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Corporate Social Responsibility: Discourse, Narratives and Communication

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Abstract

The problematic and contestable nature of discourses on corporate social responsibility (CSR) has driven the commissioning of this special issue on discourses, narratives and communication about CSR. While CSR may be seen as sharing normative goals with the concept of sustainable development, there are fundamental questions to be asked about the nature and purpose of CSR, how it has been constructed and framed, and whether it promotes the normative goals of sustainable development in order to effect change to the business-as-usual model. The teasing out of the different discourses of CSR has become an important theme in academic research in recent years. In this issue, that discourse is developed. The authors discover gaps between CSR as understood by civil society groups and radical NGOs and the CSR norms promoted at corporate level. The latter fail to impact on business-as-usual, even though the same language may be used. The link between GRI reporting and market-value is explored; and CSR principles and actions promoted by business are critiqued from the perspective of the norms of

sustainable development, one conclusion being that the parameters of sustainable development as a concept need to be extended to include the dimension of culture.

Bibliographical Notes

Peter Dobers has an interest in how ideas of corporate (social) responsibility, broadband, city images or sustainable development travel the world, are enabled or disabled. He holds a chair in management and sustainable development at Mälardalen University, Västerås (Sweden) and is currently associate dean of the Faculty for Humanities, Social and Caring Sciences. He has also been visiting professor at Umeå School of Business and Economics in the years of 2006-2008. Dobers has published widely in journals such as *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *Organization*, *Journal of Urban Technology*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Sustainable Development* and *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* and in areas such as corporate (social) responsibility, sustainable development, urban studies and modern information and communication technology. He is on the editorial board of several journals, and a member of the board of the International Sustainable Development Research Society. His most recent book is an edited volume *Corporate Social Responsibility: Challenges and Practices* (Santérus Academic Press Sweden, 2010). He is frequently commissioned as guest speaker by industry and municipalities. He has been on parental leave during the period of January 2009 to August 2010.

Delyse Springett is Director of the Programme for Business and Sustainable Development in the College of Business at Massey University, New Zealand. She has taught a Master's course on Business and Sustainability, based in critical perspectives, which she redeveloped and taught at the Kadoorie Institute at the University of Hong Kong. Her interests are in sustainability and sustainable development, education for sustainability, corporate environmental and social responsibility, innovation and sustainable development and critical theory. She has administered the New Zealand Survey of Corporate Environmental and Social Responsiveness since 1999. Her doctoral thesis, completed at Durham University, UK, focused on a critical analysis of corporate conceptions of sustainable development in New Zealand. In 2005, she became

founding editor of the *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development* which she edited until 2009. Journals she has published in include *Sustainable Development*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *Innovation and Sustainable Development* and the *International Journal of Green Economics*. Delyse has guest-edited special issues of *Sustainable Development* and *Business Strategy and the Environment*. She is on the editorial board of several of the above journals and acts as reviewer for these and for *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. Delyse recently contributed a chapter on critical approaches to education for sustainability in the business studies curriculum to the forthcoming Earthscan publication, *Sustainability Education: Perspectives and Practice Across Higher Education*. She is a member of the boards of the International Sustainable Development Research Society and the Green Economics Institute.

Seeking a Critical Discourse of Corporate Social Responsibility

Discourses are, by their nature, problematic and contestable, open to interpretation and reinterpretation and governed by the motives and goals of those who develop the discourse. According to Foucault (1977), discourses are constitutive and productive: they construct reality. They are political and may be used to foster or legitimate particular interests, placing these beyond question and normalising what is, in fact, contingent (Foucault, 1977). As Kureishi (2003) has put it: ‘After they’ve been told for a while, stories can turn into politics, into our institutions, and it is important that they seem just the way things are, and the way they have to go on being’ (Kureishi, 2003).

Consequently, it is as important to examine the origins and intent of discourses as it is to analyze their content. This is especially important with discourses and narratives of corporate social responsibility (CSR). We have a long history of narratives of social accounting that preceded CSR reporting, dating from the 1970s (Gray *et al*, 1993). Subsequently, conceptions of corporate social responsibility were fundamentally impacted by the Brundtland Report of 1987 and the formal role of sustainable development (SD) in the discourse of environment and social responsibility. Discourses about corporate social responsibility are frequently linked (or confused) with those about sustainable development. The two concepts have important normative goals in common; but it sometimes appears that CSR becomes the focus, particularly to business leaders, when the discourse of SD presents as too problematic and dependent on change at too fundamental a level. This calls for a critical perspective on how discourses and narratives are constructed. However, as Ählström *et al* (2009) have pointed out, after examining discourses in the associated area of environmental management, relatively little of the academic discourse has been couched in a critical perspective (Ählström *et al*, 2009).

Basic principles that the two concepts share include:

- The entrenchment of environmental considerations into economic policy-making;
- A commitment to equity;
- An appreciation that ‘development’ is wider than growth (Jacobs, 1991).

The dynamic connection between social and environmental responsibility entrenched in the Brundtland Report’s needs-based definition of SD harks back to the conception of the

environmental problematic held to as part of the ‘environmental revolution’ of the 1960s/1970s. Commoner (1971), for one, reminded us that ‘the root cause of the crisis is not found in how men (sic) interact with nature, but in how they interact with each other; that to solve the environmental crisis we must solve the problem of poverty, racial injustice and war; that the debt to nature, which is the measure of the environmental crisis, cannot be paid person by person in recycled bottles or ecologically sound habits, but in the ancient coin of social justice.’

Discourses about sustainable development have diverged into those that focus on ‘weak’ SD, (what Levy, 1997, has described as ‘political sustainability’ (Levy, 1997)), and those that take a ‘strong’ position. The latter is more openly political and progressive, calling for the structural and institutional changes that are prerequisites of environmental and social justice. As we focus on the discourses and narratives of CSR, we need to be alert to the possibility of being distracted with ‘political corporate social responsibility’ - narratives that describe actions that may be laudable in their own right but which do not make a difference to ‘the way things are’.

Like the discourse of sustainable development, that of CSR can account for the ways in which ‘problems’ may be managed. Springett (2006) has pointed out the temptation there has been to ‘manage’ the discourse of sustainable development - to ‘discipline’ an ‘inefficient’ concept that is messy and unruly and calls for changes that disrupt the status quo (Springett, 2006). CSR is another concept that may prove ‘unruly’ unless we carefully ‘discipline’ what is to be included and what excluded from its conception and practice. For example, an apparently laudable agreement such as the UN Global Compact (2000) between the United Nations and large corporations (UN Global Compact, 2000), with its principles drawn from such sources as the UN Declaration on Human Rights, international labour standards and key environmental and anti-corruption goals represents no more than a voluntary and discretionary initiative, perceived by some as an abdication on the part of government from grasping key areas of policy-making (See, for example, Global Policy Forum: www.global-policy.com).

Consequently, we need to start with some fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of CSR. We need to understand how the concept has been constructed and framed and why there are different ‘narratives’ of CSR that contest each other. It is important to understand who constructed the narratives, and why they did so: what are they seeking to achieve, and how? In whose interests is CSR being promoted, and whose responsibility is it to implement its goals?

One very important question is whether the shift to CSR can be undertaken within the market economy that we currently know. Finally, is CSR about the ‘standard of living’ or ‘quality of life’? About ‘value’ or ‘values’?

A critical perspective on CSR that not only analyses the ‘weak’ elements of the discourse but also directs us towards ‘strong’ conceptions of CSR has been provided by Banerjee (2007). ‘Corporate Social Responsibility: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’ indicates some of the key areas for analysis and provides an agenda for a critical approach to narratives of corporate social responsibility (Banerjee, 2007). The fundamental assumptions of business in promoting CSR need closer examination and more critique if we are to move beyond CSR as public relations management and branding. The fact that institutional imperatives are generally ignored in the narratives of CSR constrains the change agent potential of the concept. As with the discourse of sustainable development that emerges from corporations, and sometimes from those who write about them, it is the ‘silences’ that are deafening and which conceal the reality that the imperatives of profit accumulation and shareholder value maximisation do not always create win-win situations for people or the environment. The blurring between social responsibility and profitability constrains the level of commitment to change that companies can make, the emphasis generally being on picking the low-hanging fruit of cost-savings, efficiencies and PR that pose little threat to the status quo. Are we witnessing the economic capture of CSR – the "hijacking" of CSR to draw on the seminal work of Richard Welford (Welford, 1997)¹ – in order to pursue business-as-usual and the profit motive?

Developing Discourses, Narratives and Communication

In addition to focusing on CSR as a key concept for this and our previous special issues (Dobers, 2009a; Dobers, 2009b; Halme *et al*, 2009), our goal is to relate it to the three similar, sometimes connected, concepts of discourses, narratives and communication. While several

¹ ... and ten years later. Also consider the special issue on "Paradigms of Corporate Sustainability - A Decade after Hijacking Environmentalism" in *Sustainable Development* on the hijacking problems with several interesting contributions 1) Ketola, T. 2009. Pre-Morphean Paradigm – an Alternative to Modern and Post-Modern Paradigms of Corporate Sustainability. *Sustainable Development* 17 (2): 114-126, Ketola, T, Mark-Herbert, C, Pataki, G. 2009. Paradigms of Corporate Sustainability - a Decade after Hijacking Environmentalism. *Sustainable Development* 17 (2): 69, Pataki, G. 2009. Ecological Modernization as a Paradigm of Corporate Sustainability. *Sustainable Development* 17 (2): 82-91, Söderbaum, P. 2009. Making Actors, Paradigms and Ideologies Visible in Governance for Sustainability. *Sustainable Development* 17 (2): 70-81.

previous studies of CSR and SD have touched upon these concepts, we aim to shed further light on a critical understanding of the concepts. Papers published in the earlier special issues have helped to define and develop the understanding of critical perspectives in the three key areas, as the following comments indicate.

Discourses. The special issues on CSR have called for studies of SD discourses in many different settings in business, politics, society and academia. Two good illustrations of the latter reveal the structure of SD discourses and thus how legitimacy and rationalization in SD discourses are constructed (Kallio *et al*, 2007); and a recent study of scientific discourse in papers published in the journal, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, shows that critical perspectives are rare, mainly calling for marginal adjustments and thus leading to a distortion in the scientific discourse (Ählström *et al*, 2009). Another important contribution, which examines discourses on the need to recontextualize policies determining how a tourist paradise should develop in the wake of terrorist attacks like the Bali bombing in 2002, shows how these disparate discourses compete. The authors argue that regional policies should focus on conflicts within and between localized communities rather than on conflicts between tourists and hosts (Robinson *et al*, 2005).

Narratives. We also identify recent studies that focus on talk in organizational change situations (Thurlow *et al*, 2009), or on narratives used when managers describe, explain or else account for CSR-related issues (Joutsenvirta, 2009). Joutsenvirta's study shows how a linguistic perspective may reveal a sensitive understanding of how certain ways of communicating and telling stories about CSR may help or hinder efforts to comply with a more balanced relation between nature and society (Joutsenvirta, 2009). Another study focusing on story-telling in SD projects concludes somewhat dejectedly that – again – "short-termism and value for money drive project formats and objectives, whilst counter-narratives and alternative stories arising from stakeholders in such projects are often ignored". The authors argue that such counter-narratives should be supported and reinforced to help foster the sometimes fragile SD processes (Bell *et al*, 2007).

Communication. Communication, like the other concepts discussed, has many broad meanings. Previous studies have shown what is communicated in environmental reports (Cerin, 2002b) and on websites concerned with CSR-related issues (Guimarães-Costa *et al*, 2008); they have

revealed characteristics of who is reporting (Cerin, 2002a) and who is targeted by social and environmental reporting (Spence, 2009); they demonstrate how so-called "objective" indicators measuring SD- and CSR-related progress, even if based on apparently praiseworthy initiatives like the United Nation's Commission for Sustainable Development indicator project, may be (mis)represented and used in many different ways (Lyytimäki *et al*, 2008); they inform us that even legally and mandatory reporting and disclosure of environmental issues, working environment and gender equality are not met in a progressive country like Norway (Vormedal *et al*, 2009); and demonstrate the ease with which people's perceptions of the use of CSR-related donations are influenced by vivid messages and communication that increase consumers' emotional involvement toward a product-cause association, raising several crucial ethical concerns (Baghi *et al*, 2009)

The Issue's Contribution to Discourse, Narratives and Communication on CSR

The authors in this special issue seek to shed light on discursive, narrative and communicative issues and elements of corporate social responsibility. In her article, 'Corporate Response to CSO Criticism: Decoupling the Corporate Responsibility Discourse from Business Practice', Jenny Ählström has used discourse analysis to examine the discourses of civil society organizations in their critique of how corporations should be run in general and their lack of social responsibility in particular (Ählström, 2010). The discourses of Corporate Accountability International, CorpWatch, Swedwatch and Clean Clothes Campaign on corporate (social) responsibility are examined in the wake of how an international large garment retailer, Hennes & Mauritz, was put under scrutiny for their perceived shortcomings in taking responsibility for working conditions in their supply chains. Ählström's study shows that civil society organizations clearly present a challenging discourse to how corporations present their social responsibilities, and that corporations respond to this challenge by creating responsible business discourses. However, these are decoupled from business-as-usual practice and thus tend to keep the core business practices intact.

In his article, 'A Linguistic Interpretation of Welford's Hijack Hypothesis', Mark Brown presents an empirical critique of the hypothesis of Richard Welford in his well-known and seminal book, *Hijacking Environmentalism: Corporate Responses to Sustainable Development* (Welford, 1997). Here, Welford claims that corporations have hijacked the agenda and discourse of environmentalists (Brown, 2010). For this purpose, Brown created two language databases within which the complete web page texts of representatives of an eco-modernist

culture was compiled: three million words written by 25 British corporations considered green by their membership of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the UK Business Council for Sustainable Development or by being signees of the UN Global Compact; and six million words written by 37 radical non-governmental organisations (NGO). Using Wordsmith Tools, available from Oxford University Press (Scott, 2008), Brown analyzes the frequency of most commonly used words of the radical NGOs and how they have been adopted by so-called green corporations. However, Brown concludes that, while using the same or similar words, 'green' corporations and NGOs do not conceptualize concerns about environmental degradation in the same ways.

In 'Communication via Responsibility Reporting and its Effect on Firm Value in Finland', Hannu Schadewitz and Mikael Niskala analyze Finnish corporations' responsibility disclosures (Schadewitz *et al*, 2010). Based on a review study of responsibility reporting literature focusing on the link between reporting and firm performance as well as firm valuation, Schadewitz and Niskala undertook an analytic and formal analysis applying the Ohlson model (Ohlson, 1995). They used all available responsibility reporting following the form of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) by Finnish stock listed corporations during the period 2002-2005. They conclude that communication by GRI responsibility reporting is a crucial explanatory factor for the market value of corporations, and point at theoretical, managerial, as well as legislative implications.

In their article, 'A Reinterpretation of the Principles of CSR from the Perspective of Sustainable Development', Bjørn-Tore Blindheim and Oluf Langhelle start out by presenting and comparing the basic principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD) (Blindheim *et al*, 2010). Given basic principles of CSR and three levels at which CSR may operate - legitimacy on the institutional level by satisfying demands and expectations of society and stakeholders; public responsibility on the organizational level by expressing a legitimate scope of corporate responsibility; and managerial discretion on the individual level by "doing what is right" - Blindheim and Langhelle undertake a discursive reinterpretation of these CSR principles from the perspective of sustainable development, based on the concepts of jurisgenerative politics and democratic iterations by Seyla Benhabib in political science and philosophy (Benhabib, 2008; Benhabib, 2006), and present possible implications for corporate social responsibility and corporate social performance.

Sture Packalén's 'Culture and Sustainability' presents an important and convincing call for *culture* to become an inherent and fourth dimension of sustainable development, side-by-side with the traditionally taken-for-granted economic, ecological and social dimensions (Packalén, 2010). Packalén describes how responsibility, ethics and aesthetics go together and how culture is needed as a means by which necessary communication and actions for sustainable development are shaped and enhanced. Going beyond the traditional understanding of culture in terms of all its elements of, for instance, theatre, film, music, art, architecture, literature, museums, and so on, Packalén proposes an advanced understanding of the concept of culture to embrace also norms, values, assumptions, traditions and practices. Of course, concepts such as CSR and sustainable development are normative concepts, and by recognizing and using the ability of culture to arouse feelings and create emotional empathy, we may be better equipped as citizens to work for sustainable development. The article by Packalén presents an important argument for culture to be an important means and dimension of sustainable development.

In Conclusion

This issue, along with the special issues that have preceded it, makes a valuable contribution to the discourses, narratives and communication that focus on aspects of corporate social responsibility. The authors bring critical perspectives to a concept that has sometimes been conceived as little more than public relations in practice and make a valuable contribution to the academic discourse on CSR. Our thanks go to all of the authors for their papers and to the many scholars who have enhanced the quality of the issue by acting as reviewers: David Gibbs, Peter Groenewegen, Edgar Göll, Michael Hall, Diane Holt, Derick De Jongh, Timothy W Luke, Henrik Nilsson, Johan Sandström, Peter Söderbaum, Karolina Windell and William Young. Thanks! We also wish to thank ERPEnvironment for making possible a series of special issues in our areas of interest which has enabled the editors and the writers to make a focused contribution to an important area of research which still has crucial questions awaiting investigation. Peter is also humble for the time that his wife has given him to conclude the article although on parental leave throughout 2009 and well into 2010. Tack så mycket!

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