

## Book Review

**CATHERINE DOLAN and DINAH RAJAK, editors, *The Anthropology of Corporate Social Responsibility*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2016, 274 pp. (hb £60).**

Corporations, an omnipresent form of organisation in today's society, are increasingly called to participate in tackling environmental and social issues such as climate change or refugee crises by 'taking responsibility' and supporting governments and civil society. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement can be seen as a response to the public's increased attention to corporate malpractice, financial scandals, and human rights abuses since the 1990s, but it can also be interpreted as an idea that co-emerged with and as a product of neoliberal capitalism starting in the 1940s. Looked at either way, the underlying premise of CSR is that a corporation is an organisational form that bears some kind of responsibility towards society and the environment at large.

The first edited anthropological volume on CSR is a much awaited, timely, and important contribution, ethnographically addressing these manifold practices labelled CSR. It was developed from a special issue of *Focaal* in 2011 and a conference panel in Vancouver<sup>1</sup>, both titled 'Ethnographies of Corporate Ethicizing'. What makes the volume particularly

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<sup>1</sup> The panel was organised for the Canadian Anthropological Society and American Ethnological Society conference in May 2009 (<http://aesonline.org/meetings/past-spring-conferences/aes-2009/>).

interesting is the focus of the ethnographic lens on corporations as agents in the negotiation of social, ethical, and moral goods rather than merely synonyms for global capital. Editors Catherine Dolan and Dinah Rajak make the case for an anthropology of CSR that looks beyond the normative evaluation of corporations being 'good or bad for society' and aim instead to shed light on 'the ambivalences, contradictions and potentialities that inhere in the morality of the corporate form' (p. 2) and its attempts to 'be responsible'.

The overarching question that connects the ten chapters in the volume is how different actors conduct social responsibility in the everyday practices of corporations and their bearing on social and material particularities. The contributions cover a wide range of countries (e.g. Bangladesh, Cameroon, Chile, the UK), industries (e.g. cosmetics, mining and extraction, garment), and practices. In the introduction, the editors offer an overview of social studies of the corporate form, discuss the idea of the anthropomorphic corporation, and critically engage with business-driven approaches to development. The contributors then deconstruct the imagined personhood of the corporation by focusing on the people acting on behalf of the organisations and the concrete practices related to CSR. In the Afterword Robert J. Foster argues that responsibility can be understood as a form of debt. Yet, 'irresponsibility appears to be built into the corporate form' (p. 248), which is equally indifferent to debt towards the workers, the shareholders, and the stakeholders. Corporations are legal vehicles for disavowing debt, and therefore, he concludes, 'CSR is ultimately oxymoronic' and thus we need to ask 'Who owes what to whom' (p. 248).

The contributions, each rich with empirical details, demonstrate what can be gained by researching CSR ethnographically, as they provide detailed accounts on the sense-making and power at play in the personal and corporate relations. The contribution of Muñoz and Burnham, drawing on the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project, shows how even subcontracting local companies can be framed as a form of developmental aid, which then becomes 'a goal in its own right' (p. 154) and mobilises political support from the government. Analysing these complex webs of relations between corporate representatives, local business owners, NGOs, and the government, Muñoz and Burnham show that the project fell short of the promised local business development. The introduction of new laws and bureaucratic formalities where the project was conducted was presented as a corporate gift of development through the corporation's partnership with the World Bank, but this standardisation was not necessarily perceived positively by the subcontractors. In a similar vein, Katy Gardner (p. 128) vividly describes how Chevron used the language of 'partnership' when engaging with communities on the edges of their gas plant in Bangladesh. While the local people hoped for employment and long-term investment, Gardner argues that Chevron successfully avoided assuming responsibility for the local population through their clearly defined community development programs.

The chapters by De Neve, Cross, and Dolan and Johnstone-Louis look closely into supplier/buyer or client/seller business relationships and how certain ways of controlling mechanisms were framed as ethical and moral. In these cases, corporations' quests to strengthen their position to define appropriate behaviour and ultimately self-regulate sanctions for non-compliance leave little room for those subjected to their practices to counteract them. For example, in De Neve's case, South Indian garment suppliers, who simultaneously find themselves under rigid ethical evaluation and cost-cutting demands, employ practices considered to be business strategies to avoid rigid dependency on a single corporation, such as carefully selecting a range of clients from local and international markets. Each chapter concludes that the corporations' superior position is strengthened through 'politics of ethical compliance' (p. 86, De Neve), 'making poverty business' (p. 69, Dolan, Johnstone-Louis), and 'ethic[s] of detachment' (p. 125, Cross).

Only two chapters in the volume engage with cases where it was not the big corporation but the opposition that successfully claimed their interests. In Li's account, engineers rendered water reservoirs surrounding Pascua-Lama gold mine in Chile measurable. Yet, when the actors involved in fighting the mine made the glaciers a socioenvironmental issue, the engineers were unable to define the value of the glaciers in terms of their equivalence in water. The glaciers became a strong anti-mining symbol bridging different and sometime contradictory interests of the opposition. This made them incommensurable with water and hence non-compensable for the mining company. Resisting the 'logic of equivalence' (p. 201) imposed by the mine's engineers became an effective political strategy of opposition to the goldmine. Similarly, Sydow shows the limits of globally conceptualised CSR practices by comparing two communities' reactions to the strategies of the same gold mining company. In Peru these strategies created political resistance but in Ghana they mobilized support. As she argues, 'standardized technologies of governance do not lead to standardized effects of domination [...] While global standards are mostly disconnected from local history, the people's reactions are not' (p. 223).

With the exception of these two contributions, the volume seems to suggest that the CSR movement by and large has increased the power of corporations at the cost of communities and smaller suppliers. The book thus critically engages with the common trope employed in CSR practices of creating win-win situations and it contributes to a fuller understanding of the actors, interests and agendas in the field of CSR generally. Yet, it seems that the selection of the chapters implicitly makes a value-statement, as all chapters (except two) seem to agree that leading moral and ethical discussions on topics that Hardin defines as 'collective contradictions' (p. 195) benefits the corporate players.

While the individual contributions deconstruct the abstract idea of globalised hegemonic CSR by highlighting the political agendas of corporations' representatives making moral and ethical claims, the overall composition of the case studies implicitly suggests that the 'Global North' makes policies enacted in the 'Global South'. The policy defining practices of CSR seem to be everything that is not 'local', in the sense that they are somewhere other than the geographical focus of the individual case studies. While this illuminates positions of power in the interactions of corporations as global players and the communities as local cases, it also reifies the very narrative of CSR constructing the morally engaged (modern) Global North beneficially developing or maliciously dominating the rest of the world. The two chapters drawing on the performance of CSR in the Global North engage with a locality of abstraction, where dominant discourses of CSR are created in 'theatres of virtue' (p. 29) in conferences and boardrooms in London (Rajak) and through 'virtuous language' deployed by industry and academia alike in the US (Kirsch). Rajak's and Kirsch's focus is on the locality where CSR policies are defined and the hegemonic idea of CSR is created. The other chapters located in the Global South deal with the enactment of certain manifestations of this globalized idea of CSR and its concrete translation into what can be considered CSR practices. Further enquiry into the morality of the corporate form could look at CSR practices in the Global North and policy-making in the Global South to counter the dominant notion of the Global North defining and 'the rest' needing CSR.

While this volume provides a much-needed overview of anthropological inquiry of practices framed as CSR, it might come at the expense of a clear analytical definition of the concept. A clear analytical definition of CSR would show the limits of such a movement, but it would come at the expense of tracking the use of the concept by corporations themselves. Thus, the authors deliberately follow the practitioners' definition of CSR as a somewhat vague catch-all concept that responds to and incorporates new ideas in adapting to the 'particular political-economic and social currents in which it is deployed' (p. 5). While we get a clear idea of the emic understanding of CSR, we are left with the question of what precisely we learn about the morality of the corporate form and what practices would not be subsumed under the concept of CSR. Nevertheless, this volume draws an excellent polyphonic picture of CSR practices with ethnographic perspectives at its centre and therefore provides a comprehensive introduction to anthropological engagement with the morality of the corporate form. As such it is invaluable for students and senior researchers alike who are interested in questioning this form of business organization, the idea of corporations as socially responsible, and the social and moral orders of today's societies.

*Deniz Seebacher (the University of Vienna)*

## About the author

Deniz Seebacher is a DOC-team fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, PhD candidate at the University of Vienna, and Research Associate at the School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. Her main interest lies in contemporary organisations and organising, especially in (business) practices framed as corporate social responsibility and sustainability. Her PhD draws on extended ethnographic fieldwork in one of Turkey's largest apparel corporations. [d.seebacher@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:d.seebacher@sussex.ac.uk)  
// [deniz@vereinmindset.org](http://deniz@vereinmindset.org)