

Toward a Polycentric Perspective on the Business Corporation

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Drawing on Elinor Ostrom's work on natural resource management, Simon Deakin argues that the business corporation can be understood as a commons, namely as a resource which is collectively held and managed for the benefit of multiple interests. This is an important insight, but Deakin's discussion lacks precision regarding the kinds of shared resources that corporations consist of and manage, and has little to say about how competing governance norms emerge, are contested or become accepted. We show that extensions of the Ostromian research program to information, knowledge, and institutional infrastructure can enhance our understanding of corporate resources, and argue that corporate governance can be usefully seen as a polycentric system: it involves competitive and cooperative relationships among relatively autonomous stakeholders, whose heterogeneous valuations must be mutually adjusted in various nested action arenas; it further involves competitive and cooperative relationships among external regulators and norm-setters with partially overlapping jurisdictions, operating at different levels.

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