

Chapter 24

Analyzing CSR's Expectation Gap Through the World System Differential

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically approaches the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on the theory level with a new theory frame called World System Differential (WSD). The new frame has been developed by bringing together Luhmann's system theory, Grosfoguel's world system, and Irigaray's theory on gender equality empowerment. The principle assumption here is that CSR unchangeably consists of many contradictive definitions. This allows for framing CSR as an expectation gap. Applying the WSD to the CSR field, the expectation gap is analyzed as an idealized conception that is shaped by a proposed universal that everyone is assumed to desire in the same way. As result, the chapter shows that we must verstehen (Weber) CSR in its contradictive reflections by different societal rationalities, which by nature discriminates against the less powerful opinion holders. For this, the WSD can show its analytical usefulness as both a theoretical and a methodological tool.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a broadly accepted and widely used concept in corporate practice and the academic field. Originated by Bowen's (1953) conception of the social responsibilities of businessman, Carroll's pyramid of responsibilities (1991) and Elkington's triple bottom lines (1998), the concept has been internationally established. The puzzling aspect of the CSR field for academics and practitioners refers – directly or indirectly – to a generally defining theme for social responsible acting of corporations. Numerous academic disciplines, industries, CEOs, political movements, and the political establishment seek to frame the ground, on which claims are made and guidelines are proclaimed. The present chapter argues that a multitude of issues is thrown into the concept of CSR. In fact, CSR appears to be able to be everything when all definitions are taken together. Is it a useless concept then? Can every stakeholder draw the piece of it that fits his particular interest at best?

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This chapter would say no to the former and yes to the latter: CSR is designed to be a gap of contradicting expectations. Moreover, despite arguments on broad and tight definitions (Raupp, Jarolimek, & Schultz, 2011) a commonly accepted definition of the concept cannot be found. This is due to the societal antagonisms regarding class (first and foremost), but gender and ethnicity too among others. What is it then good for? It is perfect to understand how our current society is designed by the existing power relationships. The current mainstream definition of CSR tells us better than many other concepts about the principle obstacles of our future precisely because every stakeholder can pick the aspect of his interest from the concept. This begins with the three elements of CSR theory that contain economy, social, and environment (Haynes, Murray, & Dillard, 2013, p. 1). Each is contested and filled with numerous, contradicting concepts. Each of the three elements consequentially brings their contested definitions into the dispute on CSR.

On the one hand the CSR concept contains many of our most pressing problems in society (environment, development, social inequality etc.), from which all stakeholders pick the piece that fits their interest best, on the other hand is it exactly that characteristic which allows us to understand the world we are living in by analyzing CSR. For this purpose, a holistic theory frame is developed that portrays our world system and can be applied to understand CSR. Herewith differences between the societal expectations towards CSR will be revealed and on a system theory level understood (*verstehen*).

Here is to be taken into account that this chapter will outline the system theoretical viewpoint on CSR and not provide the one definition that is capable to bring together all existing approaches on CSR.

Consequentially, the chapter will deal with the issue what different expectations on CSR are framing the concept rather than proposing one clear definition. CSR is neither useless (see above) nor educible in its complexity. The paper draws on the fact that societal contradictions cannot and aren't meant to be harmonized within the concept of CSR. Different rationalities (Weber, 2009) of different stakeholders articulate their demands through different symbols (Joas & Knöbl, 2009), using different communication codes (Luhmann, 1999). Academic approaches have tried to understand CSR based within Luhmann's system theory by developing communicative structures for PR strategies on CSR to guide communications about companies (Szyszka, 2011) or tried to frame the perception and influence by a stakeholder system environment on discrepancies of trust and trustworthiness (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2011), but all have failed to provide a holistic theory. All existing theory approaches neglect the fact that a particular rationality is behind these definitions.

Here presented is the world system differential (German *Weltsystemdifferenzial* or WSD) as explaining theory frame to understand the expectation gaps towards CSR. Herewith, the examination refers to three theories: first, the theory of social systems and system environment (Luhmann, 1999), referring preferably to the social system's autopoietic character (Luhmann, 1985; Martens, 1991). Secondly to the cultural world system (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006) that is – thirdly – determined by valuation of a certainly defined normality to the extent that what some kind of people actually have is what all should have (Irigaray, 1993, 2003; Khader, 2008, p. 51).

Centered is the understanding of CSR's grounding problem as being less a lack of definitions but being more the lack of theory.

Scientifically this contribution challenges the established 'sociological thinking' which assumes that what we aim for is something we can find actualized in the world in which we already live in irrespective of the fact that we find the world dehumanized and dehumanizing (Irigaray, 2003, p. 167).

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