

The Language of New Community¹

“Language is the dress of thought,” said Samuel Johnson 200 years ago. The way we talk colors the way we think, and the way we think shapes the way we act. We are the unconscious prisoners of our language. While most of the time this constraint matters little, at times of momentous change in culture or society, when things are unstable, and inwardly disposed to change, it is madness to maintain the fossilized permanence of language and the status quo of social institutions, when our use of old words and old institutional structures to describe new things can hide the emerging future from our eyes.

The old language of corporate property and ownership, is now supported by the constitutional right of free speech.² However, this is not broad speech open to all, but the narrow speech of “big money” granted dangerously high priority for exercise of power in election campaigns, without community wisdom, to bolsters **investor driven politics!**³ This is speech of the same elite social class that plundered the global economy in the financial disaster of 2008,⁴ guided by their self-destructive philosophy of greed with the goals of **disaster capitalism!**⁵ This moral insensitivity was at the root of the US Supreme Court decision to limit corporate political speech, to prevent corruption and its appearance, in a 2003 Court decision,⁶ that was overturned,⁷ in Jan 2010, after Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justice O'Connor left the Court, and were replaced by the two new Court plutocrats, Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Alito.⁸

- 1 This essay was adapted by Lovers of Democracy from “**The Citizen Corporation**” by Charles Handy, from [Therapeutic philosophy for the individual and the state](#) the HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW, September-October 1997, pages 17-28; see also by Andreas Sofroniou (1999). Fair use is claimed for purposes of non-profit education, criticism, and news reporting, as provided by 17 U.S.C.A. § 106(1).
- 2 Cf. [CITIZENS UNITED v. FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION](#), No. 08–205. slip op. (U.S., January 21, 2010) 558 U. S. ____ (2010) .
- 3 T. Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Political Systems* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 4 *The New York Times* Columnist Thomas L. Friedman provided an inventory of all the people who were in on the 2008 financial meltdown, “**All Fall Down**” (Nov. 25, 2008). This included “the total unabashed complicity of the upper class of American capitalism .. a near total breakdown of responsibility.”
- 5 N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2008).
- 6 [McCConnell v. Federal Election Commission](#), 540 U.S. 93, 129-130, 224 (2003).
- 7 [Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](#), *supra*, note 2.
- 8 They were nominated by President George W. Bush, who was ranked as “**Worst. President. Ever**” in a poll of 109 Historians, in 2008, by George Mason University's History News Network.

The old language of corporate property and ownership no longer describes what a company and corporate structures really are or the “modes of association,”⁹ that the paramount human needs and interests in the Age of Internet require. The old language suggests the wrong priorities, leads to inappropriate policies, and screens out the creation of new imaginative possibilities.¹⁰ The idea of a corporation as the property of the current holders of its shares is confusing because it does not make clear where power lies. As such, the notion is an affront to natural justice because it gives inadequate recognition to the interests of the people served by and people who work in and for corporations who are, increasingly, its principle assets. To talk of owning other people, as shareholders implicitly do, might even be considered immoral. Moreover, the language of property and ownership is an insult to democracy. One of the great paradoxes of our time is that it is totalitarian, centrally planned organizations, owned by outsiders, that are providing the material wherewithal of the great democracies. Free people do not relish being instruments of others, The best of them will, increasingly, either refuse to join such institutions or demand a high price for the sacrifice of their rights.

We need a new language to release our thinking, and I suggest that it be the language of polity. A public corporation should now be regarded not as a piece of property but as a community – although a community created by common purpose rather than by common place. No one owns a community.

Communities, as democracies know them, have constitutions that recognize the rights of their different constituencies and that lay down the methods of governance. The core members of communities are more properly regard as citizens rather than employees or “human resources” citizens with responsibilities as well as rights. Even where organizational entities such as the Internet have already taken on new forms – which may be models for the future – we lack the language to describe them. No one “owns” the Internet. It is a self-organized community of common purpose, which serves its constituencies and is supported by them. This is changing,¹¹ but is still spoken of as if it were a licensed, self-appointed oligopoly, dominated, in the Anglo-Saxon world, by the pursuit of profit and stock market pressures. Yet the research on long-lasting and successful organizations (see “The Living Company,” by Arie

9 M.P. Follett, **The New State**, ch. XVII "Democracy Not the Majority: Our Political Fallacy" 142, 147 (1918).

10 Pertinent excerpts on “Futures Creation” from Part 3, H. Ozbekhan, “Toward A General Theory of Planning,” in PERSPECTIVES OF PLANNING 47-155 (OEDC Report, Jantsch ed. 1968); *explained in* A.N. Christakis, A New Policy Science Paradigm, FUTURES, Dec 1973; *applied in* Ozbekhan, The Future of Paris, in ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON, PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS SERIES A, at 287, 523 (1977)

11 See e.g., Elinor Ostrom, on citizen governance of the community commons, the subject of the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences! [reported, in [yes!](#); also in [CNN.com/europe](#), and [Forbes.com](#)].

de Geus, HBR, March-April 1997) suggests that what enables a corporation to succeed in the long term is a wish for immortality, or at least a long life, a consistent set of values based on an awareness of the organization's own identity; a willingness to change, and a passionate concern for developing the capacity and self-confidence of its core inhabitants, whom the company values more than its physical assets. I suggest those conditions are best met when organizations live up to the literal meaning of the word company – “the sharing of bread” – and regard themselves as communities, not property.

What difference would it make if we were to regard corporations as communities, with a self-governing community commons, as sovereign states within states? The key difference is that a community is something to which one belongs, while it, in turn belongs to no one. This inversion of the property concept has implications for the way in which the community is governed. It requires a clearer definition of the bond between individual and organization – something that could be called the *citizens' social contract* – as well as of the relationship with the other stakeholders, particularly the providers of capital, who must receive their due rewards. Last, the culture and purpose of the community have to pervade the organization.

In time, a new theory of the corporation will develop. Profits are the lifeblood of any business, but life consists of more than keeping the blood flowing, otherwise, it would not be worth living. As more corporations realize this truth, they will become increasingly interested in enriching the lives of the people who work for and who are served by the corporation. First, however, we need a new language to explain this new theory – a language of community and citizenship, not of property. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “Words enable deeds.”

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Cornelia P. Atchley, artist,
Portrait of Vigdor in blue 2001
