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The Corporation as a Political Actor: understanding corporate responsibility for the 21st century

We are entering the age of involuntary transparency. This manifests in the growing pressure on corporations for the social and environmental harm happening along their production processes. If we buy a product, we often do not realize that this product might be the result of a highly complex process of division of labor: Some of the resources necessary to build the product might come from mines in Africa and the product might be assembled in a factory in China. This so-called value chain behind the product is not visible and the misery that might have been caused by the production is not visible either. Problems with water waste, emissions, extinction of species, slavery, corruption, child labor and other issues appear along the value chains of many of the products we buy, such as computers, chocolate, coffee, pharmaceuticals, clothes, flowers, cars, or jewellery. What began as a debate on direct suppliers in the early 1990s has turned into a critical debate on the complete supply chain.

In the past, corporations were held responsible for what they did themselves. Today, they are held (co-)responsible for all the (potential) problems that happen along their complete production process. Whether they own a factory or a cotton field or a flow plantation is no longer relevant. The fact that they have the power to change the misery to which they are connected is considered to be a sufficient reason to hold them responsible.

My presentation will present the current state of the art of a debate on value chain responsibility - from the resources to consumer behavior, from the factory to the complicity with repressive political structures.