Democracy and Corporations

Most people in their day to day lives do not think about corporations or how they affect our lives. I suspect few people give any thought to what a corporation even is; I know I didn't, at least not until I noticed that corporations were influencing my life more than people, and not in a good way.

So let's take a look at corporations. The word *corporation* comes from Latin *corporare*, meaning "combine in one body", and you may recognize the root word *corp*, or "body", from such words as corporal, corpse, and corpulent.

A corporation is an entity—a legal construction invented to make a profit. Yet, the laws of our country now view a corporation as a person. Bill Moyers (look him up, kids) took exception to that view of corporations and is credited with the saying, "I'll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one." Unfortunately, the Supreme Court does not agree with Mr. Moyers. Long before Bill Moyers, the Court was dealing with person status, and really screwed up when in the Dred Scott decision, the Court decided Black persons who were enslaved were not considered persons. That did not end well. And yet the Court somehow managed to conclude that some words printed on sheet of paper and recorded in some State or Federal office building was entitled to personhood. Go figure.

The corporation as a person was initially viewed by the courts as being limited to the right to sue and be sued. But in a legal version of "mission creep", the laws have since allowed corporations other individual liberties. Corporations now have the right to privacy. The same privacy that today, women—who, so far as I know, are still persons—are struggling to attain.

The civil rights of corporations have so expanded as to allow them to become major political players. Perhaps two-thirds of the money that puts people into Federal office comes from corporations. You could say that corporations elect our government. And, if corporations get to elect those people, they effectively have more power than the people. Who do you think the politician is going to pay most attention to, you or the corporation that poured a bunch of money into his campaign? And, here's a question: Do you think it is an accident that the burden of taxation has moved from corporations to individuals?

Back in the early twentieth century, when corporations were really flexing their muscles and running roughshod over humanity, a strong progressive movement pushed back, and legislation took back some power, resulting in health and safety regulations both at work and with consumer products, as well as the eight-hour workday, and anti-trust laws. But that was one hundred years ago.

Now we not only have bigger corporations but with globalization we have mega-corporations. What is an individual, or even a group of individuals who have been harmed or disadvantaged by a corporation supposed to do? Option one: government regulation. But that seems to no longer be an option. Option two: Sue the bastards. Well, you can try, but "tort reform", basically a reduction in the rights of an individual to sue, limits redress. And in some cases it creates a situation restricting the right of access to our own courts.

Corporations, if they are indeed persons, are persons without morality, without conscience. Corporations are not evil. They are simply unconcerned with economic justice or social justice. And they are growing, or, more accurately they are gobbling each other up, creating fewer, but bigger entities. And what, then happens? Airlines consolidate, and before you know it, there are only three or four major carriers, and with less competition, then prices go up and there are fewer flights. These corporations consolidate, and who is it that is supposed to regulate these mergers? Congress, if, and that's a big if, there are laws in place to even allow regulation. Remember the

economic collapse of 2008? Remember that phrase "Too big to fail"? How did those big financial institutions get so big? And how, even after such an instructive crisis, did they get even bigger?

And it isn't just the world of finance. Have you noticed changes in the news media? There are a handful of corporations that now own the greatest number of news outlets; they control much of the news and opinion. Think that might have an effect on reporting? And it wasn't a major news organization that uncovered the scandal involving U.S. Representative George Santos—or whatever his name is now—it was a small independent local paper. And with fewer reporters, we now we have "self-reporting". What a concept. This is not good for democracy.

One of the long-standing pillars of progressive activism against corporatization of America is former consumer watchdog and advocate Ralph Nader (kids, you really, really have to look *him* up). Nader (he's from Connecticut, you know) is one of the few voices who have been railing against corporatization since, oh, forever.

If you were hoping that in the closing of this essay I was going offer a simple solution—or any solution—on how to reverse this corporate encroachment on our lives, sorry. It may be that, like the emerging quandary over what to do about the encroachments of Artificial Intelligence, it may consume us all, which is a frightening prospect. Last I knew, this country was a democracy, and people were still running the place. But maybe not.

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