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Master's Degree Thesis
Brand Activism in the age of Woke Capitalism

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Introduction

What happened to management, its brands and capitalism in general to get to the point of talking about activism or even doing activism?

I started wondering about this during a course on Civil Writing with advertising writer and creative director Paolo Iabichino. And, in addition to growing a certain sensitivity to the engagement of brands, I also began to wonder if it was enough to rely on the book *Brand activism* by Kotler and Sarkar to understand this phenomenon or if, rather, there was more to it. As the initial question suggests, I was curious to understand if the presumed activism of companies had other reasons besides profit and the desire to get closer to the tensions that run through the new generations and society as a whole. Moreover, I recognized in brand activism the possibility of combining my three-year degree in management and my master's degree in arts management. A path that had sensitized the more scientific themes of management and the more social and humanistic ones of arts and cultural organizations.

So, comparison after comparison, the outline for this final paper began to appear. Initially, I was thinking of a thesis that wondered what positive impact such a phenomenon would generate. Then, however, my training in management and the critical and shrewd comparison with my supervisor made me recognize that behind the commitment of brands there is inevitably an interest. So, we chose to work in another direction: to tell about this phenomenon and what it produces. Telling what it is, however, also means acknowledging the different points of view regarding it and therefore not only the main narrative but also the counter-narrative, namely *Woke Capitalism*.

Then, in addition to presenting in the same paper a possibly in-depth coexistence of these two different points of view, we wanted to proceed by going to ask ourselves why management and therefore marketing had borrowed the term *activism* from a social and political context, which is also decidedly anti-capitalist and anti-corporate from the beginning. Slowly, by studying social movements and looking for traces,

manifestations, signs of how companies have been activated in the past, we found that there are points of contact with social movements in the way the phenomenon of brand activism manifests itself, creates identity and mobilization. Moreover, it emerged that companies do it more to react than to act. A subtle difference, but one that, as we shall see, gathers a decidedly different posture.

In this process then, as we said, we came to recognize a critical juncture. A moment, in short, from which many things began to change. As will be recounted and argued, this shift concerns the movement of society from production to knowledge, and then, linking to Naomi Klein's stories, from product to brand and even to culture. It will emerge in the thesis how this shift has allowed brands to take on higher and wider values, meanings and therefore imagery. The same ones that, event after event, have allowed a brand, Nike in particular, to react to social issues and even become brand activism literature. When, let's remember, a few decades earlier it was the best example of sweatshop and even claimed not to be an activist company.

The main narrative of this phenomenon, brand activism, recounts and justifies itself as a response to the issues our world is facing: climate and civil issues first and foremost. But although the thesis talks about taking a stand, initially the argument that follows will try not to do so. Instead, I will let the questions guide the reasoning, the different points of view, and the arguments. The attempt is certainly not to assert whether the truth lies in brand activism or woke capitalism. Rather, the desire is to bring to light, as mentioned at the beginning, the coexistence of different points of view and, above all, a strong historical and social component in this phenomenon, too little considered in the existing literature. In fact, today we talk about the communication of purpose and why as discoveries, when in fact, as will emerge, they are phenomena of an evolution of the socio-political and economic context. The way of being on the market has changed, but our world is also changing, as well as the tensions that affect it and all of us, including our approach to things and our choice rather than consumption.

Chapter I — Social Movements: from activism to corporate private politics

1.1 Mapping the field of Social Movements

When and how did the term *activism*, and activism in general understood as practice and action, approach the world of corporations and, thus, that of management and marketing? Or, to be a bit more direct and frank in posing the real question: when, how and why did it happen that corporations appropriated the term *activism*—and practice and action as well, we will understand later—stealing it away from social and political movements that have always proved distant from capitalism and corporations?

These are the questions that have driven the research and argumentation you are about to start reading on the phenomenon called brand activism and what it produces. And if at first the desire was to ask what positive impact brand activism actually produced— assuming we could actually measure it—it was then decided to reorient the research question for the reasons mentioned above. In fact, it was not convincing to accept that the explanation for the emergence of this phenomenon lay exclusively in the void left by the institutions and the publication of the book *Brand activism. From Purpose to Action* by Kotler and Sarkar in 2018.

Of course, it was not about questioning the originality of the work of the father of marketing, but there was a need to discover the evolution of the relationship between activism and collective action—what we would later call social movements—and business. Only in this way could we better understand the phenomenon of brand activism and its socio-political and economic origins. Consequently, to the background story of social movements and the main narrative of this phenomenon, brand activism, we wanted to add the counter-narrative: woke capitalism. By doing so, the expected result of this thesis should be a mapping of the phenomenon in question that considers its origins and its current different points of view—predominantly two—, in such a way that they coexist in the same paper.

This could give back to the patient reader a broader and more complete overview of the brand activism phenomenon.

This chapter on the evolution of activism and social movements on one side, and their relationship with the corporate world on the other, will be divided into two main sections: the first one is dedicated to a mapping of the field of social movements, the second one to an analysis of the book *No Logo* by Naomi Klein. A book that, as we will see, represents a manifesto of the anti-globalization and anti-corporate movements, but also a thorough critique of the development of the concept of brand. Both, therefore, are fundamental aspects for understanding how companies have moved from the product to the brand, and then to culture and, finally, to activism.

1.1.1 Activism, collective action and social movements

As mentioned just above, the desire of this section of chapter one is to map the field of social movements. This is to acknowledge the evolving links and mutual influence between movements and business. Before we begin, however, two points should be made. Although the phenomenon of brand activism, not to mention social movements, is present in various forms almost all over the world, this thesis is focused only on the Western part of this for reasons of proximity, greater possibility of understanding the cultural, socio-political and economic context and for availability of literature. Then, the mapping of the field of social movements was done mainly relying on *The Oxford Handbook on Social Movements* edited by Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, for clarity and completeness.

Having made these clarifications, it is now essential to explain why social movements are used to trace the evolution of the phenomenon called *activism*. And to do so, I would take the opportunity to reintroduce the origin of the term and its meaning. Looking at the Online Etymology Dictionary, the English words *activism* and *activist* seem to appear with a purely political sense respectively in the year 1920 and 1915 and, in particular, *activism* with the meaning of 'advocating energetic action'. Probably, and here we rely momentarily on Wikipedia, also with a reference

to the French terms *activisme* and *activiste* coined by the Belgian press in 1916 to describe the movement of Flamingant, supporters of Flemish sentiment. And summarizing, activism is what activists and their organizations do, dedicating a good part of their own time and resources (Císař 2015).

In general, the whole history of the word *activism* refers to a desire to encompass collective behaviour (Merton 1945; Hoffer 1951) and social action (Parsons 1937). In the 1960s the purely political connotation of the term began to broaden, when activism was defined as a practice that consisted in pursuing goals with decision and energy. As Kotler and Sarkar (2018) also accurately report, today activism consists of efforts to promote, prevent, direct, or intervene politically, socially, economically, or environmentally, with the desire to generate change in society.

Activism, however, and we are approaching the passage that was being sought, when it is highly visible and impactful takes the form of collective action, in which people and their action is coordinated to bring about greater impact (Tarrow 1998). And when collective action has a strong raison d'être—a *purpose* we would say today—it is organized and sustained over a period of time, it is also known as a social movement (Goodwin and Jasper 2009). This explains the reason for mapping social movements: they are an organized form with a strong purpose of activism. Characteristics that are very reminiscent of those of activism supported by brands, also in accordance with Kotler and Sarkar (2018) and the subtitle of their book. Finally, for the sake of completeness, social movement mapping was also preferred to that activism due to a simple availability of literature and studies.

Some recognize the historical origins of social movements in the West even in the time of the Greeks and Romans, but also in the peasant rebellions of the Middle Ages. Here, however, we could locate them at least from the late 1700s onwards (Tilly 2004; Tarrow 1994) and we could consider social movements still as a consequence of major economic, technological, social and political changes accompanying the times (Rochester 2013). In the form of organized collective action, as mentioned before, social movements also and above all have a political dimension that is

expressed through occupations, sit-ins, strikes, riots, boycotts and, more recently, also through online activism (Anheier and Scherer 2015).

To approach the field of social movements, then, I borrowed a classic definition of field: that is, a set of data actors creating and interacting in an area of institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). A useful definition to understand social movements as people and actors participating in and producing different dynamics, and later thought also useful to do the same with brand activism movements and their actors participating in them, on all consumers and corporate. But more specifically, we could understand social movements also as a practice through which the actors involved express their position the political and social conflicts or tensions (della Porta and Diani 2015). Where psychology applied to protests recognizes three major reasons why people should participate in a collective action: to change the circumstances therefore the context, to act with groups with which they identify and to express their views (Klandermans 2015). We will also find these reasons in the second chapter talking about brand activism.

At this point, then, the feeling is that social movements are indeed movements that have been widespread for quite some time, but above all with rather permeable and not so definitive boundaries (Hassan and Staggenborg 2015). Indeed, movements include social networks, collective identities, and cultural, social and, we will see, economic campaigns or organizations (Melucci 1989, 1996; Diani 1992; Polletta 2008) that form real communities. The concept of social movement communities thus aims to map the interactions of those activists capable of mobilizing and then acting. For example, as happened in the 1960s with the women's liberation movement in the United States (Buechler 1990) or with the youth, women, ecology and *new consciousness* movements that emerged in Italy after the 1970s (Melucci 1989, 1996; Donati 1984).

In addition to a more rational account of social movements made up of people who organise themselves to take a position in social and political spheres, there is another perhaps more irrational or at least emotional one. Activist movements have in fact always been guided also by the most subjective and personal emotions, which

then become motivations and therefore stories (e.g., della Porta 1995; Blee 2003) to be told. This is not only because stories make us human as Jonathan Gottschall (2012) would suggest, but also because stories and their narration are an opportunity and a way to share the values of a movement, generating what Durkheim would have called *Effervescence Collective* (1995). This narrative turn (Eder 2009) allows us to understand the dynamics of social movements marked by strong sharing and, at the same time, we can consider the movements themselves as a product of imagination and collective action (Juris and Khasnabish 2015).

This reflection returns us to an important role of stories that can serve as crucial resources for activists to mobilize participants and influence decisions inside and outside movements. Moreover, stories have that ability to transform more or less discrete events into values and meanings that link past, present and future (Polletta and Gardner 2015). Indeed, it is not surprising that once a movement is created, activists also use stories strategically: for example, to recruit participants (Armstrong and Crage 2006; Viterna 2013), sustain commitment (Owens 2009; Steinberg and Ewick 2013) and justify it (Fine 1999). Finally, storytelling also allows for that process of identifying people in the movement, which is crucial for them to be mobilized to action, to take place (Viterna 2013). In conclusion, this focus on stories should have given us an idea of the value of storytelling in constituting, strengthening, and bringing to action a social movement. Aspects we will not be slow to recognise when, instead, we discuss how corporates approach activism and so videos, posters or brand ambassador stories will emerge as brand narratives.

The centrality of stories in contemporary society is juxtaposed with the centrality of vision, resulting in the context that Mitchell called the *pictorial turn* in 1994. With this assumption, we could consider the production, circulation and interpretation of images as part of a collective elaboration and political process (Rogoff 1998). Thus, that visual culture, that environment produced by visual artifacts and knowledge, is also a context for activism. Indeed, images can be associated with a store of cultural knowledge and experience, then useful in creating the discourses and raison d'être of activists (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2015). This is why images become charged with the production of meaning (Goffman 1959) and demonstrate internal and

external value in the creation of a collective identity and mobilization for a goal (Melucci 1996). To get a more practical idea of what is being said, it is enough to see how social movement activists are able to disseminate or create images that raise emotions, attract attention and move people to action, including with the help of slogans and visual objects (Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2015).

1.1.2 Corporatism and Neo-corporatism

Before proceeding with the transition from the production of goods to the production of knowledge, I think it is also relevant to suggest one of the most important examples of the 20th century in which political activity influenced economic activity. This is because, wanting to simplify the phenomenon under consideration of the alleged activism of brands, we could trace it back to an influence of politics on business, on the way of conducting it and of being in the market. Even though this may seem like a simplistic view, what brands are actually trying to do is to intervene in order to influence the capitalist system with a political stance. Of course, as we will see, today the reasons are different and so are the effects, but even in corporatism we can recognize a first attempt to create a political movement with economic intentions.

In the moment before the Second World War, corporatism was initially based on an obligatorily authoritarian structure: the organizations that represented interests had to submit them to the political regime. This type of corporatism was in fact mainly associated with fascism and, in most of Europe, was later replaced by a liberal democracy or a socialist state. It survived, however, in Portugal and Spain, which were neutral during the war, and took hold in Latin America, especially Argentina (Crouch and Streeck 2006). Schmitter (1974), however, recognized other situations in which a liberal form of corporatism took place that he called *societal*. In this case, workers' organizations cooperated voluntarily with the government, participating in continuous compromises that allowed for benefits for their members without disadvantaging national economies (Crouch and Streeck 2006).

This second form took the name of neo-corporatism, thus distancing itself from the previous version of fascist matrix and emphasizing the completely different political, social and democratic context. As mentioned before, neo-corporatism was thus rooted in a strong and autonomous idea of a workers' movement in a democratic context. Neo-corporatism represented a model of political regulation of the economy, in which large organizations, representing individual interests, could make decisions by confronting public authorities (Crouch and Streeck 2006). It was thus presented as a form of co-governance of collective decisions especially of labor and so economic matters. And until the 1970s it was considered the model indicated to regulate more effectively the balance between market, politics and society.

For these reasons, we could therefore recognize in neo-corporatism a first manifestation of a movement with political power useful to influence the economy. That is, the same influence at the base of the phenomenon brand activism and woke capitalism. In the circumstances that we will explore later, in fact, we will talk about how a political power is then used to change the market. Or at least, promise to do so.

1.1.3 From the production of goods to the production of knowledge

But if up to here we have only suggested a certain closeness between social movements, their organization, their stories and their visual narrative with the phenomenon of brand activism, we can now recognize another fundamental relationship between social movements and corporations that began to grow more or less in the 1970s. The theorists of new social movements such as Touraine (1981) and Melucci (1989) have acknowledged that movements such as feminism and environmentalism have embraced and made their own the shift of contemporary society from the production of material goods to the production of knowledge. These have in fact reclaimed free spaces, to free them from the domination of the market and the state (Offe 1985). An epochal change that invested the whole of society and that the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard had first theorized in 1979, with *La conditione postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*. We can also recognize this by looking at Marxian Heritage, from which it emerges how movements are practices

that occur and manifest themselves when groups become aware of their position in the social relations of production (Eder 2015). Processes, then, in which group identity is the central motivation for taking part (Melucci 1980, 1988, 1995).

Therefore, I would like to bring attention back to this very important step for the whole thesis, so much so that we can consider it as a real *critical juncture*, i.e. a moment in which all relationships change consistently (Markoff 2015). As we will see later, but I feel it is necessary to emphasize here, companies will go on to assimilate this shift from production to knowledge, moving their efforts and work from production to brand creation and nurturing. And so, precisely because of this shift, to be kept in mind throughout the argument from activism to brand activism, brands began to develop and make space for themselves in our lives, as well as in our culture and society at large (Klein 2000). All while culture is also manifested in the production of social action (Tan and Snow 2015), confirming even now how indirectly—but consciously—brands have thus influenced culture and then social action.

What we are doing is reconstructing not so much the history of social movements as the consequentiality of the events that have changed social movements and influenced other actors in society: companies, their management and, definitely, their brands. In doing so, we can imagine a real map, in which the reliefs are the major events that we are bringing to the surface. Among these, to sum up, the shift between product and brand, and between production and social knowledge, is the highest peak. Moreover, the desire would be to expand both the boundaries of the field of social movements and those of brand activism. While always conceiving society as the result of continuous collective actions (Touraine 1977).

After having pointed out this great change, we return to the emergence of social movements, thinking of them also as movements of groups that compete with each other with opposing positions (Koopmans 2004b). That of opposing views is not an aspect to be underestimated, indeed it is decisive because the movements themselves are born in society precisely as a form that organizes a certain counter-power (Eder 2009). And it does so by taking a position, possibly different from

someone else. A first example, close to what will be discussed in the next part of chapter one, are the anti-global and anti-corporate movements that expressly position themselves against the power of capitalism and its corporations.

This argument could also be confirmed by James Madison's political science view, which describes social movements as the expression of collective power confronting another organized power. And so again, we recognize here the context in which the relationship between capitalism, the state and counter-movements gives rise to social movements. Moreover, also recalling Karl Marx, social movements are the agents of systemic social change moved from below (della Porta and Diani 2006; Tarrow 2011; Barker et al. 2013). Conception in which Marxism recognized social movements as an alternative to capitalism established in society (Císař 2015).

At this time, I would take the opportunity to highlight the strong connection between a capitalist environment and the emergence of counter-power movements. Indeed, in this regard, it is found that it is precisely an eventual systemic crisis of the capitalist system that can offer a real opportunity for change (Císař 2015). And, leaving out the present for a moment even though this already seems to be a good description of it, we recognize how change began around 1968. In those years, in fact, the mobilizations called new social movements began, later recognized by Wallerstein (2003) in the forces of alter-globalization and anti-capitalism. This is not surprising if we refer to what was previously reported on the post-materialist movements that originated in the late 1960s and 1970s (Cohen and Arato 1992).

At this point it should appear clearer the overcoming of the struggle between the two dominant classes of Marxist influence in favour of a conflict of post-industrial modernity where it is human rights, gender equality, individual autonomy, political participation, and environmental protection that are pursued (Císař 2015). In this more social development, however, it is good to highlight how global capitalism still seems to shape the field in which these issues take place, reconnecting us with Althusser. It was precisely in the 1960s and 1970s that a feeling of marginalisation and discontent began to emerge among a population that continued to grow (Huntington 1968). A situation in which the institutions failed in their attempt to

maintain the rhythm imposed by this growth and change, thus raising counter-culture, free love, anti-war, student and women's liberation movements (Goldstone and McAdam 2001).

And here an alarm bell should ring: it is not by chance that even now there is widespread discontent among the population, on the one hand those who are aging and seeing their possibilities worsen and their retirement delayed, and on the other those who for the first time in generations will have fewer opportunities than their parents. Going beyond these reflections, we can recognize how much the demographic analysis of people, together with the geographical and political context, is so important to understand social movements, their emergence and what they produce.

Therefore, slow or negative population growth affecting our day, an aging population, and scarcer economic opportunities are the tensions and trends that are likely to lead to active and widespread movements. This is what Goldstone (2015) wrote just over five years ago, without considering an increasingly pressing pandemic and climate emergency, referring to recent movements. For example, that of people linked to the Tea Party movement to preserve the world as they knew it, taking an anti-immigration, anti-globalization and anti-big governments stance between 2008 and 2013 (Skocpol and Williamson 2013). Probably one of the first symptoms of nationalism.

1.1.4 Consumer-oriented social movements

Let us now return to the 1980s to talk about consumerism. After all, in a thesis that wants to deal with the theme of brand activism, it is necessary to study the movements in order to draw similarities, but also to focus on those mobilizations that concern the market and consumers. In fact, it is the latter who buy the products and therefore the brands. Consumerism, therefore, began to take on a certain relevance in parallel with the birth of the new social movements. Social movements, in fact, had extended their action to use markets as their political arena, taking

advantage of consumer practices to bring about changes (Micheletti and Stolle 2015).

Indeed, consumer choice has been an important vehicle for activism for several past movements, such as those to abolish slavery in the 1700s or Gandhi's nonviolent battle for India's independence from Britain (Micheletti and Stolle 2015). The belief is that various issues, such as those related to climate change or deforestation, can be solved if consumers begin a global mobilization to generate some pressure on corporations and other institutions. Using the market itself as a context for activism, hence the term *political consumerism*, and changing market practices may be questionable, however. As Stolle and Micheletti (2012) consider it questionable whether this is ethical.

Leaving aside whether it is debatable and ethical or not, what is relevant here is that term *political consumerism* which seems to want to link the consumer to a political action. This leads to the reflection that, perhaps, every individual can buy politically. That is, he can not only consume, but can also choose as a 'citizen-consumer' (Stolle and Micheletti 2012). And in this regard, there are four different forms of consumer-oriented political activism: boycott, buycott, discursive consumer strategies, and lifestyle politics.

Boycotting in this case consists in refusing or rejecting a product going to compromise the company's profit, influencing its value on the market, damaging its reputation or raising public awareness about that particular product and related practices. Buycott, on the other hand, simply consists in choosing one product over another by expressing a more or less explicit opinion. This opinion can also be accompanied by a discursive consumerism to reiterate or explain the choice made. Here a behavior put into practice by consumer-oriented social movements to communicate their intent is culture jamming or adbusting. This activity consists in changing the meaning of the advertisement, altering the logo or the tagline of the brand, as happened with Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonalds (Klein 2000). Finally, lifestyle commitments are about taking responsibility and awareness of one's

consumption, decreasing or changing it. Veganism and vegetarianism are some forms of this.

All these commitments made by citizen-consumers prove to be important in stimulating greater awareness and a sense of more active responsibility in the production and consumption process. This influences consumer culture, political development and social change (Micheletti and Stolle 2015). Thus, consumer choice can bring about positive changes in today's globalized world, addressing for example civil rights or environmental issues, even going so far as to demand fundamental changes in entire sectors, as the manifesto of Naomi Klein's anti-sweatshop movements *No Logo* wants to confirm.

We should know, however, that social consumer movements have a long tradition and that, in the beginning, they were mainly a way to offer more information and help to consumers so that they could make a more accurate choice. To give an example, the organic food movement appeared in the mid-1800s, while the new organic food movements re-appeared in the late 1960s and 1970s to counter the emerging issue of pesticide use and animal treatment on farms (Micheletti and Stolle 2015). Tensions that led to the largest European campaign in 1999 'Take the GM out of Animal Feed' targeting the well-known food brands.

Among the consumer movements there is also the anti-sweatshop movement, which has a long history and has indeed attracted many young people (Sklar 1998; Boris 2003). Among other things, as mentioned, it represents the tension that has driven most of Naomi Klein's work, *No Logo*, whose argumentation we will analyse in more detail later. But we can already briefly introduce it in this passage because the book represents a strong and argued critique of how the most popular brands—mostly Nike and Gap— produced their collections of clothes and shoes, then communicated with untruthful if not false advertising. In particular, it is in the late 1980s that the global sweatshop movement begins to mobilize systematically, i.e. in a more organized way, continuing to grow until the period between August 1995 and August 1996, renamed the year of the sweatshop (Ross 1997; Greenberg and Knight 2004; De Winter-Schmitt 2007).

This is an interesting phenomenon because, despite the initial difficulty in implementing a triangle of change between activists and consumers, corporations and then governments, it certainly demonstrated the importance of the younger population in protesting for change. As in fact happened earlier in the history of activism, in the anti-sweatshop movements universities played an active role in the mobilization. Students and university administrations, for example, blamed the brands for not taking initiatives on the problem of workers' exploitation. Scenario that produced its changes and, in particular, the university-based multi-stakeholder Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) (Micheletti and Stolle 2015).

Thus, if consumer-oriented strategies went beyond the original commitment to protect consumer rights it is also because of the unstable balance between governments and business that globalization and privatization were challenging. The lack of sufficient regulation, in fact, re-oriented the strategies and goals of social movements to recognize a new arena (Micheletti and Stolle 2015).

1.1.5 Gender and sexual movements

In the meantime, around the mid-1980s, the theory that deals with and studies social movements begins to move towards the study of gender and sexuality movements. Gender, in fact, is one of the most relevant tensions that bring out the social protests of this period (Ferree and Roth 1998; Abdulhadi 1998), while their study confirms how power is organized in different institutions, non-profit realities and workplaces, and how culture influences in its social recognition (Gamson 1989; Melucci 1985, 1989; Taylor 1996; Epstein 1996; Katzenstein 1998; Naples 1998; Cohen 1999; Turner 1999; Armstrong 2002a; Bernstein 2003, 2005; Van Dyke, Soule and Taylor 2004; Raeburn 2004; Bruce 2013). Moreover, invariably the study of gender and sexuality leads theorists to recognize its contribution in the identity formation of social movements (Taylor 1989; Bernstein 1997). This is a fundamental step because recognizing oneself as part of a movement that shares

and communicates its identity leads to empowerment (Bernstein 1997, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2009). A possibility that corporate movements will also try to recreate.

To sum up, what the previous paragraph suggests is that the emergence of gender and sexuality movements—determinant for the evolution of LGBTQ+ movements—have reinforced the concept of identity, self-recognition and empowerment of people since the mid-1980s. Concepts that even corporations have recognized and then borrowed to create a higher and broader positioning of the brand and its narrative. In this context, it also helped the recognition of gay parades, which began in San Francisco in the 1950s to 1990s (Armstrong 2002a, 2002b, 2005). An atmosphere of recognition and corporate pride that appears in Italian journalist Michele Masneri's book *Steve Jobs Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (2020), where large Silicon Valley companies participate in LGBTQ+ parades in San Francisco with their own custom floats.

With patience, then, we are trying to connect dots between the characters and manifestations of social movements and the similar, or at least influenced, actions and interests demonstrated by corporations. The desire is to return a map of points of contact and similarities that does not explain but suggests how the emergence, development, strategies and goals of corporate movements have purely social roots.

1.1.6 Anti-globalization and anti-corporate movements

In this narrative, then, the phenomenon of globalization begins to strengthen especially from the 1990s onwards. Globalization therefore fits into the context described so far as another element that influences the coexistence of social movements and firms, also due to the lack of a legislative completeness that supports the changes of the global market. It is for this reason, then, that social movements are also considered as phenomena that require modern capitalism to comply with standard and recognized regulations (Eder 2015). Reason why supranational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the European Union have given good pretexts to social movements

(Císař 2015). Indeed, changes in the international context can also influence the opportunities for activists in a country, giving them the chance to mobilize at a higher, supranational level (Meyer 2003).

Globalization has brought a certain fluidity of the boundaries of all economic, social and political environments. And for example, the growth and speed of cross-border capital movements has not only complicated the possibility of taxing states and regulating business, but has also caused the periodic occurrence of financial bubbles whose effects spill over into states, generating subsequent crises and delegitimization. Fluidity, however, has also inspired social movements that have thus improved their transnational organization, using the permeability of websites or social media to coordinate action in different states and disseminate and share information that reaches everywhere (Beissinger 2007). Of these possibilities and evolutions, the spread of the anti-climate change movement Fridays For Future is one of the most recent manifestations.

The increase in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the last decades has certainly impacted political and social life, influencing also collective action and then the organization and communication of recurrent social movements. This, at the same time that digital media platforms became a means to quickly and sometimes instantaneously demonstrate support and action, as seen for example with the Arab Spring in 2011 and Occupy Wall Street in 2011-2012 (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

These shifts in the social and political structure and communication systems therefore had strong implications for both the evolution and the reasons for the movements, as is particularly clear when looking at the decade between 1999 and 2011 or so. During that period, large-scale protests developed against international organizations such as the G7, G8, G20, World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and the iconic Battle of Seattle that stopped the WTO meetings in 1999 and determined a decisive step for this kind of movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2015) with the slogans 'Another world is possible', and 'Our world is not for sale'. Collective action, moreover, in these processes has also become connective action

where individuals can interact and identify with tensions directly online, sharing ideas on the internet or on social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2015).

Globalization, going on, is a real process of expansion and intensification of transnational exchanges and relations that influence social movements. A context has emerged, then, in which states have begun to be more interconnected, as have ideas, goods, people, money and communications that flow faster and so easily across national borders (Smith 2015). And recalling here again the political aspects of social movements, research on their transnational dimension shows how the relationship between social movements and political authorities also shapes the basic structure of societies, namely the state (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 2011).

Talking about globalization that we have been talking about so far, and that will continue to flank the argument for a while longer, we are still in the mid-1990s when a new phenomenon began to emerge: greenwashing. The term itself suggests that this effort of companies to embrace humanitarian, social or environmental law issues is not so well perceived, despite seeming to put aside the interest of the company. Definition and feelings aside, it is interesting to see that under pressure from the United States, the United Nations gets the Global Compact started in 1999. According to Smith (2010), however, the intent would be to create an opportunity and mechanism for companies to respond to the growing anti-corporate and anti-globalization movement. The Global Compact does this by promoting corporate social responsibility, thus asking companies and partners to adhere to certain principles, but without having first thought of a monitoring mechanism. Basically, the Global Compact proves to be an opportunity for companies to strengthen or restore their public image without necessarily changing their practices (Smith 2010).

Meanwhile, and in the very same year, it seems that governments on the other side are engaged in repressing political and social movements. Among these, the most dramatic events are those occurring on the occasion of meetings dedicated to trade and international relations, including the appointments of the respective G7 and G8 groups in the late 1990s and the World Trade Organization in 1999 and early 2000.

In these situations, movements go beyond communicating a position, instead taking action to block delegates' access to the meetings. While these major conflicts affecting the global economy also involve environmental tensions, and since 2007 negotiations involving the environment and climate change are also beginning to be affected by protests and conflicts (Hadden 2015; Bond 2012).

1.1.7 Corporate private politics

Some management scholars, meanwhile, offer us insights about the political power of corporations, including sharing the strategies they adopt to shape the legislative environment in their favour (Culpepper 2010; Wernern 2012; Lawton, McGuire et al. 2013; Walker and Rea 2014). Indeed, it would seem that in addition to the policy-making role of the state, there is another form of policy called *private politics* (Soule 2009; Baron 2010). And in a context where corporations are often the targets of social movements and activists (Walker, Martin et al. 2008; Soule 2009) and the same movements begin to create coalitions to counter corporations with campaigns that suit their businesses and markets (Balsinger 2010, 2014a), corporations are beginning to develop their own response.

Targeted companies, in fact, develop a set of tactics and strategies to respond to the demands made on them by social movements. Thus, especially larger companies such as multinationals begin to prepare themselves with units specialized in risk management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), public affairs, with the aim of continuously monitoring the environment in which the company operates and developing strategies to respond to the demands of movements and society. In short, companies equip themselves with specialized departments to generate a corporate policy and reaction to the challenges of social movements.

This scenario emerges from several studies that analyze the outcomes of relationships between movements and corporations. And markets and corporations are themselves policy-makers or, at least, they behave as such (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). This private regulation has then also been studied by regulation scholars (Bartley 2007; Fransen 2012; Locke 2013), while management scholars

have been interested in the relationship between firm and NGO (Yaziji and Doh 2009) and different forms of corporate social responsibility (Vogel 2005; Crouch 2006; Egels-Zandén and Wahlqvist 2007; de Bakker and den Hond 2008; Gond, Kang et al. 2011).

To recap, companies often use corporate social responsibility and other various forms of self-regulation more strategically than ethically. Indeed, they recognize it as a way to respond to tensions, attention directed or even prevent the emergence of mandatory regulations (Fooks, Gilmore et al. 2013, Scherer, Palazzo et al. 2014). But the ways that companies adopt to respond to and manage a protest do not stop there: there are in fact more explicitly political or strategic solutions. Examples of these are communication and reputation management strategies (McDonnell and King 2013), or counter-campaigns to stop any opponents. A repertoire, then, that Philip Balsiger might classify as corporate protest management.

Speaking of policy, companies also use their resources to influence governments, their legislations, administrations, and not least public opinion through that integration as a policy-maker mentioned earlier. Approach that is thus manifested through opinion efforts and campaigns, either as part of business associations or independently (Hall and Soskice 2001; Maloney, Jordan et al. 2007; Wilks 2013). And speaking of public opinion, companies can use their opportunities to lobby for certain public discussions to be hushed up when they concern large political and economic organizations (Werner 2012).

The feeling is that this corporate power is increasingly relevant when the political power of governments is calmer (Culpepper 2010). And it is precisely here that private politics comes to the fore, namely the 'politics (which) pertains to individual and collective action to influence the conduct of private agents, including oneself, as in the case of NGOs that apply social pressure to change the conduct of firms' (Baron 2010).

At this point, the widespread feeling is that corporations have begun to take over activities traditionally concerned with government. So much so that Scherer and

Palazzo (2011) report how corporations have begun to concern themselves with public health, education, security, or even human rights. This new political role of corporations (Scherer and Palazzo 2011), however, is not driven by civic philosophies such as those that in the past interested companies like Olivetti, but rather is to be interpreted as an attempt to mend to one's own advantage the space left free between global markets and international laws. Because as Matten and Crane (2005) remind us, it is necessary to rethink the citizenship of the company far from the idea that the company can be a citizen in the same way as the individual. If anything, the company manages certain aspects of our and its citizenship as it sees fit.

So, companies not only pursue political activities, but are political individuals themselves (Scherer, Palazzo et al. 2014). What we are trying to say is that firms not only identify and try to fill spaces left vacant by regulations, but also advance a real activity of private politics. Going deeper, it seems that private politics has become more and more important in the last decades, but in fact it is not a totally new behavior. If we look at the history of modern welfare, we can see how certain forms of welfare, health care for example, are worker-driven programs. Here some scholars had already suggested that this kind of self-government—which also happens for other issues such as the environment and quality control—arises where there is a shadow of hierarchy. In fact, a very interesting phenomenon happens, and one that we will also find later on: when the danger of certain laws becoming mandatory is perceived, companies and their associations prefer to proceed with self-regulation rather than wait for government regulation (Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008; Werner 2012).

Thus, a scenario emerges in which private politics can be used by corporations to preempt the intervention of the legislature. But these private politics, however, are also a context and a tool for activists, again when the state seems not to be sufficient (Balsiger 2014). And if this thinking is related to our current contemporaneity, it will not escape us that it is a very frequent phenomenon in a globalized world.

But what does this repertoire of corporate private politics consist of? To look at the different existing types of corporate political action the works of Oliver (1991), Kneip (2012, 2013) and Walker and Rea (2014) come to our aid. Indeed, we can distinguish around six different corporate action strategies for responding to activist tensions, challenges, or even accusations: avoidance, acquiescence, compromise, sidestepping, confrontation, and prevention. Strategies that involve different nuances from action to non-action, with a more or less active role in responding to requests or influencing the public debate. These strategies can be carried out through different tactics, both by the company acting individually, and by those who decide to cooperate in forms of business associations (Walker and Rea 2014). But we can say that, in general, these companies tend to be large and multinational. Among other things, they are the ones most affected by social movements, and who have the most resources to respond to them.

Avoidance

To define *avoidance* we can think of a real form of non-reaction, as long as it is desired by the company, in which the company simply pretends to ignore the requests received. The company, therefore, waits to hope that the storm will soon pass. To relate to a phenomenon, we will discuss later in this period, when the sweatshop case exploded, for example, many retailers and brands that were singled out by the movement did not actually respond or even bother to take the necessary steps to meet social or supply chain standards (Balsiger 2014b). Rather, if they responded at all, they blamed the subcontractors who worked in the poor and polluted parts of the world for them.

Acquiescence

The *acquiescence* consists instead in an acceptance: activists make requests, companies listen to them and make the necessary changes to their policies. There tend to be two reasons for acquiescence. There may be considerable public pressure, and fearing reputational damage the company decides to accept the demands, or at least to compromise. Or, it may be that companies see this form of corporate action as an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors through a *social strategy*. In this second scenario, according to Husted and Allen (2011) it

would seem that activist campaigns can offer opportunities: social issue opportunities. This does not necessarily mean that the behaviour is opportunistic and driven by pure economic interests, but it may be that it reflects the ethics and thinking of managers or ownership. However, in acquiescence companies can be considered as allies of activists in confronting their battles, contributing to mobilization.

Compromise

Compromises, briefly mentioned above, require instead a more or less implicit negotiation of demands. This is why, in this case, we can also speak of concessions. This type of corporate politics, therefore, is recognized when companies focus on one issue while neglecting others. To better understand this practice one can think of the situation in which in negotiation the company offers to compensate for the consequences of their practices. An attitude that in conflicts with local communities can be mediated by the construction of hospitals and schools or the investment of funds for the health and education of the population. Finally, compromise often leverages the more moderate parts of the population to slowly succeed in convincing the more radicalized groups (Gustaffson 2014).

Sidestepping

Sidestepping is a solution that companies use to respond to tensions that are recognized by movements, but not directly requested by the company in question. It is therefore a tactic of reputation or impression management (McDonnell and King 2013). In essence, companies decide to react to an activist demand by making a commitment, for example social or environmental, but which is actually disconnected from the concrete issues. An attitude that could be criticized externally as greenwashing. Also because sidestepping often consists of communication strategies such as reporting, auditing, or donations. Or, it can consist in the development of products or labels that satisfy the particular demands of certain movements-green, organic, fair, and so on.

Confrontation

The *confrontation* requires an active commitment on the part of companies to listen to activists' requests and organize a response. This strategy can even see companies on the front lines defending their own position and that of activists, possibly through campaigns. In the case of the anti-sweatshop issue, for example, French retailers decided to work together to determine a shared way to monitor their impact and initiatives. They also decided to publicly counter those who opposed their position with media campaigns (Balsiger 2014b). On the other hand, however, as we will see in the second part of the chapter, confrontation does not always end well. In order to confront *culture jammers*, activists who subvert the logos of brands and their advertisements, companies decided instead to accuse the activists themselves (Micheletti and Stolle 2013).

Prevention

Prevention is better than cure. Therefore, companies often not only react to the demands of movements, but also try to prevent their emergence by implementing measures when they are about to emerge. In order to do this, companies need to know the various actors of social movements and NGOs well. So they prepare themselves with units specifically dedicated to public relations or risk management, or rely on agencies specialized in PR litigation. Today, however, prevention requires even more constant monitoring of media and social media in order to keep a finger on the pulse of the public debate and be ready in case action is needed. In the meantime, companies can take advantage of intervening in the public debate to influence it with content in social media or traditional media. To give just one example, companies usually take pages in newspapers both to enhance their reputation and to prevent direct attacks from the newspaper.

What emerges from these points, then, is that businesses influence both the dynamics of social movements and their outputs. Indeed, there is an interesting quote from Walker and Rea (2014) about how the politics of business have many facets, but are always focused on winning the hearts and minds of consumers and beyond. Existing literature tells about how corporations manage to limit the mobilization of social movements. The various strategies of corporate politics and

in particular the tactics of sidestepping, confronting, and preventing allow companies to influence the demands of movements according to their interest. At the same time, however, the literature has shown how companies can also cause an external mobilization leading to the emergence of some phenomena: social entrepreneurs, green start-ups, LGBTQ+ friendly companies that can prove to be on the side of movements to support their ideas.

Thus, on the one hand, some scholars such as King and Pearce (2010) or Soule (2012a) have devoted themselves to researching the question of the relationships between firms, markets, and social movements. On the other, some wondered how the activities of social movements impacted on firms' outcomes (e.g., Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003; King and Soule 2007; King 2008b; Bartley and Child 2011; Soule et al. 2013). Finally, some also took an important step further: wondering in which business firms also acted as social movements (e.g., Davis and Thompson 1994; Vogel 2005; Vogus and Davis 2005; Walker and Rea 2014). Adding to this question is a focus on how markets and firms impact social movements, how movements in turn impact firms and markets (Soule and King 2015).

The concept of corporate (King 2008a) and industry opportunity structure (Schurman 2004) is important for understanding how markets and firms influence movements. Both concepts are actually derived from an earlier concept of political opportunity structure, which Tarrow (1998) would have defined as the set of those dimensions and possibilities of the political environment that provide people with reasons for taking collective action. This idea was later developed by Schurman (2004) who specified that, in the case of movements directed at firms and markets, industry opportunity structures offer the opportunities and limits that influence the activities of movements in industry. Specifically, Schurman's (2004) definition of industry opportunity structure is a set of 'economic, organizational, cultural, and commodity-related' factors that facilitate or complicate the activity of movements and their effects on company targets.

King (2008a, 2008b) later developed the idea by introducing the corporate opportunity structure and corporate mediation whereby companies can influence

both the activity and processes of social movements. Some scholars, then, argue that not only firms in general have the possibility to generate this impact, but also the characteristics of the chief executive officer CEO are an important dimension of corporate opportunity structure. Indeed, a CEO of a firm has much more power over decisions and policies than any other individual within the firm (Soule and King 2015).

On the other hand, activists aspire to more visible targets so that their protests gain more media visibility (King 2011), an attitude that makes these companies to be more sensitive in perceiving the opportunities or dangers of influencing movements (King 2008b; McDonnell and King 2013). Nike for example, and then we will see more about this, has in the past become more vulnerable to activists because it had tried to portray itself as a good corporate citizen (Micheletti and Stolle 2008).

Finally, some scholars have seen that corporate culture and receptiveness to activism is an important dimension of the corporate opportunity structure. Indeed, some companies embrace certain corporate cultures and philosophies that make them more sensitive to the influence of movements. Vasi and King (2012), by the way, noted that companies with a green corporate culture are more likely to respond to activists' environmental demands, also because they find that a progressive culture can decrease the risk to which companies are exposed. In this regard, McDonnell et al. discussed that companies often adopt certain policies such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports to preserve their reputation and public image. The interesting aspect is that these social management devices change the internal culture of the company and make it more receptive to the demands of movements in the future. Rojas et al. (2012) give us the idea that the corporate culture also determines the way in which the company itself responds to the demands of the various stakeholders.

1.2 No Logo. The no-global manifesto

The new millennium began with the publication of *No Logo*, the no-global manifesto by Canadian journalist Naomi Klein. A book that soon became the icon of criticism

against multinationals, their policies and their advertising (Iabichino 2009). Naomi Klein with this book—in her own words—sets out to find the dirt behind the shine (Klein 2000). But what is this dirt and what is what shines?

1.2.1 From production to branding

Since the mid-1980s there has been a significant growth in the cultural influence of multinational companies, which can be explained by the shift for these companies from the production of goods to the production of brands (Klein 2000). A fundamental critical juncture, therefore, from which and for which the approach of brands will change completely. For Nike and other companies such as Gap, Calvin Klein, Diesel and other brands mentioned in the book, production thus becomes a marginal activity of their business as their main work is in marketing. Rather, these companies are in the business of outsourcing production and then taking care of branding. Hence also comes the obsession of companies with brand identity (Klein 2000), while the role of advertising changes from communicating information to creating an image and a story around a product. Advertising therefore becomes even more relevant than the advertised product.

However, the growth of branding and brand advertising has not been continuous. There was a moment, in fact, when, for a short time, there was a feeling that things might be getting worse. It was April 2nd, 1993, and Philip Morris, the multinational tobacco company and owner of the Marlboro brand, announced that it would soon reduce the cost of Marlboro cigarettes by 20 percent to compete with the other brands that were stealing market share. This moment becomes relevant in this account of the rise and evolution of the brand, as it is one of the most relevant symptoms of brand instability in those years and is equivalent to the loss of brand value on the product, as if the Marlboro brand alone was no longer sufficient to give reason for that high price positioning (Klein 2000).

It is interesting because this shock was not felt by all the brands and it was probably just a crack that would soon be filled with more branding. In the same years, in fact, the then CEO of Nike Phil Knight tells of how the company is no longer product, but

marketing oriented since the mid-80s-let's consider that the first Just Do It commercial was in 1988. In particular, Knight says in an interview with the Harvard Business Review that internally the company has understood that the most important thing is 'market the product' because the product is the most important marketing tool of the company. Among other things The Economist declared that 1988 was 'The Year of the Brand' (Roberts 2004).

This movement from product to brand is a decisive shift for everything that is going to happen and, as we will see, it is the breaking point with what was done previously and indeed it is the first sign of that brand evolution that will lead brands to even borrow the practices of activism. The idea we get, in fact, is that the Brand X of the moment is no longer a product, just as Nike is no longer synonymous with sports shoes. But that brand, and in Klein Nike's example, is a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea. Talking about brands as concepts, experiences and lifestyle we can also take a look at what was said at the time of the launch of the Nike tagline: Just Do It. The then head of marketing Scott Bedbury talked about how Nike was lifting that deep emotional connection people have with sports and fitness. He also added that the brand's job was to lift the shingle, add a great sense of purpose to the experience of sports, while also challenging yourself in sports with the condemnation that what you are doing really matters.

Months ago, I was reading this book on the advice of my thesis advisor to look for those passages, those events and phenomena that led to the birth of brand activism and the communication of why and purpose with which companies are making a restyling of their image. When I read the term *purpose* in the presentation of Just Do It in 1988 everything became much clearer. If in the book of Kotler and Sarkar (2018), as we will see in the second chapter, we can know the phenomenon of the present, it is in these traces of the 80s, 90s and 2000s that emerges the whole road traveled by brands. Let's remember, for example, that between the 80s and 2000s the clothing company Benetton from Veneto, Italy, began to use advertising to associate progressive social and political messages to its brand, thanks to Oliviero Toscani (Leodi and Volli 2012). Rebranding that Klein defines as 'cultural sponge' and that even the owner of Diesel is not slow to declare. In an interview with Paper

Magazine, in fact, Renzo Rosso states that his company does not sell products, but a lifestyle. He adds: 'I think we have created a movement. The Diesel concept is everything. It's the way to live, it's the way to wear. It's the way to do something'.

That work on social movements, looking for links and influences with companies, now comes in handy to rethink this statement. 'I think we have created a movement' confirms that the shift from product to brand is completely revolutionizing the way we market, or at least the way we tell the story. Here, Nike no longer competes—at least explicitly—with another shoe manufacturer for who makes the best performing shoes, nor does Diesel claim that its jeans are more durable than Levi's or Replay. Here the brands in question are changing semantic field, leaving that of technical and product terms, to elevate themselves to the ideas and imaginaries of culture, society and, therefore, also of those social movements we discussed at length earlier. And if, with this awareness, we look now at what these brands are saying after thirty years, I think we will not be overly surprised to see Nike associate itself against discrimination and Diesel in support of gender identity and sustainability. These brands have been associating their brand narrative with society for years.

In this regard, the graphic designer Tibor Kalman reasons on how the brand meant quality, before it became a badge of courage. Empowering, we remember the goal of the sexuality and gender movements, from the mid-90s companies like Nike begin to research the extension of the brand as a possible evolution and positioning of the same. The objective is therefore to build a narrative of values and images that is close to cultural values, so that the brand can make them its own and reflect them, and so that those same values or social images refer to the brand. Culture, in other words, could thus add value to brands (Klein 2000). Advertising therefore fits very well into this process because it is the ideal means to elevate products to positive cultural or social experiences. In short, wearing a pair of shoes can thus be the manifestation of certain ideas, attitudes and therefore culture.

Nike began to devote itself to after-school basketball programs, Diesel and Abercrombie switched to a storyboard format to combine storytelling and catalog,

while Benetton fit nicely into the magalog trend of publishing magazines with Colors (Klein 2000). The Nineties were also characterized by new communication strategies of companies, which concentrated their efforts more and more on the creation of brand values. At a time when television accounted for 68% of the advertising budget compared to other media, Oliviero Toscani's decision to focus on billboards was particularly significant. The Venetian company then built the multicultural identity of its brand also through the publication of Colors magazine, entrusted between 1991 and 1995 to the American designer Tibor Kalman. While Toscani's advertisements abruptly broke into themes taken from journalistic information, the magazine distributed in Benetton stores dealt with topics such as food, religion, immigration, ecology and AIDS with a visual language that appropriated advertising gimmicks (Carlo Vinti 2016).

To this third culture of brand-name products and brand-name media, we can add the universe of brand-name people. A branding practice that Nike adopted widely sponsoring several athletes. Among these, the most important relationship is the one with Michael Jordan, who declared that Knight of Nike had turned him into a dream. Jordan and Nike became one of the maximum manifestations of how the barriers between branding and cultures can be eliminated (Klein 2000). Another example from those years that gives an idea of how far Nike wanted to push the possibilities of empowerment of its brand, dates back to 1995. On that occasion Nike invested in a couple of Kenyan runners so that they could participate in Africa's first Olympic ski team (Klein 2000). Needless to say, the result was grotesque. Finally, just to add one more absurdity that accompanied Nike, was the branding of flesh. Exactly, the swoosh or the little man who rises in flight to crush Jordan tattooed on his skin. As Klein writes: 'Human branding? Check'.

Products are in fact produced in factories, but it is in the mind that brands are formed (Klein 2000). The concept is that the real value of brands is in the ideas, lifestyles and attitudes they inspire and share. And those who build brands, companies and their agencies, become the new primary producers of what is the knowledge economy (Klein 2000). Knight confirms this by stating at first hand that there is no longer value in making things, but rather this lies in research, innovation

and marketing. That is, what keeps Nike in-house while outsourcing everything to manufacturing. As the next section will recount, it is factory workers in the poorest parts of the world in the 1990s who assemble the products for the branded world (Klein 2000).

1.2.2 The sweatshop issue. Emerging a global problem

The same *No Logo* book raises a relevant question about the history of what is perceived as cool in America by many super-brands. That is, cool means being inspired by black culture by taking as much as possible. Consequently, it emerges why it was initially the basketball courts of America's poorest neighborhoods that influenced some cool products (Klein 2000). Indeed, certain brands went even further by trying to sell, again in America, to the white population the black-style, while to the black youth the white wealth (Klein 2000). These brand practices make us understand how street style and youth culture are very relevant marketable commodities (Klein 2000). This passage, however, also shows how the success and narratives of certain brands have also been created by using—if not exploiting— aspects of black culture or, even more so, of its poorer side in order to create cool and desired imagery. Fashion brands seem to sell the most disadvantaged people an exaggerated representation of the good life, which can be achieved simply by using their logo. A critical reflection, to be sure, but one that can make one think about how Nike and other clothing and non-clothing brands have embraced the various issues of discrimination, with Black Lives Matter being the latest most visible and global movement in 2020.

Reflection of exploitation of social and political imaginaries, values and ideas that we will address in the next two chapters. In this paragraph, instead, exploitation accompanies us to a global problem that has involved many superbrands especially in the Nineties: the sweatshop issue. Naomi Klein takes us to Cavite, in the Philippines, where she finds the first unswooshed corner of the world. Hers is a clear provocation to Nike's hyperbranding, but it is also a rather sincere reflection: what she visits is paradoxically a Nike shoe factory. With the ploy of free-trade zones

(Klein 2000), zones without taxes and duties of which Cavite is also a part, multinational companies recognize an opportunity to relocate their production. Entire countries or vast areas of them are therefore transformed into industrial slums and ghettos of very cheap labour. These are the sweatshops.

But how low is the cost and how poor are the working conditions? They talk about $6 a day and when that is considered even too much companies can charge the local government a fee. Or, it is said that 50,000 workers at Nike's factory in China would have to work for 19 years to earn what Nike spent at the time on advertising in a year (Klein 2000). So, it is easy to see how the claim that these companies would bring jobs, education, and sustainable growth to local economies soon collapsed. The working conditions, then, are terrible. *No Logo* talks about it accurately and just the images of long working hours, even 16 a day or more with mandatory and unpaid overtime, give us the pulse of that situation. Conditions to which is added the illegality of organizing strikes in many areas of Central America and Asia.

On the other hand, the CEO of Nike, which we understood to be Klein's favourite example, says in 1996 that for 25 years the company has been contributing to bringing good work and raising living standards in the countries where it operates. Transnational corporations are thus affecting democracy, work, communities, culture and the biosphere. All this agitates activists who now feel that it is time to stop what is happening and demand that spaces in the world be freed from brands and among these especially democracy and culture. In fact, Jaggi Singh states that states have failed in their role to control and regulate, while corporations have taken advantage of this to become the new institutions. This passage should awaken all those arguments about private politics mentioned above.

Thus, a new anti-corporate activism, i.e. a network of environmental, human and labour rights activists, began to develop (Klein 2000). This movement reached its peak in the year of the sweatshops. It is 1996 when Life magazine publishes an investigation about Pakistani child workers who were earning six cents an hour to produce Nike footballs. From here it is clear that an anti-Nike movement started with more than 1500 articles about sweatshops. Nike, however, did not immediately

worry because they were aware that the company's image was created not so much in the malls or stores, but in the way they associated their aspirational products with the styles and imagery of poorer black or Latino neighborhoods. The problem, therefore, emerged when information reached these people that on the $150 price point the cost of the shoes was $5. Nike was then concerned about the black and Latinos kids from the Bronx, so that in September 1997 Nike's chief of public relations took action. In response to the protest 'Nike, we made you. We can break you', in May 1998 Phil Knight declared in a press conference that they had a plan to improve working conditions in Asia. The fact is that these changes did not include a wage increase.

Indeed, the codes of conduct introduced by corporations were in a sense a controversial system of brand-based activism by companies like Nike. These companies took the opportunity to apparently take a position on these issues. They recognized the existence of abuses in their manufacturing sites and started writing statements of principles, codes of ethics, memoranda and all other legally non-mandatory documents. So, it was just good intentions repackaged as a real stance. In short, fake brand-based activism. Global labour and environmental standards should be regulated by the laws of governments (Klein 2000).

In this context of the sweatshop issue, there is a statement that I quote here that I would like you to remember when you later go to talk about Brand activism with Nike as a case study. When the sweatshop case exploded, a Nike spokeswoman declared 'We're not political activists. We are a footwear manufacturer' (Klein 2000). Where their brand, not product philosophy was hidden is not known to us. What is clear, however, is that these events related to the sweatshop contributed not only to create a movement against Nike, but above all to question the brand by triggering a new and strong anti-corporate movement.

1.2.3 The new anti-corporate activism and the brand-based activism

No Logo, we said, is a manifesto written to tell the anti-corporate attitude that was emerging in the late Nineties among many young activists. What Naomi Klein wants to share with us is that more and more people, also thanks to her work, come to know the secrets-that dirt we mentioned at the beginning of this section-behind the transnational corporations and oppose them individually or collectively with social movements. In particular, what would really stir up this anti-corporate sentiment is the way brands have assaulted labour rights, civil liberties and civic space (Klein 2000). The activism we are talking about, then, is an activism convinced that there is something else, another possibility. Another world is possible, as the Occupy Wall Street posters would later say. In short, the anti-corporate movement has its own manifesto, it is *No Logo* and proposes itself as a convinced alter-movement. An alternative, therefore, that represents the image that movements often give of themselves.

Reading the book, however, it emerges that brand-based activism actually refers to two opposite manifestations: activism directed against the brand and the reaction of the brands in response. Anti-corporate activism is fueled by mostly young people around the world who more or less aggressively claim their space. They fundamentally want an unbranded world and, to get it, they are willing to play the same game, especially when corporations seem to be leveraging society's demands. An example, speaking of sexuality and gender, is Diesel's 1995 campaign in which two sailors are kissing. Certainly, a stance in favour of the freedom of expression that the brand has always pursued in the last thirty years, but it could also represent a symptom of how all the demands of the movements for greater representation can then be easily accommodated by marketers, the media and those who produce pop-culture (Klein 2000).

Even back then, people were talking about diversity, and even back then several brands embraced its value. So much so that research published in the book Rocking the Ages in 1997, showed how diversity was—more than twenty years ago—a determining factor for the Xers generation. Diversity in its various cultural, political,

sexual and social forms was already important for the choice of consumption (Klein 2000). So perhaps the numbers on today's consumer demands that we will see in chapter two will not surprise us so much. It is a matter of recognizing relevant social tensions, interacting with them and making them one's own to expand one's brand identity, without which it seems that companies cannot live in the marketplace (Klein 2000).

In this process, even Nike is quick to insert itself and recognize how people who feel part of more oppressed groups of the population can actually be very strong niche markets. An opportunity to elevate a shoe from product to ally in their battles. In the meantime, in the Nineties, Benetton was also confronted with race stereotypes, but also with other social issues such as AIDS. The question arises whether this activation of brands on social issues is a cynical choice of pure commercial interest or is it a push to bring advertising to a social role. This is what Klein (2000) also asks herself, recognising, for example, that Benetton has really generated an important message on certain themes, such as AIDS. This thought can also be found in the book *L'impresa della visione* (*The enterprise of vision*), where the founder himself, Luciano Benetton, explains the reasons for that choice: he and Toscani wanted advertising to do something more than just sell a product, so what could be better than making culture?

So, some companies get alongside social issues and build brand messages disguised as cultural messages. In short, they start to take a stand. Activists, however, on the other hand, soon realize that all this increased and valuable representation in the media thanks to companies is actually feeding the brands more than the issues addressed. And, indeed, diversity itself becomes the key to communicating in the same way around the world. Let me explain. Klein (2000) makes us think about how companies have recognized the importance of the diversity factor in order to create unique messages addressed to the whole world. Benetton's campaigns, for example, talk about a world united in diversity and they do it through great visuals that can be understood everywhere. A passage that is not surprising if we remember for a second that it fits perfectly into that fluid, transnational context of 1990s globalization we spoke about earlier. Vandana Shiva calls this widespread diversity

a monoculture and so nationality, language, politics are all nuances that are part of a larger culture, that of 'us'. As Diesel chairman Renzo Rosso reminds us 'never an us and them, but simply one giant we'. Advertising slogans and company logos therefore become the best way to communicate across cultures (Klein 2000).

However, it is precisely the logos and slogans of companies' campaigns that also become an opportunity and a tool for counter-narration and activism for culture jammers who begin to create parodies. What they try to do goes beyond inverting advertising messages, but rather consists of improving, editing, augmenting or unmasking them (Klein 2000). This practice of activists is important because, in reality, it is also the cause of a reaction by companies and therefore of a first form of activation by brands. In fact, they start to become aware of their own possibilities and thus show that they can cut out the culture jammers. An example, as always, comes from Nike that in 1997 released a pre-jammed ads campaign that included the slogan 'I am not/a target market/I am an athlete'. This campaign borrows the language, the tone, the sarcasm of the anti-corporate activism of the jammers and does just that to build an almost unassailable message. Diesel, then, manages to go even further by incorporating the political content of the attacks received by corporations into its advertising. Thus, it does so with the Brand O and Reasons for Living campaigns that increase sales in the United States from 2 million to 23 million. All this while the agency Wieden & Kennedy makes Nike a feminist shoe (Klein 2000). A quest that is pursued to this day. Given the gender tensions, Nike launched The Land of New Football – Play New campaign last June declaring its mission to create a land of new football where there is no difference, especially in the most popular sport in the world where the disparity between men and women is immense. In addition, Nike is working with Bebe Vio for an academy in Milan and with commercials dedicated to the Arab world to help women's empowerment.

In short, it seems to be understood that the activist attack on the brand created a reaction of the brands which then became quasi-activist. Nike, above all, took this step by loading the idea of sport with the idea of transcendence through sport, self-empowerment, women's rights and equality between different ethnic groups (Klein 2000). Some twenty years ago what he is still pursuing today. However, what was

very different then from what is happening today was the relationship between brands and young people. If today young people are the target that brands are trying to conquer by demonstrating a common attachment to certain values, during the sweatshop and anti-corporate movements, it was young people, especially those in universities, who took a stand. In fact, it happened that on university campuses young people, aware of their university's relationship with Nike, began not to support the idea that the company treated young people of the same age differently in two different parts of the world. In the States with sponsorship and in Asia with exploitation at six cents an hour. Thus, they were also instrumental in the movement against Nike and corporations (Klein 2000).

Harvard business professor Debora L. Spar (1998) argued that the growth of brand-based activism has actually been so instrumental in changing companies that it is no longer economically attractive for large multinational brands to continue the abuses. This is her theory of the spotlight phenomenon. That is, the big spotlight on corporate practices by activists and the media and thus public opinion has led to a change in supply chain, but not in ethics.

Conclusions

Mapping the field of Social Movements was an opportunity to get to know the social, cultural, political and economic context in which companies and the phenomenon of brand activism fit in. This action of mapping, however, has also proved to be fundamental in recognizing and tracing the links between the characteristics of social movements and companies. The map that is returned to us sees movements and companies in a relationship of mutual influence where activists influence corporate responses or changes and where companies do the same with the actions of movements. Among these, the new social movements represent a fundamental passage for the context we are telling. These movements are in fact a post-materialist thrust, the same that society was expressing in those years with a shift from the production of goods to knowledge, in the West. Therefore, not only the movements intercepted and manifested this drive, but also the companies themselves were influenced by it, and thus gradually changed their relationship

with the products in favour of the brand. Companies, slowly but progressively, approach more social and political issues. In doing so, first during consumerism and then reaching the apex with the start of globalization, they begin to prefer practices of private politics. Actions then, of various kinds as we have seen, but which make these institutional subjects appear as actors of policies, both influencing and regulating the practices of the market and their internal ones. We cannot and do not want to speak here of premature activism of companies, but what is certain is that under the surface companies move social, political and then also economic actions. And they do it to respond to movements, to civil society, but also for social management service. Interest, one might say. In fact, companies recognise opportunities and make these possibilities their own.

The second part of the first chapter was inspired by Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* and aims to mark a link between the mapping of social movements and the next two chapters of the thesis, respectively dedicated to brand activism and woke capitalism. In particular, thanks to *No Logo* three events were identified that determined the emergence of brand activism. The first, as we have seen, is also the most relevant as it consists in the shift from production to branding. A fundamental shift that led to the birth of the brand we know today. The brand, therefore, is charged with aspirational, social and even political values. The second event, on the other hand, concerns sweatshops and is both cause and effect of the shift from product to brand in the West. In fact, to enable this shift, production in the 1980s and 1990s had simply moved, especially to South-East Asia and Central America, bringing poor working conditions to those places and drastically reducing costs. Money saved, therefore, which is easy to understand how it was invested: to feed the brand. Finally, the last event concerns a reaction of activists and society to the exploitative labor and hyper-branding behaviors of companies. These tensions, as we have seen, have led to the birth of new anti-corporate and anti-capitalism movements, over time gathered under a single creed: no global.

What emerges, then, is that the shift from product to brand corresponds to society's shift from production to knowledge. This ensured that brands were able to engage with culture and society in a deeper and more grounded way, but it also caused a

widespread and global counter-movement. In all of this, to conclude, it is interesting to see how companies reacted to the activism towards them with their own action and policy, that is, by manifesting the first signs of brand-based activism. Brand activism that here has a more critical nuance because it consists in a defensive and compensatory reaction to social demand.

Chapter II — Brand activism: from purpose to reaction

As can be guessed from the title, this second chapter will deal with the central topic of this paper: brand activism. In order to do so, we will ask about the origin of a fundamental ingredient to complete the shift of brands towards brand activism, namely *purpose*. From the discourse around the topic of corporate activism, it would seem that purpose is the attitude needed to move brands in the right direction. The question of the origin of the purpose will allow us to map different phenomena that would have contributed to this manifestation of a deep belief, present in brands.

In doing so, it will emerge how purpose is a necessary corporate asset in order to be able to take a stand on certain issues affecting society. In addition to the mission and vision of the company, therefore, there is a high sentiment that wants to align itself with the feeling of the territory and the communities with which it relates. This feeling of being part of a wider system would help generate a more human, and often profit-oriented, raison d'être. In this regard, we will see both how this new concept of rethinking capitalism, and branding in particular, generates an impact in society, and how pursuing causes beyond profit paradoxically contributes to generating greater profit.

It is precisely for this second reason that it will be important to recognise how the concept of purpose first, and then brand activism, are undergoing a decisive inflation in recent years, especially since 2018 and during the pandemic. Therefore, despite the fact that the third chapter is dedicated to the counter-narrative of the brand activism phenomenon, the deep and more superficial tensions of the companies will already be recognised in these pages. In particular, the contribution that this paper would like to make concerns the concept of action. That is to say, the very grounding of the purpose of brands: their acting with concrete actions. An action which, as we shall see, it would perhaps be more appropriate to call a reaction. Reaction insofar as it never, or almost never, consists in acting free of interests, but rather is always a response to different types of tension, always considering first the possible effect on the organisation.

This second chapter, therefore, will offer a new account of the brand activism phenomenon, attempting to restore a greater completeness and awareness of its, in this case, reasons for being.

2.1 The origin of purpose

If the story of brand activism must necessarily begin with that of purpose, it is surely thanks to the work of Kotler and Sarkar (2018). In their book *Brand activism*, they add an interesting subtitle—*From Purpose to Action*—to immediately outline what causes, justifies and moves the process of brand activation. This purpose, then, is delivered to us by the two as the effect of an evolution of marketing in a more society-driven key, now essential to rethink and position the brand with higher values and ambitions.

Interestingly, it has happened more than once that some of the case consultants have spoken of these present and future years as those of the communication of why and purpose. And so here is a contribution on the discourse of purpose that immediately gives the pulse of the situation: the last few years have seen us chase the noble intentions of purpose at all costs (Iabichino 2021). I do not believe, however, that the reason lies solely in humanity's momentary awakening during the pandemic. Rather, I think that the covid, like other phenomena linked to the precarious health of the capitalist system and of the earth in primis, have activated in people the need to feel part, with every purchase, of a stance. Or at least of a greater ideal, after having paid at the checkout.

People have realised that buying a product is not just about finding the best offer or value for money. But, above all, every purchase gesture is equivalent to a choice. A vote, even, to support one economy rather than another, one way of being in the market rather than another. Purchasing is also charged with the value of choosing the world we want to see, build and support. Buying, aligning ourselves with purpose, is tantamount to agreeing with certain values in order to make them our own (Iabichino 2021).

The purpose thus contributes to creating a relationship with the companies that interest us, while the experience behind each purchase increases the value of the product. A value that we often find difficult to quantify because it has to do with our lives and has participated or is participating in the definition of our identity, also helping to tell the outside world about our personality. Think, for example, of how we choose to wear one outfit rather than another to express—more or less consciously—our thoughts. This is the power of a story that intertwines the destinies of brands and people (Iabichino 2021).

If we have seen how purchasing can differentiate us from other people, telling our story and our thoughts, it is also true that the same choice of consumption can also unite us with others. It is when we recognise our identity in someone else that empathy becomes stronger and projects us together into the future (Iabichino 2021). A future that, let us remember, affects the whole discourse on brand activism. Indeed, without the search for a better planet and widespread well-being for people and their rights in the future, companies would not have taken action to take care of certain tensions.

This is why Kotler has added the P of Planet and the P of Purpose to the 4Ps of marketing, also redefining the professions that relate to this social science. In all of this, however, the invitation is not to reduce internal brand choices to temporary marketing gimmicks. As Iabichino (2020) suggests, on the contrary, the new marketing should concern and confront itself internally with all departments of the organisation, before being able to take any action externally. Always, remembering that the most urgent demands actually come from society and not from the market.

To do this, the advice to companies, which we will check later in the story of brand activism and its manifestations, is to create a solid narrative heritage as a basis for any subsequent action. The purpose must therefore be credible, relevant and pertinent. Only in this way can it impact society and contribute to its improvement, moving companies with a new perspective in which it is more important to give than to say. With purpose there may be time for action, as long as it is driven by a desire on the part of the brand to give back all it has received from its customers. And ideas

that manage to generate an impact and improve society usually always win (Iabichino 2020).

2.1.1 Corporate Social Responsibility and Cause-Related Marketing

What we now call brand activism is a phenomenon made explicit by a more social current in marketing. This concern for society, as well as for profit, has deeper origins in the second half of the last century. And before being called Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR, it was more simply Social Responsibility or SR, when the dominance of the business sector was not yet so strong (Carroll 1999). Back then, according to Keith Davis (1960), the definition of SR was 'the decisions and actions of businessmen taken for reasons at least partly beyond the direct economic or technical interest of the enterprise'.

Before going any further, I would like to dwell briefly on this definition. If we consider social responsibility an initial fossil of the brand activism phenomenon we are experiencing today, it might be relevant to recognise a link between social commitment and, in any case, economic interest. Indeed, the very definition above makes it clear that social responsibility coexists with profit and does not override it, or at least does not cancel out this first tension of business. What should be born in mind, therefore, is that in this account of the 'other' commitment of companies, it should never be forgotten that all actions always come up against a capitalist nature of the company organisation, and consequently of its brand.

Further on, it already emerged during those years that responsible business behaviour and decisions taken for the long term offered a greater possibility of obtaining an economic advantage, being able to return value to society at the same time. So much so that pursuing this vision of social responsibility, Johnson (1971) describes SR as a strategy where 'companies implement social programmes to add profit to their organization'. This thinking is now matured and completed by McKinsey&Company who define Corporate Social Responsibility as a strategy that simultaneously pursues business and social benefits (Keys, Malnight & van der Graaf 2009).

This standard definition is thus built on the idea that companies have a responsibility to give back to society, in addition to giving back to their shareholders (Schwartz 2011). And linking to the possibilities offered by corporate social engagement as described in the previous section, CSR becomes a way for brands to position themselves and differentiate themselves in the marketplace by creating shared value between the company and society (Du, Bhattacharya, Sen 2011). Thus, CSR strategies can include support for communities, employees, and the environment (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001).

Also, in line with this strategy, Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2011) recognise an increase over the years of companies that have implemented CSR programs. The reason for this, however, lies with all of us as consumers. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) and Lafferty (2007) share the view that there is an increased consumer focus on purchasing from more ethical and responsible brands. For companies, however, it is not enough to recognise this trend and implement practices. Rather, the biggest challenge for brands is to be able to rebuild a solid and truthful point of contact between the brand image and values, and the initiatives that are being implemented (Weber and Larsson-Olaison 2017).

Nurturing and consolidating trust in the brand is a key factor in brand loyalty. Indeed, consumers tend to prefer to buy products they can trust, recognising the solid brand reputation. In particular, in 2009 Gurhan Canli and Fries developed a model linking social responsibility to brand outcomes. This study confirmed that consumer awareness, personal judgement and brand reputation are the main factors influencing the outcome and thus the health of a brand (Eyada 2020).

Viewing the same phenomenon from the consumer's side, their awareness of social responsibility inevitably influences their purchasing attitude, leading them to attribute a different value to their consumption choices (Pomering and Dolcinar 2009). In this, the level of awareness among consumers is associated with the brand's ability to hold a leadership role and ability to pursue a marketing cause. The integrated strategy has a direct influence on brand identity and perception, thus

increasing the level of brand loyalty among consumers, attracting new consumers and increasing the marketing power of the brand (Eyada 2020).

This process of calling CSR activities into marketing communications is also known as cause-related marketing CRM. In particular, Mullen (1997) defined cause-related marketing as a process of generating and implementing marketing activities characterised by contributing to a designated effort, which induces consumers to engage in revenue-generating exchanges (Eyada 2020). Here, too, it emerges how societal marketing can generate long-term value for the firm, which is crucial for the brand to survive over time and to gain a competitive advantage (Collins 1993). What is also reiterated is that the idea of generating a profit is, as always, coupled with the desire to generate a social impact, thus remaining in tune with consumers and their sensitivity to society (Duncan and Moriarity 1997).

Taking over the evolution of marketing, according to Kotler, Karatajaya and Setiawan (2010), the marketing of social responsibility would be the 3.0, also known as the Value-Centric Era, where marketing, advertising and brands create a deep connection with their audience through transparency. Evolution 3.0 would be preceded by marketing 1.0 or the Product-Centric Era where marketers appealed to the minds of consumers, and marketing 2.0 or the Consumer-Centric Era, where emotions were the object of marketing activities.

Thus, in the past, there has been a call for brands' social contribution with Corporate Social Responsibility and Cause-Related Marketing literally using social issues to build their marketing activities (Yoo et al. 2021). Now, continuing, brands are re-entering an era where accountability strategies continue to effectively influence consumers' purchase decisions, particularly with brand activism (Gray 2019). In this process, the consumer establishes a relationship with the brand, based on how they perceive the brand (Fournier 1998). The result is a consumer-brand relationship CBR, which generates a bond when the consumer has a perception of the brand in terms of its image and value (Bowden 2009).

This perspective is underpinned by the idea that companies have an important responsibility to make a concrete contribution to the world in which they operate. According to this attitude, the stakeholder management view is placed with greater importance than the shareholder management view (Freeman et al. 2010). And recently, several brands have started to promote their products through social issues that affect their consumers. This approach has allowed different companies to move from social corporate responsibility to leadership where the power of the brand can afford to inspire social and environmental change (Eyada 2020).

It is no coincidence that this has happened in a context where competition between brands and their products is growing, while quality and price remain similar. So, several brands started to dress up social-called advertising processes by taking positions on issues that should interest their target audience. And in doing so, they would start promoting different values such as confidence, women empowerment, social justice, feminism, climate change, racism, and political issues, sometimes going beyond communication and preferring other actions such as donating towards specific charities (Eyada 2020).

To sum up, at the end of this chapter we could recognise brand activism and its execution and activities as an evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility, where brands create content and generate actions that benefit the society that relates to their products. In doing so, brands would be able to demonstrate themselves as active and leading organisations in addressing certain issues (Eyada 2020).

2.1.2 The Cluetrain Manifesto

In this first part of the second chapter, as I mentioned, I am trying to map the origin of the purpose. Of course, with the knowledge that it is almost impossible to recognise the exact source. But as happens in geography for the most important rivers—and this is the case of purpose, since it then flows into the great phenomenon of brand activism—it is, however, relevant to try to establish the sources. Corporate social responsibility and cause-related marketing have helped to

change the posture of companies, but I believe that another event has also generated ripples, to keep us in the metaphor of water, on the surface.

It was 1999 and the Cluetrain Manifesto was published. I admit it: I discovered it late. It was last April, I was about to start a long weekend of Civil Writing with Iabichino at the Holden School, and the evening before I was to start, an email arrived. The request is to make sure I know this Cluetrain Manifesto and its 95 theses before the next day. So, I go looking and discover that this publication is a marketer's cult. In particular, it perfectly reflects the cultural climate of the new millennium of communication and beyond. The invitation it makes, and which we should still dust off before feeding the voice of brands, is to consider markets as conversations. These, in fact, are made up of people. Human beings, exactly, who are not demographic segments, targets to hit, people to push or attract.

Perhaps a smile will escape the reader. It is only natural, because they will be feeling the same way I did when I first read it: twenty years and more have passed, but this vision of the market and consumers has not yet fully taken hold—except in a few rare cases. Moving on, however, what the Cluetrain Manifesto advises is to adopt a natural voice, so that a brand appears as human as the people who work for it. Simple. The Internet, then, could be a new opportunity for the brand to work alongside and dialogue with consumers, who thus take the name of audience. The arrival of the Internet will therefore become the main topic of these theses, designed to suggest to companies a new way of being on the market, and even before that, in the world. I would therefore leave it to the 80th thesis of the Cluetrain Manifesto to outline what we are going to say from this point on: 'Don't worry, you can still make money as long as it's not the only thing on your mind'.

2.1.3 Ogilvy Big IdeaL

I thought that in order to talk about brands and their search for purpose it might be relevant to also look at the vision of an agency, specifically Ogilvy & Mather. It was 2006 and the then leader of the Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide Creative Council, Robyn Putter, said that the brands we most admire are not only built on a great idea, but

also on great ideals. These ideals are able to radiate values and commitment, engage as well as communicate. But what is an ideal? It is the conception of something in its perfection.

A great ideal, therefore, is the sharing of a vision that the brand has of how the world should be. It is therefore an ingrained belief that changes both the internal and external attitude of the company and then the way it interacts with the world around it. It would be wrong, however, to think that a great ideal is a brand ideal, because this goes far beyond the ability to influence the way the brand is marketed, but wants to change the way whole organisations think and behave.

It is also interesting how The Big IdeaL is not even a tagline that conveys the main narrative of the brand. It is rather the breath of the brand, the ethos of the brand or company that it wants to share with people, employees and consumers in different parts of the world. According to Ogilvy, the structure for recognising and sharing it would be as follows:
'The brand/company believes that the world would be a better place if _____.'

A structure that could also recall certain examples from the past, such as that of 1890 when William Hesketh Lever wrote his ideals for Sunlight soap: 'to make cleanliness a commonplace, to lessen labour for women, to promote health and contribute to personal attractiveness, so that life may be more pleasant and gratifying for the people who use our products'. The same could be done by looking at how Thomas Watson Sr. described the breath he wanted IBM to have, which was to support the exchange not only of goods and services but of men and methods, ideas and ideals. In short, in both cases there was something else driving the companies, something higher, shared and human.

Brand owners, therefore, should not necessarily choose between idealism and profit, precisely because the same business can be stronger and more sustainable over time when it is based on both. In this respect, a great ideal by its nature tends to require sharing. A tendency that the Internet since its birth has facilitated, giving business the possibility to present itself in a more fluid and transparent way,

releasing more information. Thus, it is consumers themselves who have begun to demand greater awareness of and commitment to environmental and social issues, thus moving businesses away from the profit-at-all-costs mentality. Companies, therefore, can no longer escape either their commitment or the control of their supply chains. And the story of Nike and sweatshops in the first chapter is, I think, enough to give the pulse of what Ogilvy's paper is trying to say.

In short, there would seem to be many signs pointing to the consumer's search for a substance behind the business, be it purposeful or ideal. But let us mark this sentence, which will accompany the entire argument of the thesis: the most profitable companies are not those that are exclusively profit-oriented. This is also confirmed by John Kay's article, then book, Obliquity. Moreover, this tendency towards an ideal also affects the employees themselves who seek to work for a company that is driven by aims higher than money. Thus, it has also been proven that people work more productively if they attach meaning to their work.

This search for the other beyond profit, however, is not to be confused with the voices in companies' mission statements or brochures, as the Cluetrain Manifesto noted back in 1999. The sound of that writing sounded contrived at the time and often still does. The Big IdeaL, on the other hand, is a practical and human way of connecting the purpose of a company or brand to the real people who enliven it. The ideal is therefore a shared voice of what the company believes in and, far from being a motivational piece without a solid foundation, is rather a sentiment that could be discussed anywhere—even in the bar—and by anyone—even suppliers and customers. This would mean bringing something authentic to the market.

The paper goes on to explain how Ogilvy conducted two consumer research studies to demonstrate the commercial value of a Big IdeaL. So, about two thousand consumers in eight different countries were presented with pairs of brands such as Coca Cola and Pepsi, Apple and Microsoft and so on to see if the big ideals, where they can be recognised, would be valued. Thus, 82% of the brands with a high consideration score, and therefore a Big IdeaL, were seen as the best in class. These brands, first and foremost, connect with a cultural tension. Something that is shared

and understood by most people. And if markets really are conversations as the Cluetrain Manifesto suggests, then it is worth listening to what brands have to say about those issues, which closely touch culture.

To bring what is being said down to earth, let us think of the famous Coca Cola ad 'Hilltop' conceived against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. A great ideal can indeed participate in and if anything resolve tensions, but at the same time it will have to adapt to the changing times and what they bring with them. Sometimes, some great ideal can also address an issue of the human condition. What is important is that any tension supported by the brand should be of global relevance, especially when working with international brands. In this way a great ideal will be built on the best part of the brand, so not in its characteristics, but in its essence. In short, what has just been called brand breath.

The whole telling process works when the brand finds a resonant cultural tension to it. Only then is the basis for a great ideal and its credibility, relevance and pertinence stable. Only then can the great ideal be internalised by people and inspire change. And this the brand can continue to do even if the context around it changes, because the root is stable and expresses a vision of the world, better than the current one, that it wants to achieve. This is true even for those markets that are apparently more rational, because even in those cases the emotional connection with a brand improves its chances of generating a cultural impact. This is a not insignificant aspect, which in addition to the benefits for people, also trivially increases the efficiency of marketing spending. After all, a great ideal allows people to think about a brand, even when it is other human values they are looking at.

And now, one last thing. A cultural tension is not the same thing as a trend. Brands often show that they want to ride the trend, but they often risk being late, sometimes early or wrong. A cultural tension is a diffuse vibration that moves just below the surface of things. It is a truth that has to be faced and can be recognised everywhere and by everyone. And the great ideal that decides to go along with it ensures that the brand has a clear and motivating role in the world. All this explains why the brand exists, or rather also tells its purpose.

2.1.4 Invertising. If advertising changes direction

Is advertising a polluting agent or can it participate in generating a positive impact? With this question we get to know another process that, according to the writer, has contributed to the origin of the purpose. *Invertising* is a book by Paolo Iabichino from a few years ago, which asks what could happen if advertising changes direction. As the question above suggests, to change gear means to take on a responsibility towards the public and to work so that the brand takes it on as well.

It is surprising to recognise how well over a decade before the publication of *Brand Activism*, this work already contained the signs of what was to develop shortly afterwards and which still moves communication, its ideas and its execution. For example, Iabichino (2009) recognises how the theme of co-creation and activism, according to which consumers become an active subject in the relationship and choice of the brand, was already a phenomenon of those years. Years in which advertising is experiencing a modern phase marked by a general obsession with branding compared to the product, with a consequent quest to create its own value around the brand.

A short time before, Brian Fetherstonhaugh, CEO of Ogilvy, published 'The 4Ps are out, the 4Es are in', which tells how in the current context, the 4Ps of Kotler's marketing are now obsolete and must give space for the new 4Es: Experience, Everyplace, Exchange, Evangelism. A change that, again, is surprising because it seems to have foreshadowed what happened in the following decade. For example, we can recognise in the desire to recreate an evangelist brand the origin of a solid raison d'être, as is the purpose, and a consequent brand activism.

Invertising therefore tells us about the tensions that generated a change in branding, in communicating it, but also in choosing the brand. And in this process, the most relevant social issues that people were experiencing proved to be the values that drove the brand change in advertising (The Moon Unit 2019). More and more individuals started to recognise themselves in their purchasing choices, thus

charging them with an additional value: expressing their identity and personality (Iabichino 2009).

And it is not surprising to discover that there is a parallelism between the definition of soul and that of brand. The former is described by Hillmann as the meaning of our every action, the latter as the meaning of all the activities carried out under the same name (De Martini 2002). Thus, thanks to advertising, Iabichino tells us how brands have been able to enter the socio-economic context of consumers, generating not only campaigns, but also what the agency Brains on Fire calls movements. Movements, then, like those generated by social tensions and described in the first chapter.

So, it is movements, again, that show us what a brand can aim for: uniting people with a cause. Or rather, knowing the audience it wants to address, recognising a social cause that could give rise to a widespread movement. A behaviour that some brands have tried to bring to the ground with their most recent activism and that, perhaps among the first, Dove recreated with the *Real Beauty* campaign and movement. On that occasion the brand recognised an insight, or rather a profound truth, which consisted in the distorted conception of beauty from which many women suffer, causing them insecurity.

Iabichino then tells us how the first step in implementing such activities is to refer not to a consumer, but to an individual who has chosen to use a product and to introduce it into his or her universe of values (Iabichino 2009). The connection with the product, therefore, is much more than exclusively physical, it becomes an emotional connection (Roberts 2004) where ideas find a way to unite the brand with the public (Iabichino 2009).

This relationship, however, only persists if trust in the brand is acknowledged, guaranteed by its relevant but relevant dialogue (Iabichino 2009). In doing so, companies can strategically position themselves by taking a stand, possibly on something that really interests the market (Levine et al. 2001). In this way, communication turns from monologue into dialogue, the campaign becomes

movement, and the idea is transformed into an ideal. This creates a brand culture that manifests itself as a collective phenomenon in which companies are intertwined with the questions and destinies of consumers, who are first and foremost citizens.

Brands and companies driven by these values tend to acquire greater importance in society. This reminds us that it is impossible to understand the dynamics of the market if we do not consider the socio-economic context on which it is based. The new attitude of brands and their advertising therefore seems to be one of openness to people's needs, with a desire to generate change.

2.1.5 The Why of Simon Sinek

I believe that writing an academic thesis requires in-depth and lengthy research which, if you like, may well never stop. An academic thesis, moreover, requires a critical and shrewd comparison of the existing literature, but it also invites one to listen to the discourse around a phenomenon and here, in particular, of purpose first and brand activism later. It then happens that one begins to lend one's ear and attention even outside academic publications, especially when there is not enough published material on the subject. So, like a few tens of millions of people I ended up pressing play at Simon Sinek's TED Talk. It was in September 2009 and he wanted to talk about how great leaders inspire action.

Well, as well as inviting you to watch it, I share here the value of that video. Sinek there shares a simple model that all the great leaders in history, from Steve Jobs to Martin Luther King and the Wright brothers, share. They all start with the why. The why is the question that unites people around an ideal, thus generating a movement. In fact, according to Sinek, people do not buy what a company does or how it does it, but the why that animates and moves it. The why is very reminiscent of the purpose, the raison d'être that brings an organisation to life and inspires all the people it deals with.

Sinek follows this up with a book *The Infinite Game* sharing his vision of a new and lasting way of being in the market. Businesses and therefore brands should think of the market as an infinite game and not as a game to be won by the end of time, and therefore the year or worse the quarter. Brands should also not compete with competitors in a finite and timed struggle, but rather focus on pursuing their own goal. Thus, we return to the why, which is a testimony of who we are, coming from the past (Sinek 2019). The why and an endless game indicate the right cause the brand pursues for the future and define the direction one wants to take to reach that particular point. The quest to draw a line between one's heritage, and therefore the past, and the future that one wants to create or preserve therefore gives a good idea of what the why of companies is, and thus also of their raison d'être and purpose.

2.1.6 Larry Fink's letter to CEOs: A Sense of Purpose

It is 2018, the same year that Brand activism will be published, and Larry Fink, founder and chairman CEO of BlackRock, Inc. writes an open letter to CEOs entitled 'A Sense of Purpose'. Incidentally, BlackRock is the world's largest investment firm and if its CEO decides to invite companies to seek a higher, shared purpose, it is because he believes they should demonstrate their positive contribution to society.

In his speech, he invites us to reflect on how many states fail to prepare adequately for the future on issues concerning retirement, as well as infrastructure, automation and retraining of workers. And it is for these reasons that the company turns to the private sector, asking businesses to respond to social challenges. The purpose of brands, according to this vision, has never been higher.

2.2 Brand activism: from purpose to action

It can be said that the term *brand activism* is a relatively new concept and the literature is limited (Kotler and Sarkar 2018; Manfredi-Sanchéz 2018). For this reason and in order to approach the phenomenon, so far we have recounted the origin of the purpose and the consumer-brand relationship treated by several researchers whose study has helped to form a solid foundation (Fournier 1998;

Fournier et al. 2012; Bowden 2009; Olenski 2013). Before recounting the phenomenon in the words of Kotler and Sarkar, it might be useful to go through here a quick summary of the scenario that led to brand activism. And in doing so, Matteo Roversi's podcast on the subject has proved useful in terms of clarity and completeness.

Thus, marketing works on four major assets, namely the 4Ps of product, price, placement and promotion. This more traditional model, however, started to show signs of breaking down around fifteen years ago, when the platform economy was beginning. In particular, big companies like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple started to question whether all services should be paid for. For instance, Facebook presented itself as a social network that would always be free, while Google has always provided substantial services for free. These companies thus began to see consumers as a source of increased attention for their products and services, while they began to retrieve and use their data. Monetisation would come later.

Platforms then started to speak not to a single market or audience, but rather preferred to connect the whole world, thus elevating their products to become values to be shared. In the meantime, people started to demand something more from products, namely the possibility to live experiences. As a result, or sometimes anticipating this desire, brands ushered us into the experience economy, of which Airbnb can be a perfect example, as well as Apple with its Apple Stores, absentee boxes, opportunities and courses on offer and museum-like layout. This is how companies recognised that products started to have less and less value, while the brand was definitely gaining a relevant one, leading companies to try to charge brands with something higher. And so, we come to purpose.

Speaking of platforms, in his book *Convergence Culture* (2008), MIT Professor Henry Jenkins, an expert in transmedia storytelling, stated that participatory culture is completed directly through content and consumer input, and not only at a technical level. In the same book, then, the concept of *transmediality* refers to the transcendence of stories and their possibility to become content that can be disseminated on different platforms. In this perspective, consumers' social

participation is growing, and their influence on brands is increasing the culture of participation in transmedia environments (Yoo et al. 2021).

Thus, the emergence of digital platforms has eliminated the one-way transmission from brand to consumer. Consumers who have become participants in the brand story are now sharing their ideas directly as content creators and boldly expressing their opinions, even if they are not influencers. The interactive feature motivates people to get involved in brand discussions. Now that the transmedia and participatory culture has matured, consumers' opinions flow in one direction through integrated brand communication (IBC) (Yoo et al. 2021).

Platforms, however, are neutral and at most it is their users who take a stand. This aspect, however, due to the spread of fake news, online hatred, and privacy issues, has caused and is causing fractures, of which the image of Mark Zuckerberg in front of the US Congress is an example. The feeling, therefore, could be that of having a large network at one's disposal, but currently having a sense of disorientation and, in a state of general concern and confusion, which the pandemic has certainly not facilitated, it is normal that people seek answers. Answers that the institutions are not always able to provide.

This is how brand activism was born, or rather how it has become established. This phenomenon originates from the sense of lack of trust in institutions and the lack of answers they can provide. In this context, then, some companies realise that there is a real possibility of going beyond the market or the segment in which they operate, to take a wider slice of the world: society. Competition, then, is no longer just between companies and their products, but also with aspects of culture or people. And Netflix CEO Reed Hastings' statement about his platform's competition with sleep is one of the most vivid examples of this.

As Roversi (2021) helps us to reflect, if we think about it, a successful organisation today does not just provide us with a great product, but shares with us its vision of the world, and possibly a better one than the current one. So people do not necessarily love the brand—although certain studies have shown a lesser

attachment to it than in the past—but they need it to fill the space left vacant by institutions and politics, to redefine the concept of the world.

Adding to this new need to rely on the brand, and thus its raison d'être and brand activism, is the contribution of Simon Sinek, writer, motivator and marketing consultant. His theory, told in a book and, above all, in a famous TED Talk, states how starting with the why is fundamental to inspire people to take action. In fact, according to him, people do not buy a product, but the why it tells, and this ensures a strong emotional connection and a shared value universe.

Iabichino's (2021) reasoning on the three words useful for generating a purpose and solid actions: credibility, pertinence and relevance. As he goes on to explain, bringing credibility into play means working on oneself and one's own reality, in order to understand the values and narrative heritage at one's disposal, and thus choose our games to adhere to. Pertinence, on the other hand, helps one to remain within the sphere in which one is credible, as long as one asks oneself every day whether there are conditions for affirming certain things. Finally, relevance is an important thermometer for understanding when you can communicate your message.

Dwell on purpose again, before getting to action in the next part of this chapter, we can see that it was already being discussed in 2011, for example in the article by Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter in the Harvard Business Review. In that article, she stated that companies that perform better in the long run do so because they incorporate a social purpose into their business, which, according to her, is as important as the economic purpose. Direction this, which the 2017 European Union Directive introduced. The requirement to report on corporate welfare and its sustainability now applies to companies with more than 500 employees. A choice that makes corporate ethics finally a measurable and mandatory competence (Iabichino 2020).

The reason why we are tasking companies to engage on certain issues is not only compensatory, but refers to the fact that states, governments, religions and

ideologies have failed or are struggling to bring about change. Entrepreneurs, CEOs and managers can then implement actions for their host communities through companies of different sizes (Iabichino 2020). Some might criticize—we will see more in chapter three—the excessive trust and power attributed to companies. However, it is also true that not so much marketing has moved into the world of politics, but politics has borrowed certain aspects of marketing (Iabichino 2020).

Manufacturing Consent by Noam Chomsky then brings us back to the centre of this discussion: people. He says that in the current historical context, one of two things is possible. Either the total population will take power or nobody will. Here, the feeling is that a dichotomous vision is unlikely to happen, but it is also true that it helps to simplify reality. We thus recognise that more and more brands are grappling with political and social issues precisely because they affect people (Davis 2018). And in doing so they help to preserve a valid public debate. As mentioned, a fundamental aspect of democracy, and one that is under threat especially in light of the marginalisation and destruction of the institutions that guarantee this (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

On the subject of the person, according to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), the postmodern consumer can express his identity precisely through the consumption of goods and services in which he identifies himself. Choice, in this case, acquires a symbolic value. In particular, Schau (2018) explains how identity consists of four parts: personality, self-concept, identity project, and self-representation. From this perspective, therefore, the consumer uses the market, symbols and practices to recreate and communicate an identity.

And when consumers recognise certain characteristics in brands that align with their values and beliefs, loyalty begins to develop and unites consumer and brand (Fournier 1998). In this regard Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán (2001) also add how consumer loyalty is created when the person wants to demonstrate their satisfaction to the brand. This condition allows the relationship between the consumer and the brand to develop over time (Fournier 1998).

The feeling is that the successful link between consumer and brand corresponds to a brand ambition that would like to build on a solid consumer reality. A situation from which prolific interactions and lasting engagement for the company in question are derived (Olenski 2013). However, Cambefort and Roux (2019) remind us that consumers should not perceive a dissonance between their values, beliefs and practices in business discourse and logic, otherwise they would feel oppressed, if not used.

Activist groups can therefore influence corporate social change activities, of which consumer activism is an example (Klein, Smith, John, 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004). And while consumers may demand greater commitment from companies, on the other hand, a trend is recognised whereby companies themselves take responsibility. Action that concerns social issues, such as those related to the natural environment, working conditions in developing and non-developing countries, consumer protection, human rights. In short, since the early 2000s it has been recognised that responsibility is shifting from the state to companies or other private institutions (Matten and Crane 2005).

This brings us back to the first chapter, offering confirmation of how closely the commitment of brands is linked to the characteristics of movements. According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), the starting point in defining a social movement lies in recognising it as a shared belief in one's idea of the world and how it should be. This aspect is also connected to Ogilvy's Big IdeaL. We are in fact talking about a big purpose that is capable of mobilising people in a collective and organised effort, effective in solving social problems or transforming the current order of things (Buechler 2000).

People participate in social movements for three related reasons: instrumentality, identity, and ideology (Klandermans 2004). Another confirmation is that brands are interested in movements because they have the enormous capacity to leverage the same aspect that is useful to brands and their market: telling the different identities of people through a choice. Activist groups therefore arise from the need to organise and coordinate the people activated by these tensions. Activists engage in sharing

ideals to address an organised contention and form themselves into groups because a collective identity allows them to generate a larger action, precisely because it is collective.

In addition, to generate a broader impact, one choice may also be to target an industry leader. An example is the targeting of Nike in anti-sweatshop campaigns (Carty 2002; Wokutch 2001). In this case the high visibility of the company was used by activist groups to increase the relevance of their battle on the exploitation of workers in the manufacturing industry. And the collective action was so strong that when Nike moved to implement its own code of conduct, the protests continued to demonstrate that conditions had not changed and that codes of conduct were not mandatory (Klein 2000).

2.2.1 Brand activism: a value-driven agenda for companies

To talk about Brand activism, it is natural to refer to the two authors, Kotler and Sarkar, who first defined this phenomenon in the book of the same name, announced even earlier by the article *Finally, brand activism*. It is interesting to note how the two accompany the topic. They point out that in the past, brands have oriented their marketing actions towards emphasising and narrating their performance characteristics. Thus, a toothpaste was better than a competitor, made teeth whiter, helped prevent cavities and, why not, also ensured fresher breath. That is what positioning was all about back then.

Later, something started to change and positioning based only on differences with the competition no longer suffices. Moreover, in this context, marketing also started to relate to another audience: the millennial. Today, they are one of the most important demographic groups and, consequently, so is the interest they arouse in companies. In short, millennials are an important market share, but they differ from previous generations in that they have high expectations of brands. Millennials, in fact, live in a world that is facing several problems—air pollution, poor water quality, and various crimes. Many, as a result, would like brands that demonstrate their commitment not only to making a profit, but also to preserving or improving

the communities they serve and in which they operate or, more generally, the world in which we live. And it is no coincidence that we see younger generations looking for jobs that have greater value and meaning beyond generating a profit (Kotler and Sarkar 2017).

The overall context therefore requires balancing public interest with financial return, as suggested by Professor Kanter (2011). This thinking can also be found in the early post-war period when in 1946 Drucker stated that an institution should balance its need to focus its activities for itself with its concern for the environment and the community. A vision that can also be recognised in our day in the *Manifesto* released by the World Economic Forum in 2020. *Manifesto* in which it describes an inclusive world, enabled by a stakeholder capitalism that is inclusive of the needs of all stakeholders with whom the company relates.

To pursue these needs, it seems that what we would need is precisely activism. Activism because it takes inspiration from the great movements of the past and mobilises people and institutions to achieve a shared and common good (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). A vision that, it should be remembered, is certainly not an invention introduced by the two authors, but is a transposition into the present of phenomena already found in the past. For example, in Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, which certainly took inspiration from nostalgia for the great movements of the past (Klein 2000; 2010). Then, it can also be seen in the words of Drucker (1946) when he recognises the duty of business to adhere to the aspirations and beliefs of the American people.

At the time of the first publication of *Brand activism: from Purpose to Action*, it is 2018 and Kotler and Sarkar share with us how less than half of young Americans have expressed a positive view of capitalism. The fact, as they said, is that companies are increasingly expected to be agents of change (Kotler and Sarkar 2018) and consumers seek honesty and authenticity as indispensable values when choosing a brand and then buying (Dudler 2017). Today, therefore, organisations are confronted with social and political issues that can affect their brand (Manfredi-Sánchez 2019).

If we look at the top ten companies of 2017, they all operate with honesty and integrity. And, as if that was not enough, these companies also take a stand on issues that matter to people around the world, such as diversity, inclusivity, environmental sustainability and education. The feeling is that companies are trying to strengthen their reputations, as, at the same time, consumers are directing their purchases towards brands with strong reputations. One can therefore speak of the growth of the reputational economy (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

However, to borrow Iabichino's words, companies still need to demonstrate credibility, pertinence and relevance between their actions and the narrative heritage they draw on. This aspect becomes fundamental for businesses to choose to engage some issues over others. The issue and requirement are that they are aligned with the brand (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). Indeed, it is no longer enough for today's organisations to have a noble purpose. This does not mean enough if the purpose is not aligned and recognisable in the behaviours and vision of the company. Moreover, action is now required. Hence the subtitle of the book. And therefore, it is crucial how brands live and behave in the real world (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

It is again Drucker (1946) who insists on this issue and on the need to have organisations that care about the society that hosts them. According to him, an industrial society can only last if companies contribute to social stability and the achievement of common goals and well-being. Brand activism, therefore, consists of the commitment of corporations to promote, prevent, or influence social, political, economic, and/or environmental reforms or states of inertia with the aim of promoting or preventing societal improvements (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Brand activism thus presents itself as an evolution of social responsibility initiatives. It is driven by a strong desire to confront issues. Brand activism is also driven by society and not by marketing as a promotion of a cause (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). Thus, while CSR could be framed as a set of initiatives driven by marketing or more generally by the corporate, brand activism is driven by society. More than that,

Brand activism adapts to society and helps companies to take a stand on particular issues that affect that particular community (Peiritsch 2019).

To understand the issues or problems that run through our society we could look at the five trends listed in the World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Risks Report. These are growing inequality, climate change, increasing polarisation, cyber dependence, and ageing populations. And, in particular, looking at brand activism these are the areas that concern it. On a social level, for example, gender equality. At the level of labour law, the conditions of workers and their guarantees. On the political level, there is lobbying, human rights, immigration and so on. On the environment, however, there is concern about pollution and the precariousness of the ecosystem. On the economic level, policies concern taxation and compensation. Finally, the legal and juridical aspect also intervenes and affects brand activism as laws determine and shape our actions in the world and those of companies (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Brand activism therefore goes far beyond Aaker's Building Strong Brands. Here the attempt is to nurture an activist behaviour of the brand. This, however, may be progressive or regressive activism depending on the positioning with respect to stakeholder demands and expectations. In this paper, however, we will focus exclusively on progressive activism. Patagonia is a perfect example of this. Incidentally, this company, now called *The Activist Company*, even confronted the Trump administration with *The President Stole Your Land* campaign (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Even Nike, which we have so far mainly recounted in chapter one as a leading company affected by the sweatshop scandal, has actually revealed itself as a leader in brand activism. A leader because it positioned itself beyond the expectations and demands of its stakeholders with its 2018 *Dream Crazy* campaign (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). Then, another example that we mentioned just above and that set the course for the following years concerns Dove and the *Real Beauty* campaign in 2006. The brand, accompanied by the Ogilvy agency, produced advertisements, videos, and events to celebrate women's *real* beauty and motivate them to be more confident

and self-assured (Tarnovskaya 2017). In addition, other big brands such as United Colors of Benetton, Airbnb, and Burger King have participated in the social and political debate by launching campaigns supporting or opposing different issues (Manfredi-Sánchez 2019).

Kotler and Sarkar (2018), then add another way of assessing brand activism and its progressive character, namely the common good. The common good is recognised when an action generates a valid benefit that is recognised by the majority of the community. In this way, activism becomes a real asset for the brand, determining its brand equity. It thus represents the value and strength of the brand in the market.

And referring to the 4Es described in the first part of this chapter, we can say here that an activist brand becomes an evangelist when it is progressive. And by evangelist we mean a brand capable of inspiring and moving people towards improvement. This tendency towards improvement, however, must be confronted with what Kotler and Sarkar call the evil seven: climate change, inequality, extremism, migration, education, corruption, aging population. In other words, the tensions that brands recognise and thus decide to tackle.

Since we have discussed brand activism, now that we have defined it, it is fair to ask whether it can help to increase profits. Unilever CEO Alan Jope confirmed that brands with a purpose can grow, because the purpose allows them to differentiate themselves from competitors and thus become relevant, also increasing the price elasticity of demand. Basically, therefore, we talk about purpose as an opportunity to build a more stable relationship with consumers. Reason why it should come as no surprise that seven out of ten of Unilever's top brands are Sustainable Living Brands (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

The context we are describing sees companies understanding the evolution of consumers and their beliefs closer to society, and therefore deciding to align themselves with this trend in order to support it. And furthermore, as has also emerged previously, the fact is that many consumers really want to feel a connection with the brand in such a way that an alignment between their values and beliefs and

so-called belief-driven buying takes place (Fournier 1998; Edelman 2018). In fact, by launching a brand activism campaign, brands are literally taking a position, leaving consumers to decide whether they agree or disagree. And this, can really affect the relationship between consumers and the brand in the long run more than anything else (Jørgensen and Omar 2020).

In summary, we can say that when brands decide to implement brand activism strategies, they are automatically positioning themselves as socially-conscious activists. This means that they are demonstrating how they want to care about certain social and political issues (Morgan 2018). In support of this view, there are several surveys and statistical research. These include the survey commissioned by global communications and marketing firm Weber Shandwick in partnership with KRC Research and United Minds. This study revealed that 71% of corporate employees believe they can change things, while 62% believe they have even more impact than company leaders (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

This aspect of relying on the same employees to address certain issues and to have, in a sense, internal ambassadors to support the actions, is very strong in Patagonia. The company, by the way, in partnership with other companies, promoted the *Time to Vote* programme to give people a day off work so they could go and vote on Election Day. Examples like this, and others that we will talk about later, show us that the best way to maximise profit in the long run is not to make it the primary focus of the business and its choices (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Businesses and entrepreneurs have a delicate responsibility to lead us to civilisation when current conditions are pushing instead towards polarisation, and thus the separation of society and its people. The vision of the future according to brand activism is one in which the raison d'être of business is to become a force for social, environmental, and economic well-being. In this context, a business brand activist has three choices to engage the consumer: follow him, lead him, or co-create with him. This is guided by the simple questions: What does the consumer want? What do you think should be done? To help the brand find answers to these questions, Kotler and Sarkar (2018) identify two proposals to engage the consumer: Internet

of Purpose where the product is used as a tool for activism and purpose platform where the brand creates a movement around a common good. However, I consider this division to be specific, or almost advisory, and would prefer to continue with the discourses around the phenomenon of brand activism.

Returning to the numbers to give concrete support to what is being said, we recall here some data expressed by the 2018 Edelman Earned Brand Study. According to this, 64% of international consumers-interestingly, in this case the reference market is not only the States-choose to buy, or boycott, a brand based on the position it takes on social or political issues. It would also seem that this group of belief-driven buyers corresponds to the majority of every market in the world—59% of the U.S., 60% of Japan, 57% of the U.K., 54% of Germany. This clearly demonstrates how the alignment between the consumer's beliefs and the brand's stance on certain issues is relevant in purchasing decisions (Edelman 2018). The same study also confirms the previously held view that brands can drive social change much more effectively than governments. Brands, therefore, seem to have a more easily achievable impact (Edelman 2018).

Similar studies and research have obviously also been conducted in Italy, in particular by the Civic Brands Observatory, the new project on the social impact of brands conducted by Ipsos in collaboration with Paolo Iabichino. The results are remarkable and confirm the line we are describing and that Kotler and Sarkar gave us before. More than four out of ten consumers, in fact, would have abandoned a brand in whose behaviour they did not recognise themselves. In addition, 63% of those surveyed—one thousand people between the ages of 18 and 65—believe that in addition to selling products or offering services, brands and their companies should act with respect in the most relevant social issues.

Next, for two thirds of the sample, it really is time for companies to change the way they participate in society. But, in this regard, it was noted that as many as 67% still have difficulty in understanding whether a company is actually behaving responsibly or not. However, there is a desire on the part of people to participate in change. So much so that the Observatory found around 40% of respondents to the

Italian adult population survey were in favour of taking part in social, cultural or environmental initiatives aimed at improving their community or the reality in which they live, even if promoted by brands or companies.

Again, confirming what we are arguing, more than one in three Italians is firmly convinced that if a brand really wants to participate in social, environmental, cultural or political issues, it must necessarily go through the active involvement of citizens and consumers. The brand would therefore act as an aggregator of a movement. And this behaviour could also benefit the brand itself, as 36% said they were in favour of buying products from brands that gave them the opportunity to involve their consumers in the social value initiatives they pursue. What emerges is that companies and consumers should work together side by side to make a difference and take action on various issues, thus becoming together promoters of initiatives aimed at impacting their city, territory and community.

For example, about half of the people surveyed, 48%, would be willing to participate in initiatives to promote a more sustainable lifestyle, such as cooperating to keep a cleaner territory, 45%, and helping families with economic difficulties in the city or community, 41%. These, however, are just some of the possible activities in which participation, co-creation and collaboration of companies and citizens can bring concrete improvements to communities (Ipsos Italy 2021).

The numbers supporting Brand activism or, more simply, the willingness of companies to take on board certain social issues continue to grow. For example, 47% of marketing leaders believe that it is right to take action by changing products or services to respond to various social and political tensions. And, as you might guess, it is mainly business-to-consumer B2C companies that prefer this choice because they are the companies most directly affected by conscious consumer purchasing behaviour. Their preference reaches 61.5% for companies dealing with products and 55.6% for those offering services. The percentage drops to 35% for B2B business-to-business. In conclusion, 70% of marketing leaders agree that political activism, i.e. taking a stand and avoiding neutrality, also has a positive effect on a company's ability to attract and retain employees. These participation

strategies, therefore, actually demonstrate positive effects that run through the entire organisation and especially its human capital, on which it depends.

Bhagwat et al. (2020) define sociopolitical activism as a public demonstration by the company, through a statement or actions, of partisan support or opposition regarding a tension. Thus, brand political activism is a public discourse in which the company uses its brand to give an image and meaning to its stance (Moorman 2020). People want brands to do this and especially in the most important issues, which is the best place to do it. The widespread thought is that brands have a power to bring about change by making the message more relevant. And in this are more benefits than risks for the brand (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

To conduct this process, a campaign may include several steps. It starts by defining the strategy of brand activism, also clarifying what the mission is to serve the common good. All the while clarifying the purpose of one's involvement and having a clear idea of what the contribution would be and how this contribution would be executed. To conclude, it would be good to consider at the outset how to measure the impact generated. Finally, mentality, leadership, reputation, and organisational culture could help this process (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Jay Curley global head of integrated marketing at Ben & Jerry's shares with us what brand activism is all about. This basically changes the marketing of the organisation and makes marketers into activists, because in this process you are no longer just selling goods, you are selling big ideas and new ways of being in the marketplace as well as in the world. It is for this reason that Kotler and Sarkar (2018) feel they need to take back the 4Ps of marketing, to identify the new 6Ps of brand activism. Thus, the first is entrusted to purpose, a necessary ingredient for brand activism to be feasible and credible. Then we move on to Policy, People, Power, Publishing and, why not, Pop. After all, let's remember that the preconception from which we started is that it is precisely the younger generation, such as the millennials but also Gen Z, that require this movement.

Research is about turning a campaign into a movement, a change that would be possible by implementing five steps: having a noble mission of a common good, imagining what it wants to achieve, figuring out how to inspire people, mobilising participants and acting to create an impact (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). Brand activism is thus a strategy of consonance, i.e. alignment between consumers and companies, based on a promise. The vision or message to take participants from the present to a desired future condition. This can be done with an effort of brand activism by implementing marketing activities, such as campaigns, open statements, and lobbying (Manfredi-Sánchez 2019; Shetty, Venkataramaiah and Anand 2019).

While there are a number of ways to help companies follow their path to Brand activism, it is equally necessary to recognise that this need is driven by the collapse of a truth in the public sector and the state in general (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). It is precisely because of the decline of truth that brands need to take a stand, create a movement, evangelise and give something of value back to society. It is no longer enough to invest in advertising, but one must direct one's marketing choices to come alongside customers and not just reach them. Working alongside means supporting and listening to the tensions that drive them. You need customers who not only love what the company offers, but above all who the company is. Activism, then, can be that process to unite people and create movements. Because companies, we remember, can last longer with a greater purpose (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

The culture of business, fortunately we might add, is changing. Companies need to integrate what people want into the organisation and its processes. There is indeed a focus on how people are treated and their sense of purpose. Organisations must therefore work to account in some sense for their social, fiscal, environmental and governance actions. It is no longer sufficient to rely only on the balance sheet, but beyond profit there is a growing attention to the responsibility of the corporate and the direct impact it can bring, even in long-term earnings. And remember that a company's purpose and reputation are the reason why a talent might want to choose one or the other work environment (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Communication must also be aligned with the purpose, as must management, which is not just based on accounting but also on ethics. Conscious capitalism derives from this new business attitude: having a higher purpose, demonstrating an orientation towards all stakeholders, having a more conscious leadership and a widespread and solid corporate culture. These aspects can be recognised even trivially by the better financial performance, which exceeds that of competitors simply because it is aligned with the truest and most shared needs (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). And these choices also translate into savings, if you will. For example, a conscious business invests about 10 to 25 per cent of what the average industry generally spends on marketing.

Business, therefore, can be an activity that leads to taking care of the context that hosts the different activities. All this, as long as there is trust, which is what influences every action. The brand, in fact, is a promise made between the company and the consumer, based on trust. And the reputation of the brand depends on whether or not it is able to keep that promise. By leveraging these possibilities, business can then work to generate considerable change. Indeed, businesses are the only entities in the world with the technologies, resources, capabilities and global appeal to really make a difference (Kotler and Sarkar 2018). Business could then truly understand the emerging needs of society and respond to them.

The idea of brand activism tends to be new, but its necessity is urgent, even for businesses themselves. Companies that think they can carry on with their business without worrying about the society that hosts them may not survive. And in this we must remember that the real cost of a low price is paid by societies further away from us and the environment. Therefore, turning to brand activism is tantamount to adopting a win-win model, with considerable benefits for both society and the brand, thus giving the latter the chance to relate to and act in something bigger than the market, such as society itself and culture.

To do this, however, Matteo Roversi (2021) reminds us that companies must first move from product to brand, otherwise they would not have the solidity of narrative heritage to implement certain actions. And speaking of actions, the Civic Brands

Observatory has shown that 80% of Italians believe that advertising is not enough to address social, cultural or political issues. Real actions are needed, which will determine, as we said, whether businesses will be able to last in the future. For one Italian in two, in fact, action becomes the necessary contribution to participate in society and its needs.

Concluding a little bit on this paragraph that underlined the possibilities of brand activism, I think it is however worth reiterating that companies should be aware of what taking a stand can entail: taking a risk and not pleasing everyone (Iabichino 2021). However, companies, such as Nike, must still take responsibility and help shape the social vision through its cultural power. For Holt (2002) brands are powerful social actors that can inject relevant ideas and messages into society. This possibility puts these particular companies in a position of power and therefore responsibility. For example, Apple symbolises creativity and independence, while Nike portrays a tenacious commitment to action and self-improvement (Moorman 2020).

Achieving cultural authority, including through brand activism, is the playground that companies strive for. And from an activist perspective, this cultural power offers a natural bridge to encourage people to participate. Of course, not all brands can afford to do this, and iconic brands may see political activism as an opportunity to distinguish themselves from their competitors. All this, while the company precisely calculates the risks and benefits before entering the arena of brand activism and then taking a stand (Moorman 2020).

The vision to be shared by companies is to have a political mission, i.e. to have a purpose related to social change. In this, products and services can be seen as a tool to create change in the world. This goes beyond corporate social responsibility and allows the company to be defined, as in the example of Patagonia, which describes itself as a company in business to save our home planet. According to Kotler, for companies like this or Unilever, brand activism is not marketing, but a business strategy.

2.2.2 Just Do It and Colin Kaepernick. Nike's brand activism is literature

In recounting brand activism, we come to one of its greatest manifestations, namely the case study of Nike and the campaign designed to celebrate thirty years of Just Do It, the brand's tagline. Nike is now considered an example of brand activism literature, both because it is a market leader and because it has taken a stand on a socio-political issue with its campaign. In particular, what Nike has done is to bring the brand to confront social issues rather than promote its own products. And it did so by using the emotional value of its brand and sharing the idea of heroism, telling a story of struggle and persistence, conducted under the corporate slogan Just Do it: an invitation for people to challenge and achieve their goals (Eyada 2020).

It might be interesting to recall where the slogan Just Do It emerged from, namely the 1988 campaign where old age was narrated by an energetic octogenarian named Walter Stack. A Bay Area icon, still able to run every morning, having covered 62,000 miles in his life (Bain 2018). Thirty years later in 2018, as we said, Just Do It becomes the beginning of brand activism and is another fossil of the *Hybridocene*, the fluid age we are living in, when Nike chooses Colin Kaepernick as its spokesperson for the value of the brand's historic slogan (Iabichino 2021).

From the exact moment that Nike started using Kaepernick's big face to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Just Do It, it seems that there is a new currency in the world: purpose (Iabichino 2020). In particular, with that campaign, which so far we could call a movement, is a company stance against the previous Trump administration, against the National Football League, and an opportunity to discuss the patriotism and politicisation of sport. And the fact that President Trump then called for a boycott of the company, increased the polarisation (Kotler and Sarkar 2018).

Recalling that earlier we talked about how brands should always be aware of the risks, as well as the benefits, associated with such choices, it is interesting to estimate how much Nike calculated its decisions before implementing such brand activism activities. Bloomberg reported that less than 24 hours after the launch of the video, Nike had already gained $43 million worth of exposure. Online sales, on

the other hand, grew by 31% over the next four days and the share price, after an initial drop, had reached an all-time high. Kotler and Sarkar (2018) would say that stocks speak much more clearly than words and hype.

Which is true, but nevertheless demonstrates Nike's focus also on profit before making this important decision, and thus position. Scott Galloway's data also confirms this, reasoning that Nike would have risked between 1 and 3 billion dollars to strengthen its relationship with all those consumers who instead represent between 32 and 34 billion. Specifically, over the next fourteen months, Nike's stock would have appreciated by more than 18% adding 26.2 million to its revenue to 146 billion. In summary, by taking the risk of alienating 5-10% of its customers, Nike has taken the lead in brand activism and its market, strengthening the bond with 90-95% of consumers. And as Kotler and Sarkar ironically suggested, it is also likely that the people who burned Nike's products in protest had bought them on installments.

Nike's commitment to its community is not new, however, and all of its communication has always been about improving conditions for people to reach and express their greatest potential. For example, Nike seeks to recreate a more equal sport, and has a history in which issues such as the fight against racism, gender issues and inequality are told and addressed by its advertisements and so by its products (Chadwick and Zipp 2018).

What happened in 2018, however, was something unique. The *Dream Crazy* campaign was intended to take a strong and clear stand in the political debate and, in particular, in the fight against racism (The Guardian 2019). In the commercial, Nike relied on athlete Colin Kaepernick, who in 2016 had knelt during the American anthem in protest against racism and all those inequalities and police brutalities that were raging in the United States (Mindock 2019). At the time, that gesture by Kaepernick was considered truly inspiring, but at the same time decidedly risky. Many Republican politicians, including former President Trump, did not appreciate Kaepernick's gesture (Graham 2017). Indeed, Trump asked the NFL that the player

be fired for insulting the nation. And indeed Kaepernick was left without a team after the protest began to spread (The Guardian Sport).

The execution of this campaign consists of a short video whose message is to dream bigger and bigger. In the advertisement, it emerges how important it is to have a dream to achieve, for example a sporting result, even if there are obstacles along the way, such as disability, obesity, cancer, being a refugee and therefore racism. The narrative is then that of athletes who have overcome their great difficulties to pursue a dream, such as Kaepernick's of achieving a professional career, despite his immigrant origins. Finally, in the closing of the commercial, Kaepernick mentions the slogan 'Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it' (The Guardian 2019).

The outcome of the campaign certainly created a conflict among consumers. On the one hand, there were those who supported the campaign, recognising the importance a brand could give to certain issues, deciding to take a stand (Nittle 2018). On the other hand, however, the campaign was also strongly criticised by people who did not support Kaepernick, his political statement and thus Nike's position. And to boycott such a choice, as it was said, some people even started to burn their Nike items, be it shoes or clothes, responding with the counter-narrative 'Just Born It'. However, it is fair to point out that the balance sheet was still positive. And not only for Nike's profits that we have indicated above, but also for the acknowledgements that were given to Kaepernick and the campaign (Vera 2018).

However, it is interesting to recall here how a good part of the first chapter was dedicated to the sweatshop scandal and the exploitation of Nike workers (Lutz 2015). For a long time, in fact, the company was criticised for these reasons and if, twenty years later, it has managed to take such a strong position on an issue that affects human rights, such as racism, it is a symptom of a very important internal work. In order to address certain issues, brands need to have a corporate heritage, values and narrative that is aligned with the chosen issues (Koch 2017). And even if they have this alignment, the risk of losing consumers and thus turnover still persists.

However, the discourse developed considerably online, with some showing their support and others criticising the company's choice. Among those who supported the choice were a number of athletes, including Eric Reid, one of the first NFL players to protest with Kaepernick, who was also without a team at the end of the season. So, too, Serena Williams, who participated in the campaign alongside Kaepernick (Fortin and Haag 2018). And Speaking of the online region to the campaign, some social media observers noted how even veteran Patriots quarterback Tom Brady shared Kaepernick's campaign to endorse it (Fortin and Haag 2018).

Former C.I.A. director John O. Brennan also added his support, pointing out that the campaign would direct collective attention to the problem of continuing social injustice in America. Activist and political commentator Rosa Clemente, on the other hand, confirmed her support for Kaepernick's campaign, while disapproving of his decision to team up with a corporation like Nike (Fortin and Haag 2018). An issue that I would consider legitimate, as undoubtedly the campaign brought significant revenue to the company. Clement also added that activists, organisers and leaders sometimes make mistakes, and in Kaepernick's case the mistake was aligning his values with a company that has in its history an exploitation of workers and is not only a capitalist company, but represents a hyper-capitalist company.

On the other hand, there are those who might recognise in Nike's choice a commercial interest rather prevailing over the message then disseminated through the campaign. There is in fact a reason to believe that Kaepernick, despite not being able to play without a team, still managed to move merchandise, and therefore business, well. During the second quarter of 2017, in fact, his official jersey was the 39th best-selling jersey in the league and he was the only player who, despite being without a team, was in the top 50 best-selling jerseys (Draper and Belson 2018). Be that as it may, in addition to the movement generated by Kaepernick's bow that contributed greatly to the cause, it should be acknowledged that in 2016 activism and a stance against racism in sport was already present in the events of the WNBA, i.e. the women's basketball league (Berkman 2021).

Not to question the importance of a stance like Nike's with Kaepernick from a social and political point of view, but just to complete the picture it must be acknowledged that this choice of marketing and brand activism was positive in every metric. Mentions on social media increased, sales in the following week increased and they also won several campaign awards. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that Nike clearly aligned itself with its core customer base, namely millennials and Gen Z, who are among the most important consumers for the company (Hsu et al. 2019).

The advertisement allegedly made Kaepernick a celebrity, while the video became one of the most talked about hits of recent years. However, it is curious that Nike moved from more provocative marketing campaigns to capitalising on resistance movements (Creswell et al. 2018). In particular, certain sources recount how in the summer of 2017 some debate began to arise at Nike's headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, about whether or not to stop the quarterback sponsorship contract without a team anymore. For Nike, the issue was very simple: if he no longer had a team, they could not put his name on any kind of equipment, and therefore merchandise.

With the decision now almost made in favour of the NFL, resulting in the contract being terminated, some inside sources say Nigel Powell, Nike's long-time head of communications, went ballistic once he learned of the matter (Creswell et al. 2018). He argued that if Nike took a pro-NFL stance by distancing itself from Kaepernick, it would be a backlash to respond to the fuss that would be made in the media. In addition, the target market was millennials and Gen Z, who were closer to Kaepernick and his struggles, rather than football-bound whites of a certain age. Thus, the decision that we know today was made. Somewhat fearful that the brand activism we have talked about so far was actually an interest-driven reaction. Legitimate interests, but still interests.

Deciding to support the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback meant attracting the annoyance of the National Football League, of which Nike had been a partner since 2012. But as mentioned above, the company decided to support this cause anyway, probably convinced by the credibility it would gain in its most interesting market segment: the young people of the urban market (Creswell et al. 2018). In

summary, some interviews obtained from current or former Nike employees, individuals close to Kaepernick and various analysts show that Nike considered it favourable to support this movement anyway.

So much so that one Wall Street analyst called Nike's campaign 'a stroke of genius'. What's more, in September 2018, Camilo Lyon, another analyst at the financial services firm Canaccord Genuity wrote a note to clients that Nike would be brave. Specifically, brave in taking a stand on an issue where other companies had been slow to do so, thereby gaining an advantage. It also adds that Nike was so able to speak directly to its consumers, showing them its sensitivity in understanding their issues and the issues that matter (Creswell et al. 2018).

On the subject of human rights and racism in particular, in June 2020 a special event happened: Instagram went dark. In order to contribute to the protests following the death of George Floyd, who was choked to death by a policeman in the United States, many users, activists and then also companies—and we talk about this here—decided to publish a post with a simple black square. The support for this blackout was obviously for the Black Lives Matter movement. But someone thought that posting lots of black squares and clogging up the various Instagram feeds was not the ideal way to give a voice to those who have no voice, and instead use social network like Instagram to express their opinions. So, already in the afternoon, many deleted their posts (The New York Times 2020).

It is interesting for us because it shows how in certain situations, especially in the digital world, activism is often confused with simply posting a piece of content—here trivially a black square—thus raising the question of whether brands, in our case Nike, actually take an action by taking a stand with a commercial. In any case, Adidas also participated in this movement by posting in those days on Instagram, where it had 26 million followers, a content: 'Together is how we move forward'. It is therefore curious to note that after Nike's campaign, companies started to include hot-button political topics in their advertising and marketing strategies. Although it is still a delicate choice, as consumers of the younger generation feel it necessary to be able to recognise themselves in the values expressed by the brand they buy, they become critical before making their choice (Draper and Creswell 2020).

Returning to Nike, the company posted a video on its Instagram taking, once again, its Just Do It tagline and inverting it to communicate its position on Black Lives Matter—which we remember being close to the sensibility with which the company chose Kaepernick for the 30th anniversary of Just Do It. So, it wrote 'For once, Don't Do It' as in do not pretend for once that there is not a problem in America about racism (Draper and Creswell 2020). Kejuan Wilkins, Nike's spokesperson, also reiterated how the message could be perceived as a desire to inspire brand action. Nike had recognised the deep problem in American society regarding racism and equality, and felt that the video could encourage people to shape a better future. For the sake of the record, it is also interesting to note that those who led the decision to come out with the 'Don't Do It' communication, namely Mr. Wilkins together with Adrienne Lofton, are both he and she black people. This is just to reiterate the consistency that the company would maintain to give value to its message.

On the subject of inclusion, Nike is reported to have publicly supported the women's football team in their battle for fair pay, but at the same time some employees, such as certain sponsored athletes, are reported to have complained that they are not getting the attention they deserve from the brand (Draper and Creswell 2020). Looking at the numbers from Nike's recent diversity and inclusion report, it would appear that 56% of employees in 2019, including store employees, were non-white or from underrepresented groups. However, what is striking is that only 21% of its vice presidents were nonwhite, a slight increase from 17% in 2017 (Draper and Creswell 2020).

I would conclude this paragraph by sharing another side of Nike's coin that I found when researching what was happening internally at the company in those years, before the brand activism campaign. In fact, an article that appeared in The New York Times in 2018 and signed by Creswell et al. (2018) would talk about the difficulties faced by women internally within the company, and coincidentally just before the release of *Dream Crazy*. Some of the people interviewed by The Times would have linked the then weakness of women's products to the lack of female leadership within Nike and thus of a favourable environment. The same research also found that women held almost half of the positions in the company, but only 38% of the positions of director or above, and 29% of the vice-presidents.

The same article reported that the company's toxic situation had led to several exits. Among them in the spring of 2017 was Patty Ross, vice-president of workplace design and connectivity, who had started at Nike at a very young age, just 16, and also founded a mentoring network dedicated to women within the company. She was also followed by Kerri Hoyt-Pack, a 15-year veteran of the company who had helped launch the Nike women's brand. Then, came also Nikki Neuburger, vice-president of the brand's global marketing for running, who was instrumental in the Nike+ app, to end with the case of Marie Yates, a former designer who after being in human resources because of problems with the manager, had been rejected and then left the company in 2016.

This information partly tells a different story than the activist facade of the brand. The desire, however, is not to judge the value or otherwise of the campaign, but to bring to the surface a deeper question: can we talk about brand activism despite the fact that brands deal with internal issues, sometimes with results that are at odds with the message generated and disseminated externally?

2.2.3 The impact of CEO Activism

Having reached this point, I think it is quite clear the underlying concept that Kotler and Sarkar (2018) recognise as the reason for the run-up to brand activism: a general and widespread crisis of trust. What the two add, however, and of which I found several hits online, going from academic papers to journal articles, is the emergence of a new figure of activist and its impact, namely the CEO Activist. Basically, the two authors even talk about a new era of CEO Activism, recognising this mythical figure of a leader of large companies as being responsible for and capable of leading change.

Perhaps, they might have been influenced by Apple CEO Tim Cook who saw in the failure of states to be effective, an opportunity for business and other social partners to go a step further. In any case, back in 2016 Chatterji and Toffel wrote an opinion piece—an editorial, in short—entitled 'The Power of CEO Activism' in the New York Times. Here they suggest, years before the release of Kotler and Sarkar's book let's

face it, how much corporate CEOs actually have the power to influence public opinion. But they add an aside: these CEOs also have the power to increase interest in buying their company's products.

Of course, nothing new in the middle of a thesis that talks about the power of companies to generate impact and influence people on issues that cross society. But I feel it is worth reflecting on this potential to have a say on controversial social issues. After all, the CEOs we are talking about and their companies are private individuals who have enormous possibilities and, above all, a large audience that is willing to listen. What is more, consumers would seem to prefer the products of companies when they adhere to the thinking and policies of their CEO. This was the case, for example, with Mr. Cook when he declared himself in favour of same-sex marriages, and after some consumers had initially distanced themselves from him, the majority adhered to his thinking. This is a different context from the time when basketball star and Nike ambassador Michael Jordan refused to support a Democratic candidate because 'Republicans buy sneakers too' (Chatterji and Toffel 2016).

In our era of political polarisation, where we all more or less belong to similar groups whether in our neighbourhoods, social networks or workplaces, and where these places all become echo chambers for our ideological beliefs, corporate neutrality may no longer be relevant. The feeling, as the authors of the article tell us, is that in 2016 it is convenient for brands to personalise their relationship with consumers, even taking political positions and therefore an explicit orientation. This behaviour might reward, because it is better to be loved by a few than to be indifferent to many (Chatterji and Toffel 2016).

Another means of sharing a form of activism are public letters from companies. As Meike Eilert suggests after her research on consumer behaviour at the University of Kentucky, the turning point for this kind of activism was the 2016 presidential election. It was a historic moment for the United States and the world in general, which I think we have had the feeling so far has partly determined the phenomenon we are talking about. That is, I think I can say that brand activism is also a reaction

to US politics and the divisive climate it has generated. However, just as politics was becoming more divided, Gen Z was entering the workforce or simply gaining power as consumers. And, again, the new generation tends to put pressure on companies to prove their worth (Purtill 2021).

Taking a stand, then, is the action that is required, but there are quieter and safer ways than confronting the NFL and the Trump administration with a commercial. For example, writing a letter is pretty safe, as an article in the Journal of Marketing in 2020 suggests, and, you might imagine, signing a letter from a group of companies is even safer (Purtill 2021). Furthermore, it is interesting to think that the more consumers demand activism from the brand, the more taking activist actions for the brand is part of serving its customer. And therefore investors might see activism as a required and therefore natural extension of business (Purtill 2021).

In the future, therefore, it may be that some companies truly believe in the values represented with credibility, pertinence and relevance. While other companies will sporadically and temporarily try to take a stand only because it interests its consumers at that moment. It can be seen that the former version of standing will be clearly preferred over the latter (Purtill 2021). Research on brand activism and the positive and non-positive impact it can generate for the company has already begun. What is missing, however, is a more complete insight into the power a letter has on the issues it addresses.

Words, however, have great potential for consumers and employees who pay more and more attention to promises made by brands or their statements. It is telling that a year after companies donned the activist's shoes to support the just cause of Black Lives Matter, many promises seem to have not been turned into action (Purtill 2021). If we refer to Creative Investment Research, a Washington consulting firm, American companies would have pledged about 65 billion dollars to fight race inequality since the event, i.e. George Floyd's death. These would have included donations to civil rights groups and investments in black staff. The fact is that a year later only $500 million has been spent, according to William Michael Cunningham, the company's founder and chief executive officer and an adjunct professor at

Georgetown University. That is why Mr Cunningham himself has reportedly called for regulation of companies' commitment to Black Lives Matter (Purtill 2021).

Taking a stand, therefore, would give companies the opportunity to benefit from a certain popularity, and thus from increased sales. In this regard, Patagonia saw an increase in revenue exactly after declaring its lawsuit against the Trump administration that wanted to reduce the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. Furthermore, research by Chatterji (2018) conducted with Michael Toffel of Harvard Business School would have shown that even in the case of Apple there would have been a preference for its products after CEO Tim Cook's statement of opposition to Indiana's religious cold weather bill.

What might be discussed is that, in doing so, activist CEOs represent a historic shift in the way companies relate to politics. The concern is that the toxic environment of politics is dictating the rules of corporate strategies. The feeling is therefore that politics is requiring CEOs to take a stand in our cultural war, like university presidents, celebrities, professional athletes and religious leaders before them (Chatterji 2018). As a result, the danger is that brands are increasingly forced-or interested-in segmenting themselves between Democrats and Republicans, with the risk that brand campaigns will increasingly resemble political campaigns in order to recreate a loyal bond with consumers and get them to repeat their purchase (Chatterji 2018).

The feeling is that many companies are not prepared for this new world of politics. Pepsi and Starbucks, for example, have already been victims of fake news campaigns, and these are likely to continue. And with more and more companies taking a stand, there is also the danger that those who do not will be targeted on social media. This would create a paradoxical situation where neutrality is no longer an option. Corporate America—but we could make this argument in Europe as well—is trying to sell us what we want, to accompany and support our identity. And after letting politics determine our acquaintances and acquaintances, what we read and how we live, it may only be a matter of time before politics also determines our purchasing choices (Chatterji 2018).

In conclusion, CEO activism is experiencing a moment of increased attention, even if the social and political issues addressed do not directly concern the brand represented (Chatterji and Toffel, 2015; 2018). In an era in which trust in politicians is declining (Gallup 2016), expectations of CEOs and their ability to engage on public policy debates are growing (Edelman 2018), which are also useful in guiding a sustainable transition (Delmas, Lyon, and Maxwell 2019). These researches complement the literature related to corporate social responsibility strategies (e.g., McWilliams, Siegel, and Wright, 2006) and the influence of companies' nonmarket strategies (e.g., Eesley and Lenox, 2006; Dahan, Hadani, and Schuler, 2013; Hadani, Bonardi, and Dahan, 2017).

Thus, it emerges that CEO activism can influence public opinion by fragmenting the discourse, sharing statements. CEO activism could also be an important tool is driving large transformations in business and society (Delmas, Lyon, and Maxwell 2019).

2.2.4 Brand activism: a reputation amplifier for Millennials and Generation Z

But is not all this brand activism, after all, a reaction to the demands of the Millennials and Generation Z? Before them, in fact, there was very little sexy about a solidarity campaign, while reputation is far from becoming a monetisable brand asset. Today, however, the feeling is that this has happened, with business ethics as a strategic driver to achieve and maintain consumer consent. And so, their purchases (Iabichino 2020). It would seem that Gen Z only wants to choose products from companies they know and whose way of staying on the market they consider transparent. In short, these young people—whom I am writing about gladly—are looking to make purchases in a fair and responsible way and, therefore, finding brands that respect this need is fundamental.

Iabichino (2020) in the preface to the Italian edition of *Brand Activism*—and I underline this to give an idea of the context he chooses to state it—believes that Gen Z is not always fascinated by ethical-responsible storytelling. Rather, it asks

companies for a commitment, actions, transparent pacts for new relationships, which go beyond the promises of good advertising to give instead a new marketing model. This change, moreover, could also closely concern marketing and communication professionals. The invitation that young people seem to be making to them is to do this job in a more adult and, above all, civic way. As emerged during the three-day course on Civil Writing with Iabichino, it would be a matter of changing one's posture in writing messages, taking responsibility.

Of course, doing so can involve considerable risks, because it corresponds to the danger of cutting off a segment of the public. However, if it is done when the brand has a sufficiently strong and credible narrative capital, that heritage can justify and give credibility to actions and messages (Iabichino 2020). A recent study of Gen Z respondents between 13 and 24 years old showed that 76% are conscious consumers. They tend to buy from brands that respond to the social issues they consider relevant. However, the percentage drops to 62% among people aged 25 and over (Yoo et al. 2021).

It is therefore a question of meeting the expectations of Gen Z in order to build genuine brand activism. In this regard, Reach3 Insights found that younger consumers would have these high expectations if brands were to engage with the broad and dedicated discourse of social justice movements. So, in hindsight, it should probably come as no surprise that a thousand brands, including Mercedes-Benz, Netflix, Disney, Apple, Spotify and Nordstrom, participated in the movement to support Black Lives Matter on social media by posting their black square or similar content (Admirand 2020). Whether they were trying to sympathise with the younger generation or whether it was an expression of their own corporate beliefs, we do not know. But we can assume.

However, if I am writing this paper today, it is also because that very phenomenon of the Black Lives Matter movement has led brand activism to be something of a mainstream (Admirand 2020). This is not necessarily a bad thing, in fact having a larger audience tends to mean having a larger public that can participate in the movement. And participation can make a difference in change, just as Gen Zs

themselves are aware that their buying habits can generate positive transformations. For example, 61% of these young people are interested in where their money goes, with the belief that their dollar is their vote (Admirand 2020).

Silence, therefore, may no longer be an option. This confirms what was said earlier about the difficulty for brands to remain neutral. The percentages tell us that for the majority of non-Gen Zs it is not relevant that brands take a position, 66%, while looking at Gen Zs the percentage almost halves, reaching 38% (Admirand 2020). It is no coincidence that many young people liked Nike's viral initiative 'Don't Do It' to take a clear stand in favour of the Black Lives Matter movement, as stated by a 17-year-old black youth from Illinois (Admirand 2020). However, it is worth remembering that young people are looking for meaningful action and consistency in brands, while they do not think it is enough to post a black square or suddenly dress up a can of cola with social values, see Pepsi's mistake. Gen Z believe that corporations have an important role and several possibilities to lead change, while social remains a place to contribute to the discourse of social tensions, as long as actions are taken outside (Admirand 2020).

Eyada (2020) also recognises the opportunity for younger consumers to become brand ambassadors by sharing and supporting the demands of brands on social media. This possibility would increase awareness and support for the company's values. So, as we said, buying a product is the equivalent of having a say, making a statement and exercising power. Brands, however, remember how aware they are of the profit possibilities offered by the younger generation. In the future the purchasing power will be in their hands, but already today they can influence their parents' choices (Twenge 2006). For this reason, it is necessary to rethink brand activism also as one of the best ways to reach millennials (Peloza and Shang 2011).

On the other hand, millennials still expect companies to be socially responsible and to act beyond their own commercial interests (Steckstor 2012). As a result, they value honesty and transparency in brands' marketing and advertising activities (Bergh and Behrer 2013). Indeed, corporate investments in social responsibility and activism can pay off quite well as they change and orient purchase intentions (Chang

and Cheng 2015) and increase the willingness to buy a particular product (Becker-Oslen et al. 2006). In addition, these efforts also help to promote brand image (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2007) and the perception of better product performance (Chernev and Blair 2015).

If the Edelman Earned Brand Global Report (2018) shows that younger consumers are driven by values and ethics in their purchasing, looking also at past studies we could recognise this trend, thus retracing the evolution of an already pre-existing tension. For example, Peters and Barletta (2005) found that socially conscious consumption was pursued by both genders, a finding also confirmed by Kim and Johnson (2013). However, it emerged that it was mainly women who were more inclined towards and supportive of cause-related marketing. These findings probably contributed to brand managers' understanding of how young people's emotional attachment to the brand is rather anaelastic, i.e. young people would be willing to pay a premium price for activist brands. And again, profit comes back along with values.

The weapon, however, is double-edged. Garfield (2018) states how exposure to false statements, false claims or false actions makes young people very sceptical with the result that they are more likely to boycott brands that are not really activists. Conversely, the demand would be for brands to add their voice to the contemporary social, cultural, economic, political and environmental causes to give back to the society. This, however, as long as it does not take place with a phenomenon called *woke capitalism*, which we will learn about in chapter three, in which the stance corresponds at most to a representative gesture such as a general statement or a donation. The line, I realised in researching first and now in writing, is very thin. But the perception is that for millennials and Gen Z these small actions are not enough (sld.com 2021).

The Ben and Jerry's company stance is a good example of brand activism, which can always be recognised in relation to the tensions that emerged after George Floyd's death. Its relevant traits are: authenticity, ability to engage and innovate, and community orientation. In fact, on 23 June 2020, they reportedly stated the

following: 'The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy. What happened to George Floyd was not the result of a bad apple; it was the predictable consequence of a racist and prejudiced system and culture that has treated Black bodies as the enemy from the beginning'. Ben and Jerry's therefore made its position clear without nuance or general phrases, before taking action. This led to the company being named 'Activist Brand of the Year' that year by Marketing Dive (sld.com 2021).

Dove could also be a good example of brand activism. During the first pandemic Dove Canada reused the 'Real Beauty' platform, which we remember as perhaps one of the first examples of brand activism in the then 2006. In this second case, in 2020, the brand told the real beauty of the period: the faces of the health workers, marked by masks and long shifts. The campaign was called 'Courage Is Beautiful' with doctors and nurses and, indeed, the signs of protective gear. In addition to the campaign to support these people and the beauty of their work, far beyond the aesthetic standards Dove has always tried to fight, the brand also committed to concrete actions. Dove Canada also donated $1 million worth of products to Canadian health workers as part of a larger $3 million support program in donations to organizations in the GTA, Simcoe County and Montreal. Dove's commitment, therefore, took concrete form on behalf of people and communities during a troubling time as the pandemic began (sld.com 2021).

Another great example of a brand activist is Patagonia, which has integrated activism firmly into its business. Besides the purpose of being in business to save our planet, as the company's tagline states, its actions prove it. Since the 1980s the company has been giving 2% of its gross profits to non-profit environmental groups. This percentage later increased to 10% of net earnings (Chouinard 2016). Moreover, the company does not usually use advertising—except in sector magazines—to tell people about its products, but to support community and environmental campaigns. This is why the company also dedicated 10 million dollars in U.S. tax savings to fight climate change (Roberto 2020).

Lego is also running several campaigns for young people. One of these is Green Instructions, designed for the Polish market, a country where pollution from coal-fired power generation is a serious problem. The campaign, in this case, rethought old models of the company with new instructions to recreate greener objects such as an electric scooter, a wind turbine and so on. Another important collaboration is with Sesame Workshop to help Rohingya and Syrian refugee children learn and heal through play. Not only has the company invested $100 million in the programme, but it has been able to turn its global mission to educate and inspire through play into local, social and environmental action (Roberto 2020).

Conclusions

Brand activism is a reaction of brands to a request from a large part of society. The demand is to take a stand, and then to activate and take care of certain cultural, political, economic and environmental tensions. The large part of society asking for a tangible commitment, however, is the younger generation—the millennials and Gen Z—or, at any rate, the population with purchasing power. In addition to the ethical and human motivations that drive brands and their brand activism strategies, there is in fact a long-term interest of companies. Durability over time, which is what profit allows.

The fact that even in a society-driven process such as brand activism there is an interest in profit, however, should not give rise to discouragement. It was part of our premise and, thus, of management itself. Rather, I believe that bringing out a context in which consumers are moving from buying to choosing a product, the brand and its marketing is fundamental to generating a positive impact in society. And if, on the one hand, it is the Big IdeaL at Ogilvy or more simply the purpose that moves companies and employees, and then inspires people, it is actually people who make the difference.

It is in people's constant demand for less neutrality, in favour of taking a stand, that the market and its actors can change and become active. This, if the process is conducted with credibility, pertinence, and relevance. In short, for the reaction of brands to the tensions that run through society to create a movement, it must be possible to recognise a natural alignment between its narrative heritage, its actions

and the soul of the people. The profit mentioned will then come of itself. As long as it is not the only thing that matters, as the Cluetrain Manifesto suggests.

Chapter III — Woke Capitalism: the counter-narrative of brand activism

3.1 Woke, before corporate progressivism

But are we sure that a quasi-consultative book, like *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action*, could be enough to tell us that companies have now awakened, have decided to engage and, even more, to be activists? It is therefore the woke that we want to talk about in this third and final chapter. The term woke, in fact, brings to mind woke capitalism and first of all, however, it is good to know the origin of the word *woke*. If up to now we have been talking about the potential of the progressive nature of corporations for humanity, democracy and the environment, now the book *Woke Capitalism. How Corporate Morality Is Sabotaging Democracy* by Carl Rhodes (2021) may help us to assess the other side of the same phenomenon, and its threats.

In 1962, an article by William Melvin Kelley entitled *If you're woke, you dig it* was published in The New York Times. Recounting how beatnik culture had appropriated certain Black American terms, the article was a critique of the White appropriation of Black language. The issue of Black language that the article describes has deep origins, going back even before the abolition of slavery when the development of their own lexicon allowed workers to speak in code to each other without being understood. However, it took several years before *woke* entered the Oxford English Dictionary in June 2017 given its widespread use in the United States. And while until a year earlier it exclusively denoted the past participle of wake up, since that year it has referred to being well-informed and, more importantly, alerted to discrimination and racial or social injustice.

American R&B musician Erykah Badu also contributes to the introduction of the word *woke* into contemporary language. She does so in particular with the song *Master Teacher* from the album *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* released in 2008. In the song, Badu repeats the phrase 'I stay woke' to join the long tradition of African American culture that uses the metaphor of 'staying alert' to the socio-political context (Rhodes 2021). The term, therefore, became part of the American

civil rights movement in the 1960s, before becoming popular with the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. In 1965, for example, Martin Luther King gave a speech entitled 'Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution' at Oberlin College and a few years later, in 1975, Teddy Pendergrass' song *Wake Up Everybody* called for action to change the world (Rhodes 2021). As mentioned, the Black Lives Matter movement adopted the word woke when it began in 2013, following the tragic killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, on 26 February 2012 (Luscombe 2012).

This fact and what happened afterwards was instrumental in the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement and the adoption of the term *woke*. In particular, it happened that following the solving of Trayvon Martin's killer, Alicia Garza wrote a post on Facebook: 'Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter'. Then, it happened that the post was shared by her friend Patrisse Cullors with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Subsequently, the two together with Opal Tometi created a plan for the voice of African Americans in America to be heard. The slogan later became a movement following the killing of another African American teenager, Michael Brown, who was shot on 9 August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. The Black Lives Matter movement was thus constituted as a social movement against the violence and injustice faced by African Americans, especially at the hands of the police (Chase 2017).

Consequently Badu's 'Stay woke' returned, along with King's message, to reiterate the importance of staying aware of what is happening around you (Rhodes 2021). Then, in 2016, the American Dialect Society named the term woke as the slang word of the year for being a term long used by African American society (Zimmer et al. 2017) with the meaning of being aware and aware of issues of social justice and racial inequality. Reasons why this word also made it onto MTV's list of '10 words you should know in 2016' (Trudon 2016).

There is, however, another aspect to take into account, as Rhodes suggests at the beginning of the book. It is Kelley's own article that notes the fluid character of African American language use. The tendency, in fact, is to take words currently in

use and reverse their meaning. For the same reason, it can be said that today the word *woke* does not only indicate a situation of alertness to possible racial or social injustices, but rather indicates a person who declares a superficial morality or political correctness (Rhodes 2021). Being woke, therefore, could currently be considered a mere ethical statement required by the current trend of adhering to progressive policies such as movements against sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression.

This phenomenon of altering and inverting the meaning of certain slangs used by Black culture may be reminiscent of the conquest of cool identified by Thomas Frank (1997). He noted that the business world from the 1960s onwards began to adopt culturally radical dispositions in its predominantly conservative economy. Similarly, the counter-cultures of the 1960s were depoliticised by corporations and, in doing so, being cool was soon juxtaposed with progressive politics (Rhodes 2021). Thus, the word *woke* was another trend term borrowed from Black culture for the masses to appropriate, thus making it a meme and a form of irony (Watson 2018). Social media, then, was not slow to provoke its spread.

Adhering to social tensions, as recounted so far in the thesis, is certainly not a bad thing. What is being questioned here is the origin, form and action of this awakened morality. The negative meaning of *woke*, then, describes precisely those people who support progressive political causes, but do so disingenuously and ineffectively. So much so that to be referred to as a *woketard* is to be obsessed with appearing ethically correct at all costs on issues of environmental and political identity (Rhodes 2021). A trend that Serena Smith (2020) reports is also a lure used to attract partners in the phenomenon called *wokefishing*. In short, it seems that the fashion of being progressive in facade also has its sex appeal.

Being woke is described as a form of insincere self-righteousness (Binyam 2016). In particular, this desire to label people as woke is part of a cultural and ideological clash between liberal progressives and reactionary conservatives. In recent years, in fact, progressive causes have dominated the public debate-mostly in the United States, but also generally in Europe and Italy-bringing it to bear on the issues of

same-sex marriage, racism, climate change, animal rights or gender equality. To these movements, there are those who have responded not by proposing solid counter-arguments, but simply by questioning the sincerity of progressive positions (Rhodes 2021).

On the question of whether woke people then fail to generate or participate in real political and social action, former US President Barack Obama also intervened in 2019 in a speech at the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago on questionable contemporary US politics. His reasoning revolved around the fact that there are ambiguities in the world and thus compromises that call into question the purity of a woke position. He also criticised the supposed activism carried out between one tweet and another, between one hashtag and another. Because that does not generate change. For Obama, then, that wokeness is not a serious way to address policy issues, let alone bring about transformation.

3.2 Woke Capitalism: when corporations take progressive positions

The same wokeness, i.e. taking progressive positions in a superficial and incomplete way, reaches its peak when it arrives in business and capitalism (Rhodes 2021). Thus, it did not take long for the word woke, after circulating for some time and especially in the 2010s in common parlance, to be applied to corporations that publicly support progressive causes. This critical use of woke capitalism is particularly directed at an increasing number of corporations, often multinationals, that align themselves with social movements to conduct their marketing and advertising campaigns. The reason these corporations are criticised, therefore, relates to their use of progressive causes to their advantage in the hope of gaining consumer support and thus their commercial input (Rhodes 2021).

Some examples could be found in the same cases recounted by brand activism, which here could be rethought with the critical eye of wokeness. Thus, Gillette has been accused of taking advantage of a progressive current related to sexism to reposition the brand against toxic masculinity (Berkowitz 2019). Ben & Jerry's in introducing the Pecan Resist ice cream flavour for peaceful resistance to regressive

and discriminatory Trump-era policies was accused by Fox News of attempting to insert leftist politics into everything (Gutfeld 2019). Fast fashion brand Zara received its share of criticism after releasing its collection of ungendered clothing for suddenly proving woke. Similarly, Klein described Coca-Cola and Delta Airlines' condemnation of Georgia's voting law in 2021, claiming that large corporations have grown up in the shadow of the Left (Klein 2021).

The criticism of this woke attitude of companies, however, is not limited to highlighting the opportunistic and hypocritical character of their declarations. According to detractors, woke capitalism is also a threat to prosperity and economic growth within the system of capitalism itself (Rhodes 2021). Writing in The American Conservative, a libertarian-conservative magazine, Rod Dreher (2019) is reported to have stated that woke capitalism is in fact our enemy. In his view, the pursuit of political correctness at all costs could actually have a negative impact on a company's business model and thus on its success. Dreher therefore sees woke capitalism as an affront to the values of capitalism, thus joining the vision of economist Milton Friedman, who in 1970 stated that the social responsibility of business was solely to increase profit.

3.3 Woke Capitalism: threats to democracy

On the one hand, we have reported the committed position of companies ready to engage in progressive political causes for the good of society. On the other, we are seeing the more conservative position that corporations should stay outside politics and take care of their own commercial success, to ensure benefits for their shareholders (Rhodes 2021). However, we have to put these two positions in a context that has seen a process of growth of corporate power over the last forty years, while inequality became more and more present globally (Piketty 2013). The position that the book *Woke Capitalism* is intended to support, and which is strictly relevant to this chapter, is the danger that woke capitalism allows corporations to take too much political power, thus leading to a kind of privatisation of democracy. A danger that is being realised since corporations have started to capitalise on public morality (Rhodes 2021).

As Helen Lewis suggests (2020) it is not just a question of criticising the superficiality of corporate progressive engagement, but the serious political implications that this entails. Indeed, Lewis believes there are implications of woke capitalism for the future of democracy, in which corporations seem willing and able to override its true traditional values: equality, freedom of voice and debate. What will be discussed in this chapter, leading from Rhodes (2021), is therefore woke capitalism as a well-disguised affront to democracy. And, in this regard, it would be appropriate here to join political theorist Wendy Brown in arguing that the idea of democracy should not be constrained within the vision of the modern liberal democratic state. This, in fact, is precisely the context that is being influenced by economic growth, competitive positioning and the valorisation of capital (Brown 2015).

On the contrary, the idea of democracy would like economic prosperity to serve the people. And, instead of woke corporate power, true democracy should be based on people power (Rhodes 2021). Instead, we seem to be faced with a modern neo-feudalism in which political authority is concentrated in economic power, while corporations create elites who increasingly determine the laws that should govern them (Whitehead 2013). As Whitehead confirms (2013), the feeling in our age is that it is the corporate-state rulers who govern us. It is also frightening that corporations are not only taking legislative authority, but are also seeking political and moral authority in such a dangerous process of de-democratization of democracy, to borrow a phrase from political science preffessor Yannis Stavrakakis (1997).

Indeed, de-democratisation occurs when politics moves from the public and political to the private and economic sector. The concern therefore lies in this shift of political power from the public to a corporate elite. A shift that, at this point in the thesis, we could link to certain events linked to the private politics of companies, to neo-corporatism and to the branding that has affected companies and which we discussed in the first chapter. Moreover, we can also recognise some traces of woke capitalism in corporate social responsibility from the 1950s onwards, as well as in

neoliberalism from the 1980s to the present day (Rhodes 2021). In short, the feeling is that every event, shift or phenomenon that has contributed to the strengthening of corporate power has then contributed to generating the corporate behaviour that we have been calling woke capitalism since the late 2010s.

Companies have thus started to discuss various political and social issues such as LGBTQI+ rights, same-sex marriages, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, without addressing the real reasons for social inequality: income and tax inequality, workers' rights and tax evasion. Rather, companies have often simply taken sides with social justice messages in their marketing campaigns. Therefore, what follows is an account of how companies have preferred to continue to pay workers little, to continue to chase tax avoidance mechanisms and to lobby, while presenting themselves as business purpose driven, socially responsible or stakeholder driven. In short, it is only the story that has changed, and with it the brand messages, thus strengthening the power of companies thanks to woke capitalism.

3.4 How Woke Capitalism turns social and environmental issues into profits and political power

As mentioned in the first chapter, companies' stance is stimulated by a boiling socio-political context, where some issues are affecting people more than others. Among these, climate change is certainly one of the hottest topics. Coming to about two years ago, it was 15 March 2019 and 1.4 million young people from all over the world were joining a global climate strike initiated by a 16-year-old activist, Greta Thumberg. The demand was simple: they demanded that something be done to save the world (Barr 2019). Interestingly, after that event, something probably clicked in the marketing or CSR departments of companies. It may have been the right cause or the recognition of the birth of a new movement so large and so widespread, but it was probably also the thought that this generation would in a few years be the one with the most purchasing power.

Colourful pages began to appear in the newspapers to announce the arrival of the sustainability report of some big company, everything started to turn green, and

bottles produced in China and sold for €25-30 in Europe became the new gadget to save the world. The desire, let me be clear, is certainly not to criticise but to raise how much that movement, because of brands, soon became a trend. And it is not surprising that, when the fires raged in Australia in early 2020, on 11 January of that year even the luxury jewelry company Tiffany & Co. went so far as to call in Australian newspapers for climate action from the Prime Minister (Wilkinson 2020). This was followed by other calls from major Australian companies.

At the risk of repeating myself: it is not so much reprehensible for a company to demand decisive action from the government on a climate issue as it is for it to dress up as an activist for a few days to ride a trend and align itself with people's demands. These are indeed symptoms of superficiality and opportunism that we have seen called woke, and woke capitalism when referring to a company. As the author of *Woke Capitalism* Rhodes points out, the spirit of solidarity of corporations is welcome. What is worrying, however, is the long-term effect of this political system in which corporations seek and take power from an authority, if not an activist. Looking back now at chapter one, it should in fact seem clear to us how this way of taking action is very reminiscent of the anti-corporate activism recounted for example by Klein in *No Logo*. Yet, now, it really seems that it is the corporations that play that role previously conducted by the state and activist movements.

As is often the case, however, it is hardly ever a single event that generates a widespread and discussed phenomenon. So even in the case of woke capitalism, or brand activism depending on your point of view, it is not enough to look for the cause exclusively in Fridays For Future or other recent movements such as Black Lives Matter or #MeToo. One reason why companies would put woke capitalism on their agenda would also lie in Davos 2020. On 21 January of that year, in fact, several personalities if not celebrities from politics and business gathered in the Swiss Alps with the aim of reshaping the agenda of global and regional industry (World Economic Forum 2020). And as The New York Times wrote, the dominant leitmotif at Davos 2020 was woke capitalism (Wu 2020).

At this point, however, it should come as no surprise that there was talk of the need for companies to address the challenges that the world was presenting such as climate problems, inequality, populism or the abuse of big data, as much as that the reason why companies should bear this burden lay in the inability of the state (Burke-White 2020). However, shortly afterwards the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and the premises of Davos 2020 were questioned. Rhodes, however, tells us how some action actually took place. For example, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink—the same man who had called for a higher purpose in his 2018 letter to CEOs—donated $50 million to people affected by the virus. A sum that, however, proves to be a drop in the ocean of the multi-trillion-dollar fund that constitutes BlackRock, its 14 per cent increase in stock price in the months since the pandemic began (Team 2020) and Fink's annual remuneration of $25.3 million, or more than 500 times the average salary of a US worker. This time, therefore, it is numbers and not feelings that show us how actions like this can be driven by profit.

An increase in earnings or market value that could take us back to the case of Nike when, soon after the launch of its 30-year Just Do It campaign in 2018, it saw a $6 billion increase in its market value, while making only $25 million in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Nike News 2020). Similar critical thinking might be prompted by Amazon's $3.9 million pledge to the UK in 2020, compared to an estimated $100 billion in taxes avoided over the previous ten years (Neate 2019). The list could also go on with Mark Zuckerberg's $25 million dedicated to developing treatments against the virus, when in the very year of the pandemic his personal fortune increased by $37 billion (Blumenthal 2020). The fact is that the pandemic amplified the inequality in society. While ordinary workers were losing their jobs and experiencing the insecurities of contagion, the wealthy class was getting even richer in what Oxfam calls *pandemic profiteering* (Oxfam 2020).

To go back to the numbers again, the 634 people on Forbes' list of billionaires saw their wealth grow by $685 billion between March and April 2020 alone, increasing by 25 per cent (Inequality.org 2020). All this, while many of them tried to behave as individuals or as CEOs of their companies as good citizens. The problem, however, as Rhodes (2021) writes, is that no one addressed the real causes of social

inequality, but rather, just like any form of populism, appealed to people's concerns with apparently progressive policies. An attitude that might well recall the new vision of stakeholder inclusion proposed by the Business Roundtable in 2019, according to which the purpose of business had definitely changed.

If there is, however, an early formal moment when the term woke was associated with the activities of corporations and capitalism, it might be columnist Ross Douthat's editorial for The New York Times in 2018. Douthat recounts a shift in corporate America following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. In particular, he proposes two possible explanations for the corporate stance. The first considers a genuine increased consciousness on the part of corporations in response to Trump's discriminatory and regressive policies, especially regarding gun control, transgender rights and immigration. The second, on the other hand, sees corporations' progressive statements as an attempt to appear as benevolent in the eyes of the people, while simultaneously taking advantage of Trump's right-wing economic policies, particularly those related to tax cuts (Douthat 2018).

Douthat thus recognises woke causes as opportunities for companies to manipulate politics in their favour, in short as if the possibility of going woke was an alternative to lobbying. What Douthat's article suggests is a relationship between business, politics and society. In this relationship, however, companies would be using their cultural and financial power to take positions on political issues (Rhodes 2021). A nice opportunity, then, to take advantage of right-wing economic policies, while progressive causes secure legitimacy from the people. As Derek Thomson points out in The Atlantic, however, this shift of corporations towards political activism leads to the rise of liberal corporatocracy (Thompson 2018).

What Thomson would seem to be saying is that corporations are taking advantage to take power from those institutions of democracy that had lost prominence under the Trump presidency (Rhodes 2021). To better understand these two points of view, we might return to the social responsibility of the 1950s and 1960s, already introduced in chapter two, a context that created the basis for the woke capitalism

of these days. However, the historical contexts of the mid-20th century and the beginning of the 21st are different. Social responsibility emerged in a period of shared economic prosperity and a general rise in living standards. Woke capitalism, or brand activism with reference to the positive aspect of the same phenomenon, emerged in an era of high inequality (Rhodes 2021).

The issue is that in today's context it would seem that injustices are criticised by the very people and companies that have benefited most from them. Even more, the centralisation of wealth and thus power in the hands of a few would have detrimental consequences for social harmony (Piketty2014). This is because woke capitalism does not offer solutions to the causes of inequality and thus the issues it embraces, but prefers to maintain a state of inequality and control it through political influence and moralisation (Piketty 2014). This is reminiscent of William J. Ghent's description of capitalism in 1902: a benevolent feudalism that seeks, on the other hand, to appease the discontented.

Later, in 1953, it was Howard R. Bowen who first addressed the issue of social responsibility, which basically stemmed from the role of the businessman in the free enterprise economy. According to Bowen (1953), in particular, social responsibility considered the direct correlation between the actions of business and the quality of our lives and personalities. Bowen's view, however, considered an important coexistence of two points of view, which are still present in woke capitalism. On the one hand, he considered that the businessman should exercise power because he has a moral duty to do so. On the other hand, the businessman must carry out socially responsible practices because otherwise his power could be questioned and thus diminished. In short, then as now, the same phenomenon that has evolved and changed its name is, however, based on the same coexistence of a morality and an interest in maintaining power (Rhodes 2021).

Bowen was thus explicit in asserting a connection between social responsibility and the possibility of corporate power continuing within a capitalist economy (Rhodes 2021). Milton Friedman also entered this discussion with his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*. Convinced that the only responsibility of business was to use

resources and engage in profit-oriented activities, he thought that capitalism required a clear distinction between public and private interests. A division considered necessary to preserve democracy itself. In fact, his question, in some ways more than legitimate, concerned the possibility for a private individual to decide for the public interest (Friedman 1962). The solution therefore had to be a general laissez-faire capitalism.

On the subject of business freedom, William C. Frederick recognised that the post-war interest in social responsibility stemmed precisely from the disappearance of laissez-faire at the beginning of the 20th century. This happened in favour of systems such as Soviet communism, Italian fascism, German Nazism and the American New Deal because they transformed capitalism into a central economic plan (Frederick 1960). For these reasons, a context of large and powerful corporations led by managers emerged from the 1950s, while Smith's invisible hand was no longer relevant in a system that had suffered from the interference of politicians and managers (Frederick 1960).

In 1960, however, Professor Keith Davis, whom we quoted in chapter two to introduce CSR, reflected on how the changing role of businessmen in society was due to cultural changes in society (Davis 1960). Davis thus recognises a power to companies and those who run them that he believes is a more sophisticated way of pursuing his interests. Then, a few years later in 1967, he explains how politics was the main reason why business was interested in social responsibility. Social responsibility is in fact the opportunity to prevent the government from imposing more regulation and control on the business (Davis 1967). According to his 'Iron Law of Responsibility', companies that do not take responsibility for their own actions are lost. This statement is somewhat reminiscent of Kotler and Sarkar's intimation of brand activism in order for companies to take the long view.

Compared to the conditions that gave rise to social responsibility, those of woke capitalism are different. The latter is a more global phenomenon due to the presence of multi-national companies and a context of widespread inequality that existed before the emergence of the phenomenon (Rhodes 2021). And inequality is defined

as the fact that the richest 1 per cent of the planet's population holds half of the total wealth. At the same time, the ten richest people on the planet have a combined wealth of $745 billion, which is more than the GDP of states like Switzerland, Sweden, Thailand or Argentina (inequality.org 2020). The truth is that inequality has increased over the last forty years, so much so that the philosopher Frédéric Gros (2020) refers to this era as the 'age of indecency'.

Indecency that is caused by corporate tax avoidance. That is, by what Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2019) is said to have identified as the toxic aspect of globalisation and which does not get the attention it deserves. The fact is that large corporations, among whom many names are among the alleged benefactors, do not pay the taxes due in the countries where they have their real business at an estimated cost of $500 billion each year, despite the fact that since 1980 the average tax rate on profit has fallen sharply from around 45 per cent to 25 per cent (Asen 2019). The question now arises as to what happened between the middle of the last century and the emergence of woke capitalism to cause this situation.

Rhodes's work (2021) becomes even more relevant when he decides to get to the bottom of the causes that have allowed corporations to take more and more power. He recognises this shift in the 1980s when there was a significant change in society, culture, politics and the economy. It would seem to begin in Britain with Thatcher recreating a liberal capitalism based on a free market and privatisation, or what was later called neoliberalism. It is interesting to see how this current of liberalisation and deregulation is actually a global phenomenon that is also found in Ronald Reagan's America. All this, while the Soviet Union is beginning to crumble, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the separation into fifteen independent states.

From the 1980s onwards, a new right-wing on the ideas of Reagan and Thatcher began to spread, reinforced also by international policies led by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Measures included for example lower taxation, reduced regulation of corporations, removal of customs tariffs, a cut in investment in public services followed by privatisation of public organisations (Karjanen 2015).

In this process of capital-driven neoliberalism, Thatcher also thought that soon every citizen could become a capitalist. Even more, her new policy did not think of an economy regulated by society, but rather a society regulated by market mechanisms (Rhodes 2021).

While we may recognise 2019 as the year in which the Business Roundtable came out with the new promise of a renewed stakeholder capitalism, it is in 1983 that we can recognise the birth of shareholder capitalism, or rather *shareholder value* (Rhodes 2021). The term, in fact, had already started to circulate in business-related publications since the mid-1960s, so much so that it was present in academic research by the 1970s. But it is only from the 1980s onwards that shareholder value becomes the aim of business and capitalism. In short, from those years the idea that the purpose of capitalism is to produce profit is reinforced. An affirmation that should remind us of Milton Friedman, among other things Thatcher's adviser (Rhodes 2021).

This shift is decisive because it generates a change of posture in the whole system of capitalism. Since the 1980s, and this can still be recognised in the statement of the Business Roundtable aside, maximising the financial value of shareholders in terms of share price has become the main goal to be achieved (Rhodes 2021). This meant that managers and executives oriented their decisions towards profit maximisation in order to increase the dividends to be returned to the shareholders. Subsequently, this shareholder value movement also led to a change in the determination of executives' compensation. It has become customary to provide some form of share ownership, stock options and share-price-linked bonuses (Rhodes 2021).

The effects were devastating. While business began to be oriented towards short-term profit maximisation, at the same time the inequality between the average salary and that of CEOs increased. In the US, for example, in 1978 a CEO earned about thirty times as much as the average worker. This ratio increased to sixty times by the end of the 1980s and reached four hundred times by the end of the 1990s (Umah 2008). The problem is not only in the disparity in earnings that this shareholder value system has led to, but in the temporary and deleterious solutions

it has begun to require to sustain itself: lower wages, less hiring, and widespread job insecurity.

In this context, as is obvious to justify what was going on, the importance for companies to pursue corporate social responsibility initiatives, as self-interested strategies to maximise value in the long run, re-emerged (Lougee and Wallace 2008). CSR became even more relevant after the events of the 2000s when various crises broke out, including the dot.com and global financial crises of 2007. CSR started to present itself as a reassurance for shareholder primacy after these events, although the system remained the same (Rhodes 2021). CSR was actually used by large corporations as a strategy to change the old short-term orientation in favour of the long-term. And the article *Creating shared value* by Porter and Kramer (2011) became an opportunity to justify the use of social problems as a strategy for business, i.e. pursuing shareholder value (Rhodes 2021).

The feeling is that all the talk of the time about corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability—which is very similar to the current talk used by the brand activism movement—is actually a narrative that serves the interests of business (Banerjee2008). In other words, these practices would serve to legitimise the power of big business. And it is precisely this relationship between corporate social responsibility and corporate power that has provided the context for a movement like woke capitalism to take hold (Rhodes 2021). In this vision, progressive corporate policies became a branding opportunity, thus benefiting from people's support by deciding to support socio-political causes. And, if you like, you could say that there is a certain awareness in companies since they have called this phenomenon brand activism. We are therefore faced with woke capitalism as a form of corporate power which, compared to the desire to maintain legitimacy through the old CSR, now also wants to take an ideological and practical stand in democracy (Rhodes 2021).

In order to take a position and power in society, and therefore in democracy, you need a valid justification. If we now reflect on what the book *Brand Activism* indicated, this justification was given by the failure of the state to provide adequate

solutions to social issues, a situation that required corporate intervention. This idea is also shared by the annual letter to the CEOs of 2019 signed by Larry Fink, the CEO of BlackRock also presented above. What is curious is to see how in the letter Fink arrogates to himself the right to claim that the company is asking companies to serve a social purpose (Fink 2018, 2019). Indeed, the doubt arises that, just as marketing has often recreated a need and then satisfied it with a product, companies in a decided woke capitalism have recreated the justification for their intervention and power in society.

However, in 2020 Fink went on to publish a new letter to CEOs, this time on the climate issue and in response to the tensions that were running through the historical period and society: Fridays For Future on the one hand, fires in Australia and California and a pandemic also caused by environmental issues on the other. Interestingly, on that occasion Fink positioned himself as a model CEO by urging the companies he supported to be actively concerned about climate change, otherwise BlackRock would take its investments elsewhere (Fink 2020). This commitment earned BlackRock several awards as America's Most JUST Company for 2020. However, Fink himself used his company's private jet in February 2020 to fly from New York to Sydney for a lecture at the Australian finance industry, a journey of 16,000 kilometres that consumed 1,100 kilograms of fuel per hour of travel (Aston 2020). In short, Fink's description of the Spectator (2020) as a trend of woke capitalism could be quite apt.

The reason for this commitment by Fink in the first place, and thus by the CEOs BlackRock supports, is thus recognisable in the long-term profit for companies and investors. And he himself says this when he speaks of investments in sustainability and climate as an opportunity to integrate investment portfolios with a better risk-adjusted return (Fink 2020). As Mark Kramer reiterated (2019) business must recognise social factors are indeed relevant to the economic success of companies. But also political and social, we might add. The trend of woke capitalism would see private companies attempting to seize power that used to belong to the government, instead of offering a real solution to the democratic values of equality and solidarity that are beginning to falter (Rhodes 2021). With woke capitalism, then, corporations

are rediscovering a moral justification for their existence and practices, snatching away the position of saviours in the fight against the inequality that the system has produced (Rhodes 2021). A system, let us remember, of which they are part and which they have helped to produce since neoliberalism gave them the opportunity to privatise capital and public services.

For these reasons, one has to wonder about the morality of companies' actions, even when they seem to share great social or environmentalist impulses. As in the case of the 17 February 2020 announcement by Jeff Bezos, founder and then CEO of Amazon, for the Bezos Earth Fund. The fund envisaged an initial sum of $10 billion to be used to discover new solutions to combat climate change (Bezos 2020). A large sum that came in the wake of what has been described as the 'year of climate consciousness'. In 2019, in fact, the climate engagement and activism promoted by Greta Thunberg and started a year earlier in 2018 when she began to protest peacefully outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm exploded around the world (Brandlin 2019).

It is not the attempt to take advantage of a trend that questions Bezos' action, but rather to reflect on the origin of part of those earnings and then funds invested for the community. As Rhodes (2021) reminds us, paying taxes remains the best way for companies to contribute to society. This is true corporate social responsibility, leaving the government to administer resources for the interest of the people. Yet Amazon, staying within the law, took advantage of all the mechanisms to not pay the correct amount of taxes in the states where it actually had the bulk of its business. Specifically, between 2010 and 2019, Amazon paid $3.4 billion in taxes on a profit of $960.5 billion and a profit of $26.8 billion. That, on balance, would amount to a corporate tax of 12.7 per cent compared to the standard US tax of 35 per cent (Neate 2019). It might therefore suggest that the $10 billion invested in the Bezos Earth Fund corresponds to three times the taxes paid in ten years in the US (Rhodes 2021). And it should come as no surprise that tax avoidance is rarely mentioned in the corporate social responsibility reports of large organisations (Rhodes 2021).

Personally, it makes me wonder how companies can take on social issues by putting their brand name on them. Of course, it is understandable that a person would want to put his or her name on making a good gesture, but one cannot hide the fact that it is strange to see the surname of a private individual in a huge fund for the future of the earth. The fact is that in this context of woke capitalism, many CEOs have begun to use their position as a prominent stage to reinforce their image and that of their company. In short, nothing different from the phenomenon we called CEO Activism in chapter two, which we could reconsider with a more critical eye. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Ford Fondation president Darren Walker referred to an example of CEO Activism as 'a seminal moment in the history of Business America' (Gelles 2017).

As Rhodes (2021) argues, it is not a matter of concern about the high purpose of business and its CEOs extending beyond profit, but rather the drift to which it is leading. It would seem that political activism is becoming a strategy for many companies. The same companies that, by the way, are seeing their success in stock prices. Moreover, while CEOs among themselves recognise the right and moral responsibility to represent their various constituents on political matters (Rhodes 2021), at the same time they present themselves as political authorities justified by their economic power and certainly not by a democratic election. There is nothing democratic about the narrative that CEOs, Fink above all, are committed to safeguarding democracy. Rather, one recognises what Professor David Vogel (2006) has called 'the market for virtue'. That is, that market in which ethical behaviour is exchanged for a better public image and less regulation.

So, there is always a reason to wonder whether the behaviour of companies is only or mainly an opportunity to benefit from a trend. Take for example the case of Nike and Kaepernick in chapter two, where the former quarterback after being excluded from the NFL Football League received support from Nike and threats of boycott even from the former president. There, we have previously described how Nike benefited, its earnings and its stock in supporting Kaepernick and his cause. Now, we could also take a look at what the NFL itself did, for profit-driven reasons, a few years later. In July 2020, and thus only three years after Kaepernick's exclusion for

kneeling during the American anthem to protest police violence against African Americans, it announced that from then on every match of the 2020 season would begin with the song *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

Interestingly, the song chosen to front the American anthem is the beginning of a poem written by James Weldon Johnson, leader of the civil rights organisation for black people NAACP, and set to music in 1899 by his brother (NAACP 2020). This means that only three years after the NFL took a stance under pressure from Trump and against Kaepernick and any other player who did not pay respect during the anthem—this, according to them—, the league itself embraced the same cause. The reason, however, is not ethical. Instead, it can be traced to what followed the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement that summer of 2020 after Floyd's killing. The protest also spread to those states with a conservative, white majority. It also reached overseas to Europe, Asia, and Australia.

Thus, this very outpouring of political activism against racism and, indeed, in favour of an organised Black Lives Matter caused a general shift in opinion, first public and then political. As a result, the NFL made a purely commercial decision to change its stance on race-based violence and pro-racist protests. Quite simply, because as a business it could not afford to alienate its customers and consumers (Rhodes 2021). In short, as Michael Bennett (2020) might suggest, the NFL realised that the world was no longer willing to accept racism in the way it had done until then.

According to what was argued in the second chapter dedicated to brand activism, we could therefore recognise in this stance of the League the phenomenon of the same name identified by Kotler. Before we can do so, however, Rhodes (2021) puts some numbers in order to support the usual hypothesis: it is profit that drives choices like this. One should therefore speak of woke capitalism and not brand activism and a civic altruism of brands. Indeed, although the NFL has gone well beyond the choice of playing *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by presenting a ten-year investment plan of $250 million to combat systemic racism, reality also tells us another side of the same coin.

Not only are most football team owners White, but if we were to take the sum of $250 million and divide it by ten years, the fee for each team would be around $781,250. A small sum compared to the average of what quarterbacks alone charge the league, which is $5.76 million each year. Further, in 2019 alone $4.48 billion in television advertising would be spent on NFL broadcasts (Bleier 2020). At this point, the millions promised to fight gender inequality are clearly a very small part and this is more of a commercial and image strategy.

The attempt to take advantage of an existing trend to align their product is unfortunately still being pursued by many brands. Among the earliest examples besides Nike, however, was Gillette. It was 12 January 2019 and with the slogan 'the best a man can be' Gillette rewrote its payoff after years to address toxic masculinity (Rhodes 2021). The ad went viral on YouTube where it garnered four million views within two days of publication (Rhodes 2021). Gillette's attempt was to reposition itself following a new sensibility related to gender identity, which had mostly developed since 2017. In fact, it was on 15 October 2017 when in response to the Weinstein case accused of being a sexual harasser, actress Alyssa Milano asked through a tweet to write 'me too' if one had been a victim of sexual harassment (Pflum 2018).

The idea of the hashtag #MeToo, which actually dates back to 2006 when activist Tarana Burke used it to help young women, led to the *silence breakers* movement becoming the 'person of the year' according to Time (Zacharek et al. 2017). It is for these reasons that Gillette probably decided to align its brand with the cause. Although the ad was quite controversial, Gillette's operation was well thought out to make the brand of the millennial generation's dad (Coombe 2019). The strategy was to take a relevant space in a changing world, and to do this you had to get on one of the strongest trends and movements.

Gillette was thus one of the first examples where the traditional division between politics and economics, fundamental to democracy, began to crumble (Leshem 2016), so much so that Douglas Holt would call the brand an 'ideological parasite and proselytizer' (2006). The truth, however, is often far from the extremes and, in

conclusion, I think we can recognise the importance of a brand sharing the right message, as long as it does not use a social movement such as #MeToo opportunistically to get its brand known in the new generation (Rhodes 2021).

To sum up, woke capitalism, which is brand activism told from a critical point of view, experiences a coexistence and therefore a strong contradiction. Although it is desirable that companies take a stand and take action for the good of society, it is precisely in their action that the danger of democracy emerges. After decades in which corporations have benefited from neo-liberal economic policy, they have become stronger in terms of wealth and political power, while inequality has only increased. All this, while our industry still has a serious impact on the environment, compromising the future of generations. The problem is that, despite its good claims, woke capitalism does not propose solutions to these problems, but rather only produces statements and vague compensation figures in exchange for political power (Rhodes 2021).

Conclusions

I think that at the end of a thesis discussing the stance of brands it is natural to expect a biased conclusion from the writer. That may well be, but I am convinced that the main objective of this research was rather to map a recent phenomenon in a broad and inclusive way. We have here called it brand activism first and then woke capitalism, while still referring to the same practice of corporations, their CEOs and their brands to take a stand in socio-political issues, flaunting the failure of the state as legitimation. To sum up, I would like to propose my own reading of the phenomenon, recognising its tendency to react. The research shows how the two different points of view, brand activism and woke capitalism, share the fact that the strategies deployed by corporations are a reaction and not an action. Reaction because corporations respond, in a more or less credible and relevant way, to a cultural and social tension. Their behaviour is therefore a consequence of, and therefore a reaction to, a state of reality that they wish to address and improve. Whether the reason or purpose is more or less remote from the interest in profit or society, we cannot really quantify. Instead, we can honestly recognise the role in

society and democracy of business and politics and, in doing so, hope that this distance is maintained. Then the hope, as far as I am concerned, is that companies will also commit themselves socially, but only after having fulfilled their tax and welfare obligations—real and tangible—for their employees in terms of salary and job stability.

Conclusions

The topic of this thesis, Brand activism in the age of Woke Capitalism, was initially prompted by the question of the potential of writing and thus advertising in the service of brands, to generate a positive impact. A change to which, in recent years, has been given the name of brand activism. In particular, from this more personal question, the focus then shifted purely to the brand activism phenomenon in order to better understand the discourse around it. I, therefore, wanted to understand what impact this new brand posture was generating—answering the questions of what it is and what it produces—and if this impact was really positive, if not even required by society and, in particular, by consumers.

Apart from the book *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action* by Kotler and Sarkar, there are not many publications about it, since it is a rather recent phenomenon. What I could find were analyses of campaign executions related to this brand activist movement or, otherwise, accounts of brand actions or statements to support the thesis. The feeling, however, was that there was a lack of work mapping the relationship between brands and activism on the one hand, and between brands and woke capitalism on the other. The various discussions with the supervisor in an embryonic part of the thesis, therefore, allowed me to move beyond the question of the impact of brand activism, which is difficult to measure objectively and in part already proven by other research, to a more precise question. So, I asked myself whether the impact generated by brands was credible or, even more, where this commitment came from. And further on, I wondered if this phenomenon was complete or, instead, if it represented only a part of the narrative of a manifestation of corporatism in politics and society, which is affecting our time.

To find the answer to this question, research began. In particular, I felt it was necessary to understand when, how and why the brand had borrowed the term *activism* and, with it, its imagery of actions, identification and creation of a movement of participation. This work, in particular, was carried out in the first chapter where the influence, sometimes reciprocal, between brands and social activism was sought in the literature review. Thus, it emerged how the social and

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political part had started to interact with the more economic and branding part. In this analysis, *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* was fundamental to map the relationship and the mutual influence. In the book, not only is it understood that social movements are an organised form of activism, bringing the stance of an organisation closer to that of a company, but also that there is an evolution in the relationship between brands and people. Therefore, brands have started to borrow the way of involving people, of creating a widespread movement, in which the cause is also shared, directly from social movements.

Along with this fundamental passage, I recognised two others. Neo-corporatism shows how already after the Second World War there was a link and a possible influence between the political and economic sides. Moreover, this relationship is also recognisable in corporate private politics, thus in the private political actions that companies pursue in response to demands from activists, the state, institutions and regulations in general. Very often, then, corporate private politics includes measures taken by companies to prevent new regulations. Therefore, a question emerges here which will concern the phenomenon of brand activism later: is taking a political position a strategic choice or is it an ethical choice?

This mapping of social movements confirms that there is a connection of influence between politics and economics. It also shows how companies have intervened before, albeit in different contexts. The first chapter, then, explores the link between brands and social movements, parties that historically would seem and have been opposites. In particular, the deepening takes place in the second part of the first chapter with the analysis of Naomi Klein's work: *No Logo*. The anti-globalisation manifesto is fundamental because in it we can recognise the occurrence of a critical juncture that radically changes the economic and social scenario: the passage from product to brand. This shift was anticipated in the social sphere by Lyotard, who recognised the change from the era of the production of goods to that of the production of knowledge.

This shift, which had already taken place in the 1980s and was confirmed in the 1990s, found a definitive moment of transition in one particular event: the

presentation of Nike's tagline, and therefore of its new positioning, with 'Just Do It' in 1988. The term *purpose* was used in that presentation speech. This word, which has exploded in recent years, thus demonstrates its origins going back a few decades, precisely at a time when companies were beginning to expand their brands. And, not for nothing, the case of literature that produces this change is once again Nike. A bit like what we saw happen in 2018 when the *Dream Crazy* campaign officially started the brand activism phenomenon.

No Logo, moreover, makes us understand not only how the slogans and logos of the various brands become the best way to penetrate society and its culture in a new way, but also how this allows the brands themselves to enter the minds of people and their most human and social aspects. The brand, thus, goes beyond the story and the exaltation of the product's characteristics and enters that universe of values that characterises individual people, who then represent the consumers. This, however, as the title of Klein's book suggests, generates an equally strong and contrary reaction: the no-global and anti-capitalist movements. Here, it is interesting to see how the brands reacted: in turn with a counter-narrative constructed in exactly the same irreverent and sarcastic tone with which the activists hacked the brands. Nike, for example, went so far as to write the slogan 'I am not/a target market/I am an athlete', while Diesel launched Brand 0 and other irreverent campaigns demonstrating awareness of any criticism of brands. To anti-corporate activism, companies in those years expressed early examples of brand-based activism.

After understanding the influence of the political and social sphere with the economic and corporate sphere, I then brought out the influence of activism on corporate behaviour, as an effect of the shift from product to brand narrated by Naomi Klein. To get closer to the present day, it was then relevant to understand the origins of purpose and thus of corporate engagement as well as the reaction to no-global activists. Thus, the importance of the birth of Social Responsibility first and Corporate Social Responsibility later emerged, fundamental steps in the evolution of corporate responsibility. In particular, corporate responsibility itself already represented at that time an opportunity to differentiate from competitors and thus

gain a competitive advantage, as well as the action of giving back a company's commitment to society. Linked to these phenomena is Cause-Related Marketing, which proposes a more social issue relevant to the company and to which it can devote itself. Brand activism, on the other hand, takes a step further according to Kotler and Sarkar. That is, companies recognise the issues that already exist in society, therefore external, and decide to embrace the cause and integrate them as part of their business.

However, the arrival of brand activism is preceded by other events that give a preview of the tensions that are running through society and companies. Among these was the publication of the Cluetrain Manifesto in 1999, which recognised that the advent of the Internet offered an opportunity to change how companies operate in the marketplace and pursue their business. According to the 80th thesis of the Manifesto, in fact, companies can continue to pursue their profit, but as long as it is not the only thing that matters. Ogilvy's Big IdeaL, on the other hand, also tells us that what really enables companies to succeed is ideals, even more than ideas. It is important to ask the question 'would the world be a better place if' in order to redirect business decisions and thus communication. Linked to this is Paolo Iabichino's concept of Invertising, according to which advertising can be much more than a polluting agent generating instead a positive impact, participating in people's universe of values and society. These discourses, together with Sinek's why lead to the phenomenon of brand activism defined by Kotler and Sarkar in 2018.

Their book has become the reference for this phenomenon, even though it is sometimes advisory in nature, making it a manual for applying this action-oriented approach to different companies. In the book there are also many data in favor of this passage, but at times the justification for the phenomenon seems superficial and is recognized in the lack of institutions and trust in them. We must therefore ask ourselves whether ethics or interests are more important in driving this phenomenon, which, we repeat, companies justify by demonstrating its necessity for the common good. What is unconvincing, and what we do not find in the book, is the recognition that the values to which companies align themselves are instead being privatised, if not commoditised. The data that state it is young people who

demand the commitment of brands, therefore, become a real opportunity for legitimisation. And, in doing so, in addition to the void left by institutions, companies also leverage the inequality present in society.

The third chapter, finally, is crucial in problematising the supposed engagement of brands and tracing a more decisive direction to the thesis, thus allowing a position to be taken and the meaning of the title to be clarified once and for all. Brand activism, in fact, is only one narrative of a broader and more widespread phenomenon called woke capitalism. The era we are living in is thus a period of capitalism awakened in a critical and sarcastic sense, as recounted in the book *Woke Capitalism. How Corporate Morality Is Sabotaging Democracy* by Rhodes. The excellent work of this recently published book is essential to tell an evolution of the relationship between brand and civic or political engagement. It is also essential to show how the reasons that corporations use to legitimise their actions, such as inequality and polarisation, are actually the effects of unhealthy capitalism from the past. In fact, it is the policies of the second half of the 20th century that allowed brands to break free from regulations, to take production elsewhere, and to focus on branding and branding of culture and society.

In particular, it emerges that the period of neoliberalism initially promoted by Thatcher and Reagan allowed for widespread privatisation and orientation of companies towards shareholder value rather than value for society. Coming then to the present day, the progressive awakening of brands would also have been influenced by the political landscape of recent years, such as the election of Trump in the United States. This has led companies to take a progressive stance and oppose that administration. The whole narrative of the companies and brand activism itself is an expression of these years, which, although with deeper roots, has found in the Trump years the opportunity to manifest itself. And in this regard, politics has also been an opportunity for brand positioning and action in Italy, where Netflix painted the subway stop of Porta Venezia, a district famous for its spirit of sexual and gender equality, in the colours of the rainbow in response to the statements made by the then Minister of the Family.

The influence of politics on brands and of brands on the socio-political landscape is therefore considerable and reciprocal. It is possible to recognise the benefit that these campaigns would bring while recognising their strategic and profit-making importance for the companies themselves. The problem is for democracy, as Douthat pointed out in The New York Times when he first wrote about woke capitalism. Corporations insert themselves into politics and moralisation more to legitimise their privileged position. The temptation is therefore to privatise the most public values such as democracy. The need, instead, is to present itself as a purpose-driven and responsible business in order to strengthen its position in the market.

After analysing the development of the relationship and mutual influence between brands and activism, from social movements to the transition from product to brand and then to brand activism, it emerged how brand engagement is more or less directly part of a positioning strategy. Brand activism is therefore only one aspect of a broader and more complex phenomenon that needs to be problematised, namely woke capitalism. Moreover, this paper shows how companies are influencing society, selling social values in addition to their products and, thus, leading for instance to the commodification of climate, gender and inequality issues. It would be relevant to research how far companies' engagement with society could go, without falling into the dynamics of woke capitalism where the profit motive drives all actions.

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