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Reconsidering the link between corporations and society: insights from a counter-corporate movement perspective

About a month after the Spanish ‘*Indignados*’ movement started in May 2011, with an initial call in 58 Spanish cities, the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* sent out a short, simple email to its 90 000 members with the hashtag #*OccupyWallStreet*, a date, September 17, and a query, “What is our one demand?”. When the date arrived, 2000 people gathered at a previously obscure “privately owned public space” called Zucotti Park in Lower Manhattan, soon to be renamed “Liberty Square”. *Occupy Wall Street* burst into public view and after a few short weeks, the *Occupy Movement* appeared to be everywhere, from Osaka to Buenos Aires.

Though the observers seem to consider that a movement like the *Occupy Movement* never really forged a clear goal, its list of complaints included inequality of wealth, the lack of affordable housing, crony capitalism, outrageously high executive compensation, business greed, and a general discontent with capitalism. In this context, it is at least partly understood that a focal enemy of this movement – though not an exclusive one – was what is vaguely designated as the ‘big corporate system’.

Building on the cases of the *Occupy Movement* and other related recent civil society protests targeting corporations, we argue in this address that an in-depth analysis of the often neglected discourse and arguments of 21st Century counter-corporate social movements can shed an instructive light on the state of the link between corporations and society. The typical streams of arguments of counter-corporate movements about the influence and control of corporations in society indeed tell insightful stories and – when seriously considered – contribute to build a wide-ranging understanding of the contemporary relationships between corporations and the societal environment in which they operate. In particular, we highlight and describe in this address that the streams of arguments at the heart of recent counter-corporate movements’ discourse recurrently include (1) a political ‘*dominancy*’ stream, (2) a free-market ‘*sycophancy*’ stream, (3) and a cultural ‘*occupancy*’ stream of arguments. These respective streams of arguments underline the adverse impact of the activities of large corporations on different fundamental societal spheres, as perceived by protestors and sympathizers of such movements. Taken together, they further contribute to draw a comprehensive picture of a more general, increasing corporate ‘*potency*’ in society, whose objectives are depicted as being increasingly disconnected from public wellbeing and expectations.

The protestors and sympathizers of 21st Century counter-corporate movements assert that they are stakeholders of the corporations they condemn, and they are certainly correct — they *are* stakeholders, as consumers, as employees, and as citizens affected by the activities of these large corporations. In line with a stakeholder view of the corporation, we thus consider in the second part of this address why proactive corporations would do well to consider the concerns raised by these stakeholders and engage with the reformative ideas they propose, rather than trying to deride or neglect them. In the long term, corporations’ failure to engage with these critics might indeed eventually lead massive counter-corporate movements to be heard again and re-emerge stronger than ever, more radical and more resolute to change the status quo.