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Corporations as Partners: “Connected Capitalism” and The Coca-Cola Company

For-profit corporations increasingly promote themselves as potential partners with government (state actors) and community (NGOs and civil society groups) in addressing social problems. These partnerships enact what the former CEO of The Coca-Cola Company, Neville Isdell, calls “connected capitalism”—collaborations in which businesses must do good in order to maximize shareholder value. How should we understand the self-qualification of corporations as responsible partners and thus the corporate rejection of Milton Friedman’s famous claim that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits? I address the question by considering how the partnerships currently advocated by The Coca-Cola Company enhance the value of corporate-owned brands and deflect criticism of business operations. I argue that these partnerships perform what Garsten and Jacobsson call “post-political governance” in which cooperation with business displaces regulation of business by government. I argue furthermore that these partnerships represent what Nader calls “harmony ideology,” in which the concern for polite consensus displaces any interest in addressing social inequality. [corporations, corporate personhood, corporate social responsibility (CSR), Milton Friedman, The Coca-Cola Company]

In July 2012, The Coca-Cola Company announced that it was teaming up with will.i.am, a musician and performer with the hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas, to launch a new lifestyle brand called EKOCYCLE. EKOCYCLE would, in turn, invite the makers of well-known brand-name products such as Levi’s (jeans) and Beats by Dr. Dre (headphones) to become partners by creating fashionable items that contain recycled materials. For example, when EKOCYCLE partnered in April 2013 with the National Basketball Association and adidas¹ (sports apparel and equipment), consumers were offered the opportunity to purchase a limited edition T-shirt made from a blend of recycled plastic and organic cotton, decorated with the logos of all three corporate partners.

According to The Coca-Cola Company’s press release:²

The EKOCYCLE brand initiative was developed to educate consumers about everyday recycling choices and empower their purchasing decisions as part of a social change movement. The initiative supports

recycling by helping consumers recognize that items they consider waste today may be part of a lifestyle product they can use tomorrow. With a dedication to supporting a more sustainable environment, the EKO-CYCLE brand initiative will identify products, such as assorted plastic bottles and aluminum cans that can be repurposed into recycled content for fashionable and valuable lifestyle products.

The initiative is one of several undertaken since 2005 by the company in an effort both to promote greater sustainability (Foster 2014) and “to refresh the Coca-Cola brand” (Elliott 2012). Bea Perez, vice president and chief sustainability officer at The Coca-Cola Company, noted that renewed attention to recycling engages a younger generation that cares about the environment: “That [engagement] dovetails with ‘a core goal of Coca-Cola,’ [Perez] added, which is ‘to recruit teens’” (Elliott 2012).

* * *

What are we to make of corporate partnerships like this one? Are business corporations today embracing more than just a profit-making purpose? In what sounds suspiciously like a charter myth, it is often said that modern corporations were invented to overcome the economic constraints of legal partnerships. As artificial persons enjoying indefinitely long lives and the advantage of limited liability, corporations have enabled capital accumulation and risky investment on a scale far beyond the reach of an aggregate of individuals in which each partner is vulnerable to personal lawsuits. And so, happily, the advance of industrial technology and economic efficiency could resume its preordained course.

It is accordingly ironic that many for-profit business corporations today—including large corporations with transnational operations—readily represent themselves as partners, or as potential partners, with NGOs, civil society organizations, and government agencies in addressing a wide array of social problems (Rajak 2011:11). Such corporate self-qualification signals an apparent repudiation of the declaration of shareholder primacy baldly stated in the title of Milton Friedman’s famous 1970 essay, “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase Its Profits.” Indeed, it recalls benevolent images from the early 20th century in which big businesses like AT&T and General Electric fashioned themselves as servants of the public good—images strategically created to give the modern corporation a soul (Marchand 1998). What does the rush toward partnership in the early 21st century involve if not merely cynical public relations? Why do corporations seem to be assuming the role of states in promoting social welfare?

These questions invite consideration of how public performances of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become a normal feature of doing business in the post-Enron era. I restrict consideration here to a quick look at developments over the last ten years at The Coca-Cola Company. In particular, I discuss the notion of “connected capitalism” proposed and championed by Neville Isdell, the CEO of the company from 2004 to 2008 (Bisoux 2010). For Isdell, connected capitalism

describes a “new model of social engagement” (Isdell 2010:44)—an alternative to both Friedman’s position on maximizing profits and conventional corporate philanthropy. In connected capitalism, businesses, nonprofits, and governments work together as partners to satisfy their own particular interests, including the long-term profitability of businesses. Profits and progress, Isdell claims, need not conflict: “In fact, one demands the other” (Isdell 2011:222).

Isdell’s view of profit-making and social amelioration as compatible recalls the better known notion of “the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid,” put forward by C. K. Prahalad (2010), according to which corporations can make money and improve lives by treating the population of the world that lives on two dollars a day as an untapped market for consumer goods. (For philanthrocapitalism, see Adams 2012.) “Bottom of the pyramid” initiatives explicitly target poor consumers (of inexpensive goods such as antibacterial soap and iodized salt), while partnering initiatives such as EKOCYCLE clearly target more affluent consumers. Yet, Isdell would undoubtedly agree with Prahalad’s assertion: “There is a growing recognition that marrying the local knowledge of the nongovernmental organization with [the] global reach of the multinational firm can create unique and sustainable solutions” (2010:5).

My ultimate aim is to demonstrate how the corporate partnerships that realize Isdell’s vision of connected capitalism enact a “form of post-political governance,” a term that I take from Garsten and Jacobsson (2007). This kind of governance presumes that conflicts among differing interests—conflicts usually associated with “the political”—can be transcended. Instead of confrontation there will be consensus (Rajak 2011:14); adversaries become partners, and voluntary agreements replace regulation by both the competitive market and the hierarchical state (Moon 2002). In other words, as Julia Elyachar (2012) noted in her discussion of “the bottom of the pyramid,” markets are to be managed in enlightened ways through a hybrid formation of NGOs, local governments, private firms, and multinational corporations.

My more immediate aim, however, is to demonstrate how the precepts of corporate personhood make it easy to talk about partnership and, in so doing, make it difficult to speak about other ways of imagining corporate accountability and the corporate form itself. I suggest furthermore that such an inability to speak indicates the operation of what Laura Nader (2001) calls “harmony ideology,” a dogma that privileges consensus over contestation to the point of trading justice for “peace.”

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What is a partner? Consider the handshake. This iconic gesture, images of which frequently ornament CSR literature, expresses both voluntarism and symmetry: the goodwill of equal agents. In so doing, it communicates the defining qualities of partnership. The conceit of legal personhood, of course, makes it easy to talk about corporations as human partners—to animate them with the moral virtues of people committed to others.

But the discourse of partnership has a reciprocal effect, namely, reinforcing a particular definition of personhood (see Kirsch 2014). By this definition, the person is an individual who precedes the relationship of partnership. That is, the individual is a natural unit, given or axiomatic. The relationship, by contrast, is a contingent and artificial creation—a presumption of Milton Friedman's (1970) assertion that "society is a collection of individuals and the various groups they voluntarily form" (126). This reciprocal effect thus draws attention away from the legal fact that a corporation is not quite a natural person; even after *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* 558 U.S. [2010]), the controversial U.S. Supreme Court decision that extended the rights of corporations to engage in political speech, corporations do not enjoy all of the rights of natural persons (see Ciepley 2012, Pollman 2011). This effect, moreover, represents the relationship of partnership as a positive accomplishment that speaks well of the individual person's moral character (indeed, of the individual's specifically human nature, according to Adam Smith [1976].) Partnership, then, befits an unselfish, other-oriented person.

Who is this person? He (rarely she) is the corporate executive with whom the company becomes identified both to the general public (Bose 2010) and in particular to the company's own mid-level managers (see Rajak 2014). That is, the rhetoric of partnership and social responsibility doubles as rhetoric of managerial leadership. Friedman (1970) seemed to realize this condition in presuming that the "doctrine of social responsibility" meant that *corporate executives* have a "social responsibility" in their capacity as businessmen. (Indeed, his essay postulates corporate leaders who act with almost total autonomy and without the counsel of others inside the corporation.) This presumption would also probably make sense to Isdell, who in 2006 became chairman of the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF), a UK-based organization that since 1990 "has focused on the themes of business leadership and corporate responsibility, working directly with CEO and Board level executives to drive change across their companies and networks."³

In his memoir *Inside Coca-Cola: A CEO's Life Story of Building the World's Most Popular Brand*, Isdell (2011) claimed that corporate executives today have an opportunity to surpass the "corporate leader of yesterday" who "worked closely with governments and nonprofits on a local level" (218). Through partnerships with organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and United Nations, corporate executives today can effect "true social change globally" (218). Isdell's emphasis on partnering, now conducted at a global level, signals a move away from the CSR initiatives of an earlier era of welfare capitalism. These initiatives—an array of programs that supplied employees with everything from housing and pension plans to mirrors in women's dressing rooms (Marchand 1998)—were centered within the corporation. Connected capitalism, however, requires corporations to collaborate with external organizations, especially NGOs.

Isdell's claims also indicate a shift in emphasis from shareholder value to stakeholder value, that is, from a view of the corporation as the property of its investor-owners to a view of the corporation as a separate entity—a person with the capacity to act in the interest of not only investors but also employees, customers, and community members

(Foster 2012). The effects of such a shift remain unclear. It is a perverse coincidence that viewing corporations as autonomous person-like entities can underwrite both CSR programs to make a corporation accountable to all its stakeholders and legal arguments to endow a corporation with constitutional rights against government regulation (Mark 1987). John Dewey, who highlighted the indeterminacy of theories of the corporation, made this point long ago. Dewey (1926) noted that assimilating a corporation to a singular person, even if deemed a limited creature of the state, might end up enlarging the corporation's rights, privileges, and immunities:

In an "individualistic" period—that is, an era chiefly concerned with rights of private property and contract—it is pretty sure to do so. Consider, for example, the court decisions that a business corporation is a "person" in the sense covered by the Fourteenth Amendment, and the effects of this decision. [668]

In other words, the corporate-person metaphor can have unintended effects.

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For Isdell, connected capitalism is emphatically neither charity nor penance, "as if companies owe society a debt for making a profit" (2011:219). Connected capitalism is activity tied to the core long-term business interests of a company—securing sources of clean water for The Coca-Cola Company, for example. Hence, it resolves the old agency problem within the corporation, that is, the accountability of corporate managers who act with other people's money. Corporate profitability and community sustainability can coexist without conflict. Milton Friedman (1970) would not of course disagree, but he would be inclined to call the arrangement "hypocritical window dressing," the generation of "goodwill as a by-product of expenditures that are entirely justified" (124) in terms of corporate self interest.

There is, however, more going on here than mere hypocrisy. The partnering initiatives championed by Isdell and undertaken by The Coca-Cola Company illustrate a corporate approach to social activism consistent with the ideal of postpolitical governance—an approach adopted by corporations in the wake of street protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington, in 1999. Richard Edelman, of Edelman PR Worldwide, foreshadowed the game plan in his 2001 report of a survey of "opinion leader attitudes" toward NGOs. This survey, "commissioned in response to the first anniversary of the Seattle meeting," found that NGOs were trusted nearly twice as much to "do what is right" as compared with corporations (Edelman 2001:34). Edelman's advice followed accordingly:

If Seattle was a wake up call, then the survey's findings can be considered a smoke alarm, requiring decisive action. It is our recommendation that a company proactively manage relationships with NGOs to protect its global corporate reputation. No longer can corporations risk meeting

Figure 1: “Brandization”: The Global Fund subsumed under the familiar script and iconic red color of Coca-Cola. Source: <http://www.untogo.org/News/Health/Coca-Cola-and-the-Global-Fund-announce-partnership-to-help-bring-critical-medicines-to-remote-regions>

minimal standards. Instead, corporate leaders must learn more about NGO concerns and begin dialogues with them to implement programs, strategies, and tactics designed to avert confrontational situations before they become major news stories. [36]

Reputation is crucial to brand management, which stimulates the production of social relations in the form of brand communities, for example, and offers consumers material and symbolic media for self-fashioning. This “consumption work” then becomes a source of surplus value for corporations as consumers pay rent to gain access to the products and means of their own self-fashioning (Foster 2008a, 2008b). From this perspective, partnerships “brandize” NGOs (Willmott 2010); that is, partnerships treat NGOs as brands (as assets built partly out of consumption work) and then subsume these brands under the corporate brand, consequently increasing the monetary value of the corporate brand and generating revenue for shareholders. This process of subsumption or “brandization” (Willmott 2010) is effectively illustrated by the image that accompanied one announcement of a partnership between The Coca-Cola Company and the Global Fund to deliver critical medicines to remote parts of the world (see Figure 1). NGOs—to which Edelman (2001) referred as “the new super brands”—do not merely legitimize corporations; they function as a source of surplus value for corporations.

Partnerships offer corporations political benefits as well. For Isdell (2011:241), connected capitalism is opposed to “reckless capitalism” or capitalism that has become detached from society. Reckless or detached capitalism of the sort that produced the BP oil spill and the financial crisis of 2008 will provoke a populist response—new forms of protectionism or maybe even socialism. Isdell noted that people like former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich called for the nationalization of BP’s holdings. These alternatives to capitalism, Isdell insisted, since they previously failed, must

be avoided. The answer is connected capitalism: “We have to rewire our companies and redesign the way that capitalism works by connecting it to communities and the values of its employees, building new alliances with civil society and governments to address the challenges we face” (Melford and Isdell 2012). Put differently, connected capitalism heralds the return of a managerial capitalism in which the corporation is “understood as a social institution, an organization with constituents and responsibilities well beyond the individuals and institutions” that own stock (Ho 2009:124). Isdell thus presumes to voice Main Street’s outrage over the out-of-control institutional culture of Wall Street and the harsh discipline applied by Wall Street investment banks on corporations in the name of increasing share prices.

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The Coca-Cola Company and its affiliates have entered into numerous partnerships with an array of organizations. Not all of these partnerships obviously reflect the principles of Isdell’s connected capitalism, but one that manifestly does is the highly visible partnership between the company and the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF),⁴ an organization with high levels of public trust according to the Edelman report on NGOs as superbrands. This partnership, launched in 2007, focuses on water conservation and climate protection. In addition to \$20 million dollars, the WWF receives the company’s assistance in implementing conservation projects in seven selected river basins around the world. The Coca-Cola Company in turn receives WWF assistance in minimizing water and energy use throughout its supply chain. That is, the WWF supplies The Coca-Cola Company with expertise of the sort that Friedman complained most corporations lack when it comes to engaging in projects of CSR, thereby preempting any criticism that CSR tempts managers to make uninformed decisions about allocating scarce resources.

The partnership between The Coca-Cola Company and the World Wildlife Fund resists criticism. Who would argue against clean water? Until, of course, one asks in the first place why clean water should be transformed into a sugar-laden, high caloric, nonnutritious beverage marketed globally to teenagers, often in circumstances where people’s access to clean water for drinking, bathing, and cooking is highly insecure. Indeed, The Coca-Cola Company has faced allegations that its bottlers in India have “mined” or depleted groundwater and polluted soil with toxic byproducts given to farmers for use as fertilizer. These allegations—as well as charges of complicity in labor violence in Colombia—have mobilized not only local but also international protests against the company—precisely the sort of “confrontational situations” against which Edelman had warned. (For details on the controversies surrounding the company’s business practices, see Foster 2008a.)

In other words, the rhetoric of the partnership with WWF is that of harm reduction: The Coca-Cola Company pledges to use less clean water to make more cans of soda or . . . bottles of clean water! The partnership thus functions much like what Benson and Kirsch (2010a) have called “corporate oxymorons,” comforting figures of speech such as “safe cigarettes” and “sustainable mining” in which the first term obscures

the harmful implications of the second (see also Benson and Kirsch 2010b; Benson 2014).

Corporate–NGO partnerships can indeed bring together incongruous elements, notably in the form of so-called green consumerism or eco-chic (Barendregt and Jaffe 2014). Green consumerism of the kind represented by the EKOCYCLE initiative promises to make stylish sensibility compatible with concern for the environment. For example, in 2007 Conservation International and Fiji Water announced a partnership aimed at making the designer bottled water company “carbon negative.” What does it take to make such a counterintuitive alliance seem plausible? I suggest that an answer can be found in the response of Glenn Prickett, a Conservation International senior vice president, when asked if green groups should endorse bottled water: “That nation is going to find something to ship out of Fiji. It could be logs or an industrial product. We’d much rather see it be a clean product that is produced with renewable energy.” Prickett similarly claimed: “Maybe it would be morally preferable to carry a bottle I filled at the tap, but bottled water is a consumer reality. So rather than operate in a moralistic framework, we’ll use the economy as it exists to make a difference” (Deutsch 2007, C3).

There is an assumption of inevitability in these comments, and a resigned assertion that “clean” bottled water is at least better than some dirty “industrial product.” The result is discursive paralysis—an inability to formulate and articulate an alternative version of things that recalls the condition of “capitalist realism” that Michael Schudson insightfully associated with advertising. Schudson (1984) observed that advertising, like official art, “brings some images and expressions quickly to mind and makes others relatively unavailable” (230). Partnerships likewise promote a particular view of the world, one in which public or collective values are invoked, but to be pursued only through incremental voluntary changes in either business practices or individual consumption practices. It is a world in which the win–win solutions epitomized by corporate–NGO partnerships do the social work formerly done by regulatory states acting in the name of citizens. Indeed, states and citizens inhabit this world uncomfortably. For all the happy talk about alliances that include governments as equal partners, the role of government in connected capitalism seems uncertain, if not subordinate. In his memoir, Isdell (2011) thus accuses governments of “lagging behind corporations and nonprofits in forging partnerships” (237). His only positive examples of government partnering initiatives are legal reforms that make it easier to conduct business. Elsewhere Isdell makes it plain that it is NGOs and business that must act together to prevent populist protectionism: “Where they lead, governments must follow” (Melford and Isdell 2012). And given the disparity in resources that NGOs and business command, it is not difficult to imagine who will navigate.

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The conceit of corporate personhood in which legal entities assume human characteristics makes it seem plausible that a company can act as a considerate partner and good citizen. Shever’s (2010) discussion of Shell’s CSR programs and public

relations in Argentina demonstrates how a company can exploit this plausibility to reconfigure historical relations of paternalism and patronage, rendering itself as “an individual who cares about its fellow citizens but has limited obligations to them” (28). That is, the corporation’s fellow citizens must fix their own problems; corporate partnerships will “empower” these citizens to do so by themselves. Partnerships oriented toward self-sufficiency thus replace traditional charity and philanthropy.

In effect, however, corporate partnerships often replicate older forms of patronage, dependency, and asymmetrical reciprocity (Rajak 2011:19). Business partners, after all, are ideally equal and independent, symmetrically responsible for sharing the same kinds of input (expenses) and output (profit). Bryn Jones (2007:169) argues that corporate partnerships, by contrast, bear many of the features of patron–client relations. A corporation, for example, selects among potential clients according to its own discretionary criteria, excluding NGOs and pressure groups considered unsympathetic to the corporation’s activities (Benson 2014; Rajak 2011). This selection process recalls Gershon’s description of hiring in the neoliberal marketplace in which businesses choose “potential employees who signal that they are managing themselves correctly, replete with expandable skills, useful alliances, and appropriate branding strategies” (Gershon 2014). As Jones (2007:170) further notes, “less dominant parties to these arrangements seek them because of their own relative weakness,” including financial need. The social legitimacy and status of responsible benefactors in turn accrues to the more dominant party, namely, the corporation. A precapitalist form of social relationship thus lurks under the guise of a contractual agreement between equal and sovereign individuals: the paradigmatic social relationship of bourgeois society.

For Isdell, partnerships between corporations and NGOs nevertheless represent progress: the defeat of the shareholder value movement. He triumphantly observes: “Milton Friedman’s dictum that there is only one social responsibility of business which is to make profits was made history and far greater recognition was given to the connections between business and improving society” (Melford and Isdell 2012).

We should once more appreciate the irony. For Friedman, CSR personifies the corporation as a moral actor in an immoral or amoral market. This way of characterizing the market, he reasoned, made business *more* vulnerable to arguments in favor of increased government control. The proper way to prevent populist protectionism for Friedman was to eschew all forms of “external control” over the market, including CSR.

There is perhaps something to be said for Friedman’s position, which coincidentally is not that different from Robert Reich’s (2008) views of CSR. Friedman rejects partnerships and other CSR initiatives because he understands the relationship between society and the market as *not* necessarily win–win. Moreover, he recognizes that CSR is not democratic; it works outside established governmental provisions for taxing and administering expenditure programs. And even for Friedman, a modicum of such provision is unavoidably necessary—grudging acceptance on his part that in

some cases the individual must conform to the social interest as determined by the majority.

Connected capitalism promises to resolve the antagonism between state and market, and between social accountability and business-as-usual. In so doing, however, it displaces politics as a confrontation between different and irreconcilable interests. Isdell, in advocating connected capitalism, thus extends the reach of a harmony ideology that treats any objections to the win-win solution (offered by green consumerism, for example) as uncivil, if not downright hostile. Hence his characterization of The Coca-Cola Company's critics as "a small minority of activists [who] will always prefer confrontation, with its attendant publicity, to the search for mutually beneficial common ground" (Isdell 2007).

What we might well need, then, are fewer allies and partners for corporations and more critics and adversaries. Why? Laura Nader (2001) has forcefully reminded us of "all the good that has come from outrage and indignation, and of what happens to democracy when people don't speak out" (B13). Just as the conceit of personhood makes it easy to talk about corporations as responsible partners and fellow citizens, the force of harmony ideology makes it difficult to engage in open protest and noisy dissent. An overriding concern for consensus comes to eclipse any interest in addressing social inequality; large multinational firms can thus make enormous profits while consumers of canned soda and even imported bottled water need not fuss about the labor or environmental costs. It is as if "an intolerance of conflict seeped into the culture to prevent not the causes of discord but the expression of it" (Nader 2002:43). The first step toward resisting the seduction of ideas like "connected capitalism," therefore, is to recognize them for what they are: instruments of control and power the effects of which are hardly benign.

Notes

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1. Coca-Cola, EKOCYCLE, Levis, Dr. Dre, and adidas are registered trademarks.
2. Coca-Cola Press Center, <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/press-center/press-releases/an-end-is-a-cool-new-start-william-and-the-coca-cola-company-recharge-recycling-with-launch-of-lifestyle-brand-ekocycle> (accessed February 16, 2013).
3. International Business Leaders Forum, <http://www.iblff.org/> (accessed February 16, 2013).
4. "Renewing Our Partnership. Expanding Our Impact," at http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/citizenship/conservation_partnership.html (accessed June 12, 2014).

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