

# Provide a gendered account of the corporation

## + The corporation +

Before shifting the paper's focus onto a gendered account of the corporation, especially focusing on a feminist critique of the status quo, the concept itself deserves some explanation. Historically, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of the modern "corporation" as immortal, collectivist legal entities. A corporation entails a group of people authorized to act as an individual and was originally set up as an entity enabling the undertaking of tasks too risky or expensive for individuals or governments.

Contemporary companies are more or less required to maximise power and profit, while externalizing costs as far as possible. They are regulated by governments and international law, but often accused of lobbying on their ethically shortsighted behalf, financing political campaigns and thus turning international politics into a game of puppets. Global shareholders and financial institutions drive the "race to the bottom", as national governments are often viewed as the bootlickers of internationally operating corporations. Under WTO agreements, corporations also enjoy rights beyond those of any individual, as they have been granted "national treatment". Not surprisingly, Noam Chomsky describes the modern corporations as forms of an unaccountable concentration of private power resulting in a dictatorship of the capital. Of course, corporations at times appear benevolent, but only so in order to cloud their "real nature" and to appease the public, which, given full knowledge of the corporations workings, could undermine its rights and privileges. On the other hand, successful entrepreneurs are needed to propel global progress and advance human prosperity, neo-liberals favouring a free reign of the economy counter, especially as economic growth is no zero-sum game and what is good for the corporation is good for humanity, especially if the invisible hand of the market is left untouched.

## + But who is running the corporation? Who are the evil-doers or progressive, bold heroes of human advancement? +

Apparently, it are not 51% women and 49% men, which would be somewhat representative of the world's population. According to Margaret Heffernan, one of the few women who managed to climb into the CEO ranks of one of the world's most powerful corporations, listed on Nasdaq (CMGI), the top of the pyramid can be compared to "cultural artefacts of a workplace that still operates like a 1950 old-boy network". Statistics appear to prove her point. In 2002, only 4% of the top earners of Fortune 500 companies were female, the percentage of US female business-school applicants hovered below 40%, and the income gap between female and male managers, at least in Mrs. Heffernan's up-and-coming sector (communication industry), had widened. She claims that the persistent "macho leadership" of male executives continues to alienate women, that women get either trivialized or labelled "assertive bitches" and, in order to climb the career ladder, have no choice but to assimilate. To men. Apparently, the old boys "can never quite get over their feeling that women in business are charming, submissive, fun to have around, and nice as eye candy – but never quite "one of us".

In 1999, "the feminist victim myth...received a resounding blow", as Mrs. Carleton Fiorina was chosen as the CEO of the global computer giant Hewlett Packard. She was the first female CEO of a Fortune 50 company, only the third of a Fortune 500 company and the first to lead a DOW 30 tech company. Fiorina, heralded as a "trailblazer", appeared to shatter the glass ceiling of female advancement, proving that corporate America welcomes women at every level (NY Times). But, with still few and comparatively lower paid women in corporate senior management, millions of their sisters in low-wage jobs without benefits and poor working conditions, the glass appears not really shattered. Especially women of colour face a "concrete ceiling" (Sheila Wellington), additionally to the "sticky floor" (Julianne Malveaux) all women set off from. "His(corporate)story" is far from "her(corporate)story", no matter what kind of a positive myth gets created. Taking into account the annual growth rate of female executives at Hewlett Packard between 1982 and 1999, parity will be achieved in the year 2131 (Pozner). "Carly Fiorina's grim stare from the cover of Business Week, complete with cropped hair and dull-gray suit, suggests that assimilation works", Margaret Heffernan sceptically observes. The often heralded ideal of equal opportunities appears to be nothing but a constructed myth despite contrasting reality.

"You can be a mistress, a daughter, a wife, a mother – or a guy", Heffernan quotes one of her colleagues in what amounts to a dooming charge against the corporation's prevailing culture. According to her, the "glass ceiling", a phrase adopted to describe invisible, institutional barriers that have historically held women back from advancing up the corporate ladder, is still very much intact. Those who shatter it become men or frustrated - or both. It is probably safe to assume that male/female ratios at the top level are even worse outside US or European corporations, even though this is just an assumption. Despite the myth of global competition, it is often claimed that one hand washes the other on the level of international top-managements, and that global politics are heavily influenced by the corporation's coercion. Domestically, unions are pressured by the ever-looming threat of relocation. Internationally, the rise of free trade zones reshapes social orders and effectively lessens government's grip on the economy. As the corporation is a different phenomena for ambitious women than men, women have much less influence not only within managerial circles, but also concerning the shaping of world affairs, even if they represent a majority of voters, as in the US since 1964. They might decide the outcome at the polls, but the old boys control the marionettes. Or they become marionettes themselves: after managing several oil-companies, a baseball club and eventually a state, as George W. Bush's resume shows.

## + Conclusion +

In conclusion, females are held back from advancement by an "exclusion from informal networks of communication" and "male stereotyping and preconceptions of women". Life at the top differs based on the sex of the executive – gender-wise it appears almost exclusively male, as successful women are often forced to assimilate. Progress towards more equal lives at the top appears painfully slow, even though it is observable. Ambitious women try to change the game, and it is projected that by 2005 4.7 million self-employed women will roam the United States – an increase of 77% since 1983 (male-increase: 6%), as the "assertive (or trivialized) bitches" do it their own way (Heffernan). Global transnational corporations, heavily interwoven with predominantly male politics (9% of the world's legislative bodies members are female), still appear to confront ambitious women with "sticky floors" and ceilings made out of variably, uncrackable ceilings.