

# 1 *Boundaryless Activism*

Efforts to decarbonise by means of a transition of the energy system have multiplied the ways in which the environment is merged with the economic and the social. Aided by renewables, sustainability has thus been mobilised and practically implemented across these domains. What otherwise could have been a difficult merger of contradictory rationalities and imaginaries hosted within the relaxed concept of sustainability seems to work unexpectedly well in the energy transition – at least on the surface. Corporations are engaging in different types of environmental politics, politicians are calling for a greening of business and citizen activities, and climate activists are desperately grasping for whatever they can to accomplish a real transformation. Citizens are envisioned as potential activists, by themselves and others, and, as explained briefly in the Introduction, hand in hand with this transition of the energy system, we can observe an activism in transition. This chapter will further investigate this mutual alteration by tracing the boundaryless attribute of activism, that is, how it is strategically mobilised and also flows freely in between various organisational domains. We will first address the tendency that businesses are going into activism, followed by how activism is going into business. Then we will narrow in on the boundaryless attribute of climate activism.

This boundaryless attribute of activism should not be mistaken for a simple movement, working back and forth, inside-out and outside-in, of organisations conceived as separate units in control. Instead, activism can be conceived as a widespread, dispersed and diffuse movement, a process that is hard to trace empirically and, by extension, difficult to represent in terms of theoretical assumptions about organisational boundaries and ‘civil society’. With an accentuated will to take ‘action’ via renewables, across society and business, the boundaryless attribute of climate activism has become more dominant. The chapter closes in on this modification of activism by providing examples both from

popular culture and academic literature. The purpose is to acknowledge a more complicated picture of activism, by interweaving the debates in social movement theory, political theory and management and organisation studies. It is our hope that this will prepare the reader for the rather messy, boundaryless character of activism presented in subsequent chapters in our empirical cases that span employee activism, CEO activism and brand activism at Vattenfall, a multinational energy corporation (Chapter 5); enterprising activism via small and medium-sized energy businesses (Chapter 6); insider activism in governmental authorities (Chapter 7); and prosumer activism undertaken by citizen groups in villages, homes, schools and sports clubs (Chapter 8).

## 1.1 Activism Goes into Business, and Business Goes into Activism

There is a long history of how business people have observed and engaged with formal political processes, including legitimate lobbying activities and networking, as well as illegitimate bribery and corruption. These traditional ways of steering political action and legislation from the world of business are nevertheless complemented by a broader spectrum of political engagements by contemporary businesses. With the growing conviction that corporate leaders and ‘management’ should be held responsible for hazardous emissions and their irreparable effects on a planetary scale (Rockström et al. 2009, Folke et al. 2010, Boyd and Folke 2012), businesses have been forced to bring environmental issues into the strategic centre of organisational decision-making. This has by extension led to an enrichment of stakeholder management and other inventive responses that stretch beyond an engagement with grassroots tactics applied by business to infuse formal political processes (Grefe and Linsky 1995), and has given birth to rejuvenated forms of commercial activism. We will now illustrate this span of corporate political engagement, from formal politics to activism, to better understand how and why activism has gone into business, and, conversely, how and why businesses have gone into activism.

### 1.1.1 *Politics as Business Strategy*

Corporations often choose to become political actors, directly involving themselves in political lobbying and sometimes campaigning. This

is referred to as corporate political activity (CPA).<sup>1</sup> Seen as a growing phenomenon around the world, CPA is defined as firms' attempts to influence and sometimes shape governmental policies in ways that are favourable to them (Baysinger, 1984: see reviews: Hillman, Keim and Schuler 2004, Lawton, McGuire and Rajwani 2013). Within the energy industry, for example, we have known for some time that ExxonMobil has directly funded political campaigns to spread climate change scepticism (MacKay and Munro 2012). Equally, we know that the renewable energy sector in the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere is actively trying to persuade governments to adopt more climate friendly policies (Lockwood 2013, Sühlsen and Hisschemöller 2014). Businesses and their CEOs might be engaged in CPA out of political, ethical and ideological convictions (Chin, Hambrick and Treviño 2013) but they clearly also engage in CPA because they have more than one eye on their bottom line (Lux, Crook and Woehr 2011).

In parallel with how corporate leaders try to convince politicians about their corporate political preferences, they also work directly with political and social issues in the form of corporate responsibility and corporate governance. As a response to the growing critique of business, these managerial tools have been strategically advanced (Menon and Menon 1997, Werther Jr and Chandler 2010), often framed as a voluntary attempt to go beyond impression management and make businesses trustworthy and responsible (Sanford 2011). Hence, corporations' conscious engagement in environmental and social issues has not been conceived as a form of disruptive activism but predominantly a strategic choice, executed at the top leadership level, with the company constructed as a unit with the capacity to create 'organic linkage[s]' between business and society (Frederick 2008:523).

In its most progressive version, these studies of stakeholder management and voluntary efforts position the company politically alongside other citizens within a wider democratic sphere, giving rise to the notion of 'corporate citizenship' (Matten 2003, Moon, Crane and Matten 2005, Crane, Matten and Moon 2008a, Graz and Nölke 2008). This framework makes it possible to study the corporation as a legal entity next to other civil society actors, where the organisational unit is defined as 'a body separate in identity from its members'

<sup>1</sup> This has also been called 'corporate activism', for example in the book *The new corporate activism: Harnessing the power of grassroots tactics for your organization* (Grefe and Linsky 1995).

(Crane, Matten and Moon 2008a:3). This further enables analyses of how changing state–business–citizen relations affect corporate efforts to go beyond legal and regulative requirements to act in an ethically correct manner (Moon and Vogel 2008), stretching to notions of social activism and global citizenship – that is, taking responsibilities as a ‘corporate citizen’ in all the nations where the corporation is active (Frederick 2008). This movement has led to active interventions, for example by so-called community investments or community lending (Kurtz 2008:250), and it has raised philosophical questions about how ‘the people’ is the basis for CSR (Horrigan 2010). Consequently, there is a tendency within the sphere of business to think of ‘politics’ as something more than a changeable structure or formal rule to be lobbied for, where studies of CSR have also been expanded to better include how corporate voluntary engagement is enacted through managers’ personal values (Hemingway and Maclagan 2004).

The political engagement of corporations in social and environmental issues has additionally given rise to the category of ‘political CSR’ (see Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011; for a comparison between the United States and Europe see Rasche 2015). Based on a Habermasian framework of deliberative democracy, political CSR normatively envisages a world where private actors – namely corporations and civil society organisations – intentionally and deliberately create the rules and processes of governance and regulation themselves, without the need for a sovereign state. Political CSR repeats many of the mantras spawned in the 1970s when corporate investments were made in public relations and public affairs professionals. Whilst corporations at that time wished to gain ‘freedom from government regulation’ (Beder 2005:117), they have more recently framed the self-governance approach as a response to the increasing inability and unwillingness of nation states to govern and act (see further Moog, Spicer and Böhm 2015). It is a strategy that fits the diffused politico-economic landscape of neoliberalism in which environmental and climate change governance has been embedded (see further Peck and Theodore 2012), leading to, as some authors argue, a depoliticisation that is at the heart of Habermasian consensus-building processes (Edward and Willmott 2013; see also Mouffe 1999). The trend seems to be that corporations increasingly function as platforms for citizen/employee identification processes, self-regulation and responsabilisation (Fleming 2014,

Endrissat, Kärreman and Noppeney 2017), as authority is decentralised by the state and firms occupy ever more central places in society (Levy and Kaplan 2008).

### 1.1.2 *Activism as Business Strategy*

It is not only the boundary between the corporate world and formal politics (including legislation and implementation of deliberative democratic programmes) that is increasingly diffuse. Commerce has also offered a fecund platform for activism, where activism thrives on a disruption of boundaries between society and business (Soule 2012, de Bakker et al. 2013, den Hond, de Bakker and Smith 2015, Girschik 2020). This can be observed when companies increasingly collaborate directly with social movement organisations and NGOs, especially when aiming to address global environmental problems (e.g. see Doh and Guay 2006). Of interest here is how corporations manage environmental activists as stakeholders differently according to the reputation and status of the activist group (Bansal, Gao and Qureshi 2014, Perrault and Clark 2016; also see den Hond and de Bakker 2007; den Hond, de Bakker and Smith 2015). Environmental concerns can either be recognised and included in business decisions (Banerjee 1998, Banerjee 2002, Allen, Marshall and Easterby-Smith 2015), or activism can be treated as a threat to be smothered (Zietsma and Winn 2008, Hiatt, Sine and Tolbert 2009, Delmas and Toffel 2011). So-called corporate-responsibility-based activist groups have targeted firms with increasingly ingenious actions to advance corporate responsibility beyond private regulatory initiatives (Mena and Waeger 2014), and typical environmental pressure groups have had some success in holding businesses to account, pressuring them to change course on a range of issues (Bertels, Hoffman and DeJordy 2014). One example is Greenpeace's campaign against the Lego–Shell partnership, which was 'a textbook example of environmental activists using clever social media and protest techniques to raise the public's awareness about the environmental dangers involved in drilling for oil in the Arctic' (Böhm and Skoglund 2015).

Environmental NGOs can, in addition, go native by entering business. One example is WWF's Green Office programme, which seeks to disseminate knowledge and mobilise organisational members to act pro-environmentally (Uusi-Rauva and Heikkurinen 2013). Another

similar case can be found in the environmental charity Global Action Plan, which entered a large British construction company to change the behaviours of the employees by making some of them into environmental champions (Hargreaves 2016). Even Greenpeace, seen by many as a radical NGO, has collaborated closely and extensively with a range of businesses (Yaziji and Doh 2010). These studies nevertheless draw an implicit line between the worlds of activism (often associated with civil society political action) and business (often seen to have a main interest in profit-making) (see Pacheco, York and Hargrave 2014).

To complicate the simplified view that activism is merely entering profit-hungry private corporations from the outside, there are other studies of how activism is becoming embedded and sustained within businesses or other types of organisations that deploy commercial operations (Girschik 2020). This includes a continuous enactment of gay and lesbian workplace rights (Raeburn 2004), gender and women's rights (Fondas 2000), and the transformation of feminism into femInc. ism (Ahl et al. 2016). Commercial activism has furthermore been attributed to a number of different but related people or groups of people, such as consumers (Brenton 2013), volunteers (O'Neill 2012), cooperatives (Schneiberg 2013) and passionate individuals (Kraemer, White-man and Banerjee 2013), one being Paul Gilding, the former director of Greenpeace (Wright and Mann 2013). Within commercial activism, we also find shareholder groups (Proffitt and Spicer 2006, Mena and Waeger 2014) and investors (Hoffman 1996, Perrault and Clark 2016), who wish to ensure a good return for their money. Returning to these in more detail later on, we will first engage with those who have been most noted in various media for breaking the confinement of activism to a place called civil society: activist entrepreneurs or enterprising activists, employee activists and CEO activists.

### *1.1.3 Activist Entrepreneurs*

An early example of green enterprising activism is Mirvis' (1994) view of how progressive business should look. Mirvis showed that, on the one hand, an environmental agenda can be driven from the top, perhaps by an inspirational business founder or, on the other hand, from the shop floor, by the employees and workers. Analytical focus is thus commonly given to an individual with agentic capacities. One of Mirvis', and after him, many others' favourite examples of enterprising

environmentalism in the form of an activist company is The Body Shop, established in the mid-1970s. The Body Shop was one of the first start-ups to have a clear environmentalist agenda, rolled out effectively by the late human and animal rights activist Dame Anita Roddick. The Body Shop has since been well known for running various environmental campaigns, targeting a rich variety of things from animal cruelty to sex worker trafficking (Muhr and Rehn 2014).

Dame Anita Roddick did, however, meet strong criticism for setting up her activism in the form of a business, and especially so when she sold it to L'Oréal in 2006. As a response to being called an 'ecocapitalist' (Hartman and Beck-Dudley 1999:255), she proposed to act from within, as a 'Trojan Horse' in a hostile environment (Cahalane 2006), and this is what she attempted, until her death a year later. In one of her last interviews, Roddick emphasised that she had no wish to be defined by business but to be remembered for her civil society engagement (Cahalane 2006). On a personal basis, she thus tried to keep up the common separation between the civil sphere and the business sphere, regardless of her work 'from within' in the latter.

Having failed to significantly expand the brand beyond its niche, and losing large parts of the customer base loyal to the environmental cause, L'Oréal later sold The Body Shop to the Brazilian company Natura in 2017. Yet some of Roddick's ideas were kept alive on the surface via brand activism and a belief in the customers as a force for good (Medium 2017). As a testament to its activist history, The Body Shop even developed a product line 'just right for guys on the go' called 'Activist' (The Body Shop 2020). The idea was to attract so-called consumer activists, individuals who attempt to use their purchasing power consciously and responsibly by being informed about the impact of the goods and services they wish to attain – in other words, consumers who vote with their money. By offering the signing of petitions online, and with the help of these socially and environmentally aware consumers, The Body Shop even suggested that their customers could accomplish 'change on an unprecedented scale' (Medium 2017). Brand activism as business strategy is consequently not necessarily dependent on an organisation being constructed as a unit filled with political agency, since the brand as image can be invested with such, regardless its organisational host. The Body Shop's activism could thus move on quite detached from committed organisational members who work for a cause. Nevertheless, The Body Shop, under L'Oréal,

continued to suggest that activism was ingrained in the organisational culture, where campaigning for various issues was still proclaimed as an important part of the daily work of the employees (Medium 2017). To remain activist companies, and not just activist brands, business organisations thus seem to need a strong and authentic connection to their value creation, coherently represented by the employees and projected onto the brand.

Another popular 1970s example of an activist company that has enjoyed a successful mobilisation of a political image and brand is Patagonia. Patagonia sells outdoor clothing and is underscored by a brand that succeeds in merging a down-to-earth philosophy and nature protection with extreme sports. The company was founded by Yvon Chouinard, who has been acclaimed for practising what he has been preaching (Baldwin 2018). On Patagonia's website, under the heading 'activism', the company states that it is 'in business to save our home planet' (Patagonia 2020). The company does, however, apply both CPA and activism by merging legal and direct activist actions (Chouinard, 2016), one example being their targeting of the US government's rolling back of protection of national monuments. Patagonia changed its normally colourful website into one with a black background with the statement 'The President Stole Your Land' and took the issue to court (Wolf 2017). By using the silhouette of Trump's head profile, the company kept drawing attention to the offence, referring to how criminals had been brought to public awareness historically. This shows that activist companies of various sizes can play the same role as civil society movements when they attack oppressive state rule. Businesses, however, enjoy other means, for example monetary muscle and authority gained from market popularity.

From Patagonia's website, we additionally learn that they practically support community building and their employees' personal environmental engagement to keep up the activist spirit internally. The company openly seeks to nurture the political motivation and individual values of its employees, since they are convinced that this spurs creativity and brings in new ideas to the company (Patagonia 2018). They therefore actively encourage their employees to work as volunteers for two months with a salary, embedded within an environmental grassroots group. In comparison with The Body Shop, which mainly engaged their employees in campaigning, Patagonia thus comes across as a bigger supporter of employee activism.



The former major supplier to The Body Shop, the cosmetic retailer company Lush, also exemplifies how activism is brought in as a coherent strategy, all the way from the employee to the sourcing and selling. Lush maximises the ethical sourcing of their products by acting as activist consumers business to business (B2B consumer activism, see Table 1 in the Appendix), using their ‘buying power to affect positive change in the world’ (Levitt 2016). Illustrative of the mediatised ‘political activism’ at Lush, all earnings generated from the sales of specific products, such as the ‘GayIsOK’ soap and the body lotion ‘the charity pot’, are also given directly to grassroots movements (Levitt 2016). Similarly to the strategy of The Body Shop, Lush has also launched specific activist products. In 2013, the London riots spurred the creation of a Gorilla Perfume called Lavender Hill Mob: ‘a calming incense to still the mind and remind us of the importance of community’ (Lush 2018). Each product or product line is thus branded to effect a sense of political engagement that the consumer can tap into and display on the bathroom shelf. At the same time as the perfume is charged with ‘the importance of community’ (Levitt 2016), so too is the internal organisational culture, in popular commentary formed by ‘an ethos and personality that’s difficult to describe. It doesn’t come directly from the founders, it comes from the organisation and it is something that you belong to. It is a company in the true sense of the word, as in a group of individuals’ (Levitt 2016).

Repeatedly then, there is in activist companies an interpellation of community belonging, where the workplace is constructed to function as an open platform for the enactment of personal political preferences. As social and environmental issues are being hotly debated and campaigned for across all sections of society, it thus seems necessary to acknowledge boundaryless activism as something that not only permeates various organisations, including private corporations, but as something that is initiated, established and sustained by how enterprising activism offers employees and consumers the chance to co-create a ‘community’.

In the wake of how activism has been taken into business, where even Greenpeace (2018b) has acted as a model for how to start a company, scholars have slowly begun to study how activists migrate over from civil society or social movement organisations in order to create new business opportunities, which they consider to be

a more ethical way of mobilising markets for a specific cause (Dubuisson-Quellier 2013). In close proximity to enterprising environmentalism, we can thus find the notion of ‘ecopreneurship’, which denotes when sustainability or the environment motivates the business entrepreneur (e.g. see Pastakia 1998, Dixon and Clifford 2007). Here, the creation of alternative organisations by entrepreneurs who choose to solve a wide variety of political and social problems (Hockerts 2006, Bacq and Janssen 2011) stretches all the way from social and green enterprising and profit-making to ‘community-based social initiatives’ (Daskalaki, Hjorth and Mair 2015:421). To the extent that the entrepreneur conflates with conceptualisations of the activist (Barinaga 2013). The concept of ‘entrepreneurship’ has furthermore been detached from ‘enterprising’ (Hjorth and Holt 2016), to make sure its activist qualities can be properly observed, seen as an ‘inherently *disruptive activity* with positive social change outcomes’ (Dey and Mason 2018:85, emphasis original). This leaves ‘activist entrepreneuring’ to be all about truth-telling, generative of a removal of self-imposed limits for the release of collective imagination (Dey and Mason 2018:85). Based on the conflation of activism and business in practice, scholarship on entrepreneurship has with conceptual ease morphed into activism. With emphasis on how human relationality, community building and collective action are coupled to a non-instrumental entrepreneurial subjectivity. What happens to activism, conceptually, is however unclear.

#### 1.1.4 *Employee Activism*

According to frequent media reports, business has in general started to recognise that external activism moves into companies with a rise in the number of activist employees (Calandro 2017). Instead of pressure from external sources, it is thus internal sources that are identified to put pressure on the leadership direction of variously sized companies. Consultancies have accordingly set out to assess the levels of seriousness of employee activism in order to facilitate a transformation of those employee activists who can be identified as on the edge of becoming ‘pro’ their employer. Here, activism is definitely not thought about as disruption, neither is it configured as an internal bottom-up movement, but it is seen as a defence mechanism, where the employee protects the employer by becoming an ‘advocate’

(Higginbottom 2014). In the view of business media, activist employees are therefore to be assessed and treated as stakeholders, managed and listened to, both to secure the company's reputation and to build an internal organisational culture that supports loyalty and creativity that is eventually assumed to result in sustained competitiveness and profits (Higginbottom 2014). As leading consultants in activism as business strategy repeatedly propose, embracing employee activism and community building is a way of 'seizing opportunity' (Shandwick 2016) and of becoming 'the employer of choice' (Higginbottom 2014, Crisafulli 2018:14).

This normative popularised business conception of activism as business strategy is tightly wedded to managerial tools such as 'employer branding', designed to socially steer employee activism. With the increase of environmentalism permeating organisations, major multinational companies have started to adopt Green Human Resource Management (HRM) practices to attract a younger generation, who are proven to be more interested in environmental issues (DuBois and Dubois 2012, Ehnert, Wes and Zink 2013, Renwick, Redman and Maguire 2013, Aust, Muller-Camen and Poutsm 2018). The emergence of the term Green HRM (Renwick 2018), which outlines agendas for how to train, manage, reward and lead employees with regard to environmental issues, points to an awareness of something like internal activism, conceived as enacted from within an organisation. If a phenomenon at work is worthy of attention from HRM, then it is arguably something of organisational significance. Given that internal activism can involve commitment, motivation, resistance and performance issues, it is obvious that HRM would be keen to manage employee activism. Green HRM is thus all about synchronising values between an organisation and its members – a process of becoming unified that is suggested to 'make the world a better place' (Sonenshein 2016:349). The reason for a business to exist should thus be proposed to go beyond the focus on maximising the wealth of shareholders and stakeholders and be tuned into the current challenges in the world, via the employees (Sonenshein 2016).

Activism has consequently been brought to the core of businesses that had previously been uninterested in internalising the political imaginaries of either the citizens or their own employees. This embracing of activism is not only pursued by strategists educated in business

schools, where the Anthropocene epoch is digested and the irreparable effects of 'business' and 'management' are taught, but by employees who conceive of themselves as impelled to take action when they finally meet anthropocentrism face to face at work. These employees often explore opportunities to be social change agents who can influence their top management and direct the employer towards specific problems. While the active influence of employees on their employer in respect of social and green issues is relatively understudied by business scholars (however, see Hemingway 2005, 2013, Howard-Grenville 2006), it is a well-documented trend in popular culture and stories told by consultancies.

### *1.1.5 CEO Activism*

In The Huffington Post, Calandro (2017) summarises a popular scientific assessment of activist employees, which suggests that it is millennials in management positions who seek to change their employers the most. Configured as a unified agent, that is, 'the employer', the public relations firm Weber Shandwick claims that businesses are guided by activist employees to 'humanise and unify their enterprise voice' (Weber Shandwick 2016:2), but it is mainly CEOs that are demanded to take a clearer stand on political issues and be the responsible face and moral model, internally and externally. This has led to a particular extension of how corporate leaders have previously engaged with politics (as described in the first part of this chapter), in that a distinctive type of CEO activism has developed in the twenty-first century, with the recruitment of millennials. These younger generations strongly wish for their employer to bring in social and political purposefulness at work, which results in intergenerational tensions. The CEO position is not only filled with responsibilities for business development but is at the forefront of social, political and environmental transformations. The CEOs, it is argued, can therefore no longer afford to be silent but have to speak up in line with their employee activists who, for example, may wish 'to align their retirement plans with their company's social commitments' (Calandro 2017). Activist employees who express such demands of their leader simultaneously construct themselves as followers of a specified CEO position, one which for them is filled with added capacities and 'power' to exert, outwards and top-down.

Despite this bottom-up demand to become an activist, some CEOs of large corporations have also taken trendy activism into their own hands, without visible demands from below (Chatterji and Toffel 2018). If CEOs were previously spoken about as ‘sustainability leaders’, they have thus become increasingly mediated as ‘industrious activists’ (Gumbel 2005). Among these CEO activists, some may identify strongly with an activist agenda, while others may enjoy a looser connection to the political implications of activism. Those CEOs who only occasionally identify as activists at work can be recognised by how they play their political green or gender cards in relation to profit motives. Hence, the growing trend of CEO activism shows a clear continuum of political engagement, from those who are willing to disconnect from profit motives and make economic sacrifices to pursue their political imaginaries or ideals, to those who occasionally deviate or seek to perfectly align the profit motive with the political motive (Hinterecker, Kopel and Ressi 2018). Nevertheless, both aim to conquer a moral high ground.

In the few academic studies of CEO activism that exist, focus has been on a general trend for CEOs to act politically (Rumstadt and Kanbach 2022). CEO activism is often identified as disconnected from the core of the business, and political actions are thus to be taken in parallel with the business operations, for example defined as ‘the practice of CEOs taking public positions on environmental, social, and political issues not directly related to their business’ (Larcker et al. 2018:1). In these instances, the business becomes a communicative platform, suggesting that CEOs can influence political issues via their easy access to media channels (Chatterji and Toffel 2016). In comparison with the ability of governmental politicians to raise public awareness, CEOs tend to receive more media attention and have a greater effect on popular opinion (Chatterji and Toffel 2016). Importantly though, this conquering of a moral high ground is not a straightforward strategy (Branicki et al. 2021), as Starbucks’s CEO Howard Schultz experienced when he was criticised for having imposed political standpoints on the baristas, who were expected to communicate ‘correctly’ with customers about race issues in the United States (Chatterji and Toffel 2015). Popular business media is likewise quick to question whether the ‘moral leaders’ generated in ‘corporate activism’ can really be fully trusted due to their inevitable connection to profit motives (Paulas 2017).

## 1.2 Critical Perspectives on Commercial Activism

What the presented examples of a boundaryless activism expose is the difference between (often smaller) companies that self-identify as activists and (often bigger) corporations that rather choose to speak about their engagement in CSR, stakeholder management and Green HRM. It is quite clear that Patagonia and the Tata Group in India differ in how they affirm social responsibility. While Patagonia is focussed on its core environmental message and community building, allowing it to say that 'rampant consumerism is not attractive' (Semuels 2019), Tata is a huge conglomerate of firms that aims to grow into one of the biggest companies in the world by embedding sustainability into its progress (Bonanni, Lépineux and Roloff 2012). The closer we get to a core business that relies on market segments that are pro-environmental, the closer we also get to expressions of green commercial activism, instead of just corporate responsibilities or initiatives.

Hessnatur in Germany offers another and much criticised example of how activism has gone into business and how business has gone into activism. Founded in 1976 on strong values and a business of organic and Fairtrade clothing aligned with a green organisational culture, there has been repeated questioning of Hessnatur's green authenticity. Commentators display a need to distinguish economic value creation from the creation of green and social values. Many wish the economic to be kept separate from the political, cleansing environmentalism from dirty capitalism. This tendency is often played out in relation to brand strategies, which have provided a fruitful focus for critical academic debates (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, Montgomery 2019). Interrogations about the green content in the brand function as a relay for criticism of profit-seeking businesses, which, it is argued, strategically hide under illusionary green façades. Hence, branding is judged differently depending on the context of the business operations and how the brand does or does not point to a gap in the everyday operations (Ottman 2011, Grubor and Milovanov, 2017).

Processes of green branding also show how brands are continuously co-constructed by a plethora of actors (see Hatch and Schultz 2008, Kornberger 2010), unable to be controlled by the branded organisation itself. Even Patagonia's branding strategy has been criticised from a leftist perspective as leading to unnecessary consumption and growth of the company (Dauvergne 2016). Hence, brands

have been increasingly described and scrutinised as sources for value in the progression of 'globalised flexible accumulation' (Goldman and Papsen 2006) and a so-called anti-brand movement has arisen, adding to constant tensions within branding (Holt 2002). Companies are then often left to evaluate how to keep up an authentic relation to green environmental concerns in a collapse of the boundaries between internal and external communication activities.

The media, environmental movements, state agencies, shareholders, consumers and employees all have an interest in constructing green brands, although this carries the risk of being called 'greenwashing'. No matter how companies and their employees contextualise themselves in relation to ecological complexities, suspicion prevails among consumers and critical scholars alike. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the rebranding of British Petroleum to Beyond Petroleum (Beder 2002, Christiansen 2002, Muralidharan 2011) and how 'star species', such as polar bears, have been utilised by various corporations in attempts to appear green (Yusoff 2010). To stimulate a positive impression internally and externally, companies are even making use of social and environmental atrocities without a direct causal link to their own operations (Muhr and Rehn 2014). Here, critical commentators, for example in debates about 'woke capitalism', imply that citizens' suffering is turned into a corporate asset (Rhodes 2022).

In contrast to the use of social and environmental atrocities, companies have also utilised co-branding strategies to position themselves in a more positive activist light. Cederström and Marinetto (2013) criticise such co-branding strategies by vividly illustrating how the ice-cream company Ben and Jerry's supported the Occupy movement, and how Mercedes-Benz mobilised Che Guevara to emphasise the potential of carpools and thereby property sharing. Perhaps to fuel debate, Mercedes-Benz substituted the star at the front of Guevara's hat with their own logotype in a commercial re-make of the acclaimed rebellion. There are numerous other examples of how the anti-capitalist Che Guevara has been utilised and exploited for capitalist ends, raising questions such as: 'So how did Che Guevara – the face of the Cuban Revolution – become CEO of corporate America?' (Davis 2016).

From a critical perspective, Che Guevara is here functioning as a model for the nomadic lifestyle inhabited by what Slavoj Žižek terms the 'liberal capitalist', someone who argues that there is no necessary friction between capitalism and the social good (Cederström and

Marinetti 2013). Giroux (1994:27) adds to this view by considering commerce as something that has taken over 'critical public cultures'. In comparison with the political landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, activism has been 'mainstreamed', and particularly so within the environmental movement (Jamison 2001:10), which suggests that NGOs are part of this mainstreaming due to their close acquaintance with business or implementation of business strategies. Furthermore, it has been shown that this position leads to a commodification of civic engagement and 'chequebook activists' (Hensby, Sibthorpe and Drvier 2011:809).

This is a criticism that results from an intellectual will to keep activism in an external strong position from which it can aim at its target more accurately. Social theorists have hence been historically sensitive to the potential compromising of activists' external positions – external in the sense of there being a clear dividing line between 'us' and 'them' – as 'mainstreaming' is assumed to result in a less radical political position. The German philosophy professor Peter Sloterdijk (2014) seems to agree, pointing out the loss of possibilities for critique, as activism is diluted by capitalism. He argues that conventional anger banks, such as political parties and social movements, have been partly replaced by all sorts of economic opportunism that affirms active or passive forms of aggression, enacted overtly or covertly. He further suggests that capitalism functions too well as a vessel for speeding up social change (cf. Sloterdijk 2014), where the inhumane rhythm, rather than just the dilution of activism, is considered a major problem.

The criticism of the boundaryless attribute of activism has, in addition, called attention to what is going on when corporations craft, facilitate or constrain citizenship from within the business sphere. At the same time as performative change can happen from within business, by various sorts of balanced confrontation and collaboration across hierarchies (Parker and Parker 2017), it has been suggested that there exists an abusive form of alignment between corporate interests and citizens' concerns about sustainability, insofar as corporations often try to incorporate and harness people's political agendas (Nyberg, Spicer and Wright 2013). Bridging the world of business and NGOs, for example, is often quite explicit in the renewable energy sector, as consumers are called upon to act, as moral citizens, to make the right choices (McEachern 2015). It has been argued that this results in a negative and crippling effect on people's political subjectivity (Kuhn and Deetz 2008), for example a confinement of people's capacity to believe in their own political power to accomplish various transformations.



In the case of climate change and efforts to accomplish a sustainable society at work, Taro Lennerfors (2013) nevertheless complicates this argument of simple corporate co-optation of the activist. According to Lennerfors, truths generated externally to an organisation can infuse the personal ethics of the individual employees to such a degree that they choose to live, machinated, in accordance with that specific truth. Here, employees are disciplined and governed through an organisational 'outside', rather than controlled and managed at an organisational 'inside'. Nevertheless, it has also been shown that employees or organisational members still experience 'some latitude to author their own reality, though always in ways shaped by the available social discourses' (Humphreys and Brown 2002:422).

Despite the acknowledgement of some 'latitude', this very 'latitude' has yet again been claimed to be a key element for how businesses draft successful empowerment games to roll out neo-normative control of their employees (Fleming and Spicer 2004, 2009). That is, when managers realise that it is impossible to align the core values of the organisation with a complex and heterogeneous workforce who may be increasingly cynical about such values, they instead aim for an existential empowerment of the employees, who 'should not be expected to share the organisation's values', but perhaps even oppose them (Fleming and Sturdy 2009:570). Business organisations that acknowledge the human to be inherently complex are thus strategically cutting their employees some slack to better manage and steer a multiplicity of passions and at times contradictory personal politics. This tension between activism and its management, bottom-up self-organising and supposedly functioning co-optation from the top, is, however, long-standing. Labour and union movements have always expressed their experience of struggles and strains in relation to top-down versus bottom-up organising (Dewey 1998, Marens 2013, Hampton 2015).

### 1.3 Conclusion

The examples of commercial activism explored in this chapter, found in various historical and international arenas, illustrate the fecund business paths taken by activism. The categories outlined are sometimes hard to keep separate, as they tend to merge and support each other. A common difference between lobbying activities and the engagement in formal politics by corporations, and 'activist companies' such as Patagonia, is the

creation of a coherent value chain in the latter – a strategic coherence that spans from the activist entrepreneur to the employee activist and consumer activist, all offering to build a ‘community’ that bridges business and society. Even though it is difficult to draw clear scholarly boundaries between a commercial interest in formal politics via coalition building and grassroots tactics and commercial interests in activism *per se*, a corporate turn to ‘activism’ is important to acknowledge.

However, seen from a broader historical perspective, companies may perhaps always have been activists to some extent (Böhm and Skoglund 2015, Böhm, Skoglund and Eatherley 2018). Corporations have long needed to go beyond impression management to win the trust of others (customers, policymakers, employees and citizens) and make them truly believe in the positive effects of goods and services. Tellingly, when Henry Ford (1863–1947) paid three times more than the then average wage to his workers to bring automobility to the masses, perhaps he could have been regarded as an activist. When the Marxist and English craftsman William Morris (1834–96) created his home styling business, mainly based on a refined production of patterned wallpapers and materials, perhaps this was his attempt to counter capitalism in efforts to restore a sense of community and local connectedness. Commercial community building is still hard to disconnect from other types of community formation, located in civil society, as ‘belonging’ and ‘togetherness’ are equally seen to be facilitated by contemporary activist companies.

To have this broad perspective of activism in mind – with its historical roots in, and contemporary enrichment by, business strategies – will be of importance for the rest of this book. The sheer number of businesses that have invested in change, especially in relation to environmentalism, testifies to a boundaryless attribute of activism that is understudied. Rather than confining activism to actions pursued by civil society, we should acknowledge how activism has gone into business and vice versa. As argued by Sloterdijk (2014), commercial activism offers a significant change in speed and tempo, and the question is how climate activism marries with this sort of temporality and dynamism of technological innovation and entrepreneurial disruption (Glezos 2012). Despite a growing ‘slow movement’ in attempts to live more sustainably, perhaps acceleration will become increasingly alluring to the environmental cause and quests to accomplish social transformations aided by renewable technologies, ‘here and now’, in quick response to the climate emergency.