

## Review

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*The Corporation*. Directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbot.



### The Edges of "Externality"

Following *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Super Size Me!*, the two docudrama hits of last season, comes *The Corporation*, bearing accolades from not only the Sundance Film Festival, but *Premiere* magazine, the *LA*, and *New York Times*. Directed by Mark Achbar (previous co-director of *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*) and Jennifer Abbot, and based on the book by Joel Bakan -- *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Power and Profit* -- this radical Canadian documentary features Left-notables such as Michael Moore, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, and Naomi Klein, as well as thirty-odd lesser-known corporate experts: "CEOs, whistle blowers, brokers, gurus, spies, players, pawns, and pundits," as the film's promotional blurb proudly declares. As both a critical analysis and a dramatic indictment of the "dominant institution of our era," *The Corporation* probes far deeper than Michael Moore's and Morgan Spurlock's work. The film merits serious attention and deserves a truly super-sized audience (one that, unfortunately, it seems unlikely to get in the US).

Beginning with a fast-paced overview of the recent explosion of corporate crime scandals, the movie proceeds to satirize the dominant media's diagnosis of this scandal "crisis" as the product of a few -- OK, a few *dozen* -- "bad apples" stinking up otherwise healthy Corporate America. The film breaks down this "bad apple" metaphor, demonstrating again and again how the "rotting" of corporate "apples" is little but the open flowering of the corruption present in these institutions' very corporate seeds.

In its early sequences, *The Corporation* examines how corporations acquired the status of legal "persons" following the US Civil War, ironically via the Constitutional amendments aimed at guaranteeing equal citizenship to newly freed African Americans. Wittily, the film then charts the corporate "person's" behavior using an authentic psychiatric checklist from World Health Organization: "Callous unconcern for the feelings of other?" - *Check*. "Incapacity to maintain enduring relationships?" -- *Check*. "Reckless regard for the safety of others?" -- *Check*. "Deceitfulness; repeated lying and conniving of others for profit?" -- *Check*. "Incapacity to experience guilt?" -- *Check*. "Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior?" -- *Check. Check. Check. Check.* As the evidence mounts, the damning diagnosis emerges: the corporation, examined as a "person," is a "psychopath."

"Unaccountable, private tyrannies" is how Noam Chomsky describes them -- rather less playfully -- likening the institution to slavery, which deformed slave-owners -- whatever their benevolent intentions or particular personalities -- to behave brutally and inhumanely. From its early moments *The Corporation* thus moves beyond superficial demonization-or fetishization -- of "bad" corporations -- Big Tobacco, Big Oil, Big Weapons, Big Fast Food -- towards a critical, historical and institutional analysis of corporations' very structure and nature. In this sense the film goes further than either *Fahrenheit 9/11* (anti-Bush, anti-Big Oil and anti-Big Weapons) or *SuperSize Me!* (anti-Big Fast Food).

But not only does the film analyze the origins, history, behavior patterns, and social and environmental effects of corporations; it is also manages to be an entertaining movie, one that is creatively organized and well-produced. Though it relies heavily on individual interviews, for instance, *The Corporation* seldom drags, periodically picking up the pace with clever editing and help from a strong beat-driven soundtrack.

Conceptually, *The Corporation* focuses its critique closely on the idea of "externalities," that is, the external -- often undesirable -- effects of business transactions between two parties (often two corporations) upon an un-consulted third party (often the surrounding community). Indeed, the film presents a devastating barrage of such "unintended" corporate attacks on the environment, public health, and public access to information, while frequently demonstrating how even those who are planning and ordering these attacks are themselves "personally" opposed to them; i.e. their actions as slaves to the corporate bottom line contradict their own beliefs as private citizens. Yet in keeping with its "external" approach, *The Corporation* tends to focus more on the "unaccountability" of corporations and less on their intrinsic "tyranny" as capitalist enterprises, more on the "external" damage done by these institutions than on the *internal* exploitation and repression which they carry out within their factory walls and office hallways, especially with respect to their labor forces.

In fact, while this film boasts a diversity of points-of-view, the perspective of one major group of "corporate insiders" is notably absent: that of the workers whose labor makes these corporations run.

For the most part, the only corporate "insiders" the film interviews are CEOs and managers, with the exception of two news-reporter "whistle-blowers" from Fox 13 News in Florida (whose story, I must note, dramatically demonstrates the willingness of the corporate media producers to censor the "news" to fit its corporate sponsors' interests). But no factory workers, no union organizers, no cubicle white-collar employees appear, at least not for long.

To be fair, "harm to employees" *is* one of the "file categories" examined by the filmmakers during their mock psychiatric exam of the corporation as a "person." Yet there is little to no attention paid to the self-activity of the workers within and against these corporations, or to the role that the state plays in disabling this self-activity. In fact, the only example of labor activism with which we are confronted is that of the American National Labor Council's external expose of sweatshop and child-labor in Kathy Lee Gifford's Latin American garment factories. Though the exploitation of child-labor in third world countries here stands exposed, the workers remain generally passive victims, apparently yet another "externality" for the corporation. However, their status as "internalities" with the potential power to transform -- or even to shut down or to take over -- the corporation from within is virtually ignored.

10. Related to "externality," the other central concept of the film's anti-corporate critique is *privatization*, the corporate take-over of previously public resources. From the human genome, to the inside of children's imaginations, to Iraqi oil, to the public water-supply, to the song "Happy Birthday," the directors bring us a slew shocking and outrageous examples of corporations *crossing the line* -- whether "the line" be ethical, communal, moral, religious, or legal -- to take control and to profit off of what instinct or tradition tells us should be free for all. Clearly nothing is sacred, no line impermeable, nothing off-limits to these out-of-control creatures.

In addition to these lines of analysis, impressively, Howard Zinn and Chomsky use their camera time to foreground corporations' historical complicity in the rise of fascism. For instance, they point out how in Europe during the 1930s, in the US during the Roosevelt reign, as well as throughout the 20th century in Latin America, major corporations have routinely supported right-wing coups and dictatorships. As Chomsky notes, it makes sense: fascists have after all been great defenders of corporate interests, repressing labor unions, destroying left-wing political parties, and issuing large and profitable military contracts. Mussolini as well as Adolf Hitler benefited greatly from corporate aide, the film shows, with IBM in particular coming in for shame for supplying and maintaining the German punch-card machines that kept track of people in the Nazi concentration and death camps, all the way through the early 1940s.

The extensive corporate complicity in the rise of fascism is a fact routinely excluded from US history textbooks and mainstream political discourse (a fact which alone should demand that all high school and college students in the US today see this movie). In fact even Edwin Black -- author of *IBM and the Holocaust* and interviewed in the film -- tends to understate the broader trend in the course of highlighting the exceptional evil of IBM. Like many writers, Black evades the underlying -- and often anti-communist and anti-union -- reasons that corporations cooperated with and supported the Nazis early on. Thus, Black's book does not so much as mention the labor unionists, socialists, and communists who were among the first to be rounded up and killed by Hitler's SS. Thankfully, with the help of the graying professors of US radicalism, however, *The Corporation* puts the ever-more-timely link between big business and the black-shirts back on the table.

Lest we become hopeless in the face of seemingly endless corporate tyranny, *The Corporation* closes with an examination of some of the local victories that mass movements in the third world -- as well as consumer and community movements in the US -- have won against modern-day corporate encroachments. The film pays special attention to the successful Bolivian mass movement against water privatization, as well as to an anti-corporate town meeting in Arcata, CA, and the internal corporate reform efforts of CEO Ray Anderson.

In the end though, what *The Corporation* left me with was the stark contrast between the movement in Bolivia, which mobilized what amounted to a general strike to face down murderous police state violence (and win!) and the limited, rather unfocused victories of the Arcatans, who manage to succeed in banning fast-food chains from their city limits, not to mention the rather facile optimism and self-righteousness of American corporate reformer Ray Anderson, who hopes to clean up his carpet-corporation from within, while still maintaining its hefty profit margins. *Premiere* magazine no doubt has not been alone in deeming Anderson the "bona fide hero" of the movie, as a CEO who has been born-again as an environmentalist and "still has his job." But really, although *The Corporation* does let Anderson give his own account of his ecological epiphany, showing him as he lectures his -- seemingly apathetic -- fellow businessmen on the need to move towards ecological business balance, it is the scenes from the streets of Bolivia -- where tens of thousands take to the streets, and where dozens are shot down for simply asserting their human right to public water -- that contain the real heroes of this film. "I see dark days ahead for my children," Bolivian activist Oscar Olivera" tells the camera, "but I have faith in the people . . . El pueblo unido, jamas hara vencido." *The people united, will never be defeated.* Speaking softly in Spanish to the camera, Olivera's comments are hopeful, yet not naïve or self-serving. Indeed, his words remind me of Italian Marxist and communist organizer Antonio Gramsci, who, from within his fascist prison-cell in the 1930s, called for "pessimism of the intellect," but "optimism of the will."

Still, while this remarkable film depicts plenty of local resistance -- from India to Canada, New York to California -- one would have liked to see *The Corporation* (and one *would still like* to see its viewers) move beyond its extensive discussion of the way that corporations routinely violate the law -- moral as well as juridical -- to a consideration of political strategy. Likewise, I believe that we need to move beyond Chomsky's assertion that corporations are simply "legal institutions," and hence theoretically capable of being restrained or even abolished by that same law, to a political discussion of the extent to which corporations have effectively *taken over* the law and the lawmakers as well. Major corporations after all, practically speaking, via campaign contributions, incessant lobbying efforts, and corporate control of media discourse itself, have to a remarkable degree co-opted the leadership of both major US parties, the White House, most of the Congress, and most regulatory agencies.

On this note, perhaps the most conspicuous absence in *The Corporation's* long line of experts is corporate-raider Ralph Nader, whose biographical trajectory from long-time regulatory and reform advocate to anti-corporate political campaigner could have added a recognizably and explicitly political edge to this otherwise radical work. Without necessarily implying an endorsement of Nader's campaign, his presence could have introduced the idea that perhaps not only local direct action and agitation, but also independent, coordinated, national political action is necessary to take down these monstrous multinationals. That instead of Nader-Camejo, the *The Corporation's* credited and its website gesture to *Moveon.org* as their sole "democracy in action" link suggests a limited left-political vision indeed.

But I don't want to understate the radical edges of this movie. More so than *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Corporation* raises fundamental problems that cannot be answered by supporting corporate-funded candidates or parties (no matter what the film directors or screen credits may tell you), but only by building forms of independent, anti-corporate, political action on a growing, increasingly mass scale. As the treatment of dissenters inside as well as outside the DNC last summer (not to mention the RNC) dramatized, such independent action is something that the Democratic establishment (not to mention the Republicans) seek to control and to co-opt, not create.

To me, *The Corporation* suggests the political impotence of establishment solutions to the current crisis or corporate domination. And while the film doesn't come to any clear conclusions about what is to be done, it does clearly show us how dire is the international need for a political praxis that goes beyond beating the Bush to unearthing, root and branch, the overgrown corporate forest that has produced him (as well as his rather wooden-looking soon-to-be-doomed opponent, John Kerry).