ABSTRACT
This dissertation offers new perspectives on long-standing debates about private actors in global politics. It does so via three journal-length papers on the role of institutional investors in advancing human rights compliance by multi-national firms. The thesis innovatively bridges international relations scholarship on private authority, human rights norms and transnational advocacy, with academic work on corporate governance, responsible investment and business ethics. These disparate academic themes are unified through an empirical focus on the institutions through which responsible investment activism occurs, and how these institutions respectively inform and challenge existing conceptions of shareholder power, as a form of transnational private authority.

Using comparative analysis, the first paper examines how Dutch and Norwegian pension funds responded to allegations that a Chinese state-owned firm in their portfolios was complicit in human rights violations in Sudan and Burma. In this paper, I argue that state-based institutional checks on shareholder power can affect the tactical strategies employed within investor-led human rights advocacy, and in some cases, can limit the scope for ethical deliberation on these strategic choices. The second paper maps thirty-three investor-driven governance networks to show how their institutional design choices vary significantly in the degree to which they allow for meaningful engagement with civil society. This paper argues that although the mainstreaming of responsible investment has relied heavily on a narrative of values alignment with stakeholders, governance mechanisms to incorporate stakeholders within investor activism on sustainability issues remain rare. The third paper analyses 72 shareholder proposals on the topic of global human rights filed in Canada from 1982-2017. The analysis confirms that contrary to dominant viewpoints, shareholder power is not ethically neutral. Rather, its use reinforces particular social hierarchies that do not advance global human rights, despite the appearance of doing so.

The dissertation’s key contribution highlights the need for institutional adaptations to enhance the democratic qualities of global investor activism in ways that move the global business and human rights agenda towards collective publics rather than individual and private solutions. This study represents the first systematic effort to theorize and empirically evaluate shareholder power in the context of global human rights.

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UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
EXAMINATION PROGRAMME

The Final Oral Examination
For the Degree of
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Exam Location: Buchanan Tower 1206/1207, 1873 East Mall V6T 1Z1.

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