THEME SECTION

Ethnographies of corporate ethicizing

Catherine Dolan, Christina Garsten, and Dinah Rajak

Introduction: Ethnographies of corporate ethicizing

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Abstract: As the global community confronts increasing economic, social, and environmental challenges, the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement has demonstrated a powerful capacity to offer itself up as a solution, circulating new ethical regimes of accountability and sustainability in business. This article introduces five contributions that explore ethnographically the meanings, practices, and impact of corporate social and environmental responsibility across a range of transnational corporations and geographical locations (India, South Africa, the UK, Chile, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo). In each of these contexts corporations are performing ethics in different ways and to different ends, from the mundane to the ritualistic and from the discursive to the material, drawing a range of actors, interests, and agendas into the moral fold of CSR. Yet across these diverse sites a set of common tensions in the practice and discourse of CSR emerge, as the supposedly “win-win” marriage between the social and the technical, the market and morality, and the natural and the cultural becomes routinized in global management practice. By tracing the connections and conflicts between the local micropolitics of corporate engagement and the global movements of CSR, the collection reveals the ambiguous and shifting nature of CSR and the ways in which social and environmental relations are transformed through the regime of ethical capitalism.

Keywords: capitalism, corporations, CSR, development, ethics

As corporations confront new social and environmental challenges to their operations—from concerns about labour productivity to community resistance, environmental activism, or saturated markets—the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement has demonstrated a powerful capacity to offer itself up as a solution. Today, ethical initiatives, from certification and labeling schemes to social marketing and sus-

tainability programs, are ubiquitous, circulating new regimes of accountability that aim to institute ethics and social responsibility in global business practice. Indeed, while ethics were once the currency of philosophy and religion, they have increasingly become the province of corporate capitalism, as the market supplants politico-judicial and religious domains as society’s ethical arbiter. It is now the global brand—

whether Coca-Cola, Nike, Wal-Mart, or L'Oréal—that serves as the guarantor of social welfare and environmental stewardship, uniting financial profit with social good in the localities in which companies operate across the globe, and giving rise to a contemporary expression of what has become known as “enlightened self-interest.”

But despite the growing orthodoxy of corporate responsibility, and the web of standards, auditors, and certifiers that make up the burgeoning ethical industry, our knowledge of how ethics are practiced in the everyday routines of organizations and differentially grounded in particular social and material realities remains underdeveloped. How then do we make sense of the emergence of these new forms of ethical corporate capitalism, encapsulated in the discourse and practice of corporate social responsibility?

Almost two decades ago James Ferguson, in making his case for an anthropology of development, wrote that the study of development had been dominated by an “ideological preoccupation with the question of whether it is considered to be a ‘good thing’ or a ‘bad thing’” (Ferguson [1990] 1994: 14). The study of CSR has been similarly polarized, drawing supporters and critics in equal measure. While advocates extol CSR as a radical reorientation of business for the twenty-first century, heralding a new era of “humane capitalism,”¹ critics have sought to expose CSR as “a Band Aid over deep capitalist scars” (Jones 1996: 8), a smokescreen which can be blown away to reveal an unchanging capitalist order (Sharp 2006). Yet, this normative preoccupation with whether corporations are a “good” or “bad” thing for society obscures not only the ideological fault lines along which the study of CSR has run, but also the ambivalences, contradictions, and tensions that populate the landscape of CSR.

As more transnational corporations step in to fill the ethical void, as it were, left in the wake of neoliberal capitalism, there is a growing need to grapple with the myriad configurations of CSR and the expectations and frictions the movement is generating. Yet while anthropolo-

gists have turned their attention to the life worlds within complex bureaucracies, exploring the inner workings of governmental and non-governmental organisations, the focus of this work has remained for the most part on the public sector (see for example Anders 2005; Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Mosse 2005). What is missing from the picture is the private sector, and in particular large corporations. Recently, however, anthropologists have begun to engage with novel forms of “ethical economy” in industries around the world, including garments (De Neve 2008), soft drinks (Foster 2008), petroleum (Shever 2008), mining (Rajak forthcoming; Welker 2009), pharmaceuticals (Ecks 2008), and retailing (Dolan 2007), charting and problematizing the contested morality of the corporate form (see, e.g., Benson and Kirsch 2010).² The articles gathered in this themed issue aim to build on and extend this emerging area of anthropological enquiry, bringing together five contributions that explore ethnographically the meanings, practices, and impact of corporate social and environmental responsibility in a variety of social, cultural, and geographical locations (India, South Africa, the UK, Chile, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).³ The section raises several questions concerning the ethical turn of corporate capitalism including: how does the embedding of ethics within commercial rationalities blur the boundaries between moral and market forms of exchange? In what ways do systems of ethical and environmental governance introduce new forms of management, control, and discipline that alienate rather than empower? Are CSR standards and protocols replacing human forms of sociality with a virtual “transnational economy of inspectability” (Mutersbaugh 2005: 391)? Does corporate responsibility challenge existing patterns of inequality, or is it implicated in the reproduction of power inequalities, creating new geographies of inclusion and exclusion? The collection addresses these questions through ethnographic accounts of “ethical” practices in a range of transnational corporations—Anglo American, De Beers, Barrick Gold, and Avon—revealing the local realignment and reordering

of social relations produced through the contemporary reign of corporate responsibility.

The articles bring new perspectives to these diverse forms of ethical corporate capitalism, engaging how ethics are defined, authorized, and embedded across companies, commodities, and countries. Rajak opens the account by introducing the ritualized performance of CSR in what she terms “theatres of virtue,” the cosmopolitan arenas in London in which dominant discourses of CSR are produced and authenticated as transnational corporations (TNCs) stake their claims to global corporate citizenship. Moving from the sites of discursive construction to that of material production, Cross’s article explores the intersection of CSR and management regimes on the shop floor of a diamond-polishing factory in India. Li and Hardin, exploring the seemingly incommensurable worlds of Chilean gold mining and wildlife conservation in the Congo Basin, draw our attention to a common theme: how regimes of power and vested interests mediate CSR’s exercise of responsibility. Dolan and Johnstone-Louis complete the collection with a study of the archetypal “bottom-of-the-pyramid initiative,” Avon Direct Selling, describing how “poor” women are repurposed as the instruments of ethical capitalism in the “New South Africa.” In all of these contexts, corporations are practicing CSR and deploying ethics in different ways and to different ends, from the mundane to the ritualistic and from the discursive to the material. Thus, we see how new ethical schemes are routinized in novel management practices as well as longstanding business models (Cross, and Dolan and Johnstone-Louis), how they are instrumentalized in response to particular local or global challenges (Li and Hardin), and how they are marketed in cosmopolitan arenas to celebrate and naturalize corporate virtue (Rajak). Yet across these diverse sites certain continuities in the practice and discourse of CSR emerge, a set of common themes on which these contributions reflect.

First, the articles attend to a broad concern with how companies practice “ethics,” exploring what people do when they engage with ethics in

organizational contexts (Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes 2007). This emphasis on “ethics” as process foregrounds the “making” and “doing” of CSR in situated contexts, shifting the focus to how moral strategies are rendered visible and legitimate through quotidian practices. Several articles address the question of how these processes of corporate ethicizing and social responsibility mold the subjects they seek to transform: whether as Avon’s army of empowered entrepreneurs (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis), or the attempt to create a disciplined and “modern” workforce (Cross); as active participants in corporate processes of “stakeholder engagement” (Li), or the right kind of NGO “partners” for corporations (Rajak). The focus on how companies shape the targets of their ethical actions also points to another critical theme that runs through the collection. The CSR movement projects an inclusive vision of empowerment and social responsibility through corporate investment, partnership, and market mechanisms.⁴ But in practice, as the articles in this section highlight, they often prove to be exclusive, privileging certain actors, agendas, and interests while marginalizing others, despite a rhetorical, if not often institutional, commitment to principles of collaboration and participation. In fact, as the articles illustrate, defining the boundaries of participation, that is designating who is and who is not included in the moral fold of CSR, transforms not only the targets of CSR initiatives, but its agents. For example Dolan and Johnstone-Louis (this volume) show how Avon’s empowerment initiatives require participants to embody the model of the successful entrepreneur. Similarly, Rajak (this volume) illustrates that the performance of corporate–civil society partnership (the mainstay of good corporate citizenship) often demands that NGOs conform to a hegemonic conception of the “perfect partner,” one which accords with dominant corporate interests, norms, and ideologies.

A second, related concern running through the papers is the uneasy fusion between the spheres of affective ties and self-interested calculation that underlie the CSR mission to remoralize the economy. At one level, the

discourse and practice of CSR draws on elements of morality and affection not usually associated with the working of corporate capitalism, penetrating the technocratic world of mineral extraction or the supposedly pure free-market rationalism of the free-trade zone, and unsettling the accepted wisdom that such corporate spaces institutionalize asociality in its most detached form. Yet as Dolan and Johnstone-Louis's article shows, the intimate world of social attachments and moral obligations drives not only Avon's CSR agenda, but its commercial success. At another level, Cross's article shows the productive work that distance, dissociation, and detachment perform for CSR, as corporate virtue operates through estrangement as much as intimacy. As an ethic, detachment assumes both human and technical forms. On the one hand, we see how the global firm sustains non-binding attachments to producers, circumscribing the boundaries of relationships in order to short-circuit obligation and dependence. On the other hand, we witness how the contemporary modalities of ethical governance, such as standards, protocols, compacts, and auditing technologies, are increasingly proxies for face-to-face interactions, replacing social relations with the material artifacts of ethical regulation.

Third, the five articles engage collectively with questions concerning the interrelation of global discourse and local practice that constitutes corporate social responsibility. As a global ethical regime, the CSR movement appears as a marriage of "global" values and "local" practice, systematized in technical reporting frameworks and international corporate codes or compacts which claim to be simultaneously globally applicable and locally responsive. Yet the claim to global values is far from neutral, just as the technologies employed to embed these corporate ethics in practice are much more than just technical mechanisms. The discourse and practice of CSR attempts to standardize, categorize, measure, and routinize different forms of value (economic, ethical, legal) in a supposedly "win-win" marriage of social and commercial objectives that works for all parties involved, even those with apparently conflicting interests, as

the articles in this section show: for example the community and the corporation, environmental activists and mine engineers (Li, this volume), workers and managers (Cross), a cosmetics firm and its door-to-door sellers (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis). As the collection reveals, this equation glosses over the tensions and disjunctures among the different ethical values and interests of actors drawn into the transnational networks of CSR. Companies do not simply extend universal ethics to operational localities. Rather, ethics take shape within the particularities of place, as commercial imperatives, social relations, knowledge forms, and cultural meanings, to name but a few, come together to create different "ethical formations," or in Li's words new "logic[s] of equivalence" that arbitrate the conflicting values inherent in CSR. This demands that researchers examine different points, intersections, and levels within these processes, tracing connections (and conflicts) between local micropolitics of corporate engagement and global movements of CSR. The articles in this collection go some way to capturing these multiple scales, from the ritualized performance of corporate citizenship in London conference suites to business strategy devised in corporate headquarters in London, Johannesburg, or Toronto; from the routines of the factory floor in an Indian diamond-polishing factory to the sales conventions of an "Avon Lady" selling door-to-door in Soweto.

In her contribution to this collection, Fabiana Li quotes a mine engineer remarking that "few people get to see the 'the complete picture.'" This is of course equally true of the anthropologists who attempt to capture these new ethical forms within corporations, constituted as they are by multiple social relations and transnational economic processes connecting centres at diverse points on the globe. But, while the full picture is always unattainable, this collection of articles contributes to building a fuller understanding of the shifting, ambiguous, and dynamic field of CSR and the constellation of actors, interests, and agendas that are drawn into or become subject to new forms of corporate ethicising.

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Hopkins 2007; McIntosh, Murphy, and Shaw 2003; Zadek 2001.
2. See also De Neve et al. 2008 and Garsten and Hernes 2009 for anthropological critiques of CSR discourse and practice.
3. The papers were originally prepared for the panel "Ethnographies of Corporate Ethicizing," organised for the Canadian Anthropological Society and American Ethnological Society Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia in May 2009.
4. Cf. the forum on De Soto's *Mysteries of capital* in *Focaal* 41: 179–201.

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