IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED ACTIVISM: HOW ACTIVIST GROUPS INFLUENCE CORPORATE SOCIAL CHANGE ACTIVITIES

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Using insights from the social movement literature and institutional change theory, we explore how activism influences corporate social change activities. As the responsibility for addressing a variety of social issues is transferred from the state to the private sector, activist groups increasingly challenge firms to take up such issues, seeking to influence the nature and level of corporate social change activities. Eventually, they aim to bring about field-level change. We argue that ideological differences among activist groups motivate them to choose different influence tactics to support their claims.

The nature and level of a firm’s corporate social change activities can be understood as an expression of what that firm believes to be its social responsibilities. Such activities are expected or demanded by the firm’s social constituencies, but they are beyond what is minimally required by law, and they may occur at a cost to the firm (Carroll, 1979). As the activities of corporations have become matters of public debate, pressure from activist groups has become more prevalent; consumer activism is one example (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). This trend is likely to continue as, in many countries, the responsibility to address social issues, such as those relating to the natural environment, working conditions in developing countries, protection of consumers, and human rights, increasingly is being transferred from the state to firms and other private institutions (Matten & Crane, 2005). Activist groups present themselves as legitimate claimants in these matters and, accordingly, put pressure on firms to address such issues, occasionally with considerable success. For instance, dozens of companies ceased their activities in Burma when pressured by activist groups whose motivation was to stimulate democracy and peace in this country ruled by, arguably, an oppressive and brutal junta (Spar & La Mure, 2003). Likewise, activist groups in the anti-sweatshop movement keep exerting pressure on major brand producers in the apparel and shoe industries to improve working conditions and wages in the industries’ international supply chains (Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

In the management literature the question of stakeholder tactics largely has been left unattended (Whetten, Rands, & Godfrey, 2002), despite the existence of a strong tradition in the social movement literature to study tactics and targets of activist groups. Nevertheless, even in the social movement literature, only recently have scholars attended to the question of how social movements shape corporate social change activities. This question is relevant for various reasons. As claimants of the firm, being motivated by ethical concerns rather than material self-interest (Knight & Greenberg, 2002), activist groups are secondary stakeholders in the sense that the firm’s survival does not depend on their continuing support (Clarkson, 1995). They have a claim they consider urgent and legitimate, but they have little bargaining power against firms. Even so, many activist groups are not interested in solely affecting the
level of social change activities in an individual firm but, rather, strive for field-level change (Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003). For example, during the Brent Spar episode, Greenpeace clearly indicated that its protest was not only directed against the intended disposal of this particular decommissioned oil storage platform but against the very principle that oil platforms could be sunk into deep-sea ridges; according to Greenpeace, the world’s oceans are not dumping sites (Jensen, 2003). Finally, often a number of activist groups aim to affect the nature and level of corporate social change activities in a firm, but they do so from varying ideological positions. This brings in the issue of collaboration and competition among activist groups (Zald & McCarthy, 1980). For all these reasons, it is theoretically interesting and highly relevant for corporate executives to understand the sources of pressures for corporate social change, the mechanisms by which firms are pressured, and the role of activist groups therein.

In order to address the question of how activist groups influence corporate social change activities, we make use of institutional change and social movement theories. The relevance of institutional change theory (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996) is in highlighting the ends of activist groups’ activities—that is, institutional change at the field level. Activist groups may use two complementary routes in stimulating field-level change. One is to work at the field level—for example, in demanding state regulation. The other is to work at the organizational level and to hope that change in individual firms will eventually evoke field-level change. In this article we focus on the latter route, since this route is increasingly important. Institutional change theory, however, is less developed regarding the means that can be employed to further these ends. We therefore turn to the social movement literature, since this literature offers a rich and diverse tradition of research on the public expression of collective grievances (della Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004). Moreover, it is increasingly being applied in organizational research (cf. Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005; Davis & Thompson, 1994; Hensmans, 2003; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000; Van de Ven & Hargrave, 2004).

Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) have made an important step forward in understanding some of the antecedents of corporate social change activities. Building on social movement theory, they argue that both the interests and the identity of what they call “stakeholder groups” matter in explaining why and when these groups act in pressuring companies. Rehbein, Waddock, and Graves (2004) tested Rowley and Moldoveanu’s propositions in the context of shareholder activism and found that activists selectively target companies that are highly visible and whose practices raise specific issues of interest to society. Still, it remains unclear how different activist groups try to get their claims attended to. We suggest that the choice of protest tactics depends on the activist group’s ideological position, rather than on its interests and identity.

To develop our argument, we first argue that activist groups with similar interests and identities operate differently, and we relate this to radical and reformative ideologies. Next, we consider the ultimate object of activist groups—institutional change—and explore how radical and reformative activist groups seek to encourage processes of deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization. We then present a typology of the various tactics that activist groups may employ and subsequently combine this typology with the institutional change process in order to derive a number of propositions on how radical and reformative activist groups seek to further institutional change. In doing so we investigate how institutional change and social movement perspectives can be productively combined to develop new theoretical insights on an important set of antecedents of corporate social change activities. We illustrate our argument with examples of activist groups that seek to affect the level and nature of firms’ corporate social change activities. Finally, we reflect on the theoretical and practical implications and suggest some directions for future research. For the sake of the argument, we regard activist groups and firms as distinct actors that often have diverging interests. Reality may be more complicated, though, since there may also be movements within firms (Raeburn, 2004) or inside allies working together with external activist groups (Lounsbury, 2001).
ACTIVIST GROUPS AND IDEOLOGY

We view activist groups as stakeholder groups that represent a social movement or that claim to do so. A starting point in defining a social movement is to regard it as a shared belief about a preferred state of the world (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), but one that is able to mobilize people into an organized collective effort to solve social problems or even to transform the social order (Buechler, 2000). People participate in social movements because of three interrelated motives: instrumentality, identity, and ideology (Klandermans, 2004). If their interests, identities, and ideologies sufficiently overlap, people may decide to cooperate in changing their circumstances and in expressing their identity and ideology. Activist groups then emerge out of the need for organization and coordination. They are activist in transforming shared ideals, concerns, or grievances into organized contention, and they are a group in the sense that a collective identity enables them to overcome the problem of collective action.

People may create activist groups by joining together into loosely organized networks (Diani & McAdam, 2003), or, depending on their ability to mobilize sufficient resources, they may create activist groups that are more like formal social movement organizations—highly professional and internally differentiated organizations that aim to shape and structure the social movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Of course, both possibilities are extremes on a continuum, and activist groups may form at any point along this continuum.

Within a particular social movement, usually a number of activist groups operate, each with its own organizational repertoire of arguments and tactics (Clemens, 1993). As Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) have suggested, understanding their interests and identities helps in understanding why stakeholder groups become activist groups. The explanation may be similar for activist groups within the same social movement because of the considerable overlap in their interests and identity, but there may be significant differences in how these activist groups operate. Indeed, within social movements the question of how activist groups should operate is a recurrent topic for debate, and occasionally a point of cleavage. Although activist groups can change their goals and tactics over time (Zald & Ash, 1966), we suggest that looking at ideological connotations of activist groups can teach us a lot about the tactics these groups consider appropriate to invoke institutional change (Minkoff, 2001; Zald, 2000).

The concept of ideology comprises an interconnected set of beliefs and attitudes relating to problematic aspects of social and political topics that are shared and used by members of a group and that inform and justify choice and behavior (Fine & Sandstrom, 1993; Zald, 2000). This concept arises from the circumstances and experiences in that group’s history. In some instances ideologies of social movements may be widely shared, elaborate, consistent, and encompassing, but they are not necessarily so, since in other cases they may be contested, partial, incoherent, and fragmented (Platt & Williams, 2002). Ideologies indicate “a sense of what is problematic” (Blee & Currier, 2005: 138) and can therefore start from a fairly vague discontent. They develop over time and in interaction with other activist groups in the same social movement (Platt & Williams, 2002; Zald, 2000).

Activist groups that campaign for the realization of similar goals can be distinguished according to their ideological stance, since “nearly all social movements divide into ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ factions at some point in their development” (Haines, 1984: 31). Those activist groups that “offer a more comprehensive version of the problem and more drastic change as a solution . . . are normally called radical” (Zald & McCarthy, 1980: 8), whereas activist groups at the other end of the spectrum are considered moderate or reformative. In the context of corporate social change, reformative groups are taken to believe that although companies are part of the problem, they can also be part of the solution. In contrast, radical groups do not believe that companies can be part of the solution. Again, intermediate positions are possible. We focus on the degree of radicalism in the ideologies of activist groups as a significant dimension in the choice of particular tactics at the operational level.

At first sight, associating an activist group’s ideological stance with its preference for particular tactics might look somewhat tautological. For example, radical activist groups tend to be organized non-hierarchically, to be non-bureaucratic, and to emphasize participatory democracy. They are ideologically anti-capitalistic, emphasize working outside the current polit-
ical/economic system, and are multi-issue organizations. Due to their marginalized status, [they] tend to rely on innovative tactics as well as alternative forms of communication (Fitzgerald & Rodgers, 2000: 589).

However, the association between ideological stance and preferred tactics is not entirely rigid, as both anecdotal evidence and findings from empirical research show. One anecdote regards the case of a major Dutch animal rights protection organization (Dierenbescherming). Local branches of this reformative activist group were confirmed to have financially contributed to the violent and disruptive actions of a radical animal rights group (Dierenbevrijdingsfront, comparable to the American Animal Liberation Front). In addition, members of Dierenbescherming’s national board even participated in several of the violent actions of Dierenbevrijdingsfront (NRC Handelsblad, November 29, 2003, and December 13, 2003).

Conversely, radical groups may be involved in actions that by no means can be classified as disruptive or violent, such as buying shares of a contested firm in order to be admitted to speak at shareholder meetings. Another example is the “subverting” that is applied in a campaign where airlines are contested for their involvement in the “deportation” of economic refugees out of Europe. “It is an image polluting campaign. It takes the typical images, logos, colors and ideas of a company and slightly changes their contents. . . . it should question the image as if something in this image is seriously flawed, a flaw which should be pointed out to the consumer” (No Border, 2005).

Apart from these anecdotes, evidence from systematic research is also available. Rucht, for instance, concludes that “informal groups can be moderate in their activities and formal groups can tend towards radical action” (1999: 166). Lustig and Brunner (1996) show that two American environmental organizations, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and Citizen’s Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (CCHW), have radical stances on pesticides but differ in how they operate: CCHW uses nonconventional, disruptive tactics, but EDF does not. Further, Meyer suggests that even if the choice of a set of core tactics by a peace organization is best explained by the ideology of the organization, still “a number of organizations in the sample did not identify as protest movements, yet engaged in occasional acts of protest” (2004: 182). Finally, it should be noted that many of the disruptive, innovative, and nonconventional tactics explored by radical groups are adopted by reformative activist groups at later stages in the development of a social movement (Tarrow, 1983). Activist groups thus have a broader and more complex set of tactics at their disposal than would be suggested from looking at their ideology alone.

Activist groups are aware of the complex amalgam of more or less converging interests, identities, and ideologies that characterize the movement in which they operate. Ideological variety within a social movement can lead to “radical flank effects,” which involve the consequences of the existence of radical factions on the ability of reformative factions to realize their goals (Haines, 1984). The existence of a radical group may affect the legitimacy of a reformative group as being representative of its constituency; it may increase public awareness of reformative groups, their definitions of the problem, and their access to decision makers; or it may affect their ability to attract resources.

On the one hand, movement characteristics thus restrain the choice of action of activist groups, their flexibility in tactical choices, their possible organizational form, and the level of accountability they must demonstrate toward their constituents (Dreiling & Wolf, 2001; Minkoff, 2001). But, on the other hand, activist groups can deliberately make use of these characteristics—for example, when influencing the broader movement’s ideological stance through the specific framing of contested issues or when differentiating themselves from other activist groups in the movement with whom they compete for resources (McCarthey & Zald, 1977; Zald & McCarthey, 1980). Social movements can even make use of this effect strategically, for example, by having radical groups perform disruptive tactics to pave the way for the claims of reformative groups (Haines, 1984). In this sense ideology and instrumental behavior are not opposites (Zald, 2000); ideology suggests how activist groups may operate instrumentally to effectively pursue their beliefs and interests, even to the extent that they—temporarily—denounce their identity. The specialization and differentiation among activist groups could allow the entire movement to operate more flexibly and to find a solution to the legitimacy dilemma by the loose
coupling of the activities of radical and reformative activist groups.

Looking at different ideological positions as influencing activist groups’ tactics to stimulate corporate social change therefore goes beyond Rowley and Moldoveanu’s (2003) distinction between interest- and identity-based activism. In their model of stakeholder group mobilization, the interests and identity of individuals, as well as the characteristics of the group they belong to, are considered determinants of group mobilization toward the focal organization. Of course, identity and ideology are related concepts, but identity refers to social relations, whereas ideology refers to views and beliefs (Hunt & Benford, 2004; Snow, 2004).

In short, collective identity provides “a shared and interactive sense of ‘we-ness’ and ‘collective agency’” (Snow, 2001: 2213), whereas ideology stabilizes the relationships among an actor (or a group of actors), its (their) adversary, and its (their) objectives (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Ideology “is assumed to provide the rationale for defending or challenging various social arrangements and conditions” (Snow, 2004: 396)—for instance, the level of corporate social change activities. Adding the notion of ideology as another influential factor of activism hence takes the discussion beyond the individual and its group, since this notion provides a link to the world view the group adheres to. Ideology therefore provides a useful link to understanding activist groups’ expectations and demands at the organizational and field levels and to the repertoire of tactics these groups consider legitimate and suitable for establishing corporate social change.

ACTIVISM AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Institutions can be defined briefly as “multifaceted, durable social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources” (Scott, 2001: 49). They have isomorphic effects on the actors in an organizational field by constraining their behavior through coercive, normative, and cognitive forces (Scott, 2001), but they are simultaneously shaped by interaction among the actors in the field. Field frames (Lounsbury et al., 2003) provide order and stability in an organizational field, since they comprise the technical, legal, or market standards that define the normal modes of operation within that specific field (Lawrence, 1999). According to Lounsbury et al., the “notion of field frame is an intermediate concept that has the durability and stickiness of an institutional logic, but akin to strategic framing, it is endogenous to a field of actors and is subject to challenge and modification” (2003: 72). Some actors in the field, including activist groups, thus try to influence field frames, turning the field into an arena of power relations (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Activist groups employ various tactics in order to better align the prevailing field frame with the preference structure that characterizes the social movement they represent. Before we discuss how radical and reformative activist groups differ in this respect, we need to conceptualize institutional change.

Characteristics of Institutional Change

Institutional change comes in several forms, including the genesis of an institution, its elaboration, its decline or abandonment (deinstitutionalization), and its replacement by another institution (reinstitutionalization; Jepperson, 1991). No doubt, the ambition of activist groups is to significantly alter or even replace current institutions by others, but their efforts may have less dramatic consequences in that current institutions are only marginally modified or not even affected at all. Institutional change is constrained by the relatedness of a challenged institution and other institutions and by the mutually reinforcing systems of practices, interests, and ideas that are embedded in the challenged institution (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Holm, 1995; Jepperson, 1991). Hence, to change institutions, old institutions first need to become deinstitutionalized and disentangled before new or adapted ones can be reinstitutionalized (Greenwood et al., 2002; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

Theorization—the “justification of an abstract solution” (Greenwood et al., 2002: 60)—is an important condition for reinstitutionalization, since it “specifies why the potential adopter should attend to the behavior of one population and not some other, what effects the practice will have, and why the practice is particularly applicable or needed” (Strang & Meyer, 1993: 500). This institutional change process provides activist groups with several points of leverage to pursue corporate social change, notably in stimulating
the deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization of field frames.

Figure 1 suggests that institutional change has taken place when a field frame, F₁ (at time $t_1$), has developed into another field frame, F₂ (at a later point in time, $t_2$). When F₁ has transformed into F₂, it can be argued, first, that F₁ has become deinstitutionalized and, subsequently, that F₂ has reinstitutionalized. The distinction is analytical, because in reality it may be very difficult to define an exact moment in time at which the transformation of F₁ into F₂ is completed. During some period of time, F₁ and F₂ are likely to coexist, and elements of F₁ are likely to be found as sediments in the practices informed by F₂ (Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood, & Brown, 1996). We nevertheless can distinguish activities aimed at the deinstitutionalization of current practices in F₁ from those aimed at the reinstitutionalization of preferred alternative practices in F₂, because different forms of legitimacy are invoked to justify them.

Moral legitimacy has been argued to be central in processes of deinstitutionalization, and pragmatic legitimacy in processes of reinstitutionalization (Greenwood et al., 2002; Lounsbury et al., 2003). However, we expect that radical and reformative activist groups will differ in how they invoke these different forms of legitimacy in striving for corporate social change. Differences will appear in the type of arguments they use, as well as in the level of activity they demonstrate.

Deinstitutionalization, Reinstitutionalization, and Legitimacy

Before F₂ can be reinstitutionalized, F₁ needs to be sufficiently destabilized for field players to even start thinking about alternatives to it. In the process of deinstitutionalization, moral legitimacy is central, because it is related to an evaluation of whether the organization “effectively promote[s] societal welfare, as defined by the audience’s socially constructed value system” (Suchman, 1995: 579). When striving for the deinstitutionalization of F₁, activist groups systematically invoke moral legitimacy. However, in doing so, radical and reformative activist groups use different arguments. This idea builds on a distinction between consequential and structural aspects of moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Actors may be granted moral legitimacy because of what they do (consequential) or because of what they are (structural). If a firm’s activities—or the consequences thereof—are considered appropriate and effective in promot-

![FIGURE 1](Types of Legitimacy Invoked in Processes of Frame Transformation)
ing societal welfare, the argument to grant moral legitimacy is said to be consequential. If, however, a firm receives moral legitimacy because it is considered an appropriate entity in itself, the argument is said to be structural. Reformative activist groups turn their judgment that the activities of a particular firm are not appropriate or effective in promoting societal welfare into a disavowal of this firm’s activities; they use a consequential argument. In contrast, radical activist groups expand the moral judgment to discrediting the firm itself. They locate the firm in a “morally disfavored taxonomic category” (Suchman, 1995: 581), thus adding a structural argument to the consequential argument.

For example, radical branches of the animal rights movement categorically oppose farms that raise livestock for their meat and skins, because, they argue, animals have intrinsic rights that are violated when the animals are killed for consumption. Hence, they campaign against the very existence of such farms, and even the entire meat and fur industries. Reformative groups limit their campaign to improving the conditions under which the animals are raised (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). Both groups are motivated by moral indignation, but they use different arguments.

Proposition 1: In striving for the deinstitutionalization of an established field frame, reformative activist groups use consequential arguments, whereas radical activist groups supplement consequential arguments with structural arguments.

Theorization is a central activity in the reinstitutionalization of preferred practices, as articulated in F2. To do so, activist groups use arguments based on moral legitimacy. This is not surprising, since the alternative practices are preferred simply because of their expected consequences. However, theorization that solely builds on arguments of moral legitimacy is unlikely to provide a sufficient condition for diffusion, for to some extent firms may resist pressures for institutional isomorphism (Oliver, 1991). Additional arguments are needed before theorization can have the effect of “turning diffusion into rational choice” (Strang & Meyer, 1993: 500). Additional arguments can be found by invoking pragmatic legitimacy, which “rests on the self-interested calculations of an organization’s most immediate audiences” (Suchman, 1995: 578). Again, reformative and radical activist groups are likely to differ in the extent to which they invoke arguments based on pragmatic legitimacy.

For instance, as Lounsbury et al. (2003) observed in their study of institutional change regarding recycling, reformers made use of appeals to both moral and pragmatic legitimacy when advancing recycling, whereas radicals solely used arguments connected to moral legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is invoked because theorization is not only about the desirability but also about the viability of an alternative frame (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). However, whereas the pragmatic legitimacy of F2 is very clear to the activist group—because adoption of F2 by a challenged firm makes the activist group see the firm “as being responsive to [its] larger interests” (Suchman, 1995: 578)—this legitimacy is not necessarily clear to the firm. The challenge to activist groups is to convince the firm of the interest it has in receiving pragmatic legitimacy from them. In order to do so, activist groups must seek to occupy a position in society that signals their relevance to this firm—they must increase their salience (Mitchell et al., 1997) in such a way that their involvement in adopting F2 becomes relevant and valuable to the challenged firm and thus adds to this firm’s self-interested calculations.

Activist groups may advance different types of arguments to contend why it would be in a firm’s interest to receive pragmatic legitimacy. They may try to convince the firm that adopting F2 is in its best interest because of material benefits to the firm; the argument could be that adopting F2 enables the firm to explore attractive market opportunities or to benefit from lower costs. Alternatively, activist groups may allow the firm to make use of their reputation in bolstering its own reputation, which may help the firm to differentiate from its major competitors. Finally, activist groups may even allow the firm to be involved in their own internal decision making. For example, it has been reported that WWF1 regularly accepts sponsorship from companies, and, in return, these companies may

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1 WWF was formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund but now presents itself by just this abbreviation, sometimes explained as World Wide Fund for Nature.
use the WWF logo or even obtain a seat on WWF’s board—practices for which the organization is heavily criticized by other, more radical activist groups (Wilson, 2002).

The granting of pragmatic legitimacy thus implies a cooperative stance toward firms, increasingly so when the arguments used vary from pointing out business opportunities to allowing firms to have a say in whether and how the activist group’s assets, such as its reputation, can be used to the firm’s benefit. In light of the different ideologies of radical versus reformative activist groups, it is to be expected that only the latter groups will be inclined to use arguments based on pragmatic legitimacy in advancing the theorization of F₂. Because there is only limited space in the collective action frame of the most radical activist groups for firms and the current structures in which firms operate, their theorization of F₂ is unlikely to address the firm’s self-interested calculation that is inherent to pragmatic legitimacy.

**Proposition 2: In striving for the reinstitutionalization of their preferred field frame, radical activist groups use arguments based on moral legitimacy, whereas reformative activist groups supplement these with arguments based on pragmatic legitimacy.**

Having examined the arguments invoked by activist groups, we now turn to their level of activity during different stages of the institutional change process. By granting pragmatic legitimacy, activist groups run the risk of being co-opted. Activist groups are likely to differ in their opinion about the risk of co-optation. Radical activist groups are less likely to call for cooperation, since this can be seen as a confirmation of existing structures; they would not want to be connected to other actors representing the very system they discredit.

For example, the involvement of a large number of reformative activist organizations in the establishment of the UN Global Compact has generated severe criticism from more radical activist groups. In the Global Compact activist groups, policy makers and businesses signed a set of principles concerning environmental protection, labor rights, and human rights that stimulate firms to voluntarily report on the progress they make in these domains (Kell, 2003). Radical activist groups contest the voluntary nature of the Global Compact, believing it offers insufficient incentives for firms to change their practices since it might shield participating firms from further governmental regulation. Moreover, these groups see their potential leverage over firms threatened, because the involvement of reformative groups might cause participating firms to be no longer willing to listen to noninvolved activist groups.

We therefore expect that radical activist groups will consider the risk of co-optation as greater, whereas reformative activist groups will assess this as less risky. For this reason radical activist groups are likely to devote a greater share of their time and resources to activities related to deinstitutionalization than to reinstitutionalization.

Conversely, reformative activist groups will be keener to engage in activities aimed at reinstitutionalization than deinstitutionalization. In deinstitutionalizing F₁ and reinstitutionalizing F₂, reformative activist groups focus their energy on the issue of how firms in general may convincingly show that they have established high levels of corporate social change activities. According to them, firms ought to be transparent and accountable, because under such conditions market forces will reward those firms exhibiting high levels of corporate social change activities and punish those that do not. They leave it to others to draw implications from what firms report.

For example, Consumers International (CI) campaigns to increase the levels of corporate social reporting, and it especially demands producer transparency and accountability (Scholte, 2004). Rather than challenging labor conditions in a specific firm’s supply chain, the group posits that labor conditions in general should be in accordance with international standards, urging firms to demonstrate their compliance with such standards. Such information should allow consumers and investors to make their own choices regarding which firms’ products to buy or in which stock to invest.

There is hardly any activity oriented toward deinstitutionalization to be observed in these campaigns. If firms were to be discredited in such campaigns, it would be because of their lack of transparency rather than because of the labor policies of their supply chain. Opposite radical activist groups, reformative groups hence show a higher level of activity aimed at
reinstitutionalization than deinstitutionalization.

Proposition 3: Reformative activist groups spend more of their resources and time on activities aimed at reinstitutionalization than deinstitutionalization, whereas radical activist groups spend more of their resources and time on activities aimed at deinstitutionalization than reinstitutionalization.

TACTICS FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

There are many different tactics that activist groups may use, ranging from petitions and lobbying to confrontations and sabotage (Rochon, 1988) and reflecting the entire range of conventional, disruptive, and violent tactics (Tarrow, 1998). There is a long history of examples of material damage to firms caused by activist groups. For instance, between 1811 and 1816 the Luddites applied machine-breaking tactics, deliberately looking for opportunities to further their own interests (higher wages, job security), rather than acting out of an indiscriminate position against industrialization per se; they hit where it hurt (Hobsbawm, 1952). The activism of these Luddites, however, was different from present-day economic protest in democratic advanced capitalist societies, since the Luddites “were defending livelihoods under threat from new economic forces and could not campaign overtly without facing severe repression” (Plows, Wall, & Doherty, 2004: 200).

Friedman (1999) provides another historical example, reporting that, since the 1880s, stand-ins and other obstructionist tactics, such as picket lines, were used to convince customers not to buy at particular stores—for example, if the owner would not hire African American labor. Shop owners were selectively put under pressure to comply with these demands by negatively affecting their turnover.

Current activist group protest tactics are believed to be increasingly supplemented by inflicting symbolic damage on companies, such as affecting a firm’s reputation through the clever use of mass media, rather than bringing economic damage to firms (Friedman, 1999; Taylor & van Dyke, 2004). To understand the different tactics activist groups can employ vis-à-vis firms, we discuss two influence logics.

Although the tactics of activist groups have received ample attention in the social movement literature, the focus there is often on the political change these activist groups strive for (Taylor & van Dyke, 2004). Della Porta and Diani (1999: 174–ff.) discuss several mechanisms by which protest tactics can be effective in a public policy context. They suggest that collective action may be effective in forcing decision makers to change or abandon contested practices or policies if the protest raises the cost of continuing the contested practices or policies (“logic of material damage”) or if the protest is supported by a large number of people (“logic of numbers”). We argue that these two logics can be elaborated in the corporate context.

Damage and Gain

The logic of material damage is based on economic calculation. By disturbing or slowing down the normal operational rhythm or by damaging the property of a decision maker—a government or a firm—protesters increase the cost the decision maker must bear to continue the contested decisions or policies. Ultimately, the cost will rise so high that the balance with the benefits to the decision maker will no longer be positive.

For example, a significant part of the persisting protests against nuclear energy plants in

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2 We thank one anonymous reviewer for pointing out the possible interpretation of Luddite activism as an early example of activist group pressure on companies, aimed at increasing the level of corporate social change activities. In addition, in this article we highlight activist groups in a broadly democratic advanced capitalist society. After all, in defending livelihoods and facing severe repression, the Luddites might not differ that much from, for instance, the Ogoni people in the oil fields of Nigeria.

3 Della Porta and Diani (1999) also discuss a “logic of bearing witness,” in which protesters show their dedication and commitment to the cause they support by deliberately running personal or financial risk. In our view this logic is mainly meant to increase the vehemence of protest and will often be used in combination with another logic; it works by supporting and enhancing the logics of material damage and numbers. Therefore, we do not consider the logic of bearing witness as a self-standing logic in the interactions between activist groups and firms regarding the level and nature of corporate social change activities.
Germany focused on increasing the cost of nuclear energy. Strong demands for double security measures and concrete containment of reactors added to the investment cost. Also, antinuclear energy activists chained themselves to the railways, not only showing their dedication but also expecting that the cost of transport of nuclear materials—owing to loss of time, the use of special police forces, and so forth—would rise so high that, on balance, the economic feasibility of nuclear energy would disappear (Kolb, 2002).

Cost may rise because a challenged organization is required to spend time and resources in responding to the challenge, or because it needs to make organizational adjustments by creating new functions and departments (Rowley & Bereman, 2000). Although the mechanism is likely to work in both public policy and corporate contexts, it is probably more effective in the latter because of the profit motive of firms (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Spar & La Mure, 2003). In practice, however, the cost added or the reduction of revenues needs to be substantial in order to have more than a marginal impact on a healthy firm (Spar & La Mure, 2003). Making a significant impact on the firm’s economic position is quite a challenge for activist groups, especially in the case of large firms that have ample slack resources.

The logic of material damage needs to be expanded in two ways to better fit the corporate context. First, material gain may also be effective in sustaining or bringing about corporate social change activities—for example, if consumers decide to preferentially shop at one company rather than another in order to reward it for its particular policies or practices (“buycott”; Friedman, 1999; Vogel, 2004). Second, gain and damage need not always be material but can also be symbolic. Morrill, Zald, and Rao (2003) point to Scott’s (1989) distinction between material and symbolic aspects: “material’ forms focus on the subversion (and often the destruction, hampering, or appropriation) of organizational technologies and resources, whereas ‘symbolic’ forms attempt to subvert dominant meanings, ideologies, and discourses” (2003: 394). Protest results in symbolic damage if it is made clear that the decision maker is publicly typified as noncomplying with institutionalized rules, values, or categories.

Inflicting symbolic damage has become an option since the rise of mass media (Friedman, 1999). For example, large companies that operate in advertising-intensive consumer markets have become dependent on their reputation with critical constituents to maintain sales or to keep valuable members of their workforce (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Turban & Greening, 1997). Several examples of protest have been reported where protesters quite ingeniously have made use of the vulnerability of such firms for reputation damage with consumers. By taking corporate symbols and logos out of context and transforming them, protesters aim to influence the mental association that consumers experience when viewing these symbols in another instance (cf. Bennett, 2004; Carty, 2002; No Border, 2005). Usually, there is no intention of inflicting immediate material damage. The ambition is to convince the public at large, and through them political decision makers, that the firm belongs to some morally disfavored taxonomic category. Doing so is a first step in creating sufficient public support, for example, for a boycott to succeed, even if some consumers, because of their changed perception of the firm, may already decide to shop elsewhere. Thus, symbolic damage contains a threat of inflicting material damage.

Conversely, symbolic gain may change to material gain, for example, when a reinforcement of the firm’s reputation leads to increased turnover. The logic of material damage thus needs to be complemented by a logic of material gain, as well as by the logics of symbolic damage and symbolic gain.

Numbers

The logic of numbers is applied in different participatory forms of action, such as petitions, marches, boycotts, and other forms of grassroots mobilization. By showing their numbers, protesters collectively express that they no longer believe that the decisions or policies of a decision maker are desirable, proper, or appropriate. If a conflict escalates, the loss of legitimacy of decisions and policies may expand to negatively
affect the legitimacy of the decision maker itself (Beetham, 1991). Of course, the larger the number of protesters, the greater this effect will be. This mechanism may work effectively in corporate situations if the decision maker depends on the support of the contesters. For instance, Frooman (1999) argues that when a firm’s management depends on the continuing support of a particular stakeholder group, this group may use the threat to withdraw its support as a lever in negotiations. The salience of this particular stakeholder group increases if it can mobilize more supporters, all the more so if those supporters are publicly visible and highly reputed.

In their attempts to affect the level and nature of corporate social change activities, activist groups may thus choose to employ tactics based on participatory forms of action in order to increase their leverage over firms. However, it has been suggested that tactics based on the logic of numbers have decreased in importance. For several reasons, in the corporate context, consumer protest has changed in character over the past century, from being predominantly “marketplace oriented” to “media oriented” (Friedman, 1999). One reason is related to the opportunities that mass media—and more recently the internet—offer in the dissemination of relevant information and images (Illia, 2003; Taylor & van Dyke, 2004). Another reason can be found in the current difficulties that activist groups face in mobilizing the numbers of protesters required for this type of protest tactic to be successful. A third reason is related to the character of modern corporations: several remain invisible behind their subsidiaries that market different products, each under its own brand, whereas other corporations have been able to create strong customer loyalties (Friedman, 1999).

Other tactics may substitute for the numbers, however. Nonparticipatory protest tactics do not depend on a large number of protesters but on the quality of the resources that a small number of highly dedicated activists bring into the protest (Rucht, 1988). Examples of such resources are access to specialized knowledge and high-quality information, access to mass media, expertise in political lobbying, or expertise in court procedures. In terms of the tactics presented in Table 1, as much symbolic damage might be inflicted through a well-designed media campaign as through a rally or petition, but, in order to be effective, the latter must be massively attended while the former can be brought about by a small number of dedicated, ingeniously operating protesters.

On these theoretical bases we classify various protest tactics that activist groups may use vis-à-vis companies in Table 1. The left column contains the intended outcome of the use of tactics: material or symbolic. The other columns indicate to what extent the success of tactics depends on the participation of a large number of protesters: protest tactics can be participatory or nonparticipatory (mass participation versus elite participation). Having examined the ideology of activist groups, its repercussions for the type of arguments these groups use, and the level of activity they may develop in contributing to the deinstitutionalization of F1 and, respectively, the reinstitutionalization of F2, we now discuss the employment of tactics.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Outcome of Use of Tactics</th>
<th>Dependence on Participatory Forms of Action Is High (“Mass Participation”)</th>
<th>Dependence on Participatory Forms of Action Is Low (“Elite Participation”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material damage</td>
<td>Boycott</td>
<td>Blocking of gates, sabotage, occupation of premises, internet activism (“hacktivism”), lawsuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material gain</td>
<td>Buycott</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic damage</td>
<td>Writing letters/emails, petitions, marches, rallies</td>
<td>Shareholder activism, street theater, negative publicity, research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic gain</td>
<td>Voluntary action</td>
<td>Positive publicity, cooperation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPLICATION OF TACTICS

To consider how various forms of protest are actually used by activist groups that wish to advance corporate social change activities, we start from the assumption that the interaction between activist groups and firms is, at least partly, guided by an instrumental logic under resource constraints: for activist groups because of their change ambitions, for firms because of their profit motive. Cost and effectiveness then can be seen as two central characteristics of the tactics applied by activist groups. In relation to Table 1, we first argue that, in general, activist groups are likely to start their protest by choosing tactics that are nonparticipatory and that are aimed at having a symbolic impact, and, second, that as the interaction escalates or endures over time, radical activist groups will increasingly use tactics aimed at material damage, whereas reformative ones will be inclined to mobilize larger numbers of protesters.

Tactical Starting Position

The tactics in the lower right column of Table 1 are nondisruptive, and their resource intensity is relatively low. Therefore, they offer a common tactical starting position for both radical and reformative activist groups. Similar to the public policy context, it is to be expected that activist groups will begin to vent their dissatisfaction by informing the firm about their grievances and will demand corrective action to be taken. In the case of continuing unsatisfactory response or nonresponse by the firm, more radical or resource-intensive protest tactics will be used (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Tarrow, 1998), leading eventually to an escalation of the controversy. Why would, at least initially, tactics that bring about a symbolic impact be preferred over those aimed at making a material impact? To support our claim that the tactics in the lower right column of Table 1 are indeed likely to be a tactical starting position, we need to make it plausible that nonparticipatory tactics with a symbolic impact can be effective and are easier to organize than the other tactics presented.

Among participatory tactics, we contrast a boycott (material damage) with a letter writing campaign (symbolic damage). Both need to attract a large number of participants to be effective, but a boycott requires a continuing effort on the part of the participants, whereas letter writing merely demands a one-time effort. Letter writing campaigns have proven to be effective, if only through the appeal made on moral legitimacy. However, by writing a letter, participants indicate that they are willing to mobilize. Their willingness to make a one-time effort increases the chance they might also participate in more demanding or longer-lasting protest tactics—for example, by participating in a boycott. If sufficient numbers of people participate in tactics aimed at inflicting a symbolic impact, a momentum may build that can be transformed into participation in tactics aimed at material damage. The anticipated consequences to the firm, if a large number of people indeed live up to their initial commitment, may be such that the firm does not dare to take the risk of neglecting the activism. Regarding material gain, a similar argument can be developed for a “buycott” versus the promise to do business with the firm. Among the range of participatory tactics, it is therefore easier, and potentially equally effective, for activist groups to employ those tactics that aim at having a symbolic rather than a material impact.

Likewise, in the case of nonparticipatory tactics, we contrast tactics intended at inflicting significant material damage, such as sabotage, with those intended at inflicting symbolic damage, such as a media campaign. When using tactics aimed at inflicting material damage, activist groups—especially reformative ones that depend to a greater extent on their numbers for efficacy—run the risk of alienating their constituency and losing potential allies, whereas publicly discrediting the firm in a media campaign may result in a reconsideration by other parties as to whether or not to continue to do business with the firm, at least under similar conditions as before. There may not be immediate material damage, but neglecting continued symbolic damage exposes the firm to the risk of material damage (Wartick, 1992). For example, investors may eventually increase the cost of capital to reflect increased risk perceptions. Adding sig-

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5 The mechanism resembles the so-called foot-in-the-door technique, in which agreement with a small request is followed by a larger request that is then more difficult to refuse (Burger, 2001; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Although it is plausible that the mechanism also works in this particular context, we do not believe that this has been confirmed yet.
nificant material gain to the firm, in contrast, is equally risky to activist groups—especially to radical ones—since it may be interpreted by their constituents and (potential) allies as a sign of selling out or being co-opted, thus hampering their independence. In either case we therefore can presume that activist groups will initially seek to increase the efficiency of their efforts by keeping to tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact in which the threat of a material impact substitutes for a real impact.

Finally, resource efficiency arguments would also predict that activist groups prefer to adopt nonparticipatory rather than participatory tactics. After all, significant effort is required to mobilize the crowds that are needed to make the logic of numbers effective. Knowledge about and feelings of discontent and agreement with the cause are not sufficient conditions for individuals to participate in protest activities (Klein et al., 2004). Not only does the collective identity of the movement need to be incorporated into people’s political consciousness before they can be mobilized (Gamson, 1992), but, to become participants in protest, individuals must also be linked to the movement’s network. They must be convinced of the net benefits of participation both for themselves and for the protest event, while mundane practicalities such as illness or lack of transportation should not obstruct their participation (Klandermans, 2004).

It requires a large effort on the part of the organization to overcome such barriers. Regarding consumer boycotts, Vogel concludes that “it has proven very difficult to mobilize large numbers of consumers to avoid the products of particular companies for social or political reasons” (2004: 96). Still, both material and symbolic impacts can be brought about with a small number of dedicated and experienced persons through nonparticipatory tactics. Few people are needed to investigate a firm’s contribution to social welfare, and only a well-written press release may be needed to inflict reputation damage if it is shown that this contribution is lower than generally assumed (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). In addition, a handful of protesters may suffice to relate a firm to disavowed practices if adequate media coverage is secured. Protest is newsworthy if it involves many people, utilizes radical tactics, or is particularly novel (Rochon, 1988). The latter two criteria can well be met with a small number of dedicated people and are therefore easier to organize than the first one. Hence, in terms of cost and effectiveness, nonparticipatory tactics aimed at bringing about a symbolic impact are a prime choice for activist groups in many cases.

**Proposition 4**: Both radical and reformative activist groups employ nonparticipatory tactics aimed at making symbolic impacts when starting to influence the nature and level of corporate social change activities.

**Diverging Tactics Under Escalation**

Although the arguments presented above provide insight into activist groups’ tactical starting positions, it remains to be explained why firms would respond to the arguments of activist groups. If a firm repetitively ignores, defies, refuses, or otherwise responds negatively to an activist group’s demand, the conflict endures over time and may escalate. In addition to having compelling arguments, activist groups then need to increase their salience with the firm. One well-known strategy, used by both reformative and radical groups, is to increase the legitimacy of their demand and to strengthen their position in the organizational field by seeking support from other powerful and legitimate actors. Such actors can be found both within and outside the broader social movement; other activist groups in the same movement, unions, large shareholder groups, social investors, or political parties are among potential allies (cf. Berry, 2003; Frooman, 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Rowley, 1997).

To operate beyond such indirect strategies, activist groups need a reputation for being able to mobilize large numbers of supporters or to bring damage or gain to the firm. In order to make the firm respond to their demands, they may feel the need to live up to their reputation. In this respect, moving from nonparticipatory to participatory tactics and moving from tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact to those aimed at having a material impact represent two options for activist groups to increase their salience with firms. How to increase salience is a relevant question in situations of both deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization that radical and reformative activist groups are likely to approach in different ways.
Deinstitutionalization. In general, deinstitutionalization is focused at opposing institutionalized practices in $F_1$. Both reformative and radical activist groups will invoke moral legitimacy in arguing why they disavow this practice within the organizational field, but radical activist groups will be more inclined to also challenge the moral basis of the current field structure of a contested industry (Proposition 1). Nonparticipatory tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact may suffice to underscore the consequential arguments used when invoking moral legitimacy (Proposition 4). Some escalation can be accomplished within this set of tactics. For example, substantiating the threat of recourse to law by starting a lawsuit makes the protest more vehement. Likewise, when aiming to inflict reputation damage in a negative media campaign, the phrasing of the claim and the images used may be more or less confrontational (Bennett, 2004). However, the different forms of inflicting symbolic damage still have the dual objective of delivering the claim to both the company and bystanders and convincing them that the practices under $F_1$ are wrong. Deinstitutionalization represents a situation of conflict in which further escalation would lead radical activist groups to adopt tactics intended to inflict material damage and reformative ones to adopt participatory tactics.

In normal situations people usually have little reason to discredit a decision maker, even if they do not agree with all the decisions made. In situations of enduring or escalating conflict, this may change (Beetham, 1991). At some point activist groups will start to use structural arguments related to moral legitimacy, but radical activist groups will be more likely to do so than reformative ones. Radical activist groups are more likely to challenge the structural position of a firm within an organizational field and to dispute the trustworthiness of firms in general—and challenged ones in particular. This leads them to see lower barriers for the application of nonconventional protest tactics. Consequently, they will be quicker to employ tactics of material damage, including bringing the firm’s daily operations to a halt by blocking gates or even applying sabotage. Moreover, their radical position will make it even more difficult for them to mobilize sufficient numbers, beyond the normal difficulty of mobilizing support for participatory protest tactics. In attempting to strengthen their position vis-à-vis companies, radical activist groups will thus be more resource efficient in employing nonparticipatory protest tactics rather than mobilizing the relatively few people already convinced, especially since nonparticipatory tactics may also have the effect of increasing the number of people who support their position (Plows et al., 2004).

Alternatively, reformative activist groups will find it harder to justify the infliction of material damage during deinstitutionalization. If they try to inflict material damage on firms, they will face a considerable risk of alienating a substantial part of their constituency. This might lead to the erosion of the central resource that provides them leverage in their engagement with firms. In escalating situations, reformative activist groups therefore will find it more attractive to actually lever their constituency base—and, thus, to use participatory tactics—than to revert to tactics aimed at inflicting material damage.

Finally, because of the discrediting that is associated with deinstitutionalization, it is unlikely that tactics intended to provide symbolic or material gain will be found in this context. However, in the case of reformative activist groups, the analysis might be more complicated. As we argued before, collaborations between activist groups and firms may combine various stages in the process of institutional change, including deinstitutionalization and theorization. In this context, cooperation, as a nonparticipatory tactic that is based on the provision of symbolic or material gain, may also be part of the efforts aimed at deinstitutionalization.

The partnership between WWF and Unilever to establish the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) might serve as an example in this respect. The MSC was formed in 1997, when Unilever was concerned about its supply of seafood and WWF about the state of the oceans (Cummins, 2004). Both the firm and the activist group saw a need for change in institutionalized practices in the fishery industry. An important part of the activities of the MSC hence has been to discredit conventional fishery practices (Hernes & Mikalsen, 2002). The joint development of the MSC led to a viable alternative field frame $F_2$ regarding “sustainable fishing” that has gained prominence in the fishery industry over the years (Cummins, 2004).
Proposition 5: As conflict escalates or endures over time, during deinstitutionalization, reformative activist groups increasingly will use tactics aimed at mobilizing larger numbers of protesters, whereas radical activist groups increasingly will use tactics aimed at material damage.

Reinstitutionalization. Reinstitutionalization implies the actual substitution of field frame $F_2$ for $F_1$. In order to accomplish this, reformative activist groups are likely to supplement arguments based on moral legitimacy with arguments based on pragmatic legitimacy, whereas radical activist groups will merely rely on moral legitimacy arguments (Proposition 2). Again, the question surfaces concerning what tactics might lever these different sorts of legitimacy, once nonparticipatory tactics aimed at having a symbolic impact do not suffice. Since reinstitutionalization is about generating support for new theorizations and about the diffusion of alternative practices throughout an organizational field, additional arguments and incentives are required beyond those that highlight the moral legitimacy argument.

To get their claims attended to—and, thus, to get support for the alternative practices they propose—reformative activist groups need to make them sufficiently relevant and valuable to the challenged organization. This approach is likely to result in tactics of material and symbolic gain. In the application of these tactics, an activist group may indicate benefits to the firm, or it might lend its reputation to bolster the firm’s reputation. Using participatory tactics increases the benefits to the firm since it shows the potential value of adhering to the practices under $F_2$. The number of people involved in the tactics adds to the activist group’s salience. Broadly supported tactics of material and symbolic gain therefore add to the reasons why a firm would adopt an alternative practice.

Radical activist groups, however, are less inclined to spend a large share of their resources on reinstitutionalization because they do not believe that firms can be part of the solution they aim for (Proposition 3). This seriously hampers the opportunity to grant pragmatic legitimacy, since this would require an activist group to make its claim relevant and valuable to the contested firm’s objectives. Quite a few radical activist groups are likely to disband or reorient their energies during reinstitutionalization. Nevertheless, radical groups may address issues of reinstitutionalization by invoking moral legitimacy, but they are likely to do so only under specific circumstances; the consequences of doing so then would have to fit in with their world view. Invoking moral legitimacy in reinstitutionalizing alternative practices might, for instance, imply a radical transformation in ownership structure and, to some extent, the development of an alternative economic entity. The influence tactics employed in such a situation then would be a combination of symbolic and material gain. Developing an alternative economic entity would be aimed at resulting in material gain to this alternative practice; activist groups’ expressions of support for this practice could result in symbolic gain and, thus, strengthen the reinstitutionalization process. Of course, as a corollary, material damage to vested corporate interests within an organizational field might result (similar to a boycott), but this usually is not the main objective since radical activist groups dispute these interests anyway.

The support of local exchange trading systems (LETS) is an example of such an approach (Pacione, 1997), since these trading systems “operate as an alternative (local) market for the members’ goods and services” (Crowther, Greene, & Hosking, 2002: 355). Consequently, LETS often are fairly limited in scale and based in local communities (Crowther et al., 2002). Participants deliberately place themselves and their transactions outside the normal economic order, causing material damage by withdrawing their expenditure from firms. It is likely that nonparticipatory tactics are chosen when radical activist groups aim for such a specific reinstitutionalization; relatively small numbers of protesters can develop such systems, but it is their individual contribution to the LETS that is important for its success.

Proposition 6: As conflict escalates or endures over time, during reinstitutionalization, reformative activist groups increasingly will use participatory tactics that are aimed at both material and symbolic gain within the
prevailing field frame, whereas radical activist groups increasingly will use tactics aimed at material and symbolic gain within an alternative field frame.

TACTICS FOR FIELD-LEVEL CHANGE

Although most of the interaction occurs between activist groups and firms, the activist groups’ ambition ultimately would be to accomplish field-level change. There are two main routes for field-level change that are open to activist groups. One route is to work at the field level. Activist groups might try to affect the coercive, normative, or cognitive institutional pressures in the field—for instance, by lobbying with public authorities and business associations for regulation or standards or by raising public awareness. They might even try to establish a new organizational field, more or less independent from the one being challenged (cf. the LETS system). Indirect tactics have already been investigated (Berry, 2003; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; O’Rourke, 2003), so we do not further discuss this route here.

The other main route for activist groups to accomplish field-level change is by convincing individual field members one by one to change their practices. The question for activist groups then is what type of firms to focus on. The population of firms in a given field, around a particular issue, comprises a significant number of disinterested firms. Usually, however, a number of proactive firms that seek to manipulate their institutional context in anticipation of activist group demands can also be identified, as well as a number of laggard firms that seek to defy or avoid activist group pressure (Oliver, 1991). Both cases offer specific points of leverage for activist groups. Laggard firms can be discredited in public relatively easily, or they can be threatened by recourse to law. In contrast, proactive firms have already significantly moved to adopt practices under the alternative field frame $F_2$ or have indicated that they are willing to do so. To the extent that their proactiveness provides a differentiation advantage over competitors, these firms have an interest in maintaining such a proactive reputation. This makes them vulnerable to challenges to their reputation (Wartick, 1992). Also, if $F_1$ is sufficiently destabilized, early adopters of the new practices under $F_2$ might be considered by other firms in the field to have found a workable solution to the prevailing uncertainty that is worth mimicking, thus contributing to the diffusion of the new practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Working at the level of the individual firm, we suggest that radical activist groups predominantly challenge proactive firms by applying tactics that increasingly aim at bringing about material damage. If they can convincingly show how even proactive firms are incapable of doing good, the consequence will be that laggard firms are viewed as even less able to do good, which, in turn, implies a clear need for fundamental change. For instance, the targeting of Nike in anti-sweatshop campaigns (Carty, 2002; Wokutch, 2001) is a case in which a highly visible firm—a leader in its industry—was targeted by activist groups to garner increased attention for their attempts to alter manufacturing practices field wide. When Nike moved to implement a code of conduct, protests continued, with the aim of showing that working conditions in the supply chain remained substandard.

The main thrust in such activism is to destabilize the current field frame, but this gives radical groups little influence over the overall direction of the development of corporate social change activities at the field level. If they wish to operate at the field level, radical groups, given their ideological stance, have little choice but to try establishing a different field frame, independent from prevailing ones, to further their own symbolic and material benefits (Proposition 6). For example, radical “culture jammers” promote “Blackspot sneakers” through their web site. Buyers of these shoes acquire a voting share in “The Blackspot Anticorporation,” which operates a Portuguese union shop where the sneakers are made from organic, vegetarian, and recycled materials (Adbusters, 2005).

Reformative groups are less restrictive in their choice of targets when working at the firm level. They may both challenge laggard firms and work with proactive firms. By challenging laggard firms to raise their minimum level of corporate social change activities, the average standard in the entire organizational field will eventually be lifted. By stimulating proactive firms in their corporate social change policies and practices and by stimulating firms to become more proactive, reformative groups may try to expand the frontiers of corporate social
change policies and practices in the organizational field. To achieve field-level change, these groups are therefore likely to trust in the diffusion of their preferred practices through processes of institutional isomorphism. They normatively present their preferred practices as good standards of professional behavior, and they hope for the unchecked spread of these practices as firms recognize them as worth mimicking (Propositions 2 and 6), or they work to get private standards, regulations, and codes of conduct accepted as field standards that can be enforced. Working at the field level, reformative activist groups thus either challenge laggard firms or cooperate with proactive firms.

Proposition 7: To bring about field-level change, radical activist groups are more likely to challenge proactive firms, whereas reformatory groups are more likely to challenge laggard firms and work with proactive firms.

Under conditions of escalation, both radical and reformative activist groups will seek to reinforce their position by forging coalitions among themselves, as well as with actors outside the social movement. However, given the diverging preferences for tactical choices owing to the different ideological orientations of radical and reformative groups—especially regarding the question of how to approach proactive firms (Proposition 7)—conflict can be expected to arise within the coalition, potentially leading to radical flank effects (Haines, 1984). To overcome their internal ideological differences, activist groups may try to diminish their internal conflict by creating coalitions that act as more or less independent organizations in working for field-level change. An example is the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), in which a variety of activist groups operate together. Often, CCC operates as an independent organization on behalf of its activist founders, but, occasionally, one or two founding groups operate independently from CCC. The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) is another example (Spar & La Mure, 2003).

Coordinated efforts across a broader movement could enhance its efficacy, since radical activist groups could thus indirectly engage in reinstitutionalization efforts that they could not easily support independently, their ideological position hampering most cooperation with firms. For reformative activist groups, coordination can be attractive because it reinforces their efforts for deinstitutionalization without risking their options for reinstitutionalization. Still, collaboration for deinstitutionalization is more likely to occur than collaboration for reinstitutionalization, since there is a common target during deinstitutionalization, whereas different preferences regarding the alternative field frame that is to be reinstitutionalized may limit the opportunities for collaboration during reinstitutionalization.

Proposition 8: The efficacy of joint efforts by radical and reformatory activist groups in reinstitutionalization is enhanced if radical groups are constrained in applying tactics aimed at material damage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Questions of whether firms engage in corporate social change activities, and of what the nature of such activities is, are not only related to managers’ wishes to do good or to improve their firm’s competitive position but also to societal demand. Activist groups step forward to articulate societal preferences about the level and nature of corporate social change activities, and they challenge firms to comply with these preferences. The interaction between activist groups and firms is an antecedent of corporate social change activities that has received limited systematic attention in the literature to date. Our exploration in this realm gives rise to several implications and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Implications

Our contributions to theory development are threefold: (1) we argue that ideology is a factor that significantly influences which tactics activist groups employ vis-à-vis firms, (2) we identify a range of tactics that activist groups may employ in a corporate context, and (3) we link the tactics of different ideologically driven activist groups to their ambition of influencing the nature and level of corporate social change activities.

We first pointed out why ideology is an important characteristic of activist groups that needs to be considered in order to understand how...
these groups operate in a corporate context. Why and when activist groups move to act in such a context can be understood from their interests and identity (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003), but understanding how these groups act also requires considering their ideology. Although activism emerges from a social setting where people know and trust each other, it is their shared world view that affects how they act. Ideology links to the different types of legitimacy that play a role in the institutional change process by enabling activist groups to develop the abstract notions of legitimacy into arguments about what—in their view—is appropriate and justified to affect the level and nature of corporate social change activities in an organizational field. Looking at ideology is therefore a useful complement to merely considering interests and identity if we are to understand how activist groups try to influence firms.

We further proposed a typology to derive propositions on the choice of tactics by activist groups to enforce their ambitions at different stages of the institutional change process. The typology is based on the nature of damage or gain that activist groups aim to bring about (material, symbolic) and on the number of people that need to be involved for the tactics to be effective (participatory, nonparticipatory). It is an elaboration of the various logics identified by della Porta and Diani (1999) as to why social movement pressure might be effective in a public policy context. Translating and extending these logics to a corporate context constitutes the second contribution of this article. Having such a typology available for analyzing activism toward firms can contribute to our understanding of stakeholder tactics.

Our final and main contribution rests in combining these two points. We used insights from social movement studies and institutional change theory to explore how activist groups influence corporate social change activities. The ambition of activist groups in articulating their preferences can be regarded as setting in motion a process of aspired institutional change that involves both the deinstitutionalization of practices in the established field frame (F₁) and the reinstitutionalization of an alternative set of preferred practices in an alternative field frame (F₂). We argued that ideology matters in how activist groups seek to change the nature and level of corporate social change activities. In working to affect the deinstitutionalization of F₁ and the reinstitutionalization of F₂, radical and reformative activist groups use different legitimacy-based arguments, exhibit different levels of activity, and make different tactical choices. Building on these differences, we further suggested that radical and reformative groups differ in how they eventually work to bring about field-level change. The typology in Table 2 summarizes these differences.

### Practical Implications

Practical recommendations can be formulated for activist groups and firms. For activist groups, an important implication of our argument concerns the involvement of their constituency. The pressure they exert on firms regarding the nature and level of corporate social change activities predominantly takes place in a private context over which public authorities deliberately have little direct influence. National governments and supranational bodies, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, stress the voluntary character of corporate involvement in such issues as environmental protection and labor conditions beyond what is required by law. As claimants in these matters, activist groups have traditionally acted politically in trying to influence the diffusion, interpretation, and implementation of laws and regulations, as well as in lobbying for the formulation of new laws and regulations.

However, since the early 1990s, activist groups have increasingly challenged business firms directly, as opposed to the more established ways of indirectly challenging them through channels of public policy (cf. Berry, 2003; Spar & La Mure, 2003). Although their ambition of establishing field-level change remains the same, this direct route requires activist groups to approach their constituents differently. Whereas in the public policy context the constituency might be enrolled as voters, the private policy context offers the opportunity to expand the constituency’s role to that of consumers, who, by selectively using their consumer power on a daily basis—or by threatening to do so—may affect the level and nature of corporate social change activities. If activist groups wish to join this bandwagon of “political consumerism” (Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2004), they will need to spend
time and effort to educate their constituency on how to become an effective instrument for change. This is especially relevant for reformative activist groups, being more dependent on participatory tactics than radical groups.

Similarly, for firms, taking stock of activist groups’ ideological positions is helpful in understanding the range of tactics they might expect, even if it is still not completely predictable when, where, and how activist groups might challenge them. If firms wish to keep or gain some control over the process, they will need to be involved in the shaping of new practices through theorization. Moreover, better insight into activist groups’ tactics enables some level of anticipation regarding these tactics. An improved understanding of the types of activist groups, and the different tactics they might apply, offers firms insight into the conditions of starting a debate and its contents, including reasons why the more radical activist groups would be less interested in participating in such a debate. Hence, looking in greater detail at influence tactics that activist groups use in trying to shape corporate social change activities may help firms to understand some crucial societal dynamics that may either facilitate or impede these activities.

Implications for Further Research

One potentially fruitful avenue for further research would be to analyze how activist campaigns regarding individual firms build up to field-level change. Looking at the development of campaigns over time could provide insight into the different tactics that are applied at different stages of the institutional change process. This could be elaborated by taking into account, for instance, questions of whether activist groups have developed new tactics when orienting their focus toward challenging corporate behavior. Has this development resulted in a new cycle of protest (Tarrow, 1983) or in a different tactical repertoire (Clemens, 1993)? Analyzing protest events could be helpful in investigating these kinds of questions (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002).

Another relevant issue regards the role of cooperation and competition among different activist groups that work in a particular social movement. Do these groups work together, and, if so, how? Is there indeed some form of coordinated specialization and differentiation among activist groups that enhances their collective effectiveness in pursuing their institutional change ambitions, as suggested by the radical flank effect? Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) ex-

| **Table 2** | Typology of the Level of Activity, the Arguments Used, and the Tactics Applied by Activist Groups in Their Interaction with Firms During Different Stages of Institutional Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Institutional Process Aimed For** | **Radical** | **Reformative** |
| | Deinstitutionalization | Reinstitutionalization | Deinstitutionalization | Reinstitutionalization |
| **Arguments used** | Moral legitimacy: consequential + structural arguments | Moral legitimacy: consequential arguments | Moral legitimacy: consequential + structural arguments + pragmatic legitimacy |
| **Level of activity** | High | Low | Low | High |
| **Tactics during escalation** | Symbolic damage + material damage | Symbolic gain + material gain | Symbolic damage + symbolic gain | Symbolic gain + material gain |
| | Nonparticipatory | Nonparticipatory | Nonparticipatory + participatory | Nonparticipatory + participatory |
| **Field-level change** | Challenge proactive firms | Work to establish an alternative field | Challenge laggard firms | Work with proactive firms |

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pect that interest and identity overlap among stakeholder groups have differentiated effects on whether or not they take action. According to them, interest overlap increases the likelihood that stakeholder groups will mobilize, whereas identity overlap decreases this likelihood, since these groups would want to profile themselves. Yet, at the movement level, it can often be observed that activist groups with similar identities collaborate in working on the same cause, sometimes openly and sometimes disguised under umbrella organizations. For example, Schurman (2004) shows how radical and reformative activist groups productively collaborate in the anti-biotech movement. More work is needed to establish whether, or under what conditions, identity or ideology has stronger effects on collaboration between activist groups striving for institutional change.

Although we suggested a proposition on the efficacy of joint protest tactics by radical and reformative activist groups, a limitation of our research is that we did not consider the outcomes of activist groups’ efforts in great detail. Such outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure (Gamson, 1990; Giugni, 1998). Addressing the question of whether activist groups actually succeed in changing the nature and level of corporate social change activities is a third topic for further research. It is unlikely, however, that such outcomes solely depend on activist groups’ efforts; characteristics of the firm or the industry in which the firm operates will be another important set of factors. In this respect, one might speculate about the existence of an “industry opportunity structure” (Schurman, 2004), similar to the concept of “political opportunity structure” in social movement studies (Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1983, 1998). Industry opportunity structures may be related to economic, organizational, and cultural features that constrain or enhance the ability of firms within an industry to change their behavior. They may include cost structures, the level of competition, customer preferences, typical board compositions, and capital and advertising intensities (Baron, 2001; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Schurman, 2004).

Firms’ motives and objectives in corporate social change activities might also be relevant for the outcomes of the deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization of practices. Lounsbury (2001), for instance, shows how an environmental organization coordinated with ecological activists inside universities to facilitate the creation of recycling programs that became staffed with full-time ecologically committed recycling coordinators, thus contributing to the success of these programs. The interplay between internal and external activists might be an important element in such studies. However, to suggest that such factors are straight predictors of outcomes would be to reinforce the structural bias that the political process tradition in social movement studies has been criticized for (cf. Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). Since it is unlikely that structural conditions offer similar opportunities to different activist groups (Hilson, 2002), taking into account the different tactics that activist groups deploy remains highly relevant. This would expand the scope of research beyond the analysis of activist groups’ tactics to also linking antecedents and consequences.

To conclude, we have shown that the social movement literature and institutional change literature have several interesting points to offer and could well be combined to study the role of activist groups in influencing the nature and level of social change activities in companies. Both theories highlight specific aspects of the processes activist groups try to influence. From the social movement literature, much can be learned about the way influence is exerted by activist groups, whereas institutional change theories can suggest the underlying field-level structures and the mechanisms required to alter these. In discussing the interchange between the two streams of research, McAdam and Scott (2005) propose viewing organizational fields as the fundamental unit of analysis, pointing to the roles of different actors during episodes of field-level change. Studies of field frames and institutional strategies provide useful starting points in this direction. Looking at the roles of different actors in such processes—individually and collectively—can contribute to our understanding of how influence strategies within organizational fields work and, thus, of how corporate social change activities are being shaped. Investigating the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (cf. Dorado, 2005; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) might be instrumental here. The exploration in this article, focusing on ideological positions, provides a relevant starting point for further theoretical and empirical research into how activist groups may influence the rules of the game, and maybe even overrule them.
REFERENCES


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