

***Corporate Social Responsibility? Human Rights in the New Global Economy*, edited by Charlotte Walker-Said and John D. Kelly. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 392 pp. ISBN: 978-0226244273**

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The term “corporate social responsibility” or CSR, means different things to different people. CSR is an umbrella term and CSR scholars have often debated what obligations (if any) fall within it (Wettstein, 2016; Ramasastry, 2015). The lack of a common definition for CSR and the ensuing absence of normative consistency or commonality around the concept is exactly what this edited volume seeks to exploit. The editors, Charlotte Walker-Said and John D. Kelly, point to the emergence of a myriad of CSR initiatives, dating back to the post-World War II Nuremberg trials through current corporate responses in particular industries, such as tobacco and oil and gas, and argue that a serious evaluation of CSR is timely, if not overdue.

Demands for corporations to take account of their role in society and their specific impact on workplaces and communities have grown exponentially in recent decades. As this has been happening, the language of discourse has changed and CSR, a term used widely in the 1990s has arguably been overtaken by concepts such as corporate sustainability and business and human rights (BHR). The latter term, in particular, is perhaps a more precise subset of CSR that embodies legality and techniques that prize accountability over the broader CSR concept, which is traditionally associated with voluntarism.

Regardless of this emerging and arguably now dominant BHR discourse, the editors seek to step back and ask if CSR as a phenomenon can solve “fundamental human rights problems” and what impact CSR has on “the broader human rights movement?” These are difficult questions to answer without first defining CSR, but the editors deliberately choose to leave this open in order to garner wide-ranging and sometimes opposing views from their contributing authors. On one view, CSR has become a “dirty word” (31) symbolizing a victory for corporate public relations over real advances in human and environmental rights protection. Alternatively, CSR can be viewed as a useful, albeit broad, framework for guiding business toward appropriating more ethical and humane standards. The editors have gathered together an interdisciplinary group of authors from anthropology, law, sociology and politics to provide a critical perspective on the achievements, limitations and future of CSR.

This volume is comprised of fifteen chapters organized in three parts, including a wide-ranging and insightful introduction by Charlotte Walker-Said. Part I encapsulates the debate around CSR as both a tool for communication and coercion. The first chapter, by Peter Rosenblum, reveals his premise in his chapter title “Two cheers for CSR!”. He offers an interesting and critical analysis of the development of the CSR movement but argues that despite its limitations CSR has opened the door for advocates to force changes in corporate behaviour that might be classified

as CSR victories. The next three chapters provide an opposing view and argue that CSR is big on rhetoric and short on achieving real changes in corporate behaviour. Peter Benson provides a succinct and stark insight into the corporate operations and responses of the global tobacco industry. He argues that even if corporations are armed with all the good intentions potentially attached to CSR, ultimately they are “beholden to the fiduciary responsibility to shareholders, which often entails continuously legitimizing and expanding harmful industrial processes” (68). Anna Zalik focuses a critical lens on the lack of true transparency in the oil and gas sector and how corporate participation in audits and some voluntary initiatives have been used as tool to thwart rather than advance human rights advocacy. Stuart Kirsch also challenges Rosenblum’s more cheery assessment of CSR and argues that the CSR discourse “extends the power of corporations to achieve their goals through the use of virtuous language” (107).

Part II introduces the role and relevance of the law into CSR. At first glance the second part of the book combines vastly different topics into one section but the thread running through these chapters is the variance of how law (both hard and soft) interfaces with CSR. The first three chapters, by Jonathan Bush, David Scheffer and Scott Gilmore, separately deal with different aspects of military, humanitarian and criminal legal procedures and delve into their relevance for corporate accountability including their relationship to current human rights litigation against companies. Caroline Kaeb’s chapter offers a bridge between the hard and soft law chapters that bookend this part of the book. Kaeb examines the limitations of hard law in influencing corporate behaviour and suggest that morality and motivation should not be discounted as factors that can drive corporate compliance. The two remaining chapters, by Amelia Evans and Ursula Wynhoven and Yousef Aftab, veer sharply toward a discussion of soft law and in particular the role of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) in regulating corporate conduct. As nation-states, business and non-government organisations (NGOs) have come to rely more heavily on private regulation to improve corporate respect for rights (Locke, 2013), MSIs have emerged as a potentially effective mechanism to carry this burden. These chapters highlight that in-depth analysis of MSIs, their legitimacy and effectiveness (Mena & Palazzo, 2012; Baumann-Pauly et al., 2016) remains an area ripe for further academic scholarship.

Part III uses the backdrop of corporate engagement and exploitation in Africa to examine the interaction of CSR with the role of nation-states in regulating economic activity. Does CSR provide states with an opportunity to legislate on such “social” issues or does it negate or at least diminish the need to do so? This section is offered as ‘mini-laboratory’ or case study of the potential of CSR and sits rather oddly with the preceding chapters but nevertheless provides an interesting insight into the impact of CSR on select parts of Africa. While the reader may well be expecting a discussion that highlights the limitations of CSR in this context, it also offers some (albeit limited) hope as CSR permeates the broader development agenda in Africa. William Reno’s opening chapter in Part III, reveals the often understated link between business and armed conflict and has obvious parallels with the earlier chapters by Bush, Scheffer and Gilmore and perhaps would have logically been situated in Part II. Charlotte Walker-Said’s chapter examines the link between sustainability

and economic development and argues that both governments and companies have much in common and there are mutual benefits to be gained when sustainability is linked with issues like transparency, responsible investment and guardianship of human and environmental rights. The final chapters by Lauren Coyle and then Richard Joseph, Kelly Spence and Abimbola Agboluaje provide separate case studies of CSR in action in Ghana and Nigeria and the many limitations of both law and CSR in tackling the challenges that arise in attempting to marry sustainable development with short-term economic profits.

While this collection showcases the diversity, along with the limitations and achievements of CSR, the reader does not necessarily finish being any wiser as to what specifically CSR is. But perhaps this is both exactly the point and the problem of CSR. In practice, CSR continues to operate as a broad rubric that encompasses everything from corporate philanthropy, public relations to potential corporate accountability under criminal law. This book validly highlights the broad range of activities that fall within CSR and usefully documents the impact of CSR on the broader human rights movement and its incursions into areas such as criminal and humanitarian law that are underexplored. However, it does not (deliberately, I suggest) provide an answer to the question posed at the outset as to whether CSR can solve “fundamental human rights problems.” As a sceptic I do not believe it can and I for one, tend to believe that CSR, as a loose and amorphous concept that emphasizes self-guided corporate decision making, had had its day and that the time has come (as several authors in this book argue) to concretize corporate responsibilities for human and environmental rights.

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