



Using Versus Excusing: The Hudson's Bay Company's Long-Term Engagement with Its (Problematic) Past

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Abstract

Increased scrutiny of corporate legitimacy has sparked an interest in “historic corporate social responsibility”, or the mechanism through which firms take responsibility for past misdeeds. Extant theory on historic CSR implicitly treats corporate engagement with historical criticism as intentional and dichotomous, with firms choosing either a limited or a high engagement strategy. However, this conceptualization is puzzling because a firm’s engagement with historic claims involves organizational practices that managers don’t necessarily control; hence, it might materialize differently than anticipated. Furthermore, multiple motivations could jointly affect managers’ approach to organizational history, especially when dealing with conflicting stakeholder demands, rendering it difficult to historicize consistently. Examining the relationship between the legitimacy of critical historic claims, corporate engagement with these claims and corporate legitimacy, the present paper performs a historical case study of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s (HBC) long term use of history in stakeholder relations. The data suggest that under conflicting internal and external pressures, the HBC’s engagement with historical criticism became “sedimented” over time, involving both open and stakeholder-inclusive practices of “history-as-sensemaking” and instrumental “history-as-rhetoric”. Enriching understanding of corporate-stakeholder interaction about the past, this finding may stimulate its generation of social value and corporate legitimacy.

Keywords Historic corporate social responsibility · Legitimacy · Corporate engagement · Sedimentation · Settler colonialism · Indigenous peoples · Hudson’s Bay Company

As many of today’s environmental and social problems manifest themselves as negative side-effects of business activities, the legitimacy of (global) business has come under increased scrutiny (Scherer et al. 2013; Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2015). As part of this development, the viewpoint that the traditional division of responsibilities between the political and economic spheres of society is no longer apt (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo 2007) has gained prominence (Stutz 2018). In what has been labeled the “politico-ethical perspective” on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Heikurinen and Mäkinen 2018), scholars recommend that corporations take on responsibilities for the wider social good

(Matten and Moon 2008) and work with civil society actors to resolve social and environmental problems in free deliberative spaces (Néron 2010). The stretch of firms’ responsibilities beyond their traditional boundaries also involves retrospective judgments of past corporate practices, which take place within a growing effort across societies to come to terms with dark episodes (Janssen 2013).

Extending the politico-ethical approach to CSR and subscribing to the idea that firms bear moral responsibility for past actions, Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016) theorize “historic CSR”, which refers to the mechanism through which corporations engage with critiques of their past and thereby influence their legitimacy in the present. When a problematization of a firm’s past generates a broader public discourse and thus achieves legitimacy, it may provoke a public reevaluation of that firm’s “right to exist” and thus threaten that firm’s legitimacy. Faced with this threat, firms can choose between either a limited or a high engagement strategy. The former typically involves low transparency and consists of ignoring or contesting the

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critical historical narrative, while the latter is marked by high transparency of historical records and a good-faith discussion between the firm and its critics. The authors argue that high corporate engagement generally increases corporate legitimacy, while a confrontational or defensive response has moderate to negative effects, depending on the legitimacy of the historical claim.

However, Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of corporate engagement with critical historical claims has two puzzling features. First, it assumes managerial intentionality, but Hatch and Schultz (2017) demonstrate that corporate historicizing is driven by micro-level activities that prevent managers from fully controlling this process. That is, they need to organizationally embed their preferred historical narrative, establishing its authenticity and showing its present and future relevance. Second, it defines two distinct levels of corporate engagement, but organizational historicizing might be a convoluted process driven jointly by different motivations, especially when stakeholders pose conflicting demands upon the firm (Fu et al. 2018). Apart from making sense of the firm's identity and role in society (Weick 2001), which is integral to resolving critical historical claims (Stutz 2018), organizational historicizing might be used rhetorically to give sense to stakeholders by promoting a positive image of the firm (Suddaby et al. 2010; Anteby and Molnár 2012). "History-as-rhetoric" (Suddaby and Foster 2017) may include "forgetting work", which aims to weaken collective memory of a corporate irresponsibility (Mena et al. 2016). As social discursive practices, sensemaking and sensegiving connect firms and their different stakeholders in a complementary and reciprocal fashion (Rouleau 2005), which may generate paradoxical corporate engagement trajectories that involve both the "open" search for meaning and the "instrumental" communication of historical narratives (Suddaby and Foster 2017), and that can benefit corporate legitimacy in complex stakeholder environments.

More clarity regarding the validity of Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) assumptions can be achieved through longitudinal examination. Corporate engagement is not a one-off event: apart from forgetting work (Mena et al. 2016), shifts in background ideologies might affect the perceived social responsibilities of firms (Djelic and Etchanchu 2017). The legitimacy of historical claims may thus fluctuate and even become ambiguous if important stakeholders disagree (Fu et al. 2018). Extrapolating Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) theory, one would expect that with each decline or increase in historic claim legitimacy a firm needs to decide between limited or high engagement. As such, it would build up a set of engagement choices, remaining at either a limited or a high level of engagement, or alternating between the two levels. However, if engaging with a historical problematization is less intentional and dichotomous than currently theorized, there might exist a variety of corporate engagement

trajectories, especially on longer time scales, that is yet to be theorized.

Addressing this research gap, the present paper tackles the following question: *How are historic claim legitimacy, corporate engagement and corporate legitimacy related across time?* This question is important, because better understanding how varieties of long-term corporate engagement with historical criticism affect corporate legitimacy may allow firms to become more responsible in meeting stakeholder expectations and thus improve their legitimacy (Kim 2019). Moreover, the long-term demonstration of adequate levels of responsibility for the past likely generates more social value (O'Riordan and Fairbrass 2008). The research context is the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which has used its history in stakeholder relations for almost 120 years and has dealt with criticism of its historical mistreatment of Canada's Indigenous peoples since the 1970s. Our research took place against the backdrop of the damning 2015 report by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which documents the "cultural genocide" (p. 3) by major Canadian institutions and which mentions the HBC no less than 34 times. In the remainder of this paper, we will first review the literature on historic CSR, focusing on patterns of corporate engagement with historical criticism. Then, after detailing our data sources and research methods, we will present our longitudinal case study of the HBC. We will subsequently elaborate our main argument, namely that claim legitimacy and corporate engagement be conceptualized as continuous variables in order to accommodate fragmented stakeholder environments and sedimented corporate engagement with history. We will conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications and limitations.

Historic CSR: Underpinnings

CSR can be defined as a firm's voluntary fulfilling of ethical and philanthropic responsibilities toward internal and external stakeholders beyond the traditional economic and legal ones (Spiller 2000). Heikkurinen and Mäkinen (2018) identify three competing perspectives on CSR. First, the economic perspective is rooted in a classical-liberal conception of society, which features a strict boundary between the public and private spheres, and considers firms to be economic actors that engage in CSR primarily to boost their performance (e.g., De Bakker et al. 2005). Second, the critical perspective draws on postcolonial theory and is skeptical that firms can voluntarily act responsibly (Hanlon and Fleming 2009), viewing CSR as an extension of corporate influence. Third, the politico-ethical perspective, advocated by business ethicists (Scherer and Palazzo 2007), challenges the distinction between the public and private spheres in society and treats questions of business and ethics as inseparable.

It theorizes that CSR advances social causes and thus helps firms build their legitimacy, or their “right to exist” in the eyes of stakeholders (Metzler 2001).

The politico-ethical perspective has gained prominence in recent years with the growing interest in the political actions and responsibilities of corporations (Scherer et al. 2013). This development is related to the globalization of business, which has rendered accepted standards of behavior more ambiguous. As a result, corporations have become more powerful relative to nation-states and are progressively well-positioned to address public issues (Mena and Palazzo 2012). However, the increasing power of corporations has also provoked scrutiny of the legitimacy of business activities (e.g., Crane et al. 2014). The increasing difficulty that corporations have in maintaining their legitimacy in the global arena (Kobrin 2009) has increased the need for a broad examination of their social and environmental responsibilities (Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2015).

With the emergence of the politico-ethical perspective on CSR, critics have also started to expand the range of actions for which they hold firms accountable (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). Corporate responsibility increasingly covers not only the entire value chain (Koepfel 2007), but also past decisions and behavior. Contestations of corporate histories and representations thereof are becoming more common, which may force firms to account for the past (Guldi and Armitage 2014; Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). These criticisms are rooted in the assumption that firms are “intergenerational moral actors”, which in turn reflects the belief that firms are going concerns embodied by successive generations of actors. Intergenerational moral agency implies that firms have moral obligations in the present toward present, past and future generations of stakeholders. With these obligations, claims about a dark past may incite negative moral evaluation of the firm in the present (Suchman 1995). Firms can influence their legitimacy by reacting to criticism: generally, they are likely to receive positive moral (r)evaluations for a responsible approach to historical criticisms (Scherer et al. 2013).

The tightening connection between firm history and CSR has instigated an interdisciplinary research endeavor that brings together business historians and CSR scholars (Stutz 2018). One of their foci is the way in which firms take responsibility for the past. Early discussions on this subject were rather conceptual. Most prominently, Booth et al. (2007) examine how three historiographical perspectives affect the potential for firms to take historical responsibility. The first, history as integration, treats history as unified and offers limited room for firms to contest historical criticism. The second, history as differentiation, holds that contemporary conflicts may produce competing historical narratives, which allows firms to debate certain historical claims. Third, history as fragmentation, emphasizes the

multiplicity of possible historical narratives and embraces a highly relativist view of history. This perspective is not conducive to corporate responsibility for the past, because every critical narrative can be treated as a mere interpretation of source material. More recent work has explored how firms’ addressing of dark histories improves corporate legitimacy. For example, Janssen (2013) introduces the concept of Corporate Historical Responsibility, which theorizes that collectively reflecting about the bearing of the past on the present and building constructive partnerships with victims of past injustices improves corporate legitimacy through social value, corporate citizenship and legitimation.

Historic CSR: Theorization

A more comprehensive theorization of firms’ engagement with historical criticism and its effects on corporate legitimacy is offered by Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016), who develop the notion of “historic CSR”. Historic CSR begins with the emergence of a critical narrative of a firm’s past. Historical narratives are inherently open to contestation, because the practice of history is influenced by one’s analytical perspective, source material, values or beliefs (Booth et al. 2007). A problematization of a firm’s past transcends academic discourse when various civil society institutions connect with it, integrating their respective agendas in the process (Guldi and Armitage 2014). Once a critical historical claim attracts broad public attention it becomes “legitimate” and will likely provoke a historical narrative contest. Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016) identify six “elements” (p. 706) that may (together) drive claim legitimacy: (1) past institutional pressure, which may have limited the firm’s decision-making freedom; (2) the knowledge available to past actors, which they could have used to morally evaluate their behavior; (3) the magnitude and durability of harm; (4) the receptivity to historical criticism within the current context, which may vary with ideological shifts; (5) the history and reputation of the narrative contestants (i.e., the targeted firm and its critics), and (6) the plausibility of the narrated historical facts. The authors note that claim legitimacy is an “all things considered” phenomenon (p. 706), i.e., each element’s effect on claim legitimacy cannot be determined a priori and varies across narratives and contexts.

Historic CSR theory anticipates two possible corporate responses to legitimate historic claims: “limited” and “high” engagement. Limited engagement involves ignoring or rejecting a claim, which may include the rhetorical use of history. “History-as-rhetoric” (Suddaby and Foster 2017) refers to “the process by which managers skillfully impose meaning on a firm’s past” (Foster et al. 2011, p. 104) and views organizational history as a resource that managers can leverage to manage key stakeholders (Suddaby et al. 2010),

such as consumers through heritage branding (Urde et al. 2007; Burghausen and Balmer 2014), employees by imbuing collective memory, identity and values (Anteby and Molnár 2012), or the general public, as managerial decisions can become more legitimate when they are anchored in history (e.g., Rowlinson and Hassard 1993). Rhetorical narratives are typically of a sensegiving nature (Foster et al. 2011), connecting the past with the present and future through (selective) storytelling (Ricoeur 2004). In contrast, high engagement reflects the view that historical narratives constitute expressions of identity (Weick 2001) and contains an element of sensemaking (Stutz 2018). The literature on “history-as-sensemaking” indeed centers on corporate identity, discussing how firms meet stakeholder expectations by creating an identity that resonates with them (Suddaby and Foster 2017). The practice of history allows firms to collectively interpret and reinterpret identity (Maitlis and Christianson 2014a, b), as was for example the case in Eugene, Oregon (Howard-Grenville et al. 2013), where a collectively practiced revisionist history reconnected stakeholders with the city.

Combining the extent of claim legitimacy with the level of corporate engagement, historic CSR theory anticipates four types of narrative contest (Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). When claim legitimacy is limited, limited engagement will result in a “latent contest” in which the claim dissipates, while high engagement will lead to an “open contest” in which claims are proactively neutralized. High claim legitimacy comes with higher social expectations toward the corporation. Limited engagement will then likely lead to a “hostile contest” that pressurizes the firm to address the claim, while high engagement typically produces a “communicative contest”, or a good-faith discourse with critics. In line with Scherer et al. (2013), Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016) generally recommend high corporate engagement, because it weakens the intensity of the contest. Moreover, firms with a high engagement track record are believed to be more sensitive to social issues and enjoy more public “goodwill” (Vanhamme and Grobben 2009), which mitigates the legitimacy effects of any future mistake (Godfrey 2005). In contrast, limited corporate engagement is expected to have a modest effect on corporate legitimacy at best, namely when claim legitimacy is limited. When the criticism gains traction and becomes more legitimate, limited engagement may damage corporate legitimacy.

Historic CSR: Theoretical Puzzles

When it comes to corporate engagement, the theory of historic CSR seems to assume managerial intentionality: Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016) explicitly mention the “choice” (pp. 705, 709) that firms make regarding their

degree of corporate engagement with historical criticism, suggesting that firms will be able to fully realize their conceived strategy. However, this assumption is not axiomatic, as popularizing a historical narrative may require considerable managerial effort. Hatch and Schultz (2017) contend that organizational historicizing is essentially a process of bringing a historical narrative into the consciousness of organization members and embedding it into collective memory and day-to-day business practice. This process consists of a sequence of micro-level activities, including contextualization, which involves connecting the historical narrative with present and future business activities, and authentication, which validates the narrative and sets the stage for its perpetuation through activities that reflect it. Only through perpetuation can a narrative get embedded in what is generally considered to be “the past”.

Furthermore, historic CSR features a dichotomy between limited and high corporate engagement, which suggests that firms either contest historical criticism or openly engage with it. However, these motivations may intersect. First, the theorizations behind “history-as-sensemaking” and “history-as-rhetoric” are not mutually exclusive. “History-as-rhetoric” is at least partially based on identity work (Suddaby et al. 2010; Anteby and Molnár 2012), which is fundamental to “history-as-sensemaking”, and rhetorical identity claims provoke sensemaking, since they are interpreted and acted upon by stakeholders (Schultz and Hernes 2013). In similar vein, the broader organizational change literature treats sensegiving and sensemaking as interdependent social discursive practices with permeable boundaries (Rouleau 2005). Second, institutional and stakeholder theory suggest that firms exposed to complex institutional environments with conflicting demands might grow internal inconsistencies (Fu et al. 2018). Institutional theorists have employed the geological metaphor of “sedimentation” to describe how different sets of assumptions, values and beliefs, owing to distinct groups and interests, might become layered upon each other (Cooper et al. 1996), especially when the relative power of these groups fluctuates (Raynard et al. 2013). In this situation, rather than supplanting each other, they might jointly inform firm organizational behavior. Indeed, Acosta and Pérezts (2019) view political CSR as sedimented, describing it as an amalgamation of different yet simultaneously available practices. Hybrid forms of corporate engagement are therefore imaginable when corporate responsibility concerns the past.

If historic CSR theory does not fully capture the spectrum of idiosyncratic corporate engagements with historical criticism, this should be fairly visible in the long run. Historic claim legitimacy can fluctuate over time because the social and environmental responsibilities that different stakeholders assign to business—including those toward the past—can shift along with the cognitive and moral lenses through

which they read and act upon the world (Djelic and Etchan-chu 2017). In addition, firms can influence claim legitimacy through forgetting work (Mena et al. 2016). Extrapolation of Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) theory suggests that firms respond to fluctuations in historic claim legitimacy by sequentially choosing between limited and high engagement. These choices then culminate in either a consistent policy of limited or high engagement, or a pattern of alternation between these two levels. However, if firms can somehow combine limited and high engagement practices of corporate engagement, there is reason to expect the presence of hitherto untheorized long-term engagement trajectories.

Further detailing how firms engage with historic claims over time and to what effect in terms of corporate legitimacy seems important. In accordance with Kim (2019), who notes the importance of identifying specific paths through which CSR communication shapes stakeholder reactions, better understanding the materialization and effects of long-term corporate engagement might help firms reinforce their position in society. From an economic perspective, it could enable firms to better cater to conflicting stakeholder demands, but from a politico-ethical perspective, it could lead firms to recognize inconsistent or cynical elements in their approach to history, which would in turn provide a basis for more consistently responsible corporate engagement with history. Apart from corporate legitimacy, advancements in knowledge on corporate engagement might improve the social value generated by corporate-stakeholder interactions. These interactions often revolve around the "exchange" of stakeholder support for some social benefit offered by the firm (O'Riordan and Fairbrass 2008). If firms decide to instrumentally pursue a paradoxical engagement with history, this benefit might lie in the recognition of conflicting historical views that stakeholders cherish. In contrast, if firms choose to move toward a uniformly responsible engagement with history, this benefit could lie in stakeholder education.

Research Context

The setting of our longitudinal analysis of corporate engagement with history is the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which has communicated historical narratives to stakeholders since the turn of the twentieth century. The HBC was incorporated on 22 May 1670, when King Charles II granted the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" the monopoly on the trade of furs with Indigenous peoples. Exploiting its power as a monopolist and monopsonist, it overcharged Indigenous people for European goods and underpaid them for furs (Carlos and Lewis 2011). Furthermore, as the HBC's trade network expanded, the company promoted white settlement and the displacement of Indigenous inhabitants (Daschuk 2013). The

fur trade supplied most of the HBC's revenues until the early 1900s, when the HBC's land sales department and urban department stores became more important (Monod 1986). The HBC subsequently evolved into a leading Canadian department store (Menkis and Troper 2015) and with the expansion of retail, the fur trade became a less important. In the 1980s, the HBC exited the fur trade altogether (Opp 2015).

Managerial awareness of the commercial value of the HBC's history emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, when the firm made historical documents available to independent writers who wanted to write romantic accounts of the firm (Smith and Simeone 2017). The systematic use of firm history in stakeholder relations emerged with the establishment of a corporate archive in the 1920s (Ross and Morton 1985). However, since the mid-twentieth century, the HBC has been repeatedly confronted by Indigenous groups with accusations that it has systematically exploited their ancestors. The Indigenous contingent of Canadian society continues to form a socio-economically deprived "Fourth World" that is characteristic of settler-colonialist countries such as Canada, the US and Australia (Johnson 2002). Research generally ascribes this predicament to the persistence of racist and colonial cultural institutions that facilitate "racial extractivism" and inequality (Preston 2017). Against this backdrop, the broader impact of the consecutive episodes of Indigenous activism of the last decades remains questionable (Barker 2015).

Data and Method

Our longitudinal analysis of the HBC's engagement with history rests on a number of historical data sources. First, for information on the firm's use of history and the associated managerial decision-making process we drew on the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) in Winnipeg, which stretches about 3 km. In particular, we consulted board minutes, the CEO's collection of inbound correspondence, correspondence of the Canadian head office and files related to the 1995 anniversary. Due to the huge size of the archive and the lacking indexation of recent documents, we could not select documents systematically; instead, we used the help of HBC archivists. Compensating for potential selection bias, we complemented our archival data with historical literature on the HBC, a large part of which is contained in the HBCA library in Winnipeg. In addition, we searched the catalog of the National Library of Canada for works that allowed us to reinforce our reconstruction of the HBC's history. The sampling of historical literature followed a "snowball" approach: we added books to our database as long as the added material was relevant and non-redundant (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981).

Then, in order to observe problematizations of the HBC's past, we consulted company and third-party documents related to the firm's stakeholder relations. In particular, we performed keyword database searches of HBC financial reports and three newspapers: *The Globe and Mail* (1844–present), Canada's leading English-language newspaper, and because until 1970 the HBC's headquarters were in London, the *Financial Times* (1888–present) and *The Economist* (1844–present). We methodically searched these databases for materials related to the HBC's current relationships with Indigenous peoples, the role of Indigenous peoples in the firm's historical narratives, and critiques of the firm's historical treatment of Indigenous peoples. Searches included terms such as “Hudson's Bay Company”, but also multiple ethnonymic terms that have been used over time, ranging from the archaic (“Indian”, “Eskimo”) to the more modern (“First Nations”, “Indigenous”). In addition, we looked at references to names of specific ethnic groups, such as “Cree” and “Inuit”. Next to textual sources we analyzed *The Other Side of the Ledger*, a seminal critical historical documentary about the HBC.

Finally, in order to improve our overall interpretation of our source material, we consulted *Early Canadiana Online* (<http://eco.canadiana.ca>), which is a national historical database that provides access to a large range (5 million pages) of English and French language books, pamphlets, government documents, and other sources on the histories of the HBC and Canada in general. This database was also keyword-searched for material relevant to the HBC and its use of history. Because it is a national database, we also used equivalent French terms such as “Indien,” “premières nations,” and “autochtone”. In addition, in recognition of the fact that postcolonial archives and mainstream media often silence or suppress the voices of those who have been subjected to colonial rule (Decker 2013; Rao and Wasserman 2007), we endeavored to compensate for any postcolonial bias in our source interpretation. Apart from looking for “unremarkable” details in the HBC archive that would be indicative of Indigenous views (Stoler 2009), we attempted to trace Indigenous perspectives on the HBC online through Google searches. Admittedly, this particular search was less structured, but amplifying silenced voices speak often relies on tangential, non-traditional sources (Decker 2013).

The analysis was designed as an “evaluative” historical case study. Maclean et al. (2016) characterize “history-as-evaluating” as a deductive way of connecting historiography with organization studies in which pre-existing theoretical frames guide the examination of historical phenomena. The choice for evaluative history is based upon this study's largely theoretical motivation: theory on historic CSR frames the analysis, which confronts it with historical evidence in order to refine it. Although (historical) case studies are commonly used for theory building, a

deductive approach to history can still be valuable because in history a particular type of generalizability can be found, namely one of rich stories and contextual understandings (Gaddis 2002). We chose the narrative form to derive theoretical observations from our data, which are the building blocks for our theoretical contribution. Narratives compress sequences of events into storylines, which reveal how overarching concepts or themes interact. As such, they enable the formulation of process models that transcend focused cause-effect propositions (Cornelissen 2017).

To construct our theoretically structured historical narrative we took four broad steps. First, we compiled a chronological list of events related to historicizing about the HBC, practicing source selection and source criticism. Source selection involves focusing on primary sources that have high proximity to the phenomenon of interest, while source criticism entails assessing source reliability by questioning the motivations of its creator(s) and identifying its original audience (Wadhvani and Decker 2017). Second, using Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) terminology (“historic claim legitimacy,” “corporate engagement,” and “corporate legitimacy”), we first-order coded the identified historical events to distil underlying themes (mainly in terms of “increasing,” “decreasing,” “limited,” and “high”). Third, we related those themes in order to establish causal relationships between our variables. For this step we used periodization (Wadhvani and Decker 2017), which organizes historical events into coherent periods such that there is continuity within each period and discontinuity at its frontiers. We periodized our narrative according to developments in historic claim legitimacy, so that we could better isolate its effects on corporate engagement and corporate legitimacy. In addition, we performed second-order coding so as to uncover any underlying process. Finally, we double-checked our theoretical observations against the original source material.

To maximize the validity of our coding, we engaged in hermeneutics and triangulation. Hermeneutics describes a procedure for interpreting the intended meaning(s) of texts and involves the iteration between the source material, the researcher's own assumptions and the research context until a stable and deep understanding is reached of how historical actors perceived their experiences (Kipping et al. 2014). Triangulation denotes the practice of looking at documents created by different historical observers of the same event (Wadhvani and Decker 2017). Both authors coded the available source material, after which notes were compared. Whenever interpretations of the documents differed, we discussed the rigor of our hermeneutic practice. In all cases, these discussions resulted in a shared view of a document's meaning.

The HBC's Engagement with Historic Criticism

1899–1960: No Historical Problematizations

Until the mid-twentieth century, the historical culture of English-speaking Canada was suffused with colonialist ideology: many historical school textbooks promoted loyalty to the British Empire (Walsh 2008) and the country's historical profession was dominated by British-born, Oxford-trained historians who celebrated Canada's growth within the British Empire (Wright 2005). Canada's Indigenous peoples were institutionally marginalized: they could neither vote in national elections, nor purchase alcohol, open bank accounts, or seek legal assistance. Furthermore, the state controlled their movements in many regions of the country and took Indigenous children from their families to raise them in the abusive Indian Residential Schools (Conrad et al. 2013). Because Indigenous peoples barely played a role in Canada's historiography (Smith and Simeone 2017), no one problematized the HBC's history, let alone held the company accountable for any past wrongdoings. Unsurprisingly, the HBC's earliest use of history was purely rhetorical. In 1899, Lord Strathcona, Governor of the HBC, made historical documents available to independent authors who wished to write romantic historical accounts about the firm (McDonald 2002). This effort facilitated the production of propagandistic novels (e.g., Wilson 1900), but Strathcona denied authors whom he suspected of having a more critical interest in the firm's history access to these documents (Simmons 2007).

By the time the HBC shifted its focus to urban department stores, it also built a heritage infrastructure (e.g., curation of documents, designation of staff), which expanded its capacity for the practice of "history-as-rhetoric" (cf. Suddaby and Foster 2017), including heritage branding (cf. Urde et al. 2007) and organizational identity work (cf. Anteby and Molnár 2012), directed at affluent consumers and employees, respectively (Smith and Simeone 2017). These communications generally discussed the origins of the HBC (cf. Burghausen and Balmer 2014), associating them with the "romantic" fur trade at the Canadian frontier in an effort to appropriate some of its appeal (cf. Foster et al. 2011). However, it was not until 1920, at the firm's 250th anniversary, that the HBC made the first considerable investment in "history-as-rhetoric" (Financial Times 1921). This investment was informed by the desire to generate more public goodwill, as the company was in a political conflict with Canadian tax authorities. Furthermore, toward the end of World War I, left-wing sentiments had surged in Canada, which had increased labor militancy and brought about a progressive political swing in the very

region of Canada where the HBC, an anti-union firm, was most active (Belisle 2011).

The 250th anniversary campaign celebrated the "heroic" (European) men who had "conquered" Canada (Trigger 1986) and built up its economy (Smith and Simeone 2017). The campaign included extensive print advertising and the distribution of a 129-page illustrated company history (Ross and Morton 1985). Furthermore, cinemas throughout Canada played a historical documentary about the HBC for which admission was free (Geller 2011). In addition, the HBC organized history-themed events across the country. For example, in Vancouver, locally "prominent men and women" played important historical HBC figures in a pageant (Vancouver World 1920). In Calgary, the HBC's department store was extensively renovated and extended with a pseudo-Elizabethan restaurant that exuded the antiquity and Englishness of the firm (Governor and Committee 1920a). In Winnipeg, costumed "Indians, Eskimos, etc." gave performances (Bottomley 1919). For the employees the campaign included an essay contest and a new pension fund that rewarded loyalty (Governor and Committee 1920b).

The 1920 anniversary also marked the beginning of a permanent "history-as-rhetoric" strategy aimed at both internal and external stakeholders. In October of that year, the company launched *The Beaver*, a historical magazine that was initially circulated among employees to morale, and later sold to the general public as well (Belisle 2011). Furthermore, in 1922, the company adopted a logo with an antique-looking font that included its incorporation date (Fig. 1). These efforts were supported by a professional corporate archive, finalized in the 1930s, which systematized the company's collection of documents and facilitated historical inquiry (Madsen 2008), which was generally seen as "a very cheap (...) form of unpaid propaganda" (Simmons 2007, p. 219). Indeed, as the HBC became a national institution (Menkis and Troper 2015), corporate histories became more effective at turning the broader history of settler colonialism into a corporate theme or "social memory asset" (cf. Foster et al. 2011). On this basis, the settler-colonialist narratives published in *The Beaver* until 1960 helped the firm benefit from Canada's economic growth after the Second World War (Financial Times 1952), even though they denigrated Indigenous peoples. For example, a 1924 article praised the HBC's early fur traders as "hardy pioneers of trade and progress [who] (...) endured terrible hardships [and] fought bands of savages" (The Beaver 1924). Furthermore, in 1957, the magazine described the Indigenous peoples as savages that had benefited from the generous HBC (Whitley 1957).

1960–1982: Rising Historic Claim Legitimacy

The first problematization of the HBC's history emerged amid the ideological shifts of the 1960s. At that time,



Fig. 1 HBC post at 'old' Frobisher Bay, 1956. Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN 3227331

Canada's Indigenous peoples, who had obtained the right to vote and thus had seen their societal position improve (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), began setting up protest movements modeled after the Civil Rights movement and the Native American "Red Power" movement in the United States (Miller 2000). Apart from their developing social status, the Indigenous tried to legitimize their claims by leveraging increasing receptivity toward their claims in Canadian society (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), for example by calling on Canada's social-democratic ruling party to live up to its slogan of "Just Society". The Indigenous protesters garnered at least some degree of support from other social movements, including environmentalism and second-wave feminism, which made common cause with them. As a result, scholars and social activists started to examine the HBC through a different lens. The first author to criticize the firm's history was Marxist academic Stanley Ryerson, who asserted that the HBC's wealth had been amassed by exploiting its Indigenous trade partners (Ryerson 1963). The legitimacy of Indigenous historical claims was rising.

However, this development did not directly prompt the HBC to account for its historical treatment of Indigenous peoples, possibly because the critics were considered too marginal (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). In any case, the company was more concerned with updating its heritage branding by connecting corporate history to the needs of the consumer of the 1960s (cf. Urde et al. 2007). To that aim, the HBC unveiled a more modern-looking logo in 1965 (Opp 2015), and 5 years later, the firm's 300th anniversary

involved "lavish" expenditure to celebrate the firm's colonial history (MacKintosh 1970). The firm invited Queen Elizabeth II and approached the UK's BBC and Canada's CBC to produce documentaries that celebrated the HBC's economic contribution to both countries. It also commissioned Oscar-winning filmmaker Christopher Chapman to produce a bilingual film that was screened at sixty locations across Canada (The Bay News 1970). Moreover, it sponsored the trans-Atlantic crossing of a replica of the *Nonsuch*, the first HBC vessel to reach Hudson Bay, and the organization of seventeenth-century costume parties for employees. Apart from one-off events, the HBC also relocated its archive from London to Winnipeg, where the potential for "history-as-rhetoric" was greater because it would be more accessible to Canadian academics (Madsen 2008).

Despite these efforts, academic and non-academic historians that were sympathetic to the various left-wing movements increasingly developed and popularized alternative narratives of Canada's history and the HBC's role in it. These narratives, which were growing in legitimacy due to their academic provenance (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), included socialist, environmentalist, feminist, and Indigenous perspectives, and emphasized victimization as well as Indigenous resistance and agency (Létourneau 2004). Eventually, the general public started to hold the HBC responsible for its past, as is suggested by a 1971 manual on public relations (Carleton Cowan Public Relations 1971), circulated by the HBC's top management, which mentions the presence of hostile journalists asking critical historical

questions. In an apparent attempt to avoid the issue, the manual instructed HBC employees to refrain from threatening to stop purchasing advertising in newspapers that were publishing critical articles.

The HBC's past really became a liability with the 1972 release of the documentary *The Other Side of the Ledger: An Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company*, which contended that the HBC's great wealth had come from the systemic exploitation of Indigenous trappers. Importantly, the film connected the past and the present, mixing historical information about the HBC's fur trade with testimonies from present-day individuals who accused the HBC of still harming Indigenous people. For example, it discussed the high cost of groceries in the HBC's northern stores as a manifestation of the persisting self-serving mentality of Euro-Canadians. Through these and other examples, the durability of the harm caused by the HBC to the Indigenous peoples was effectively conveyed (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). The documentary makers also interviewed the HBC's official historian, Shirlee Anne Smith, who, by consenting to appear on camera, ostensibly suggested the firm's willingness to engage in a communicative contest (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). However, Smith's comments changed the subject away from the HBC's trading practices to the federal government's historic mismanagement of Indigenous education. The film was authoritative and plausible (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016) due to its high production value (Stewart 2007) and because it had been produced by the Indian Film Unit of the National Film Board of Canada, a government agency.

Beyond successfully criticizing the HBC's origins, the documentary severely undermined the firm's heritage branding strategy (cf. Burghausen and Balmer 2014; Foster et al. 2011). As such, it would have presented the firm with a trade-off between addressing the criticism and adhering to a proven branding strategy, which may explain the initial hesitation on the part of HBC's management. In internal correspondence, one executive declared that although it was "irresponsible for militant native spokesmen to lash out at the Bay as the cause of their people's misfortune", (...) "there is no doubt that over the centuries, the Indian has been badly treated by the white man and the HBC must bear a share of responsibility for this" (Huband and Novek 1974). This quote reveals a layering of different considerations, namely the protection of the firm against unfounded claims and the need to accommodate societal pressure. Second, it demonstrates that taking a new historical approach involved internal deliberation (cf. Hatch and Schultz 2017). In the follow-up, the HBC opened its archive to academic historians, assisting in the publication of works that argued that Indigenous trappers as full trade partners contributed to the firm's success (e.g., Ray and Freeman 1978). These "nuanced" works helped rehabilitate the historical reputation

of the firm (cf. Suchman 1995) and catalyzed Indigenous emancipation in Canada. In 1982, Indigenous rights were anchored in the constitution (Miller 2000) and revisionist views of historical Indigenous-white relations became institutionalized in mainstream education and media discourses (Bryant and Clark 2006).

1982–2009: Declining Historic Claim Legitimacy

Although the Indigenous socio-economic problems endured, the ideological shift toward neoliberalism in North America following the 1981–1982 recession brought along a right-wing shift in politics and a renewed emphasis on shareholder value in business (Harvey 2007). In this context, public receptivity to and the legitimacy of Indigenous historical claims diminished (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), allowing the HBC to limit its engagement with history and historical criticism. Expenditure on historical and philanthropic activities was curtailed (Madsen 2008), which resulted in the demise of *The Beaver* (Gregor 2001). The remaining use of history was rhetorical, emphasizing once again the heritage aspect of historically themed products such as fur blankets (cf. Urde et al. 2007). The department stores came to include sections with a décor that evoked the firm's historic trading posts, where these products were sold at a considerable premium (Tichenor 2002). This pricing policy suggests that there was demand and thus support for these products. In addition, the HBC assisted journalist Peter C. Newman in writing a book series that glorified the early HBC traders for their virility and domination of the Indigenous peoples (Newman 1985). However, this series did not fully undermine the plausibility and legitimacy of the revisionist narrative of the 1970s (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), as it was criticized by historians and Indigenous scholars (Newman 2008) and in the media, where it was described as "mischievous" and "irreverent" (The New York Times 1992).

Instead of addressing this criticism, the HBC used its 325th anniversary in 1995 largely as an opportunity for heritage branding (Marketing Magazine 1995; cf. Urde et al. 2007). Due to this focus, the celebration was less expensive and extravagant than in 1970 and encompassed little for employees and the general public beyond the issuance of a commemorative silver dollar and the display of anniversary-related cardboard logos around HBC stores (Celebration 325 1995a). The HBC did not organize any events, but it did support employees at stores in western Canada, the historical heartland of the company, in the organization of events such as "potluck dinners" and "hype breakfasts" (Celebration 325 1995b) that facilitated the reenactment of a historical corporate identity (cf. Anteby and Molnár 2012). The bottom-up nature of these events demonstrates the support that the HBC's traditional history still enjoyed.

From the 1980s until about 2009, the HBC did not attract major historical criticism, even though Indigenous political activism occasionally resurged in Canadian politics and business. In 1990, armed conflict between an Indigenous group and a property developer near Montreal led to the mobilization of the Canadian military (Lackenbauer 2008). In the wake of this crisis, some Canadian companies established CSR projects aimed at Indigenous peoples (Anderson 1997). The HBC did not develop any such project and continued to market heritage products, but it did end all direct business relations with Indigenous peoples. The company sold its unprofitable Northern Stores department, which operated retail outlets in remote communities and participated in the fur trade (Newman 1991), and discontinued reselling Indigenous stone sculptures (Graburn 2004). Although profitability likely drove this decision, its timing suggests that the HBC saw the firm's interactions with Indigenous peoples as controversial. In that case, this move contains an implicit acknowledgement of historic wrongdoings, rendering it doubly motivated.

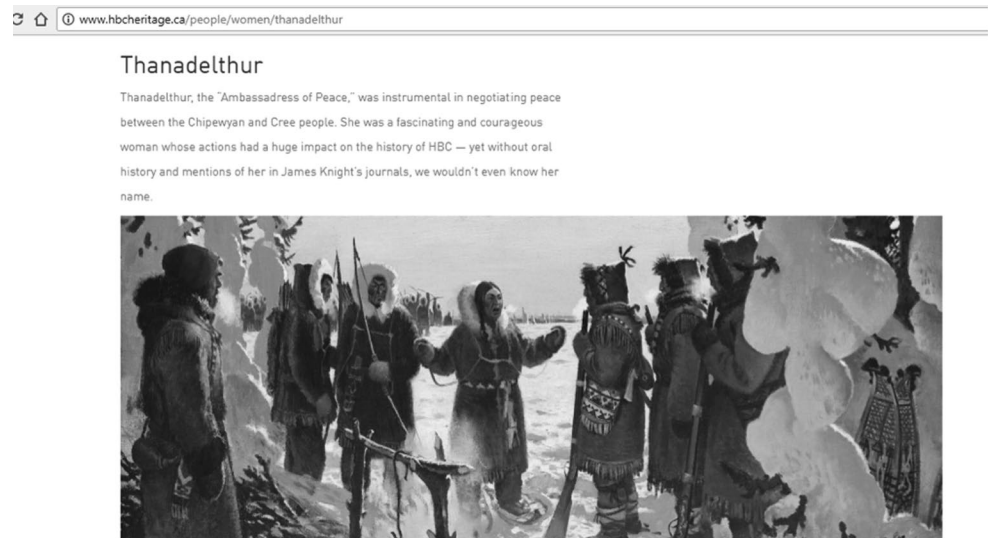
2009–Present: Resurgence of Historic Claim Legitimacy?

By 2009, heritage branding suffered another backlash. In that year, an Indigenous group claimed that the HBC's knitted heritage sweaters were close facsimiles of their traditional artifacts. This group saw these products as an attempt to appropriate the culture of an economically marginalized group for profit (Canadian Press 2010) and emphasized the legitimacy of this message by connecting Indigenous history with present-day hardship (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). Since the HBC was one of the sponsors of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, this group threatened to protest at the Olympic torch relay as it passed through their traditional territory. As such, it leveraged the fact that their critical narrative sharply contradicted the Olympic message of liberalism and multiculturalism (Perry and Kang 2012). The HBC initially contested the plausibility of the accusations by dismissing them (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), claiming that the designs of the sweaters were original (Constantineau 2009), but the controversy invoked public scrutiny of the firm's relation with the Indigenous peoples. Faced with the pressure to engage with the Indigenous claims (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), the HBC compromised, licensing Indigenous artisans to sell their original designs in a "First Nations Pavilion" at the 2010 Olympic venue and at the HBC's flagship store in Vancouver (CBC News 2009). This settlement at least seems to have settled the broader public contest: although the HBC has not maintained relations with Indigenous peoples since, it hasn't been widely criticized for it.

Most recent history has seen more instances of historic criticism. For example, the "Idle No More" movement has accused white settlers of genocide against Indigenous peoples (Belmore 2015). Although this "additional" claim has been debated in the media, its plausibility, and therefore its legitimacy (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016), remains limited (Barker 2015). More authoritative is Canada's TRC report (2015) on the "cultural genocide" (p. 3) of Indigenous peoples at the Indian residential schools. This report, which frequently references the HBC, has sparked debate among major Canadian institutions on how to address this legacy (Thiessen 2019). Furthermore, it has inspired the Witness Blanket Project, which has created a touring monument of the cultural genocide. At so-called Witness Blanket events, Indigenous people have often accused the HBC of exploiting their ancestors (Taylor 2018). In line with the current time frame, the HBC's current online presence, which also serves educational purposes, seems more engaged (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016) and "decolonized", referring to the Indigenous peoples as "First Nations" rather than "Indians", and emphasizing the company's reliance on Indigenous peoples as "guides, interpreters, hunters, and teachers of survival skills, as well as suppliers of raw fur" (HBC Heritage 2019a). To illustrate this argument, it recounts the contribution to the firm of the Dene woman Thanadelthur (Fig. 2).

However, the extent of the HBC's engagement with Indigenous historical claims remains debatable. Unlike the 1970s, the firm commonly refuses to communicate with Indigenous peoples and it continues to market controversial heritage blankets and coats (HBC Heritage 2019b; cf. Urde et al. 2007). Moreover, the firm's online historical narrative still seems anchored in a settler-colonialist approach to history. First, no Indigenous individuals were involved in its production. Second, the list of the twenty most important individuals in the HBC's history contains only Indigenous person: Thanadelthur. Finally, the narrative has a settler-colonialist undertone. For example, by praising managers such as Ralph Parsons for establishing Canadian sovereignty over Indigenous territories, it implies that Indigenous peoples are not inherently Canadian. Despite the resurging legitimacy of revisionist narratives, it is unclear whether the HBC will be penalized for these persisting signs of colonialism, as some currents in Canadian society seem less receptive to Indigenous claims, giving them less legitimacy (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). For example, although the Canadian National Film Board (NFB) describes *The Other Side of the Ledger* as a landmark film (National Film Board 2018), some commenters refuse to hold today's HBC responsible for past Indigenous hardships (Fig. 3). Likewise, although the TRC has generated Indigenous criticism of the HBC, it does not seem to have greatly damaged the HBC's reputation yet.

Fig. 2 Excerpt of the HBC Heritage website, 2019



Discussion

Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016) conceptualize corporate engagement with historical criticism as intentional and dichotomous, with firms opting for either a limited or a high engagement strategy. However, the HBC's long term use of history, summarized in Table 1, suggests that this engagement can be paradoxical. First, the move toward higher engagement with Indigenous narratives needed to be embedded in extant organizational practice before it could materialize (cf. Hatch and Schultz 2017), in part because one had to avoid undermining the firm's marketing of its origins (cf. Burghausen and Balmer 2014). For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, this process involved internal managerial deliberation and communication. Second, genuine “history-as-sensemaking” and instrumental “history-as-rhetoric” coexisted in the HBC's approach to history, as practices of “high engagement” with (legitimate) historical criticism always rested on an innate tendency toward traditional history. In the 1970s, the firm showed transparency, but skepticism regarding its historical responsibility remained. Likewise, in the 1980s, the HBC discontinued its direct business relations with Indigenous peoples to avoid being affected by the property crisis, but it also reemphasized “history-as-rhetoric”. Finally, in recent years, the HBC has responded to resurging criticism by renewing its engagement with the Indigenous peoples, both offline and online. However, the company's historical narrative retains settler-colonialist elements, while heritage branding (cf. Urde et al. 2007) has never ceased. Due to the persistence of two approaches to history, historicizing at the HBC can be characterized as layered or “sedimented” (cf. Cooper et al. 1996).

Table 1 also depicts the legitimacy effects of the HBC's sedimented engagement trajectory. Until 2009, the data support historic CSR theory (Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016),

demonstrating overall correspondence between historic claim legitimacy, corporate engagement and corporate legitimacy. Although claim legitimacy was continuous rather than dichotomous, thus accommodating sedimented practices, higher degrees of claim legitimacy were generally met with a stronger emphasis on high corporate engagement and vice versa, allowing the HBC to generally maintain its legitimacy. However, since 2009, claim legitimacy has become more ambiguous with contradictory elements. Although Indigenous groups achieved mainstream recognition for their claims by emphasizing the durability of their suffering, receptivity in Canadian society has remained uneven. Against this particular backdrop, the HBC's sedimented approach to history has successfully culminated in coexisting communicative and latent narrative contests: the firm silences criticism by embracing revisionist history, yet it escapes scrutiny of the settler-colonialist elements in its historicizing, and profits from heritage marketing. This success makes sense in Canada's fragmented stakeholder environment. Fu et al. (2018) discuss how heterogeneous stakeholder pressures may incite opportunistic CSR, or responding to stakeholder pressures according to their danger to corporate legitimacy. Indeed, the HBC's sedimented approach to history, although not the result of an *ex ante* strategy, contains an element of opportunism. The firm's core stakeholder has always been its department store clientele, which identifies with the firm's heritage. Consistently, the HBC highly engaged with historical criticism only when it influenced this stakeholder.

The finding that the HBC developed a functional sedimented approach to its history—a process that involved managerial deliberation and internal communication—echoes recent research on political CSR (Acosta and Pérezts 2019) and enriches Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) theory of historic CSR, suggesting that a firm's corporate

Fig. 3 Excerpt of the Canadian National Film Board website, 2018

The Other Side of the Ledger: An Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company

Martin Defalco & Willie Dunn
1972 | 42 min

»)



SYNOPSIS POINT OF VIEW EDUCATION

The Hudson's Bay Company's 300th-anniversary celebration in 1970 was no occasion for joy among the people whose lives were tied to the trading stores. Narrated by George Manuel, then president of the National Indian Brotherhood, this landmark film presents Indigenous perspectives on the company whose fur-trading empire drove colonization across vast tracts of land in central, western and northern Canada. There is a sharp contrast between the official celebrations, with Queen Elizabeth II among the guests, and what Indigenous people have to say about their lot in the Company's operations. Released in 1972, the film was co-directed by Martin Defalco and Willie Dunn—a member of the historic Indian Film Crew, an all-Indigenous production unit established at the NFB in 1968.



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"Lots of unpleasant things happened long ago. That was long ago. IT DID NOT HAPPEN TO YOU! Get on with your present day life."

— odiedoodie, 6 Sep 2016

engagement with history is not necessarily intentional and dichotomous. Hence, corporate engagement might be better conceptualized along a continuum. Furthermore, there is apparent value in treating claim legitimacy as a continuous variable too. Indeed, claim legitimacy is becoming more complex with the growing importance of

social media, which offer a platform to multiple competing perspectives that challenge dominant discourses, especially in the era of "fake news" (Marchi 2012). As such, they may become counter-public spaces that facilitate the postmodernist worldview, which promotes historical relativism (Booth et al. 2007). Plotting narrative contests

Table 1 Historic claim legitimacy, and the HBC's engagement and legitimacy

Period	Historic claim legitimacy	HBC: High corporate engagement, i.e., "history-as-sensemaking"	HBC: Limited corporate engagement, including "history-as-rhetoric"	Legitimacy effects of corporate engagement
1899–1960	No problematization	None	Celebration of settler past and depiction of Indigenous as savages; build-up of heritage infrastructure; selective access to historical records; historical logo; launch of pro-HBC magazine	History as unpaid propaganda; generation of goodwill; insulation from political dynamics
1960–1982	Increased: growing Indigenous activism; tie-in with other societal causes; impactful documentary; recognition of Indigenous rights	Internal deliberation, then opening of corporate archive (transparency) with support for critical historical studies	Initially: ignoring of criticism; conflict avoidance with media; continuation of celebration of settler past; move of archive to Winnipeg. Later on: effort to divert criticism	Initial media backlash from persistence in "history-as-rhetoric"; historical transparency leads to rehabilitation
1982–2009	Diminished: neoliberal emphasis on consumerism and profitability, but Indigenous claims occasionally resurge in the media; colonialist celebrations are criticized	Possibly controversial direct business relations with Indigenous peoples are ceased	Return to celebration of settler past but with less pomp; refocus on heritage branding; ignoring of criticism of celebratory book in media	Criticism in some media of celebratory work, but no real backlash; apparent insulation from property development crisis. However: success of heritage products; grassroots enthusiasm for jubilee activities
2009–present	Increased but ambiguous: criticism of cultural appropriation in media; institutionalization of revisionist history. Yet, uneven receptivity toward revisionist history; low support for genocide claim	Indigenous peoples get space at Olympic venue and in flagship store; online history has become more revisionist	Initial dismissal of accusations of cultural appropriation; Olympic message neglected Indigenous peoples; no follow-up with Indigenous critics; settler-colonialist elements on heritage website (presentation, language, production) that contradict revisionist narrative	Media backlash over cultural appropriation; engagement with Inuit eased conflict. However: continued success of heritage products; apparent acceptance of colonial elements in online historical narrative

along continuous axes of claim legitimacy and corporate engagement may advance understanding regarding firms' navigation of stakeholder demands and its effect in terms of narrative contests. Ultimately, such understanding may enhance corporate legitimacy (Kim 2019) and stakeholder value (O'Riordan and Fairbrass 2008).

To illustrate, Fig. 4 shows that hybrid narrative contests are most likely to persist at the intersection of Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) four narrative contests, where ambiguous claim legitimacy meets sedimented corporate engagement. Indeed, since 2009, the HBC's sedimented engagement has provoked both communicative (e.g., through the licensed sale of original Indigenous products) and latent (e.g., through heritage marketing and the denied genocide claims) contests, and even elements of hostile (e.g., through the initial denial of cultural appropriation) and open contests (e.g., through educational online content). However, when claim legitimacy is unambiguous, narrative contests might gravitate toward one of Schrempf-Stirling et al.'s (2016) four types. When it is limited, corporate engagement will likely evolve upward or downward, the former probably to a better effect on corporate legitimacy, conform historic CSR theory. When it is high, firm engagement will likely increase, given that limited engagement in this scenario probably hurts corporate legitimacy. Similarly, when corporate engagement practices are consistent, narrative contests are unlikely to stay hybrid, even when claim legitimacy is equivocal. Limited engagement is risky as it might alienate some stakeholders, who may spark a hostile contest (the alignment of different HBC stakeholders in the 1960s comes to mind), while high engagement might eventually stimulate a communicative contest through growing awareness of the firm's history among unfamiliar stakeholders.

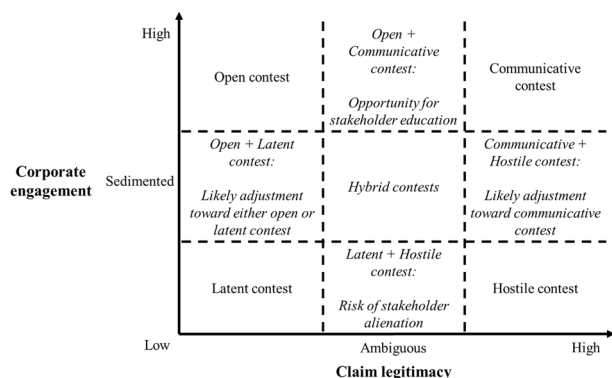


Fig. 4 Narrative contests with continuous axes for claim legitimacy and corporate engagement

Future Research and Concluding Remarks

The theoretical contribution outlined above gives rise to at least three avenues for further research. First, in line with Stutz' (2018) call for more empirical research on historic CSR, future analysis could further map long-term corporate engagement with historical criticism. The more variety in this respect is captured, the better the relationship between claim legitimacy, corporate engagement and corporate legitimacy will be understood. Second, although the data provide some rationale behind the sedimentation of the HBC's engagement with historical criticism, they do not fully clarify how hybrid narrative contests emerge or subside (see Fig. 4). Closer examination of organizational historicizing in the context of historical criticism could clarify the organizational characteristics that are conducive to the layering of different approaches to history. For example, future studies could compare the HBC with other firms that have operated in the settler-colonialist context and have subsequently met with criticism, such as the Canadian Pacific Railway (Daschuk 2013). Third, the observed fluctuations in the legitimacy of historical claims about the HBC emerged from a particular set of circumstances (cf. Schrempf-Stirling et al. 2016). Broader examination of these circumstances and their interplay could lead to a better understanding of the way in which ideological, sociological and/or industrial circumstances drive criticism of corporate pasts.

The analysis also generates at least two practical implications. First, although the nurturing of different historical narratives can be economically beneficial when stakeholder expectations are contradictory, this take-away would be considered cynical in the politico-ethical approach to CSR (cf. Heikkurinen and Mäkinen 2018). In line with Kim (2019) and O'Riordan and Fairbrass (2008), and as Fig. 4 visualizes, awareness about sedimented historicizing could inspire managers to educate certain stakeholders about revisionist narratives, which is a more inclusive way of promoting corporate legitimacy and the social value of corporate-stakeholder interactions. Such an effort requires a long-term commitment to corporate archives and the support of professional historians on-site who endeavor to spread reconciliatory historical narratives. Second, the finding that firms can layer different approaches to history over time cautions particular stakeholder groups promoting revisionist histories. If a firm demonstrates high engagement with a particular historical claim, it doesn't necessarily mean that it completely abandons all pre-existing historical viewpoints. If stakeholders are to bring about a fundamental change in a firm's stance toward history, generating and maintaining wide public attention are pivotal, especially in fragmented societal contexts.

To conclude, our analysis has at least two limitations. First, it is largely based on Anglo-Saxon sources such as the HBC archive and Canadian media. Therefore, most observed instances of Indigenous criticism have been recorded from an Anglo-Saxon point of view. Although we were able to collect some Indigenous takes on the HBC, we failed to find traces, documentary or otherwise, that reveal how Indigenous people have perceived the HBC's historical narratives. Consequently, our observation of the legitimacy implications of the HBC's engagement with the past remains incomplete. Second, the empirical scope of our analysis of historic CSR was limited to only one historical issue. It is possible that other stakeholders or historians have problematized other past wrongs of the HBC and that the firm has taken responsibility for them. If a firm's engagement with one issue can affect its engagement for another, or if a firm's responsiveness toward several historical problems can produce aggregate patterns of historic CSR, our observation of the HBC's approach to its past might be inaccurate. However, despite these two limitations, we believe that the findings emerging from the above analysis complicate historic CSR theory and thus support a move toward a more conscious use of the past in corporate-stakeholder relations.

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