Most academics you and I know are deeply suspicious about corporations and so-called corporate culture, above all when it intrudes on the university and academic life. And for good reason: we can all identify changes in procedures, in employment practices, in values, in the very language and tone that speaks from the core of our own universities that reflect the influence of for-profit managerialism and its “philosophy.” The labor practices of the modern university and its attitude toward intellectual property are especially pernicious, since they undermine faculty autonomy and authority over policies pertaining to teaching, to research, and to the evaluation of these activities—they undermine the very competence, creative, free judgment, precisely the faculties that the university claims to cultivate in its students and one of its primary reasons for being. And yet we may also, at times, find ourselves admitting that not all of the changes we see around us are bad ones; individually considered, they are in fact often undertaken with the explicit and sincere aim of preserving the university as a distinctive kind of institution, one that is held together by ideas and values that are antithetical to much of what we associate with “corporate” life, at least in its for-profit, commercial form.

These contradictions, if I can use a somewhat grandiose term with a long history, are especially evident in evidence at my own university, where faculty and graduate students are represented by an active and vigilant Union and where higher level administrators (not to mention the Board of Governors) rarely have a background in the Humanities; indeed, their careers have often unfolded in professional schools rather than in the division of Arts and Sciences, the traditional core of university instruction and research (not to mention admission and tuition). Nevertheless, on the occasions when I attend organized protests by my Union (for which I am deeply appreciative), I sometimes find myself caught up short by a chant that one hears across campuses—"We believe in education, not to mention admission and tuition." In a recent book, I explored the premise of the "political" community and its "philosophy." The labor practices of the modern university and its attitude toward intellectual property are especially pernicious, since they undermine faculty autonomy and authority over policies pertaining to teaching, to research, and to the evaluation of these activities that were best pursued, or which could only be pursued, in a collective fashion—one sees immediately how the very essence of "political" community implies a corporate idea, and vice versa.

In light of this definition, we may see that for-profit, commercial corporations are simply the latest species of a genus that has existed for some fifteen centuries and that has included (and still includes) churches, kingdoms, towns and cities, representative political bodies (Parliament was understood to be a corporation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), guilds, and, today, unions and many other types of groups. Indeed, for-profit, commercial corporations have crowded out the range of purposes that once more closely resemble corporate groups in our political imagination, including groups organized for purposes we would recognize as public rather than private. In the process, they have distorted and narrowed our understanding of what corporations have been and of what they could be—they have circumscribed the imaginative and political possibilities of a corporate idea. We suffer, in short, from a corporate monoculture; the for-profit company has occupied the definition of the corporation, as it were, which must now be re-occupied and re-personated. In order to do so, we need a clearer grasp of what a corporation really is, and how it works—we need, as Aristotle declares in a remarkable moment of the Politics, a set of hypotheses for imagining a possible political form.

First Hypothesis: A corporation is uncanny, for it is a group person.

The corporation’s peculiar nature derives from the combination of several characteristics, for if a corporation is a collective entity organized for the pursuit of an activity that can only be pursued collectively, it is also true that as a collective entity, the corporation has an identity that is distinct from that of its members—to adapt a popular mathematical phrase, the corporation has an n+1 structure. In brief, the corporation is a plurality taking a singular form. But from what does this peculiar identity of the corporation as a group person derive? What sustains it?

Second Hypothesis: The problem of corporate “personhood” and corporate speech can never be understood exclusively in terms of its legal definition or measured by legal precedent: it must be understood as problems of formal representation and of mediation. Despite having the status of a legal person—a status that is very long-standing, as the history of the universitas shows—the corporation’s identity can never be sufficiently explained with reference to its legal status, its legal foundation, or its legal recognition. In principle corporate “speech” may take any form: all mediated expressions, all advertisements, all products and commodities that originate in any given corporate body constitute its speech, both to others and to its own members. This is simply to state in another idiom the familiar idea that the corporation is performative in its ontology. Its speech is not simply its charter, its official public statements, or its internal documents (memos, emails, rules), although these are obviously integral to the corporation’s self-articulation. The corporation speaks in the many signs that it places into public circulation as solicitations for our attention and involvement. The strange combination of the ontological quotient, if you like, of a corporate group—results from a precise combination of several factors:

1. the number of declarations of group value and group identity that circulate internally and by which members recognize their membership or are invited to affiliate;
2. the number of declarations of group value and group identity that circulate publicly and by which members recognize their membership or are invited to affiliate;
3. the magnitude or intensity of this public declaration: the “mark” or memory it leaves on members or on public consciousness;
4. the duration of group identity in time—the longer any one entity endures as a group, the more corporate it may be said to be.

It would in principle be possible to measure empirically several of these factors, and one may imagine them in different combinations: a group of high public visibility that continually advertises itself; a group of low public visibility that persists through intensive activity and communication among its members; a group of limited duration that makes an extraordinary impact. This last category is perhaps the most interesting, because it is the least familiar; as an illustration we may take the example—controversial no doubt—of Occupy Wall Street, which in my view is a magnificent example of a corporate form, or of how the corporate form might be re-thought and re-enacted (even if this re-description is something many of its members would resist). “Occupy!” is an anti-brand, a cry of anti-corporate corporate speech. And if we have trouble recognizing the corporate nature of Occupy!—if we find the very idea sinister or suspicious—this is only because our understanding of corporations has been so distorted by the for-profit form and by public debates over the legal personhood of corporations, debates that tend to reduce corporations to legal creatures and that sap the power of the collective idea in the process.

Whatever its specific content, corporate speech always answers a prior, and implicit, ontological question: why and in what way does the corporation exist? All corporations exist to answer the need for an articulation; they speak to affirm their identity, and their speech is, at one level, nothing more (and nothing less) than the declaration of their existence. The more complex this declaration becomes, and the more explicit it becomes—which also means the more public it becomes, and with it the articulation of its response—so also the more political the definition of the corporation becomes, as is happening today. For the “political” always concerns a judgment about existence: who or what can exist, what is the mode of this existence, how may this existence be granted or recognized? In the case of Occupy!, the articulation eventually becomes more than a statement of specific demand or a call for specific reform; it becomes a declaration of purpose, which is the sheer fact that an alternative exists and should exist. It is the assertion of a persistence, a corporate ontology born of stubbornness and a refusal to be ignored.

Electronic book review (ebr) itself provides an excellent example of the genesis of an emerging alternative corporate type. First published by the Alt-X digital network launched as a non-profit by Mark Amerika, ebr then affiliated with ABR, founded by Ron Sukenick, with ABR serving as a
recent publicly available repository of scholarly publications. However, this project, like the Humanities Commons project is only for scholars in the Humanities. While I applaud these initiatives, both of which are “related” to ongoing Scholarly Commons projects at CUNY, where I am affiliated, I continue to believe that all of these initiatives need to be combined with university projects into a consortium model. The centralization of Academia.edu and its ease of use is unparalleled compared to any other scholarly repository that I have accessed. That said, I advise academics who have decided to continue using Academia.edu to post LINKS ONLY to that web site and upload their intellectual property to repositories hosted by universities.

In her 2015 Chronicle of Higher Education article, Ellen Weixel documents some of Price’s further thoughts on issues of definition, quoting him as saying “`Monetize’ is not a for-profit word.”

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kind of print-precursor to *ebt*, in a different media-form. As an institutionalized platform formed with the purpose of publishing the work of writers for other writers, *ABR* was self-consciously designed to correspond to the *corporate body*, and in the wake of its activity. For its disposition always implies an organization and arrangement, an embrace of ideas that might motivate collective action.

The question is one of recognition: do you participate with knowledge of your participation, or do you participate in such groups in some way, including ebr—arrangement of elements, a perpetual motion-process. An embracing of ideas that might motivate collective action, into a nudge, a stickiness or entanglement, at best only neighborliness: that antagonism has softened considerably. May be no opposition among corporate forms, in the sense that the corporate group takes its shape from an invention of ideas that might motivate collective action.

The problems of scale and modes of relation that constitute corporate groups derive from the essentially pluralist ontology of the corporation, which permits the discovery of heretofore unrecognized organizing principles and purposes, and thus also for new affiliations—or, if one prefers, for new disruptions. The disruptive potential of the pluralist analysis of corporations is important to the political imagination, as both Plato and Aristotle recognized. Nor will the composition of the universitas ever be merely: it will have an ideational component and will require a “theory.” And its compositional process implies both a more and a less. It will require more than spontaneous action, more than protest, more than networks, which are never durable enough and which must be thickened in many different ways; they require the codification of procedures, the invention of new structures for communication and action, and the formation of archives that may serve as repositories for a collective “memory” of actions and utterances. To re-occupy the corporation, in short, implies an embrace of institutions, both in theory and in practice, an implication that is antithetical to some notions of politics. But at the same time these institutionalized forms must be less than the large-scale institutional categories that often populate political discourse and political theory. They will be smaller, more subtle, more flexible than “State” or “nation” or “people” or “society.” The corporation is the meso-layer of institution situated between the one and the many: it is the form of the more-than-one when the more-than-one wears the mask of the person and begins to speak and act for itself.

Some of us are doing this now: you are in fact doing this now, insofar as you participate in groups that may be described according to the definition offered above—and there is no one who does not participate in such groups in some way, including ebr. The question is one of recognition: do you participate with knowledge of your participation, or not? Are you participating deliberately?

Would you like to do so? www.artsofcorporation.org.