (Culpepper 2011; Laurens 2017). Here we find an initial tension between corporate authority and the model of democratic societies: not only do companies have a significant influence in the



production of public policy, they are also able to access, and even shape, spaces that are by definition non-democratic, where decisions affecting society as a whole are taken.

A second conception of democracy relates to critical activities expressed in social movements in the public space and in associative life. Here, it is the conflictual dimension of democracy that is emphasized (Rancière 1995 and 2005; Balibar 2009), a conflictuality that also opens the door to the expression of alternative forms of living and social experimentation (as in the “Occupy” movements around the world, or the protests in defense of Gezi Park in Istanbul). Faced with such criticism, corporate actors might respond with counterstrategies, whether by challenging their arguments or by using violent means against them. But they can also either appropriate the criticisms or develop new ones. Companies thus seek to become the repositories of social and environmental protests and to draw inspiration from social movements and their mode of conflictuality in order to renew their repertoire of action (see Kolléck 2013 on the concept of “sustainable development”). This is documented in research on astroturfing, a strategy that companies use to challenge NGOs’ criticism “by producing a discourse that would seem to emerge from the base of society and which misrepresents their watchwords” (Laurens 2015, 86). These techniques are similar to those of professional grassroots lobbying campaigns (Walker 2014), which aim to ensure popular support for companies and help them gain influence. New media and new platforms (community management on Facebook, online petitions, etc.) have thus led to corporate strategies that consist not in manufacturing “false social movements”, but in initiating a corporate public mobilization through which a company politically organizes its clients and users to defend its interests (Gervais 2018).

A third way to approach democracy is to consider it in terms of its strong link with public services, which guarantee everyone access to essential services (health, education, water, energy), whatever their income may be. In this respect, corporate authority can result in the disappearance of certain public services and in forms of dispossession. In this book, the chapter by Chris Hurl and Anne Vogelpohl clearly illustrates the growing importance of the decision-making tools designed by large consulting firms on behalf of public actors. These tools are based on an economic rationality of efficiency and cost effectiveness, which encourages public authorities to make decisions that are seen as deals rather than as the provision of public services. Benjamin Lemoine has documented this phenomenon in his research on the financialization of sovereign debt (Lemoine 2016). Through these transformations, it is the channels, the instruments, and the very meaning of public policy that are being requalified. The budgetary reforms of public hospitals in France is a similar case where the introduction of a new instrument called “activity-based pricing”, developed by economists, made it possible to establish a new standard of hospital management, according to which hospitals must function as companies that bill for services and not as public services that provide care to patients (Juven 2016). The erosion of democracy as a provider of public services is thus taking place on two fronts: that of the privatization of public services and that of the corporatization of decisionmaking and management methods within the public services that remain (Valkama 2013). This process affects not only countries whose public services were the most highly developed, such as European social democracies, but also others: as of the 1980s in the United States, many public

services, such as the supply of drinking water and electricity, were entrusted to private operators (Hess 2011; Robinson 2013).

Finally, democracy can be understood as a regime that should offer reasonably equal living conditions – or at least limit inequalities – and allow everyone to live with dignity. This conception of democracy can be linked to the post-war period, which contributed to the emergence of the idea of social progress, combined with a whole range of social rights: reduced working hours, paid vacations, minimum social benefits, and other social protection mechanisms. This conception might be compared to the notion of social democracy, which refers to the democratic procedures governing relations between capital and labor, and organizing modes of employee representation within companies. These “social” conceptions of democracy are now being eroded and are seen as the remains of an old world in need of reform. As has continuously been the case ever since the rise of neoliberalism in Western democracies in the late 1970s, the centrality given to employment issues has thus led to the establishment of social protection systems favorable to companies (Pierson 2001). The state is rethinking the meaning of social protection, by implementing “policies of expenditure activation, of ‘workfare’, where the requirements of competitiveness seek to minimize the ‘cost of labor’, to subsidize employment or to adapt ‘human capital’ to suit corporate needs” (Delouette and Le Lann 2018, 33).

Different dimensions of democracy are thus being eroded by the practices and strategies of corporate actors. Some of them are even openly advocating the adoption of reforms that aim to reduce the role of democratic deliberation arenas in favor of more

authoritarian forms of government that are more beneficial to the business community (Miller and Dinan 2015; Chamayou 2018; Plehwe et al. 2020). In other words, it is the very legitimacy of democratic forms of government that is being challenged by corporate actors, who promote a form of “authoritarian liberalism” that combines a restriction on areas where the state may intervene, with a limitation of the possibilities for opposing the decisions made by governments or corporations (Chamayou 2018).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have proposed various theoretical approaches to extend existing analyses in order to apprehend the systemic and pervasive dimensions of corporate authority. It is a question of understanding how corporate actors have shaped their capacity to become technologically, socially, politically, and economically indispensable in local, national and international arenas. These theoretical propositions have important methodological dimensions. Firstly, we believe it is important to consider temporalities that are sufficiently long to allow us to grasp how corporate actors are able to gradually gain a strong hold on social, economic, technological, scientific or political activities so as to have a determining influence on changes to the social world. Secondly, we consider it necessary to switch focus and examine diverse arenas that are not just governmental, inter-governmental, legislative or administrative. It is also crucial to document other actors such as municipal or local institutions that regulate specific economic sectors, and corporate organizations themselves. Finally, we underline the need for the social sciences to study the wide range of tools and

instruments that corporate actors use to transform the social world, from the production of simple technical norms or material infrastructures to political lobbying or systemic violations of the law.

Various research traditions have been built around the analysis of some of these strategies – such as those dealing with lobbying and public relations practices, the production of ignorance, and corporate crimes. Yet, more research is needed over the long term to understand all of these dimensions in the study of a given corporation or industry. Research taking a sideways step to examine corporations and industries on the basis of the technologies that structure the deployment of their production systems can be particularly heuristic. For example, surveys such as those conducted by Julie Guthman (2019) on the California strawberry industry, by Heike Buchter (2015) on financial asset manager BlackRock, or by Barton J. Elmore (2015) on Coca-Cola, invite us to see the central role that certain technologies (including organizational ones) play in the success of these corporations or industries: methyl bromide soil fumigation for the strawberry industry; algorithms for data analysis and financial asset management for BlackRock; and outsourcing of both the production and distribution of virtually all its products for Coca-Cola. These approaches also make it possible to show how a wide variety of elements (natural, material, economic, social, technical, regulatory, and political) come together to consolidate the activities of these companies. They also allow us to account for the effects, which may be irreversible, associated with the development of these very large corporations and industries. These studies thus demonstrate the utility of systemic approaches, taking into consideration a wide variety

of issues, scales, and practices, in order to shed light on how the power of corporate actors is developed and perpetuated.

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<sup>2</sup> Some authors use the notion of “state-corporate crimes” to designate these interdependencies (Kramer et al. 2002; Brisman and South 2015).