BUSINESSES, ACTIVISTS, AND THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY

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Cet éditorial interroge la catégorie d'« activiste » et met en lumière la variété d'acteurs qui ont tenté à différentes époques de changer le comportement des entreprises, et ce au-delà des allégeances organisationnelles. Ainsi, la responsabilité sociale des entreprises se révèle intrinsèquement liée à des luttes de légitimité qui concernent tant les entreprises que les activistes et leurs pratiques.

1. CHALLENGING RESEARCH

How have corporate practices changed to account for social and environmental concerns[1]? As corporations have become prominent economic, social, environmental and political actors since the Industrial Revolution, this has been a recurring question. Civic initiatives have often been at the forefront of attempts to publicize detrimental corporate actions and have launched a range of efforts to change corporate behavior for the better. Such initiatives have ranged from short-lived campaigns to institutionalized partnerships and have employed a variety of tactics to target corporate practices. Some of these were adversarial, such as protest rallies, shaming campaigns, boycotts, or even sabotage. These actions could undermine companies' legitimacy and consequently dissuade consumers from buying, limit access to financial markets, or destabilize employees[2]. Other tactics were of a more collaborative nature: exchanging relevant expertise, monitoring, certification, even joint campaigning. Reacting to activist challenges, corporations have developed a variety of

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[2] For an overview, see M. Yaziji and J. Doh, *NGOs and Corporations: Conflict and Collaboration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

responses, attempting to ignore, incorporate, or co-opt such civic initiatives[3].

Despite the central importance of the interactions between businesses and activists in the evolution of societies and economies, scholars have struggled to come to terms with them. In history, this was partly caused by the division of labor between historians who were researching either businesses or social movements. In business history, a growing body of research has charted the emergence of corporate social responsibility and sustainability[4]. These studies have highlighted the considerations which drove businesses to adopt socially and environmentally responsible measures and the specific practices related to this adoption. Pioneering studies have also explored corporate change and companies' strategic responses in relation to activists' actions[5]. Outside the field of history, economics and management studies have similarly attempted to assess the outcomes and effectiveness of activists' tactics through the lens of businesses[6].

Activism targeting corporations, conversely, has primarily been studied from the perspective of the history of social movements and protest[7]. The focus of such inquiries has been on the different stances social movements adopted towards businesses - adversarial or collaborative, the repertoire of action they employed, and the extent to which they themselves adopted approaches modeled after corporate practices[8]. Within francophone

[3] P. Balsiger, « Managing Protest: The Political Action Repertoires of Corporations », in D. della Porta and M. Diani (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

[4] I. Nuhn, *Entwicklungslinien betrieblicher Nachhaltigkeit nach 1945: ein deutsch-niederländischer Unternehmensvergleich*, Münster, Waxmann, 2013; A. Rome, « Beyond Compliance: The Origins of Corporate Interest in Sustainability », *Enterprise & Society,* vol. 22, n° 2, 2021, p. 409-437; K. Sluyterman, « Corporate Social Responsibility of Dutch Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century », *Enterprise & Society,* vol. 13, n° 2, 2012, 313-349; F. Aggeri and O. Godard, « Les entreprises et le développement durable », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 45, 2006, p. 6-19 ; A. B. Carroll, « A History of Corporate Social Responsibility: Concepts and Practices », in A. Crane, D. Matten, A. McWilliams, J. Moon, D. S. Siegel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; R. Kaplan, « Who Has Been Regulating Whom, Business or Society? The Mid-20th-Century Institutionalization of "Corporate Responsibility" in the USA », *Socio-Economic Review,* vol. 13, n° 1, 2015, p. 125-155; G. Jones, *Profits and Sustainability: A History of Green Entrepreneurship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; C. Stutz, « History in Corporate Social Responsibility: Reviewing and Setting an Agenda », *Business History,* vol. 63, n° 2, 2021, p. 175- 204.

[5] For examples, see K. Sluyterman, « Royal Dutch Shell: Company Strategies for Dealing with Environmental Issues », *Business History Review,* vol. 84, n° 2, 2010, p. 203-226; I. Minefee and M. Bucheli, « MNC Responses to International NGO Activist Campaigns: Evidence from Royal Dutch/Shell in Apartheid South Africa », *Journal of International Business Studies*, vol. 52, n° 5, 2021, p. 971-998; J. A. Levy, « Black Power in the Boardroom: Corporate America, the Sullivan Principles, and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle », *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 21, n° 1, 2020, p. 170-209; S. Pitteloud, « Have Faith in Business: Nestlé, Religious Shareholders, and the Politicization of the Church in the Long 1970s », *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 25, n° 3, 2024, p. 699-727; G. Jones and C. Lubinski, « Making "Green Giants": Environment Sustainability in the German Chemical Industry, 1950s–1980s », *Business History,* vol. 56, n° 4, 2014, p. 623-649.

[6] M. Yaziji and J. Doh, *NGOs and Corporations, op. cit.*

[7] T. P. Lyon, *Good Cop/Bad Cop: Environmental NGOs and Their Strategies Toward Businesses,* Washington, Resources for the Future, 2010; B. Möckel, « Consuming Anti-Consumerism: The German Fairtrade Movement and the Ambivalent Legacy of "1968" », *Contemporary European History*, vol. 28, n° 4, 2019, p. 550-565; K. Karcher, « Violence for a Good Cause? The Role of Violent Tactics in West German Solidarity Campaigns for Better Working and Living Conditions in the Global South in the 1980s », *Contemporary European History,* vol. 28, n° 4, 2019, p. 566-580; P. van Dam, « Moralizing Postcolonial Consumer Society: Fair Trade in the Netherlands, 1964-1997 », *International Review of Social History,* vol. 61, n° 2, 2016, p. 223-250; M.-E. Chessel, « Aux origines de la consommation engagée : la Ligue sociale d'acheteurs (1902-1914) », *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire,* n° 77, 2003, p. 95-108.

[8] G. LeBaron and P. Dauvergne, *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism*, Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2014; J. Heath and A. Potter, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture,* Chichester, Capstone, 2006; A. G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: the Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism,* Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2007; J. C. Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: the Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs,* New York Columbia University Press, 2017; P. van Dam and A. Striekwold, « Small is Unsustainable? Alternative

literature, this has been further differentiated. Whereas the term "activiste" tends to be used to depict individuals or small groups of individuals carrying out high-impact actions, the literature focusing on broader attempts at changing societies is labelled "histoire des mouvements sociaux" and speaks rather of "militants"[9]. In the field of sociology, Laure Bereni and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier have started to question such division of labor and have drawn up an agenda for more contextualized approaches that consider the porous boundaries between social movements and the economic world[10].

This thematic issue attempts to move beyond this division of labor by focusing on the interactions between businesses and activists. To achieve this, it has proven helpful to shift the focus from social movements to activists. The contributions to this thematic issue demonstrate the array of people involved at different times in attempting to change corporate behavior beyond organizational allegiances. Using the "activist" as an analytical lens leads to considering jointly literature that is often studied separately in various fields of historical and social science research such as labor-relations and philanthropy. The more expansive view of attempts to change corporate behavior is supported by two other advantages of this thematic issue. First, it includes activism concerning social and environmental impacts and, in line with *Entreprises et Histoire*'s editorial tradition, therefore takes seriously the social embeddedness of businesses[11]. Second, this collection takes a long-term and international perspective on such attempts by bringing together analyses stretching from the 19th century up until the present, which helps to identify continuities as well as contextual and geographical contingencies.

Yet charting the interactions between businesses and the variety of activists who have tried to change them is notoriously difficult. This is not just the result of different historiographical specializations but also arises from methodological challenges. The archives of many activists and businesses are private. Businesses, at least large ones, tend to have enough resources for professional archive services, but often tightly monitor access to their internal documentation to control their public image. Activists might be more willing to share their archives, but sometimes lack the means to conserve them. Researchers are granted access on a case-by-case basis to this material and, consequently, being able to document both points of view over a long period is rather rare. For the recent period, interviews, especially on the business side, can be equally challenging to obtain. Foundations such as the Archives Sociales Suisse in Zurich and the Archives Contestataires in Geneva, presented in the "News from the Archives" section, are crucial in collecting a variety of private documents and oral testimonies, including those from trade unions, feminist

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Food Movement in the Low Countries, 1969-1990 », *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review,* vol. 137, n° 4, 2022, p. 137-160.

[9] See for instance: M. Pigenet and D. Tartakowsky (eds.), *Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France de 1814 à nos jours*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014.

[10] L. Bereni and S. Dubuisson-Quellier, « Au-delà de la confrontation : saisir la diversité des interactions entre mondes militants et mondes économiques », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 61, n° 4, 2020, p. 505-529; S. Dubuisson-Quellier and J.-N. Jouzel. « Les mobilisations face aux organisations », in O. Borraz (ed.), *La société des organisations*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2022, p. 291-301.

[11] See for instance these editorials: F. Aggeri and O. Godard, « Les entreprises et le développement durable », *art. cit.*; F. Aggeri and M. Cartel, « Le changement climatique et les entreprises : enjeux, espaces d'action, régulations internationales », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 86, 2017, p. 6-20; P. Lefebvre, « Penser l'entreprise comme acteur politique », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 104, 2021, p. 5-18; I. Boni-Le Goff and M. Rabier, « L'entreprise saisie par le genre », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 107, 2022, p. 6-16.

and environmental movements, NGOs, and emblematic activist figures[12].

The lack of access to internal archives can make it very difficult to establish whether changes in corporate behavior were caused by activist interventions. Most businesses will publicly disavow any activist influence with an eye to public relations, whereas activists are inclined to overstate their impact. In fact, instances of companies acknowledging influence can be just as challenging to analyze. Fabien Bartolotti's contribution to this thematic issue is rather striking in this respect, as it details how British Petroleum (BP) justified the attempt to produce petroproteins as a way to solve the hunger issue in the Third World and thus enhance BP's social responsibility in the 1960s[13]. After activists raised concerns about this "oil steak" venture as well as some economic setbacks, BP abandoned these projects by the late 1970s. This example shows how companies can attach themselves to a cause like the Third World to legitimize their operations, whilst other considerations in making business decisions remain in the background.

Another challenge to establishing the impact of interactions between businesses and activists is caused by the muddiness of the aims pursued by activists when targeting companies. Changing a specific company is often only partially the goal of such interventions. This is illustrated by Marten Boon and Noa van der Valk who, in their contribution, revisit the famous case of the 1995 Greenpeace Brent Spar campaign. They argue that activism was particularly effective when it targeted corporations directly through impact actions and boycotts and indirectly by modifying their institutional environment. Greenpeace in this instance impacted Royal Dutch Shell by dissuading the company from disposing of its Brent Spar oil installation in the sea and simultaneously shaped international governance regimes on offshore dumping[14]. Hiske Arts, a campaigner at Fossielvrij NL, in the debate section of this issue, relates to another example of how targeting specific companies is often part of a more wide-ranging activist strategy[15]. She explains that activists who had denounced the aviation industry's greenhouse gas emissions noticed that their message had become partly inaudible due to the sustainability claims of various enterprises in the sector. Consequently, they launched a greenwashing lawsuit against KLM. The court decided that KLM misled the public by saying in its commercials that it was on target with carbon offsetting, which set a precedent for other airlines and for all polluting companies that misleadingly marketed themselves as sustainable.

Activists generally attempt to achieve more than impacting market behavior. Similarly, corporations are not just economic, but political actors too. This is evident from Lora Verheecke's contribution to the debate section. L. Verheecke is a member of the Multinationals Observatory, a watchdog NGO which documents business lobbying in Brussels. She emphasizes that, beyond economic power, it is through regulatory capture that businesses might durably affect the interest of the public[16]. This renders it difficult to disentangle corporations and their economic activities from

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[12] F. Deshusses and C. Koller, « Documenter le militantisme visant les entreprises : un regard croisé par les Archives sociales suisses et les Archives contestataires », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024, p. 175-183.

[13] F. Bartolotti, « Le "steak de pétrole" contre la faim dans le monde ? L'affaire des protéines BP (1957-1976) », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024, p. 68-90.

[14] N. T. van der Valk and M. Boon, « Activism and Corporate Environmental Norms: Revisiting the Case of the Brent Spar, 1995-1998 », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 117, 2024, p. 97-115.

[15] H. Arts, Debate in H. Arts, G. Jones, S. A. Soule, L. Verheecke, Debate: « Can activists change business for good? » Moderated by S. Pitteloud and P. Van Dam, *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024.

[16] L. Verheecke, Debate: « Can activists change business for good? », *art. cit*.

their institutional environment and their role as political actors[17].

Assessing impact also depends on who we regard as the intended beneficiaries. In the document section of this issue, Iva Peša discusses the relevance and shortcomings of court cases to deliver environmental justice when companies degrade local environments[18]. While she stresses that the 2019 ruling against a mining company in Zambia became "world-famous" and was used as a reference point by activists for environmental liability, her oral history interviews suggested a more nuanced picture. For the victims of pollution, compensation did not equate to the restoration of the natural environment in which they lived. The activists' legal success, therefore, did not result in significant changes to their livelihood or their power relations with mining companies. The success of certain groups of activists might not equate to success for society at large.

A final methodological challenge relates to interpreting "success" over a longer span of time. There may be many small-step victories that do result in meaningful change. Regarding attempts at greening business since the 1970s, Adam Rome concludes that "the long list of successes is misleading" and that "even the most transformative efforts haven't truly transformed business"[19]. As Laure Bereni and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier have emphasized, rather than focusing on certain activist tactics and their direct outcomes, we should think of "sequences of interactions"[20].

Beyond highlighting these challenges in researching the interactions between businesses and activists, the contributions to this thematic issue demonstrate the value of case studies of interactions aimed at changing businesses. We will first discuss how they call into question who we call "activists". Second, we highlight different iterations of corporate social responsibility since the second half of the 19th century, tracing shifts in emphasis regarding social and environmental issues, the primary actors deemed responsible for enacting desired behavior, and the means to achieve it. Finally, we focus on the struggle over legitimacy in enacting corporate social responsibility.

2. "ACTIVISTS" RECONSIDERED

Similar to the way in which attention to advocacy networks has enabled historians to analyze the coalitions of organizations, individual experts, politicians, academics, and business leaders, a focus on activists opens up a conversation on who is actually attempting to change corporate behavior beyond organizational allegiances[21]. The category of "activist" is a social construct that requires contextualization. It is not only constructed by scholars, but also by historical actors who picture themselves or others as being the voice of corporate virtue. Being an activist whose purpose is to shape corporations' behavior is a label that can be assigned to individuals, groups or entities from the outside or that can be claimed by actors themselves.

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[17] On the complex interaction between activism, CSR, voluntary actions and the law, see for instance P. Barraud de Lagerie, *Les patrons de la vertu. De la responsabilité sociale des entreprises au devoir de vigilance*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022; A. Rome, « Plan C for Greening Business », *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 11 June 2024, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/green-business-plan-c#

[18] I. Peša, « Court Proceedings as Sources for Environmental History: Analysing Struggles for Environmental Justice on the Zambian Copperbelt », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n°117, 2024, p. 155-164.

[19] A. Rome, « Plan C for Greening Business », *art. cit.,* p. 5.

[20] L. Bereni and S. Dubuisson-Quellier, « Au-delà de la confrontation », *art. cit*.

[21] M. E. Keck and K. Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998.

Various contributions to this thematic issue illustrate the constant struggles over who counts as an activist and what this implies. Michel Capron's article shows how this dynamic plays out between businesses and their challengers, but also within the latter group. His article chronicles the rise of a new constellation of activists in France in the 1990s, the so-called New economic social movements, which coalesced in 2005 into a formal platform called Forum citoyen pour la RSE, whose aim is to reform corporate behavior through corporate social responsibility (CSR)[22]. This coalition distinguishes itself from "alternative social movements", whose views are more radical and whose actions aimed to change the capitalist system. M. Capron also highlights the hostile attitude of the business community and the lack of institutional recognition given the traditional tripartite cooperation between policymakers, business and labor unions.

Being recognized as an activist is also tied to the struggle over public recognition. Depending on the context, being regarded as such can be a validation of the extent to which an actor speaks on behalf of the common good or else as an attempt to disparage a position as "activist" as opposed to a supposedly more sensible, pragmatic position. Christian Koller shows how activists have struggled to be recognized as the voice of the common good[23]. Businesses' interests indeed often find sympathy among policymakers and the public, not least thanks to the jobs and fiscal revenue they generate. Based on the archives of the NGO Action place financière Suisse, he documents the role of Swiss banks in draining financial resources from poorer countries through the use of Swiss banking secrecy laws by dictators, and the hope of the Action place financière Suisse to raise public awareness and trigger regulation. However, in 1984, when Swiss citizens voted on the possibility of introducing more control and regulation, they massively rejected this proposal.

Consequently, while activists might affect businesses' license to operate, businesspeople might undermine activists' impact and ability to represent themselves as the voice of virtue. When their relationship is adversarial, businesses will sometimes use pejorative categories and cast their political opponents as "radicals". For instance, when facing confrontational forms of organized labor or NGOs denouncing the impact of Western multinational companies on developing countries in the 1970s, business leaders would depict their opponents as being Marxist-inspired to discredit them[24]. During the Cold War, describing activists as "communists" was also a widespread tactic[25]. Another delegitimisation strategy was for businesspeople to choose a group of activists from a broader array of challengers. By initiating a selective dialogue, those who asked for more fundamental change could be ignored[26].

Questioning who to label activists, the contributions to this issue show how activists may well be located not just outside but also inside corporations. Businesses should not be considered homogeneous black boxes but are subject to internal contestation over defining good corporate behavior as much as is the public domain. Organized labor is

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[22] M. Capron, « Les dynamiques relationnelles entre les mouvements sociaux alternatifs et les entreprises multinationales en France », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 117, 2024, p. 116-129.

[23] F. Deshusses and C. Koller, « Documenter le militantisme visant les entreprises… », *art. cit.*

[24] S. Pitteloud, « Unwanted Attention: Swiss Multinationals and the Creation of International Corporate Guidelines in the 1970s », *Business and Politics,* vol. 22, n° 4, 2020, p. 587-611.

[25] K. Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, New York, Norton, 2009; B. C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

[26] S. Pitteloud, « Have Faith in Business… », *art. cit.*; S. Pitteloud, « Business Facing Activism. Organised Business and Civil Society Movements in Germany and Switzerland Since the 1970s », in T. da Silva Lopes, P. Duguid and R. Fredona (eds.), *Climate Change and Business*, London, Routledge, 2025 (forthcoming).

probably the most obvious manifestation of insider activism. For instance, thanks to original historical evidence from the Archives contestataires, Frédéric Deshusses documents how the occupation of the Geneva machine-tool factory SARCEM in the mid-1970s was ultimately successful in saving the plant from closure through a combination of direct action and a dialogue based on expertise about restructuring[27]. Trade union actions have sometimes also addressed issues beyond working conditions, such as denouncing war profiteers, fighting fascism and, later on, the South African apartheid regime, promoting civil rights and, more recently, advocating for Gaza's freedom. As shown by Daniel Sidorick in this thematic issue, trade unions at Campbell used innovative actions, such as boycotts, to gain better recognition of the rights of all workers involved in the value chain of soup products, including seasonal Mexican workers who were employed by subcontractors to pick tomatoes[28].

Internal conflicts over good corporate behavior have become more visible, as companies have established dedicated departments for corporate social responsibility and sustainability[29]. For instance, in the wake of the increased politicization of environmental issues since the late 1960s, many enterprises have created environmental departments[30]. Since the 1980s, they have employed staff members specialized in sustainability issues. Sustainability practitioners often had to navigate dilemmas and conflicting objectives, thus reshaping the narrative about their own

role both to legitimize their position in the company and in society[31]. The same is true for diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) departments, which Laure Bereni discusses in the "With a wink" rubric of this issue[32]. She highlights that while corporations, at least publicly, have been promoting progressive DEI stances, DEI practitioners have found themselves with a constant need to justify the relevance of their programs. Laure Bereni argues that attempts to articulate an economic case to justify their work have placed DEI practitioners in a more precarious position. This approach incentivized them to regard their work as part of the company's public relations strategy, whilst evidence for "the business case of virtue" was flimsy at best and undermined their status within the company.

Overall, who can claim to be an activist and regarded as a voice for the common good is far from straightforward and calls for empirical scrutiny. The contributions highlight the importance of the location of activists in relation to the companies they address, ranging from insiders such as CEOs, shareholders, laborers or DEI and sustainability practitioners to outsiders who are close to the company's management, such as consultants and NGO partners to total outsiders. The position activists hold in relation to the companies they are targeting has important implications for the strategies available to them and their ability to hold businesses accountable. By debating who can count as an activist and in which context, the contributions reinforce the value of "activism" as a broad label to analyze

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[27] F. Deshusses and C. Koller, « Documenter le militantisme visant les entreprises… », *art. cit.*

[28] D. Sidorick, « Class Struggle or Labor Relations? Variations of Labor Activism at Campbell Soup in the 20th century », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 117, 2024, p. 51-67.

[29] See on insider activists: L. Bereni et É. Béthoux, « Réformer le capitalisme de l'intérieur ? » Compte-rendu du colloque PROVIRCAP 30-31 mai 2024, École normale supérieure, Paris, *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024, p. 184-189.

[30] D. Boullet, *Entreprises et environnement en France de 1960 à 1990 : les chemins d'une prise de conscience*, Geneva, Droz, 2006.

[31] C. Wright, D. Nyberg, D. Grant, « "Hippies on the Third Floor": Climate Change, Narrative Identity and the Micro-Politics of Corporate Environmentalism », *Organization Studies,* vol. 33, n° 11, 2012, p. 1451-1475.

[32] L. Bereni, « Diversity Wins? A Progressive Critique of the Business Case for Virtue », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024. Also see L. Bereni, *Le management de la vertu. La diversité en entreprise à New York et à Paris*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2023.

different actors who are involved in trying to change corporate behavior.

3. ITERATIONS OF CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

The supposed immorality of markets, with enterprises as their primary units, has been a constant concern since the 19th century. The resulting criticism directed against the behavior of market actors shaped the way "good" business practices were understood by the public, business leaders, and state officials. Beyond articulating different iterations of corporate social responsibility, such interventions also shaped how people thought desirable corporate behavior could be achieved. If markets were principally immoral, they could only be civilized from the outside[33]. This view warranted the intervention of actors from outside the market, such as civic initiatives or government regulation. Historiographically, this view presents corporate social responsibility as an evolving compromise between economic, social, and environmental concerns.

The contributions to this thematic issue present a different perspective on the evolution of corporate social responsibility. Economic concerns are themselves rooted in moral assumptions rather than being external to moral considerations[34]. As a result, assumptions about what are viable economic considerations appear as historically contingent

moral views. From this perspective, we can distinguish a series of iterations of corporate social responsibility since the second half of the 19th century. These iterations show shifts in three important respects: Who was articulating corporate social responsibility? How was it positioned in relation to common market practices? And who was responsible for enforcing it?

In the second half of the 19th century, many articulations of corporate social responsibility revolved around the personal commitment of the company's figureheads[35]. Businessmen like Piet van Eeghen, George Cadbury, Edward Filene, and Robert Bosch shared the conviction that business interests and social concerns did not have to be at odds. Rather, they came up with ways to combine their business interests with social concerns, such as by offering affordable housing, food, and clothing. Some of them openly positioned their initiatives in relation to the criticism that was articulated by civic initiatives about corporate behavior. Workers' movements were the most visible of these initiatives during the latter half of the 19th century, campaigning for workers' rights and stricter market regulation. In their wake, consumer movements and shareholder activists took on similar concerns, attempting to protect ordinary citizens from the growing power that companies exerted over their everyday lives both as workers and consumers[36].

These iterations of corporate social responsibility primarily revolved around social issues and stressed companies' obligations to act for the benefit of society at large. Notably,

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[33] K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. Origins of our Time*, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1944; L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2005 [1999].

[34] S. Bowles, *The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016.

[35] G. Jones, *Deeply Responsible Business: A Global History of Values-Driven Leadership*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2023, p. 17-71. Also see L. van Hasselt, « Gentleman Activist: Piet van Eeghen as a Driving Force of Social Change in 19th Century Amsterdam », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024.

[36] M.-E. Chessel, « Aux origines de la consommation engagée… », *art. cit.*; L. B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009; J. Rutterford and L. Hannah, « The Unsung Activists: UK Shareholder Investigation Committees, 1888-1940 », *Business History Review*, vol. 96, n° 4, 2022, p. 741-775; S. Yajima, « Fuel, Fear, and Fault: Mass Media and Cartel Criticism During the German Coal Crisis of 1900 », *Enterprise & Society*, FirstView article, 11 November 2024, p. 1-30.

in many instances, these were regarded as not being solely in relation to their own employees but rather were positioned within a broader urban or national framework. Businesses should promote the well-being of urban or national societies, particularly at a time when concerns about poverty and public health came to be regarded as sociopolitical problems.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the emphasis remained primarily on social concerns, yet its locus shifted towards practices within the company. In many places, civic organizations as well as government officials assumed a more prominent role in articulating corporate social responsibilities. In reaction to problems like smoke pollution, local initiatives and public officials held factories accountable for limiting the emission of smoke, particularly within their direct vicinity[37]. As workers' movements only somewhat successfully instigated the regulation of corporate behavior, they took aim at the structures within the companies[38]. These ideas about worker participation coincided with popular ideas about corporatism as a counterpoint to the class struggle. Voluntary commitment to the common good was complemented by government regulation and attempts to monitor corporate behavior by citizens. In this context, the company's responsibility was often presented in terms of corporate democratic practices. In reaction to the New Deal in the United States and the ensuing restraints on corporate freedom, business advocates started to turn this approach into the argument that businesses rather than governments should ensure fair social relations[39].

Since the 1970s, the external effects of a company's operations on the environment

and the population, particularly in the global South, have come into focus. In many parts of the world, a backlash against government intervention resulted in a situation where businesses and civic initiatives became the primary actors articulating desired corporate behavior. Governmental and intergovernmental regulation of social and environmental issues remained a formidable factor in the background of these debates but was now often regarded as a last resort[40]. In reaction to attempts to redefine corporate responsibility in relation to environmental problems and the position of people in the global South, most businesses displayed a notable reluctance to address social concerns. There were many, however, that were willing to acknowledge environmental responsibility. This split between social and environmental concerns was only partly warranted by the issues at hand. Essential concerns, like a healthy environment, could indeed be regarded as combining the environmental and social dimension. Nonetheless, the civic interlocutors for both subjects tended to diverge in most countries across the world. Whereas environmental issues were primarily addressed by groups presenting themselves as part of an environmental movement, social concerns were usually addressed by trade unions and their allied political parties. Although these boundaries were contested[41], the institutionalization of the environmental movement likely contributed to a de facto division of labor which reinforced the perception of a distinction between environmental and social issues.

Ideas about "sustainable development" and "sustainability" since the 1980s have provided

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[37] F. Uekötter, *The Age of Smoke: Environmental Policy in Germany and the United States, 1880-1970*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009; F. Jarrige and T. Le Roux, *La contamination du monde. Une histoire des pollutions de l'âge industriel*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2017.

[38] D. Sidorick, « Class Struggle or Labor Relations? », *art. cit*.

[39] R. Kaplan, « Who Has Been Regulating Whom… », *art. cit*. Michel Capron's contribution to this thematic issue indicates a similar development in France in later years: M. Capron, « Les dynamiques relationnelles… », *art. cit*.

[40] Cf. N. T. van der Valk and M. Boon, « Activism and Corporate Environmental Norms… », *art. cit*.

[41] M. Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009, p. 75-97.

a window of opportunity to reconnect these issues. The widespread acknowledgement of the challenge of reconciling economic, social, and environmental concerns was mirrored by the proliferation of ideas about 'corporate social responsibility' in business literature and corporate reporting[42]. These iterations have seen a continuation of the predominance of the environmental dimension despite the fact that sustainable development had been introduced by the Brundtland Report (1987) as a way to reconcile social and environmental concerns[43]. Even in instances where companies voluntarily reported on social and environmental issues, research has found that the implementation of corporate policies favored the latter[44]. In terms of the ways in which these responsibilities were put into practice, regulation by governments and intergovernmental bodies became a less prominent feature. Instead, the importance of corporate leadership and the potential role of activist initiatives in publicizing issues as well as monitoring corporate behavior became the primary focal points[45]. The renewed emphasis on corporate initiatives also saw the rise of new ways in which companies themselves have promoted good behavior since the 1970s. Counterculture movements extended into business ventures, which combined attempts to sell "good" products and services with activities to raise awareness about social and environmental issues and provided opportunities for like-minded people to connect[46]. Shareholder activism also became a staple of attempts to change companies for the better and demonstrates the growing importance of shareholders in influencing how large companies operated. This could either take the form of a hard-nosed business approach, which attempted to maximize the value of a corporation for the benefit of society, or translate into more traditional attempts by shareholders to implement certain policies[47].

This broad sketch of the evolution of corporate social responsibility since the second half of the 19th century is necessarily short on local varieties and alternative timelines along which the iterations, coalitions, and means developed. Nonetheless, it is evidently possible to discern transnational trends in these three respects. First, the waxing and then waning role of governmental regulations (which might once more be waxing at present) is striking. Second, the shift from social to environmental concerns around 1970 and changes in how businesses have implemented their purported responsibilities, ranging from individual entrepreneurial actions to corporate reporting, have become visible. Finally, the changing role of civic initiatives becomes evident. Transnational networking, monitoring, and pioneering business ventures have become much more prominent features of activism. When different actors make competing claims, this results in the risk that

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[42] K. Sluyterman, « Corporate Social Responsibility … », *art. cit.*

[43] I. Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)*, London, Routledge, 2014.

[44] A. Kolk, « More than Words? An Analysis of Sustainability Reports », *New Academy Review*; vol. 3, n° 3, 2004, p. 59-75.

[45] Cf. M. Capron, « Les dynamiques relationnelles… », *art. cit.* Also see J. B. Warren, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966-1988*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1989; S. A. Soule, *Contention and Corporate Social Responsibility*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; A. Rome, « Beyond Compliance: The Origins of Corporate Interest in Sustainability », *Enterprise & Society,* vol. 22, n° 2, 2021, p. 409-437.

[46] Cf. V. Himmer, « Vendre pour la bonne cause ? Le militantisme des entrepreneurs à impact et ses frontières », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 117, 2024, p. 130-142 ; A. Marrec, « "La Révolution des poubelles". Genèse et transformation d'une start up de la méthanisation, du militantisme anti-nucléaire au *green business* (1977-1990) », *Entreprises et Histoire,* n° 117, 2024, p. 81-98. Also see A. G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism*, *op. cit.* ; J. C. Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs*, *op. cit.* ; P. van Dam, « In Search of the Citizen-Consumer… », *art. cit.*

[47] W. Lazonick and M. O'Sullivan, « Maximizing Shareholder Value: A New Ideology for Corporate Governance », *Economy and Society*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2000, p. 13-35; S. Pitteloud, « Have Faith in Business… », *art. cit.*

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companies can "pick and choose" which issues and policies are to their liking.

4. THE STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

In accounting for who is allowed to define and implement corporate virtue, a constant struggle for legitimacy transpires. Legitimacy has been at stake in claiming to be an activist but is also ingrained in other forms of interaction over attempts to change corporate behavior. The manners in which businesses have navigated criticism through partnerships, co-optation, and the claiming of moral leadership have evolved into a vibrant field of academic inquiry[48].

A crucial mechanism for claiming legitimacy has been the development of partnerships between businesses and civic actors. Michel Capron's contribution explores this dimension. He emphasizes the controversial nature of so-called "multi-stakeholder dialogues" and their potentially adverse consequences for the trust placed in activists. Engaging in partnerships with businesses might lead to accusations that activists have become toothless tools of corporations. Genevieve LeBaron and Peter Dauvergne make the case that the corroding effects of such partnerships extend to the internal dynamics of NGOs[49]. Subjected to market logic through fundraising and competition, they are incentivized to partner with corporations who are a source of financial support. In the debate section of this issue, Sarah Soule develops a more optimistic view of the relationship between cooperative and adversarial tactics based on the "radical flank effect"[50]. She argues that there may be a division of labor between the various types of activists, some of whom specialize in impact actions that would incentivize corporations to adopt the recommendations of less radical activists and advocacy NGOs. Considering the importance of the dynamic between outsiders and insiders in such partnerships, determining who took part in business-activist dialogues and who was excluded is essential.

Businesses and challengers can also claim legitimacy in defining good practices by claiming moral leadership in pioneering initiatives. Corporations have neutralized activist challenges by autonomously adopting some of their demands. For instance, as detailed by Rami Kaplan, US companies adopted CSR principles from the 1950s onwards to decrease the saliency of regulatory attempts[51]. Michel Capron, in a similar fashion, notes the proliferation of labels and awards as a means for activists and businesses to establish good behavior without involving governmental regulation[52]. Challengers have adopted similar approaches. Alexandra Hondermarck's article in this issue analyzes how promoters of vegetarianism in France turned their ideals into a business venture in the early 20th century[53]. The vegetarian restaurant Natura Vigor, established in 1907, was presented as a showcase of ethical eating principles and a

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[48] G. Chamayou, *La société ingouvernable. Une généalogie du libéralisme autoritaire*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2018 ; S. Boudia and N. Jas, *Gouverner un monde toxique*, Versailles, Éditions Quæ, 2019.

[49] G. LeBaron and P. Dauvergne, *Protest Inc…, op. cit.*

[50] H. Arts, G. Jones, S. A. Soule, L. Verheecke, Debate: « Can activists change business for good? » Moderated by S. Pitteloud and P. Van Dam, *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024.

[51] R. Kaplan, « Who Has Been Regulating Whom… », *art. cit.*

[52] M. Capron, « Les dynamiques relationnelles…», *art. cit.* On this dynamic within the fair trade movement, see P. van Dam, « The Limits of a Success Story: Fair Trade and the History of Postcolonial Globalization », *Comparativ,* n° 25, 2015, p. 62-77; M. Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; B. Möckel, *Die Erfindung des moralischen Konsumenten. Globale Produkte und politischer Protest seit den 1950er Jahren*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2024.

[53] A. Hondermarck, « Natura Vigor (1907-1934) : une entreprise au service du mouvement végétarien ? », *Entreprises et Histoire*, n° 117, 2024, p. 30-50.

venue for vegetarians who wanted to eat out. The initiators presented Natura Vigor as a way to spread vegetarianism and downplayed its commercial dimension. Anaël Marrec's article shows a similar attempt by anti-nuclear activists who used their social capital to launch the company Valgora to produce biogas as an alternative source of energy[54]. Because of the activist credentials of its founders, Valgora could muster the support of various environmental associations and sympathetic elected officials.

Vincent Himmer provides an ethnographic analysis of self-declared "impact entrepreneurs" who emphasize the ethics and sustainability of both their company's production processes and products[55]. His analysis shows that these entrepreneurs do not only attempt to fundamentally change the market, but also use their status as impact entrepreneurs to legitimize their voice in both public discourse and the political sphere. They value the symbolic legitimacy they extract from their virtuous business activity as much as the material difference they make in the market. V. Himmer also underlines how their activist status is inherently fragile and that their very success in spreading ethical business models might undermine it. Indeed, as soon as regular businesses adopt (or co-opt) similar products and processes, impact entrepreneurs lose their distinctive status.

Just as activists have leveraged their status to pioneer business ventures, businessmen can use their status to legitimize their voice in the civic domain. At the firm-level, such assumptions have translated into paternalist policies aimed at employees such as housing, insurance and educational programs. It can also be observed around philanthropic activities, where economic success allows businesspeople to support causes that fit and

legitimize their social vision. Such activities mushroomed in the late 19th-early 20th century, when redistribution policies, by means of state and welfare programs, were limited whilst the "social question" became salient. Piet van Eeghen, in 19th century Amsterdam, was one such value-driven entrepreneur. As Laura van Hasselt demonstrates, van Eeghen's entrepreneurial status provided him with the necessary practical knowledge to ensure the economic viability of his civic initiatives. His economic status was also a source of social capital, generating funds and the support of other wealthy and powerful families[56]. From a formal perspective, van Eeghen kept his business and civic initiatives separate. The former nevertheless often took inspiration from the latter and they were closely connected financially.

These entrepreneurial efforts by businessmen and challengers alike are constantly called into question to retain their legitimacy. Beyond specific ways to obtain legitimacy and discredit others, this thematic issue thus points out the structural constraints that prevent virtuous entrepreneurs from becoming the norm despite the efforts of activists. Geoffrey Jones has featured a variety of case studies ranging from 19th century entrepreneurs to recent forms of B-corps and impact investing. According to Jones, competition in a free-market system is an important factor that works against the voice of virtue. The widespread absence of win-win outcomes, in which being sustainable or socially responsible is only an additional cost and a source of competitive disadvantage against "regular" businesses, is certainly central in explaining inertia[57]. Anaël Marrec's analysis of the evolution of Valgora aptly illustrates such dynamics, showing the difficulty of scaling up a green business, while at the same time preserving its

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[54] A. Marrec, « "La Révolution des poubelles". Genèse et transformation d'une start up … », *art. cit.*

[55] V. Himmer, « Vendre pour la bonne cause ? Le militantisme des entrepreneurs à impact et ses frontières », *art. cit.*

[56] L. van Hasselt, « Gentleman Activist... », *art. cit*.

[57] G. Jones, Debate: « Can activists change business for good? », *op. cit.*; G. Jones, *Deeply Responsible Business…, op. cit.*

ideals. Valgora had to rely on public support to stay financially viable, but also depended on a partnership with Gaz de France, which would ultimately buy the company in 1990. The growing influence of shareholders, particularly on larger companies listed on the stock market, has been another crucial roadblock to maintaining legitimacy in pioneering corporate responsibility[58]. Shareholders, who are mainly focused on dividends and short-term market value, tend to have a better grasp than activists on corporate strategies, as CEOs' position and remuneration depend on their satisfaction. This collection of articles thus shows the value of contextualized empirical case studies into the evolving relationships between businesses and activists to understand the shortcomings and potential of attempts to change businesses for the better.

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[58] See S. A. Soule, Debate: « Can activists change business for good? », *op. cit.* On tensions between shareholders' priorities and the legal status of companies, see: K. Levillain, A. Hatchuel, J. Lévêque, B. Segrestin, « La gouvernance de la société à mission. Du cas Danone aux premiers enseignements de la recherche », *Entreprise & Société*, n° 11, 2022, p. 97-111.