

[WHEN GIRL MEETS OIL]

THE
EVOLUTION
OF A
CORPORATE
IDEALIST



“...goes beyond
recounting Bader’s ups and
downs in a decade at BP to offer
deep insight into the central
importance of morality in any job,
company, or life.” —DAN ESTY
Hillhouse Professor, Yale University;
author, *Green to Gold*

CHRISTINE BADER

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*A good business should be both competitively successful
and a force for good.*

—BP, “What We Stand For,”
Statement of Business Policies, 2002

*There is a great deal of difference in believing something still,
and believing it again.*

—W.H. Auden

Prologue

NEW HAVEN: GIRL MEETS OIL

Big Oil and I got together in the summer of 1999. It all started a few months earlier, in a packed lecture hall in New Haven, Connecticut.

John Browne, chief executive of what was then British Petroleum, came to deliver a speech about his ambitious plans to reduce the company's greenhouse gas emissions. He had recently broken ranks with his oil titan peers to become the first head of a major energy company to acknowledge the reality of climate change and urge action.

I was a first-year MBA student at Yale, wondering whether I would find inspiration in the private sector after years of working in government and nonprofits and observing the power of business from the outside.

After college I did a year of community service with City Year, the AmeriCorps program, and got to know the corporate sponsors who donated money and goods and sent employees out to mentor and serve with us. I was a Teaching Fellow in Community Service at Phillips Academy Andover, organizing

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students from the well-endowed prep school to work with residents of Lawrence, a bustling textile producer in the late 1800s that had become one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts. I worked in the New York City Mayor's Office, where companies were wooed for their jobs and tax revenues.

It dawned on me that while many companies were making positive contributions to society, some of them were simultaneously creating the conditions that necessitated their largesse. The poor neighborhoods I worked in had been devastated by the loss of industry, with their pain then compounded as the tax base dwindled and school quality declined. In some cases, business's negative impacts were much more direct: companies polluted, or lobbied to replace a public garden with a parking lot, or failed to hire anyone from the community they had moved into.

The influence of business intrigued me. Who are these company executives? How and why do they get to decide whether a community thrives or falters?

I had ignored the corporate recruiters on my college campus. My parents both worked "in business," but growing up I had no idea what that meant. Every morning I saw my dad don his suit and my mom wiggle into her nude pantyhose, and both of them leave for the overcrowded New York City subway. After my sister and I had dinner with our babysitter, they would come home exhausted, and I had little understanding of what had happened in the interim.

But as a young adult, I was starting to see the power of the corporate world. I wasn't sure if I wanted any of that power for myself—I thought it might repulse me—but I wanted to see it up close.

I made my way to business school, but without a clear idea of where I would go next. My classmates started throwing their

résumés in for investment banking and consulting interviews as soon as we got to campus, but I hoped that something more inspiring would come along.

Then, on that autumn morning, John Browne appeared. “Companies are not separate from the societies in which they work,” he said. “We don’t make our profits and then go and live somewhere else. This is our society too. The people who work for us are also citizens. They have hopes and fears for themselves and for their families. Companies which want to keep operating successfully on a long-term basis can’t isolate themselves from society.”

Ten years later this would be standard CEO prose, but at the time Browne’s lofty rhetoric was catnip to me. I landed an internship in BP’s executive office in London, excited to be there for a few months but unsure whether it would prove anything more than a summer fling.

I was at first pleasantly surprised, then seduced by what I found: a group of clean-cut, well-dressed men (and a few women) who oozed that lovely dry British wit, and who had worked all over the world in different jobs, from hands-on operational roles to finance to government affairs. Most importantly to me, they seemed to be in constant conversation about the company’s role in society, whether fighting climate change or supporting the communities where it had operations. I cared about social justice but had no idea people in the private sector did too, and was entranced to hear corporate executives talk this way. I felt like an American exchange student hearing Italian for the first time.

I fell in love with that BP. And BP loved me back, giving me the opportunity to live in Indonesia, working on the social issues around a remote gas field; then China, ensuring worker

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and community safety for a chemicals joint venture; then in the United Kingdom again, collaborating with colleagues around the world to better understand and support human rights.

BP was paying me to help the people living around its projects, because that in turn would help its business. I was living the cliché of doing well and doing good, and I was completely smitten. My beloved company even let me create a *pro bono* project advising a United Nations initiative to clarify business's responsibilities for human rights, aimed at creating international policy to help even more people.

Then Big Oil broke my heart.

I should have seen it coming. During what would turn out to be the last few years of Browne's tenure as chief executive, BP had a number of terrible accidents, and Browne eventually resigned under a cloud of scandal. Tony Hayward, head of the exploration and production division, took over, deemphasized the progressive stances that Browne had staked out on human rights and renewable energy, and pledged to focus "like a laser on safe and reliable operations"—a commitment that would be betrayed in spectacular fashion. I left BP to work on the U.N. project full-time, but attributed the breakup more to what I was pursuing than what I was leaving: it's not you, it's me.

Then came the Deepwater Horizon explosion and the BP that emerged in the aftermath. My former employer was portrayed not as kind and caring but manipulative and murderous, more Macbeth than Romeo. To believe some of the news and commentary would be to believe that it wasn't all Hayward's fault, that the bad BP had been there all along, hiding in plain sight. The Deepwater Horizon explosion didn't undo the good work I had done in Asia and elsewhere, but I no longer knew what to believe. Had my nine-year relationship with BP been a sham?

I looked for love elsewhere. The U.N. work was good for a while, but the politics and the abstraction didn't suit me. The activists I saw in action struck me as passionate but impractical and relentlessly negative, focusing on what was wrong and what couldn't be, whereas I wanted to imagine what was possible and make it happen.

The more I flirted with others, the more I felt myself drawn back to business. I found the people in multinational corporations idealistic but pragmatic, earnest but self-deprecating, appreciative of the resources but wrestling with the responsibilities. In other words, they were just like me.

And their companies were as flawed and complex as BP, advancing human rights in some ways while compromising them in others. The companies struggling with accelerating globalization, technology, and their evolving role in the world were not just in the industries whose problems have become well-known, namely extractives, for the environmental and social damage where they pull up resources; and footwear and apparel for sweatshops. Joining the debate were Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo! for involvement in censorship or surveillance; Apple, for sourcing from factories with poor working conditions; and banks, for funding harmful infrastructure projects and undermining the global economy.

Of course, business causing harm isn't new. Slavery was the engine of the U.S. cotton trade until the Civil War. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911 killed 146 garment workers in New York City. Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle* detailed exploitation in the American meatpacking industry.

The same conditions exist today, at home and abroad. The International Labour Organization estimated in 2008 that annual profits generated from human trafficking are as high as \$32 billion. A 2005 Human Rights Watch report called *Blood*,

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Sweat, and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants might as well have been written by Sinclair. In 2013, 1,129 garment workers died when the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Bangladesh.

These problems persist despite the growth of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability, disciplines for which there are now degrees, conferences, magazines, and hashtags. The social responsibility of companies and executives is mentioned in academic literature in the 1930s and '40s. But the concept did not enter the mainstream until the late 1990s, when Nike faced pressure to take greater responsibility for its Asian suppliers' labor practices and Shell was accused of complicity in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had been protesting Shell's activities in the Niger Delta.

In 2012, more than half of the companies in the Fortune 500 published CSR or sustainability reports, and many have chief sustainability officers, CSR departments, or some version thereof. Many companies have long had philanthropic foundations, but this new iteration of corporate citizenship is closer to core operations, focusing on how the business earns its money rather than just how to give it away.

I realized that I am part of a global army of people fighting for better social and environmental practices inside multinational companies—with mixed success. I started to see every corporate disaster in the headlines differently. Instead of being mad at a monolithic, faceless corporation, I wondered about the people who were deep in the company, out of public view, pushing for policies and procedures that might have prevented the disaster from occurring. Why did they fail? How did they feel? And who are they—we—anyway?

We are Corporate Idealists. We're in Asia's factory zones, working with local managers to make sure employees are paid

and treated properly. We're in Africa, sitting on dirt floors with village elders to protect indigenous traditions amidst an influx of foreign oil workers. We're in Silicon Valley, collaborating with product developers to better protect user privacy. We're in London and New York, convincing our directors that protecting people and the planet is good for business.

We believe that business can be a force for good, even as we struggle with our own contradictions: we don't join antiglobalization protests, but agree with some of their calls for reform. We're disgusted by excessive CEO compensation, but aspire to do better for ourselves and our families. We push our companies to offer sustainable products, but balk at organic prices when doing our own shopping. We defend our companies to investors and campaigners, but insist to our colleagues that we're not doing enough.

We are trying to prevent the next Deepwater Horizon explosion and the next Rana Plaza collapse, playing defense while also moving toward a vision of a better future. Sometimes, obviously, we fail.

We have experienced heartache and disillusionment. But we also know that big business can make the world a better place, and feel compelled to do all we can to make that happen.

Are we delusional or realistic? Are we changing the way that business is done or tinkering at the margins? Terrified of the risks or excited by the opportunities? Is our love of big business justified or misguided?

Yes. This is our story.



This book recounts my time working with BP in Indonesia, China, and the United Kingdom, then with the United Nations secretary-general's special representative on business and human

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rights. Along the way I weave in stories and reflections from some of the Corporate Idealists I've gotten to know over the years to show that while my story may be unique in its details, it is not in its themes.

I have reconstructed conversations and events based on my correspondence, documents, research, and memory. I have tried in good faith to check my facts and test my recollections with others, but recognize that memories are fallible and histories subjective. I am grateful to all of the friends, peers, and former colleagues who have been so generous with their time and thoughts, and take responsibility for any errors, misrepresentations, or oversights.