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Social Responsibility:
An Israeli Test Case**

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The Commodification of Corporate Social Responsibility: An Israeli Test Case

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Introduction

This article looks at a non-profit organization that promotes the social responsibility of business. The organization acts as an affiliate of a like-minded North-American organization and purports to introduce a “world” model of Corporate Social Responsibility (hereinafter: CSR) to the Israeli scene. I analyze the role of this non-profit organization in importing the model and in giving shape and meaning to the notion that businesses have social responsibilities.

The thesis I explore is that this organization functions as an agent in a larger field of activity that is organized around the idea of CSR. Within this field of action, strong social forces tend to shape notions such as “responsibility” and “social change” in ways that are amenable to business concerns. Shaped by business, “Social Responsibility” tends to become a corporate commodity in and of itself. It is traded as a moral resource and as a component of corporate culture, while facilitating a whole range of products and services. I thus offer a critical account, arguing that CSR may frequently function not simply as a buffer against corporate-bashing, but more generally as a constitutive force in shaping the relationship between business and society in contemporary global capitalism.

In the first part of the article, I lay theoretical foundations and introduce the notion of CSR as it emerged amid concerns about the unchecked powers of Multi National Corporations (MNCs). In the second part of the article, I present observations from the field.

I analyze a series of meetings held by mid-level human resources corporate managers under the auspices of the non-profit organization I studied, as well as a number of other events organized by this organization. Finally, I offer a number of conclusions about the relevance of CSR to our understanding of the trajectory of global capitalism and the way it operates through agents of civil society.

General Background

Multi National Corporations [MNCs] are at the vanguard of global capitalism. Riding the waves of free trade and floating on the neo-liberal raft, they are assuming economic and political powers far greater than many of the governments in whose territories they operate. The transnational corporation, writes DeWinter, “is emerging as a global private authority rivaling the state in many functions” (2001 , p.113; Sklair 1995).

Normally, the free hand corporations enjoy is the engine behind their surging capacity to constantly shift capital and labor, to change production sites and methods, to expand the markets for their products and services and to disseminate those cultural images that naturalize the advance of global capitalism as a whole.

Yet as corporations accumulate powers that equal and often surpass that of governments, corporations are also increasingly identified as players whose practices have implications that go far beyond the marketplace. Novel questions and concerns begin to arise, addressing the relevance of corporate activity to issues such as human rights and social rights, global and local social inequality, issues of identity, quality of life and freedom of choice. These new concerns are adjoined to the “older” concerns about the role of corporations in determining labor conditions, assuring product safety and protecting the environment. All in all, a novel

discursive field has emerged, organized around the idea that business should assume considerable social responsibilities.¹

I am talking here about the dialectics of global capitalism. Global capitalism relies on neo-liberal modes of governance at the state and supra-state levels. National governments are applying a neo-liberal logic to their own operations and subsequently undergo privatization and structural adjustments designed to relieve them from assuming a variety of social responsibilities. Yet this process, deliberately designed to provide market players with a free and open geo-political space in which to shift labor, production and capital according to profit considerations, at the same time reopens questions concerning the distribution of duties and responsibilities towards the general public.

The welfare state, once a bulwark against uninhibited capitalism, retreats to a point where the ability of market players to determine governmental distributive capacities becomes ever more transparent. Consequently, 'private' harms incurred by market players are conceptualized in terms of their infringement upon a variety of public issues such as health, education, employment, and housing. Moreover, more and more of the harm and risks posed by MNCs are conceptualized in terms of human rights violations (Held 2002). Thus, with the growing incapacity or unwillingness of states to provide various public goods, old-new expectations from the market arise. These expectations, in turn, reawaken new forms of the old (American) fears of "big business" and breed a variety of anti-corporate sentiments, "anti-globalization" movements, grass roots resentment of consumerism, and organized and quasi-organized "corporate bashing" and "corporate watch" practices and efforts (Klein 1999). The dialectic also operates at the material level, as the very same technological and

¹ Economist Milton Freedman claims that the Social Responsibility of Business is to increase its profits (Friedman 1970.) Ever since, this approach had been rejected or substantively modified (Dickerson 2002.)

informational platforms that sustain global capitalism also allow its critics to chase corporations across the globe (DeWinter 2001; Winston 2002).

This dialectic can be summarized as follows: The more the public domain is privatized, the more that the private becomes a matter of public concern. The naked logic of the market also breeds the naked logic of corporate social responsibility. My point, in short, is that under the new global conditions, moral entrepreneurship and political activism gradually moves from focusing on governments to focusing on MNCs. In fact, the very logic of the neo-liberal framework dictates that attention shifts from the responsibility of governments to the responsibility of corporations (Beck et. al. 1994; Soros 1998).²

In recent years, MNCs have become increasingly vulnerable to criticisms implicating them in a variety of human rights abuses, environmental disasters, infrastructure neglect, health hazards, and unfair labor practices that occur (mostly) in and around their operations in the global South (Sethi 2002). Corporate giants of various types experienced the heat of consumer boycotts, bad press, demonstrations, legal action and public shaming campaigns addressing their misconduct or lack of adequate response to a variety of perceived social

² Two general conditions are necessary in order for this dialectic to gain ground. First, the existence of a relatively broad, secured and stable affluent middle-class whose so-called post-materialist values (Inglehart 1990) make it more aware of and sensitive to social wrongs, harms and risks that are unevenly distributed across the globe. It is such secured consumers-citizens -- with access to information and with relative immunity from political persecution -- who may identify corporations as potential wrong-doers on the one hand and as potential providers of social goods on the other hand. Second, the existence of a rather developed set of organizations and associations -- from grass root movements to international NGOs - that are institutionally capable of mobilizing resources to check over corporate performance, to stir public opinion, to connect with effected communities across the globe, and to ultimately have a significant voice in national politics and in global governance institutions. These conditions are often met in the rich countries of the global North, yet even the haven that corporations often find in such countries is not entirely immune to the gaze of suspicious and critical observers.

wrongs. Various non-governmental organizations began to focus on the wrongdoing of MNC's and posed new demands for new forms of international regulation of businesses.³

These waves of criticisms and protests, in turn, forced MNCs to find ways of addressing and defending such threats to their reputation. In this article, I argue that the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility, as it is developed by MNCs, is a major form of corporate response to the growing public awareness of corporate power.

The Idea of Corporate Social Responsibility

Over the past few years, and in response to consumer boycotts and public shaming campaigns, many MNCs have begun to pledge allegiance to the idea that they do have social responsibilities. In a marked contrast to previous notions of ethical obligations based on a philanthropic spirit, the corporate version of 'social responsibility' is articulated as a fusion of doing morally good with an explicit rational-instrumental approach which emphasizes that it is 'good for business' (Harris & Klepper 1976; Post et al.1996; Castro 1996; Burlingame 1998.)

Consequently, MNCs now routinely sign various codes of conduct, committing themselves to ethical codes, and articulating company "visions" and "mission statements" (Dickerson 2002).⁴ One such example is the Global Compact sponsored by the United

³ For details on specific activities see, for example, the websites of Corporate Watch (www.CorpWatch.org) and Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org). For a rich data base that included press reports and academic articles see www.globalpolicy.org. For an overall assessment of contemporary attempts to bring MNCs under the jurisdiction of American Federal courts see Brown Chomski: 2002.

⁴ In political and academic circles, such responses are often conceptualized as forms of "responsive regulation" (Braithwaite 2002; Meidinger 2001.) The idea of "responsive regulation" is at once an attempt to address growing discontent with the consequences of neo-liberalism and a way of pacifying and de-radicalizing

Nations and entered into by hundreds of MNCs on a voluntary and unenforceable basis. The Compact enlists corporations to “support and respect the protection of international human rights within their sphere of influence”, guarantee “freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining”, work to ensure “the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labor and the effective abolition of child labor”, “support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges”, and “undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility” (www.unglobalcompact.org).

Corporations also promise to ensure that their sub-contractors and suppliers will respect desirable labor, environmental and human rights standards and some even submit themselves to external auditing in order to demonstrate their adherence to “responsible” standards (Sethi 2002). MNCs are also launching philanthropic campaigns focusing on communities and on what they now term “stakeholders”. At the same time, MNCs develop Social Responsibility programs, train community-relations managers, and design their websites to look as if commissioned by Greenpeace or Amnesty International (Dickerson 2002).

Often, these responses are public relations exercises, designed to improve image, and to conceal ongoing wrongdoing (Sethi 2002). To that extent, CSR is often regarded as nothing more than a meager substitute for the privatization of governments and as part of the neo-liberal ideology that celebrates civil society as a substitute for governmental responsibility (Chimni 2000). Critics thus often talk of corporate “green-washing” in respect to corporate adherence to environmental issues, and Amnesty International has lately raised the concern that corporate adherence to the United Nations Global Compact will allow corporations to practice “bluwashing” as well (www.amnesty.org ; Sethi 2002 , p. 98).

this discontent. Responsive regulation refers to a process whereby corporations willingly assume some social or environmental commitments, often in cooperation and through negotiations with non-profit interest-groups.

Yet the fact that corporations perceive ‘social responsibility’ as a virtue that they are expected to display has sociological significance in and of itself. First, the very fact that MNCs are acknowledging such responsibilities, even as a mere lip service to growing popular discontent, seems to further legitimize the idea that MNCs indeed do bear social and moral obligations. Thus, although CSR may be designed merely to counter corporate-bashing, the unintended consequence is that the idea that corporations have responsibilities that go beyond the duty to satisfy shareholders sets deeper into public consciousness and paves the road to novel and innovative popular demands.

Second, the actual way in which corporations embark upon and shape the idea of CSR may be of crucial importance for understanding the trajectory of global capitalism. As the idea of CSR is infused into corporate culture,⁵ a whole field of practices is being created, assigning scope and meaning to concepts such as “responsibility” and “social change” in ways that ultimately rework them as a discourse of neo-liberal commitment to help people adjust to the projected realities of global capitalism. In other words, the idea of CSR becomes, through the pervasive cultural presence of corporations and their satellites (Tomlinson 1991), a media for reconstructing the global social imaginary (Castoriadis 1987) in ways amenable to corporate interests.

Thus, corporate response to popular demands opens up an interesting space of inquiry concerning the sociological problem of the contingent tension between concepts of social change and concepts of social reproduction. On the one hand, adhering to the idea of CSR potentially equips corporations with a powerful legitimizing moral principle as well as with a branding device. On the other hand, this idea provides a point of leverage that allows various social groups and organizations to try and hold corporations captive of their own promises

⁵ Corporate Culture is treated here, following Kunda, as the “shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed” (1992, p. 8).

and thereby to incrementally rework some core understandings concerning the re-distributive obligations of capitalist market players (DeWinter 2001 , p. 111). In other words, while the dialectic of capitalist expansion may open up novel possibilities for challenging the existing order, corporate response to such possibilities may close up this space by way of locking the universe of CSR into corporate practice in ways that only serve to consolidate the unchecked powers of MNCs, to enhance their ability to police their own workforce and to shape corporate culture as an autonomous mode of governance (Kunda 1992; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977.)

In this article, I am interested in these latter “closing up” tendencies and, accordingly, focus on an organization that openly adopts a business outlook. I explore the way in which CSR is constructed to become part of the corporation’s normative control over its own employees (Etzioni 1961), a market of services, a domain of scientific knowledge, and a managerial form of expertise.

CSR as a Field of Practice

One important locus of the CSR field is the business school, where ideas of “corporate citizenship” are packaged for MBA students as scientific tools for enhanced corporate success. The old academic interest in philanthropy and charity moves from religious studies departments to the business school, and the old field of business ethics – heretofore marginal to business studies - enjoys a late blooming as notions such as transparency and accountability are incorporated into the general conceptual package of ‘social responsibility.’

Within this configuration, old models are readjusted without being fundamentally altered or challenged. On the contrary, the new demands for responsibility are neatly situated within the old models of how to successfully manage a business enterprise and how to ensure its

reputation. The classic models focused on prices, quality of products and services, strategies of distribution, and organizational structure. The new models enlarge the scope by expanding the notion of quality from its traditional association with the material aspects of the product or the service to a whole package of associations that link quality with “doing good” in a social-moral sense. Consequently, strategies of marketing are also being readjusted under luring titles such as Cause Related Marketing or Social Branding that are supposed to create Brand Loyalty (Bollier 1996; Carroll 1989).

Often presented as the product of scientific research, the new models teach students how to act as a “good corporate citizen”. For example, one such model teaches students that the good corporate citizen “sponsors community events, supports employee voluntarism, donates to charities, contributes products and services, supports community organizations” and its senior management is “active in the community”. This model is also quantified so as to allow corporations to measure their social performance. Usually relying on survey research methods, this measurement is then incorporated into more comprehensive models that assess the strength of the corporation’s reputation, its consumer “brand loyalty, its “employee loyalty”, and, ultimately, its financial success. Thus unlike “classic” bourgeois philanthropy that was strictly separated from the business, “corporate citizenship” speaks the language of instrumental-rationality that ties `doing good` to profits (www.measuringphilanthropy.com).

In tandem with business education, a whole commercial market develops around shaping, assessing, and consulting on the desired dimensions of business social responsibility.⁶ Accounting firms embark upon the CSR bandwagon, developing special expertise in “social auditing” and offering their commercial services to interested corporations. A new breed of strategic consultants is also operating in the field. With a

⁶ See Dezalay and Garth (1996) for a sociological analysis of emergent private markets and transnational orders through a network of connected players.

typical background in public relations, these experts now sell strategic CSR models, advise corporations on how to develop CSR campaigns, and offer follow-up reports and impact assessment studies. Law firms also begin to appreciate the new business opportunities this field seems to be offering. For example, lawyers are asked to advise on how to frame mission statements, social compacts and codes of conduct in ways that would not implicate corporations with contractual obligations they are not ready to assume.

Nowhere are the benefits of the CSR market felt more than in the industries of public relations and advertisement. Here, a new line of “social branding” strategies is already in full swing. Copywriters and graphic designers are now trained in the new art of associating products and services with “morally good” notions like saving the planet, educating the poor, reaching out to communities, and preparing children for life in the global village.

Another part of this field evolves through the activities of non-profit organizations. Sklair (1995) argues that “[t]he contemporary level of monitoring of corporate activities is historically unprecedented. There are thousands of organizations actively seeking out corporate malpractices all over the world” (Sklair 1995, p. 68). Referring to non-governmental bodies such as Corporate Watch, Sklair thus focuses on ‘confrontational’ organizations that play an important role in shaping the CSR field.

Yet the field also consists of Market-Non-Governmental Organizations (MaNGOs).⁷ Directly and indirectly sponsored by business executives, MaNGOs work to associate corporations with the voluntary and altruistic attributes of civil society. Their mission is to educate the corporate world about the merits of CSR practices, to initiate CSR projects, and

⁷ I thank Dicle Kogacioglu for suggesting the term MaNGO to describe NGOs that are either established by corporations or are geared to address the needs and interests of market entities.

to nurture ties with communities, civic groups, and other non-governmental organizations.⁸ There are dozens of such non-profit-yet-distinctly-market-players operating in Europe and the United States, facilitating yet another dimension of the evolving CSR field. It is on one such organization that I focus in this paper.

The Place of Non-Profit Organizations in the CSR Field

In general, non-profit organizations are ideally situated to transmit and implant a newly reworked neo-liberal version of civil society (DiMaggio and Anheier 1990.) First, as governments are pushed to undergo privatization and to introduce huge cutbacks in their public spending, various NGOs are deployed to perform tasks that governments cannot and do not want to accomplish, thus realizing the neo-liberal principle of “subsidiary”. Second, NGOs are expected to accomplish their tasks by displaying the merits of a rational market economy. They must act as businesses in relation to external actors such as funding bodies and they must demonstrate efficiency, sustainability, and financial soundness in their implementation of policies.

Third, social causes, in general, are often transformed by NGOs into `projects` and `campaigns`. Social movements have a political agenda, writes Taylor, while “neo-liberal civil society has social and essentially practical aims” (Taylor 1999). In order to achieve their tasks, non-profit organizations increasingly rely on experts who apply business-like models to social causes. These experts act as “problem solvers” who “sell solutions” to a needy problem-bearing “client population,” while constantly distributing the “right”

⁸ For example, a recently established Business Humanitarian Forum is a non-profit association based in Geneva, Switzerland. It aspires to bring “business and humanitarian organizations closer together in the interest of mutual understanding and cooperation, especially in areas of conflict” (www.bhforum.org.)

organizational model across the globe (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer et. al. 1997; Hulme and Edwards 1997.)

In her study of the transformation of social movements in Latin America into rationally structured NGOs, Taylor captures some of the implications of this shift. She shows that many NGOs, adjusting to the tailored programs of donors, turn their attention to educating vulnerable groups to take economic control over their lives by learning new skills and accounting or marketing methods. Such programs, writes Taylor, “have subtly swapped a rhetoric of political empowerment for a rhetoric of socioeconomic empowerment by educating and equipping people with the skills and organizational tools for coping with the harsh realities of contemporary capitalism. A discourse of political participation has been reworked as a discourse of neo-liberal participation in the market, helping to reinvigorate the national economy and to facilitate the nation's economic success” (1999, p. 273.)

Of course, however sweeping this transformation is, not all movements and organizations comply with the imposed agenda. Mapping NGO strategies for promoting the social responsibilities of corporations, Winston (2002) draws a distinction between those organizations that retain a “confrontational” mode of operation and those who seek a “cooperative model.” While the former adhere to tactics such as public shaming, legal action and consumer boycotts, the latter seek “partnerships”, “constructive dialogue”, and “shareholders’ consent”. Moreover, while the former often engage in campaigns designed to subject corporations to enforceable standards, the latter emphasize – in the spirit of “civil society” – the voluntary nature of corporate responsibility.⁹ Typically, organizations of the

⁹ So far, attempts to move CSR into the enforceable domain of law seem to make little headway.

For example, the European Commission recently rejected proposals to adopt a regulatory approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR) in its July 2001 white paper on the subject. The EC emphasized the 'voluntary nature of CSR', and clarified that the EC did not intend to impose

former type tend to emphasize and expose the social wrongs MNCs. Organizations of the latter type tend to act as spoke-persons for business “in” civil society and as capitalism’s moral voice.

The distinction between confrontational and cooperative NGOs should be understood as a spectrum of possible lines of action within a generative field of practice. In general, many of the NGOs and non-profit organizations active today are not grass-roots organizations. Rather, they often consist of a limited number of experts and professionals in a given field of practice. In fact, the social profile of many activists in NGOs is not that different from those of their counterparts who hold key managerial positions in MNCs. The educational background tends to converge as well, as managing corporations and managing NGOs are increasingly being taught together in courses offered in law and business administration schools.

Whether we talk about governments, multinational corporations, or non-governmental organizations, there seems to have emerged an extremely vibrant and dominating model concerning the “right way for doing things”. This “right way of doing things” purports to be divorced from actual substance as it deals with forms, procedures, key words and key concepts alone. When it comes to states, as Meyer et. al. (1997) show, a world cultural model determines what a polity should do in order to look like a state, from establishing borders, through the collection of statistics along predefined criteria, to actually filling forms in a competent way. When it comes to NGO’s, as Robinson (1997) shows, they are increasingly expected to demonstrate that they are capable of implementing projects because

responsible behavior on companies by regulation or directive. It rejected mandatory social and environmental reporting, said it will not introduce compulsory social labeling of products, and rejected proposal for European regulation requiring pension funds in member states to disclose any socially responsible investment policies they may have

(www.euractiv.com.)

of their organizational and skill capacities, technical competence, managing systems, and cost effectiveness capabilities. In fact, regardless of substantive goals, NGOs resemble their corporate counterparts in their reliance on experts and knowledge systems and in their drive to perform well in terms of economic sustainability and rational efficiency. Turbo-capitalism, as Beck (1994) dubs the latest capitalist drive, has come to triumph first and foremost in its ability to determine an overriding blueprint for action, in terms, when all is said and done, of knowing how to write a funding proposal. Thus, the so-called more confrontational organizations are not necessarily outside the sphere of influence of corporate culture and its hegemonic conception of “how to do things rights”.

At any rate, in the next part of this article, I follow the activities of an organization that promotes CSR from a business perspective and in this respect clearly belongs with the cooperative side of the spectrum. I show how this organization spreads and nurtures CSR in ways that transform CSR into a marketing device, and into a commodity that conceals the power relations that underlie the relationship between global capitalism and social inequality, social harm, and social wrongs.

Methods and Design

COBIS¹⁰ is a non-profit organization established in 1998 and funded by a Jewish-Canadian Foundation and a big American Foundation. COBIS is an affiliate of an American organization that had been created by business people and corporate entities. The American ‘parent-organization’ describes itself as a global nonprofit organization that helps member companies achieve commercial success in ways that respect ethical values, people, communities and the environment. Its member companies have nearly 2 trillion dollars in

¹⁰ The name is fictional, as are the names of activists belonging to this organization.

combined annual revenues and employ more than six million workers around the world. It has partnerships with CSR-Europe, Business in the Community in the U.K., and with like-minded organizations in Brazil, Chile and Israel. On its website, the organization also speaks of establishing connections in sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia. It offers “tools, training, advisory services,” as well as “innovative models” for promoting what it considers vital corporate assets. The organization thus functions as a corporate agent that spreads and exports a collaborative market-society model in order to address what it refers to as the increasing expectations of investors and consumers.

COBIS establishes at least part of its legitimacy by emphasizing that it is an affiliate of the American organization and by presenting itself as a local agent of a global trend. Thus I find COBIS to be an interesting case for understanding how CSR is packaged and distributed as if locality is irrelevant. CSR, as a principled corporate outlook, “should” look the same in Tel-Aviv, Jakarta, Atlanta or Istanbul.

Of course, many studies have by now taught us that globalization is not to be equated with homogenization and that the spread of global models of whatever sort does not mean that they are evenly distributed across the globe or that they assume identical forms wherever they come to nest (Lechner and Boli 2000; Held et. al 1999; Appadurai 1998). On the contrary, such global models do acquire local flavors, respond to context and history, and in turn also affect the “source.” The particular character of CSR projects in Israel thus merits a separate analysis.¹¹ However an analytic distinction has to be made between the actual content of CSR projects and the form through which COBIS tries to institutionalize CSR as a field of practice. As we shall see, COBIS does not advocate any substantive line of CSR action that may suit

¹¹ My observations of CSR projects in Israel show that this activity tends to assume a nationalistic character. This tendency seems to respond to the local political culture and to a historical tendency to blur state-society boundaries (Ben-Eliezer 1999). For example, corporations operating in Israel – local and international alike – often demonstrate their CSR commitment by “adopting” a military unit, helping Jewish immigrants to adapt to Israeli society, and taking care of victims of terrorist attacks. In general, corporations tend to present their activities as displays of progressive Zionism (Barkay 2002).

the particular needs of the society in which it operates but rather advances CSR as a universal model. In the last part of the article, I discuss the implications of this strategy for understanding the trajectory of CSR in general.

COBIS is by far the most influential and the best publicly known organization promoting CSR in Israel, and hence plays a decisive role in giving the scope and meaning to the field. For two years, I closely followed the activities of COBIS. COBIS was established, and is currently managed, by two women who are assisted by a small administrative team and by an eighteen member advisory board. COBIS has offices in Tel-Aviv and it runs most of its operations in that metropolitan area.¹² During the period spent studying COBIS, I came to know the organization's leaders and administrative personnel, attended meetings in which COBIS worked to establish a committed cadre of mid-level corporate "community-ties" managers, watched a series of public events (conferences, ceremonies and workshops) sponsored by COBIS, interviewed corporate managers who were involved with COBIS, interviewed members of COBIS's Advisory Board, and obtained access to the materials of a training program for aspiring community-ties managers that was organized by it. As a supplement to participant observations and in-depth interviews, I relied on reports and articles in the mass media and on COBIS's own newsletter. I also relied on the archives of a leading business-oriented newspaper that cooperates with COBIS in administering a yearly competition in which corporations submit apply for being recognized as leaders in CSR projects. I obtained access to these applications and could thus follow actual CSR projects undertaken by dozens of corporations.

There are five primary layers of operation characteristic of COBIS: Building a committed cadre among mid-level corporate executives; Nurturing committed patrons of CSR among

¹² Tel-Aviv is Israel's corporate center and an aspiring global city (Sassen 2000).

senior corporate management and owners of capital; Equipping corporate managers with distinct language and managerial tools; Establishing rituals of recognition and creating role models; Developing a market for CSR products and services. In practice, these layers often overlap. In what follows, I introduce them by providing accounts of specific events. All in all, I analyze the process through which CSR emerges as a corporate commodity that de-politicizes the meaning of `social change` on the one hand and of `social responsibility` on the other hand.

Gaining Access to the Field

My first meeting with Sara took place at her home. She lives in a beautiful villa at one of Tel-Aviv's most affluent neighborhoods. Seated in the living room overlooking the large garden, I learn about Sara's strong social connections and about the path that led her to establish COBIS. As an undergraduate Sara studied sociology and psychology, followed by a business-management program at Tel-Aviv University. She began her career in public relations, working for 14 years in a leading advertisement agency. "From the start," she says, "I treated my job as related to public affairs. I developed a sense for strategic consultancy and thought about my job as having to do with identifying relevant publics, those publics whom we nowadays call stakeholders. In this sense, it was already there that I developed an intuition for what later became my mission."

However Sara's "moral entrepreneurship" (Becker 1963) is seldom articulated independently of a business orientation. It was a strict business orientation, she says, that was her entry point into the world of corporate citizenship. Still holding to her commercial job, she first tried to build a partnership between the Israel Banks Association and a number of children-oriented non-profit organizations. I ask her why she chose that particular issue: "Because this was a consensual issue. Because the way to build corporate involvement in

social issues is by looking for issues that are not politically sensitive, by looking for issues upon which everyone seems to agree that the contribution is for the greater social good.”

This theme, as we shall see, is characteristic of COBIS’s direction and goal.

It was at this point that Sara met Anat, the person who runs the affairs of a Jewish-Canadian Foundation in Israel. The Foundation wanted to sponsor an advertisement agency that would specialize in corporate-community affairs on a cost-only basis. Eventually, the idea did not materialize. Yet influenced by this new horizon, Sara decided to quit her job and to take time thinking about her future career.

Anat encouraged Sara to attend a conference on corporate responsibility in Los-Angeles. “It was there that it all happened,” she says. “I became captive of the idea of introducing a business attitude to social affairs. This idea is also my engine today: Applying business methods to worthy social causes.”

Sara befriended Dan Bolding, the president of the American organization and formerly a V.P. for Community Relations at a big multinational corporation. Bolding came to Israel and Sara prepared his visit and coordinated it with the Community Relations committee of the Israeli Industrialists Association. The original idea, Sara tells me, was to establish a local chapter in Israel. Sara prepared a “feasibility report” and that document later became the foundation of COBIS’s own “business plan.” Thus by the fall of 1998, COBIS was established as a chapter of the American organization. It was mainly funded by the Jewish-Canadian Foundation, with some extra funds provided by another American Foundation.

Eventually, COBIS did not operate as a chapter of the American organization. The latter operates as a member organization because historically, as Sara explains, it developed “from below.” It developed through the initiatives of individual business leaders and community-relations executives who formed a coalition of corporations acting as members in an umbrella CSR network. Sara soon realized that such a basic infrastructure did not exist in

Israel and that it might have exhausted all of COBIS's resources to enlist such members. The strategy that was chosen, therefore, aimed at working "from above". In a sense, says Sara, "we are an entrepreneurial start-up, seeing ourselves as a missionary organization that spreads the word and educates corporations about the utility of CSR for the business enterprise."

But what will be an adequate social investment? I ask her. Sara says she is "ideologically uncommitted to definite answers. The market has to choose freely for itself." Her way, COBIS's way, is not to decide on projects. Rather, she tells me that the next big project of COBIS is to establish a Forum for corporate managers who will professionally get acquainted with the idea of CSR. Such a Forum is badly needed, she says, in order to institutionalize CSR as a corporate practice. Currently, related activities are highly diffused: "Hi-tech companies have human-resources people who engage with CSR as a way of attracting satisfied and committed employees; service-oriented companies have spokespersons and public-relations managers dealing with CSR for publicity purposes, and consumer-product companies have marketing managers who apply some CSR for marketing purposes. Thus our idea is to create a more comprehensive, informed and professional cadre that will bring everything together." As we part, I am invited to attend the planned meetings of the Forum.

Over the next two years, I attended the meetings of the Forum. Yet my attendance had been clouded by concerns about my own intentions in studying COBIS. These concerns were bred by an incident that took place shortly after I was granted permission to attend the Forum. Soon after the first meeting I witnessed, I attended a one-day convention in which several corporations presented their CSR orientation to a rather wide group of NGOs. The idea was to offer NGOs a glimpse at potential partnerships or, as one attendee observed, an

opportunity to identify market-based donors. Several corporate representatives talked at length about various philanthropic activities while the audience sat quietly and passively. The meeting as a whole had not been designed to facilitate discussion about potential dilemmas concerning the relationship between non-profit organizations and commercial firms. At some point, I decided to make a provocative intervention. I addressed an executive of a cellular phone company who previously talked about some “good deeds” of the company. I suggested that these good deeds were a kind of sham designed to conceal the environmental and health risks this company created. While quite a few people in the audience enthusiastically clapped their hands, and while many later addressed me in private expressing their gratitude for my “courage,” the people on stage became quite angry and silenced me with arguments of irrelevance. Naomi, Sara’s closest ally and right-hand partner in COBIS, witnessed the incident. She told Sara about my approach and warned her that my study may hurt COBIS. It took a number of soothing conversations to convince Sara and Naomi that I meant no harm. Eventually, I was admitted into the Forum, granted full cooperation, and was treated cordially and even warmly. Yet I think it is noteworthy that my presence thereon had always been somewhat suspect, having acquired a reputation of a critical observer in an organization that consciously struggled, as we shall see, to adopt a model of business cooperation and to refrain from addressing issues that had a confrontational potential.

The Forum

Sitting at a round-table with five other people, I listen to a lecture about the business merits of good community relations. It is the first meeting of the Forum, and the guest speaker is from the U.K. After about fifteen minutes, I notice that the people in the audience become

somewhat impatient. I do not know whether it is the English or the content that puts them off. The speaker is using many terms that are familiar to me as a student of CSR, but I am not sure what they mean to the others. Among other terms, he keeps referring to NGOs and their relevance for community work. Although there is an equivalent term in Hebrew, the word NGO is commonly used as such, in English. I pretend ignorance and turn to a neighbor sitting on my right. “Excuse me, what is a NGO?” My neighbor’s name-tag tells me she is the spoke-person of one of Israel’s largest banks. “I have no idea,” she says, and turns to her neighbor. Her neighbor, a public-relations manager of a reputed company, does not know either. Soon it turns out that no one at my table is familiar with the term. A woman on my left turns to me, sighs, and says she does not understand many of the terms used in this lecture. After a while, I tell my neighbors that I discovered what a NGO is. Everyone nods in relief and we resume our focus on the speaker.

Almost two years later, I attend a ceremonial event organized by COBIS. There, I speak to one of the instructors in the training program for community-ties managers that COBIS has put together. He tells me that lately he took his class to visit and to learn about one of Israel’s most important NGOs dealing with the rights of foreign workers. When the visit was over, he tells me, the class complained to him that it had been an interesting visit but that they failed to see its relevance for their own program. “What do you make of it?” I ask him. “Well, these are different people from the ones we previously had,” he says. “What do you mean?” I ask again. “Well two years ago, most of the people who came to us knew little but had hearts and good intuitions. They were committed to the idea. Now it is the reverse. Most people who come to us are sent by their corporations, it pays them to attend, but they care less about social causes.”

Of course, the first episode may only tell an innocent story about a language barrier. And the second episode may well be just that, a coincidence. Still, these episodes represent two

ends of a timeframe in the course of which COBIS operated as an entrepreneur and a group of corporate (mainly human resources) employees were ushered into the idea of CSR. In the process, several patterned features have become quite visible.

Consider the way the Forum operated. All the meetings of the Forum were held in one of two seaside resort hotels at Tel-Aviv. A big conference room always awaited the participants, where six to ten round tables were set in front of a small podium. A large screen was placed behind the podium, where all the lecturers displayed their PowerPoint presentations. Participants were free to choose their seats and each, following registration and the receipt of a name-tag, received a packet with relevant materials about the meeting, the guest lecturer and COBIS. Often, the packet included academic articles or some informed reports about CSR activity in the U.S. and the U.K. At the back of the room, a rich buffet was always available to participants and each meeting ended with an informal dinner.

As aforementioned, the idea behind the Forum was to create a cadre of committed corporate managers who, through acquiring professional tools, would be in a better position to shape corporate policies in the direction of CSR. I arrived early to the first planned meeting. There were four women present: Sara and Naomi, the two leading figures of COBIS, and two younger women responsible for the administration of the event. The women were excited and tensed. They did not know what to expect. They extended about one hundred invitations to mid-level and high-level executives, but they had no idea who would show up. Eventually, some fifty people attended the meeting. Like in the other meetings that followed, these were overwhelmingly mid-level managers occupying positions in human resources, marketing, public relations, and personnel departments. The

overrepresentation of women was also apparent, and it constantly stayed around seventy-five percent throughout the meetings.¹³

The first meeting was distinct in that many of the people looked slightly embarrassed, unsure about the others, and unsure about the purpose of the meeting. On the one hand, everything had been done to let them feel as important corporate executives. On the other hand, anyone I spoke with expressed uncertainty about the meaning of it all. Some, perhaps responding to this uncertainty, let me know that they were simply sent by their employers. Others, and these turned out to be a significant number, told me they were personally invited and urged to come by Sara.

Some women were an exception to the rule. They moved about cheerfully, hugged and laughed, and seemed very much at ease. Over time, I recognized three such women who, along with Sara and Naomi, seemed to function as a social core. These three women did not fit the general profile of attendees. One of them worked for a non-profit organization that mobilized corporate employees to donate money and resources to social causes, roughly along the lines characteristic of the American Way organization. She turned out to be highly fluent in CSR discourse and closely familiar with Sara. Another woman was an accountant who acted on behalf of an accounting firm that closely cooperated with COBIS. This accounting firm was the local branch of a big American accounting firm and it had already established a unit specializing in social auditing for social accountability. The third woman

¹³ The overrepresentation of women is an observation that merits an analysis which is beyond the scope of this article. In general, women with whom I raised the subject offered a plethora of explanations. One explanation was that it reflected the overrepresentation of women in the “softer” areas of the corporate structure in general and their overrepresentation in public-relations and human-resources departments in particular. Another related explanation was that women had a “heart” for caring activities and that this venue, in this particular context, provided new mobility and legitimacy opportunities. One could not but note that these explanations also pointed at the possibility of producing CSR as a marginalized area of corporate life through its association with women .

was one of the few in the group that already bore the title of a “community-ties” manager. This woman was hired by a big holding company, working directly under the daughter of the owner, himself one of Israel’s financial tycoons. Thus, embodying a mixture of an already established CSR expertise and established social ties with Sara, these three women consisted an inner core around which the network began to evolve. Over time, few other women joined the inner core and, over time, some social connections had been established among the attendees.

Indeed, it was in her opening statement that Sara set the agenda of the Forum: Educating the uninitiated about CSR and providing a setting for creating a professional-social network that would cut across corporate affiliation. From one meeting to the other, it became apparent that the latter goal was not less important than the former. Newcomers were not welcomed and complete strangers, however interested, were completely barred. I witnessed one episode in which a middle-aged man appeared for a meeting. He looked out of place, lacking the corporate aura about him. He was dressed in wrinkled clothes and held a plastic bag in his hand. He approached the registration desk and announced his interest in attending the day’s lecture because of his own affiliation with a non-profit organization that had a stake in the day’s topic. Naomi tried to explain to him that this was a closed event and that money had been paid to the hotel according to the number of attendees. The man was not convinced. Naomi went over to Sara, returned to the man, took him aside, and handed him a number of documents. Soon after the man, still grumbling, left the place.

Again and again, emphasis was put on the essential dynamic of social bonding and on the relevance of such bonding to the acquisition of a joint symbolic capital. At the heart of the effort was the emphasis on acquiring the appropriate shared terminology, often referred to as “managerial tools”, and on acquiring a shared narrative concerning the origin, trajectory and significance of CSR. A key role in this effort was played by the foreign guest speakers who

addressed the Forum. In learning about these guests, in learning through them about developments at the world's corporate "center", and in being introduced through them to a distinct language, the dual agenda of social and professional respectability was to be realized. As one participant put it: "The connection to America and Europe is very important, to show that we are not `softies` but people of the world."

In fact, most lectures were very similar in content and form. The same narrative was put forward again and again, and the same vocabulary was repeatedly showered upon attendees. All in all, it was the accumulated effect of repetition, more than the accumulated effect of progressive learning, that was supposed to produce the up-to-date globally-informed community-ties manager.

The Dissemination of Language, Tools and Outlook

Managing community relations for sustainable benefits; How to shape an approach and a subject for social change?; Environmental leadership as a business strategy; Applying the knowledge and experience of the American business world to Israel. These were the titles of some lectures given to the aspiring community-ties managers. These lectures were delivered by a British expert, a Canadian expert, and two American experts.

These guest speakers, talking to the uninitiated, looked and sounded extremely confident and upbeat. Using a business language, they all came to sell a product and they all proudly announced it. In the process, they were also convincing the audience that the growing demand for CSR engagement allowed for a respectable career.

Consider Robert Mayson, the first speaker who addressed the Forum. Mayson opened his lecture by referring the audience to his website and by establishing his credentials as a world expert on CSR. Upon completion of an MBA program, Mayson started a career as a

marketing manager with a big multinational corporation. Gradually moving into the CSR field, he became a director of a British MaNGO that operates as an alliance of over 700 national and multinational companies doing business in the UK. Its stated mission is to inspire business to increase the quality and extent of their contribution to social and economic regeneration by making CSR an essential part of business excellence. While acting as director, Mayson also held key positions with the British government's National Disability Council and the government's Disability Rights Taskforce. Thus, Mayson is example of a key CSR player, moving with distinction among governmental positions, business schools, corporations and the non-profit sector.

The other speakers displayed similar attributes. Edwin Yeats is the president and owner of a Canadian company specializing in "social marketing." Through him, the audience also learns about the opportunities for those interested in selling 'society' to the corporate world. Yeats begins by establishing credentials and by bestowing the aura of the sophisticated global corporate world upon the audience. Recently, he begins, "I advised DuPont and the pharmaceutical giant Glaxo-Welcom on how to launch CSR projects."

Rachel Kohen and Bob Bolding are officials of the American CSR organization. Kohen is vice-president of the Business and Environment Program of the American organization, and Bolding is its CEO. Kohen is an economics and public policy graduate who advises corporations on environmental issues and projects. Like Mayson, the word "sustainable" is key to her vocabulary. She offers corporations, giving the example of her work for a major car manufacturer, "sustainable strategies." Bolding came to Israel on a specific ticket: to help COBIS develop its future strategy and to suggest lines of action and services that may be provided by COBIS to corporations. As a bonus, he appears as both an inspirational figure and a global expert before the Forum. Indeed Bolding opens by saying he is from "San Francisco, from the center of the new economy, where I learnt new rules and

new terms: Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Citizenship, and the general idea that the private sector succeeds in ways that benefit the broader society.”

These experts all share a basic method in displaying their expertise and utilizing it for advisory work: Speak to business people by using their language and applying their outlook. But this is not merely a rhetorical game. The experts that address the Forum are experts precisely because they fully share and embrace a corporate outlook. In this respect, they are not external to the corporations they advise but part and parcel of an evolving corporate culture.

Mayson speaks about the imperative of “managing community relations as a business, designing strategies, goals and methods in ways identical to any other business department in the firm. The purpose of such enterprise,” he says, “is to create business opportunities for the firm, constructing a loyal cadre of employees who identify with their firm through CSR activities, building a market for the firm’s products, and developing a positive reputation for the firm.” Explaining that he is talking about “effective management tools for realizing CSR projects,” Mayson uses the PowerPoint presentation to introduce a string of ideas for the community-ties manager: encourage employee voluntarism, commit your superiors, integrate other departments of the firm into your projects, inform the public and assess community needs.

Yeats, a few months later, tells the audience that the goal is not mere philanthropy but “channeling corporate energies to the right places. Think of social initiatives just like you think of business, as having a potential for growth and sustainable benefits. My belief is that we enter an era of social enterprise and that it is real. Corporate can and do create social value as much as they can create a business value for themselves. And the two can and should be merged.”

Indeed, an ideological and practical manual seems to guide the steps each speaker follows in marketing CSR to corporations. First, establish credentials by displaying your fluency in business terms and by proving your adherence to the PowerPoint way of presenting an argument (neatly arranged Tables, mission statements, familiar buzz-words, etc.). Second, offer a broad narrative that “explains” (i.e. naturalizes) the new role corporations are to play in the global political-economy. Third, provide scientific evidence that CSR projects are a good and profitable business strategy. Fourth, make clear enough suggestions to position yourself or your organization as having the know-how and skills to integrate the needs of “society” with the interests of the corporation.

Launching his PowerPoint presentation, Yeats begins by saying he is a “product of the 1960s.” He then speaks of social issues as if they are commodities: “I began my activities around issues of health, but later I moved into poverty, culture, environment, and community. So I thought about a social market before thinking about the place of corporations in this market.” Yeats then reiterates a narrative that the audience repeatedly hears. This narrative always begins with the idea that globalization effects the relative power of corporations vis-à-vis governments: “As a result, corporations are interested in their place in the social arena and become involved with social change.”

Kohen reiterates this narrative as well. Her PowerPoint displays the basic idea of “creating a business value out of environmental responsibility.” She explains that the traditional business model was based on the simple equation of “Supply Goods and Get Your Investment Back.” Corporations worked vis-à-vis partners and investors on the one hand and vis-à-vis consumers on the other. They got governmental backing when needed. This model was based on a strict separation of the business from society. Social goals were to be met by the government, whose commitment was to treat people as citizens. In this business model, the corporation was not accountable to the public but only to the government (taxes, obeying

laws). But the world has changed. And the narrative reappears: “Globalization is about the triumph of the free market and about a central role for business because we realized that this configuration worked better and allowed world trade to open up. Consequently, the balance of power among states, market and civil society changed, as well as the balance between developed and underdeveloped states. As a result, a new business model was required. Business must be concerned about accountability and transparency and a new term is born: stakeholders. The consumers are not only consumers but must be regarded as partners. Treated as partners, the corporation’s financial success depends on making these partners feel that they are involved, that the corporation is sensitive to their needs. If this is not enough, you must also remember that the new approach is a global trend and that corporations who will fail to follow it risk falling behind.” Yet Kohen is cautious not to suggest that the engine behind these changes involve a growing public awareness that corporations create risks and harms. Like in all other lectures, a conflict paradigm is not to be found. Changes, in these lectures, do not imply conflicts but a functionality. Thus for example, consumer boycotts or other public forms of resistance to the harms and risks that corporations may disseminate will be typically discussed as the changing “concerns” of consumers, or the changing “needs” of communities.

But how does one know what to do? The general picture that emerges from the lectures seems to reduce “society” to “community” and “social change” to addressing the socio-economic needs of such communities. As one board member of COBIS puts it: “I believe in social involvement more than in social responsibility.”

Moreover, the typical advice the experts give to the prospective CSR manager, here formally defined as a community-ties manager, is to nurture “networks”. Kohen, for example, tells the audience: “Teach yourself, map the field, identify your partners.” And

Mayson offers the same expert advice: “One of your most essential tools must be the creation of effective networks. Such networks are a vital organizational resource.”

When Mayson speaks of “the community”, he actually speaks about low-income neighborhoods. “Such people are typically in need of a healthy environment, employment opportunities, and personal security,” he says. “You have to assess these needs,” he tells the audience, “and you do so by collecting information and by interviewing the locals.” All this, he says, in order to realize the ultimate goal that brings everything together: “We are talking about Passion Branding in America or about Cause Related Marketing in England. Both are expressions of a business strategy of linking together a social contribution and commercial profit.”

When Mayson finishes, many in the audience look tired. I think that the lecture flew over their heads and I search for reasons. Part of it was the mere fact that it had been held in English. Part was the unfamiliar terminology. But there was more to it. Mayson had a few underlying assumptions that ill fitted the situation. His presentation assumed a more or less established firm whose management is enlisted to community projects. It assumed a community-relations department already established as a more or less separate corporate unit. It assumed a more or less known budget allocated for community work. It assumed competent community-ties managers able to identify social needs. And it assumed a community identifiable and approachable by corporate personnel.

I try to find out how people feel and ask some of them what they have taken from the lecture. Some tell me they were impressed by the professionalism of Mayson but confessed to have been tired out. Others say that they still do not know what to do with all this information. One person tells me she got some good ideas. I ask her to elaborate. “Well, she says, I was really convinced that we have to simultaneously think both internally and externally, that we have to invest in good public relations inside the firm. I shall keep in

mind the need to create strong networks.” Another woman says that she learnt little, “but others must have learnt a lot. It was very good in terms of encouraging us to go on.”

Three months later, the Forum hosts Edwin Yeats, who is about to speak about “How to shape an approach and a subject for social change?” The first thing I notice is that the atmosphere is more relaxed. People seem to begin knowing each other, they nod and greet each other and gather in small groups of two’s and three’s. Sara opens the meeting by calling attention to the training program that is about to begin in a few weeks. Unlike the Forum, which is free of charge, the program has a quite costly tuition, but Sara urges people to register in order to practice the nuts and bolts of CSR work. As she speaks, I chat with the woman who sits next to me. She works at the public-relations department of a holding company. She tells me she met Sara when her company planned a community project and that Sara enlisted her to the Forum: “Thanks to people like Sara, we are more respected now. Only a few years ago, such projects were marginal and hardly considered. Now we are respected and we are being sought after.”

Yeats offers the audience a conceptual scheme that explains the move from charity to CSR and provides the necessary language and tools: From monetary contribution to community involvement; From ad-hoc action to thematic action; From exercising charity to exercising Change; From paternalism to partnership; From cash to resources; From marginal corporate action to central corporate action; From impersonal to personal involvement; From image only to multiple exposure; From “how much money to give” to impact assessment; From static to dynamic orientation.

All this is necessary, the narrative continues, because CSR is a global corporate trend, because corporations must fill the gaps left by retreating governments, and because it serves direct business interests. In particular, Yeats emphasizes a point that surfaces repeatedly:

Corporate employees develop stronger commitments to socially responsible companies than they do to indifferent ones.

In order to bring about change, says Yeats, you have to develop a “strategic focus.” This essentially consists of answering three questions that now appear on the screen: “Why? What shall we do? How should we do it?” And Yeats elaborates. The “Why” has to do with developing a framework that would enable the corporation to retain its leading position in the field and would serve and enhance the employee’s culture. The “what shall we do” has to be decided by involving employees. For example, by way of creating employee committees that choose by voting among several options of action. And the “how” has to do with harnessing the identity of the corporation to social innovation.

The people in the room are quiet. By now, they encountered a number of versions of a rather similar storyline. By now, a quite distinct role model is offered both in terms of one’s corporate identity and in terms of one’s social identity. But the people who sit around the tables are neither social scientists nor policy makers. What can they take from these talks? How can they apply it?

I listen to people commenting about the lecture as they stand around the buffet. They talk about surveying employees to find out what they want. One person says that employees are not interested in soldiers. Another says that her company surveyed employees and at the end resolved to establish a Foundation. And another pondered: “Do we have to follow employees’ preferences or to make marketing-based decisions?”

Indeed, it seems that one meaning that “social change” assumes when it is brought into a corporate framework has to do with CSR as a new means of social control inside the firm. One board member of COBIS says: “Over time, I understood that the important thing here is not our customers but our employees. The social involvement of business has a faster and stronger impact on employees than on customers. Employees that work for an organization

that is involved are more satisfied and loyal.” One participant in the Forum, a manager in a multi-national hi-tech company, agrees: “People like to know that their company does things. We think about our projects and the publicity they generate as a way to recruit employees.” And yet another participant aptly summarizes: “The community is first and foremost the community of employees. It is important to let them feel that they are partners.”

When I listen to people around me, they also seem certain that social change is something that has mainly to do with education. Attending a Business for Society conference organized by COBIS a few months later, this impression seems to be confirmed. Invited to choose among three separate rooms where some corporations display their social projects, 300 people press into the “education” room, while only thirty attend the “environment” room and a meager twenty the “welfare” one. Similarly, one community-ties manager admitted: “We prefer to work with children. First, it is more fun. Second, people don’t like to engage with old people. It is easier with children, people feel better with it.”

A couple of months later, after Kohen’s lecture, I notice a marked difference from previous meetings. People do have questions, seem more alert, more involved, obviously more comfortable with the terminology and the narrative they heard over and over again. Someone tells Kohen that Israel is not America: “Here people don’t care about pollution as much as in the US. So how should we begin?” “Education,” says Kohen, “you begin with education.” Another woman raises yet another concern. “My experience is that many managers do not believe consumers really care about harms and are ready to threaten bad companies. They just assume that the price of the product is decisive.” Kohen answers: “It is your job to convince them that the threat is real.” I ask her who should assume the task of educating corporations to build environmental business models. Kohen says that there is a growing profession of environmental experts who move among companies and provide such consultation services.

After a short break, discussion resumes. Without a foreign speaker at the center, talking in Hebrew, the debate really warms up. All seem to agree that the main task is to convince their own corporations. They are motivated, but also skeptical. People say it takes some “crazy committed ones” to push it through and that it is all about values and education. People begin to talk in terms of “We”, “our mission”, “our expertise”, “our values”. But a woman who sits next to me, an employee of a major holding company, says it is all “just a waste of time.” “So why are you here?” I inquire. “Because I was told to attend,” she laughs, “but they keep saying the same things and I did not learn anything new.”

Eighteen months have passed since Mayson addressed the Forum. Today, Dan Bolding will speak. He is the CEO of the American parent organization. Sara introduces him as the great inspirational force behind COBIS. Here is an opportunity to wrap it all up, to have a motivation booster that will make people feel they are part of an important and dynamic trend that emanates from the world’s corporate center. An opportunity to make people feel that they are part of an evolving corporate community and that they have real professional assets to offer to their corporations. Sara informs us that instead of the “regular” lecture, she will hold a short question and answer dialogue with Bolding. She begins from scratch. “What is corporate social responsibility?” she asks. And Bolding reiterates what many in the audience can now recite with confidence. “How would you plan a CSR program?” asks Sara. And Bolding’s reply focuses on the need “not to promise too much, to be clear and to avoid situations of choice between community involvement and business practices.” “Why do CSR?” asks Sara, and Bolding reiterates the scientific evidence that shows the economic value of voluntary community work. “How do you convince your company to invest money, time and effort in CSR?” asks Sara, and Bolding addresses the audience and asks if people have problems doing so. A burst of laughter. “The idea is to convince your company that your project will serve business purposes,” says Bolding, like all who spoke before him.

And indeed, Bolding and Sara ran an exchange that sounded like a grand rehearsal of the terms, narratives, and tone that the Forum was to adopt. Moreover, the dialogue was designed to boost morale, to insert enthusiasm, to make people feel they have a mission. And Bolding spoke of a mission, describing CSR as a “virus”, a “snowball”, a phenomenon that “rapidly spreads”.

The exchange ended with an optimistic tone. The mission seems self evident, and Sara summarizes it in an article she wrote, adapting the narrative to Israel. In general, she writes, Israel undergoes structural changes in tandem with the universal move to “a global village with a free economy.” Like many other governments, the Israeli government cuts health, welfare, and education budgets. “This creates a vacuum and increases the gaps, especially in Israel where the change is abrupt because of the previous legacy of heavy state involvement... thus there is a growing economic gap between those who enjoy the fruits of the new economy and those who suffer from the collapse of old industries and from not being able to join the digital revolution.” This is where corporations step in, capable of simultaneously filling the gap and rip financial benefits.

A similar message was sent by a local expert who was invited to address the Forum. Unlike the foreign guests, his lecture did not touch on CSR as a corporate model. Significantly, here was the only opportunity the Forum had to learn about the substantive problems and specific issues relevant to Israel. But the lecture did not allow for a discussion. Rather, it provided statistical data on various subjects of concern and emphasized the relative success of Israel in maintaining social policies. Thus, the lecture amounted to a general survey and concluded with the invitation to corporations to “step into places that the government cannot reach. Fill the gaps,” advised the expert.

In sum, community-ties managers and aspirants now acquired a language, a model, and important global reference points. Moreover, they were now backed by a social network and

by a respectable organization. The latter is an important agent in legitimizing global capitalism in the age of neo liberalism. It draws on the luring images of civil society and community empowerment while at the same time naturalizing the capitalist order. Acting as a capitalist agent, it purports to fill the gaps capitalism creates, while describing these gaps as inevitable consequences of rational progress. Indeed, the most striking feature of the lectures is their total disregard of the conflicts and struggles that breed the new pressures on corporations. On the contrary, the unspoken underlying “theoretical” premises of the lectures is that corporations “change” society by merely being “involved” in society and that this involvement is a function of a systemic need to fill gaps. Consequently, the way CSR is presented leaves a hollow core in its midst. CSR becomes a framework for managerial action that incorporates a language and a structure devoid of substance. We are left with CSR as a business outlook, a marketing device, and a corporate asset that can be traded, distributed, and displayed. But we still do not know what to do.

Establishing rituals of recognition and creating role models

In the previous section I looked at the way COBIS works at what we may call a corporate-grass-root level. Namely, at the way mid-level managers are socialized into a CSR orientation. At yet another level, COBIS invests efforts at securing a sound base among Israel’s business leaders. Of course, this investment may also bear fruit in respect to the self-esteem, motivation and professional confidence of mid-level community-ties managers. But it seems that the thrust of the effort here is to generate symbolic capital that would have both help institutionalize CSR at the corporate level and establish COBIS as the most important agent in the field.¹⁴

¹⁴ For the importance of rituals to corporate culture see Kunda 1992 , p. 154.

In this section, I focus on two types of ceremonial events. One is a Business-Society annual conference that COBIS helps to produce. The second is a Social Responsibility annual competition that COBIS launches in cooperation with Israel's leading business daily newspaper. These are ceremonial events in which corporations get a chance to display their social projects (typically termed "campaigns") and to encourage other corporations to follow. But not least important, these are good opportunities to see and to be seen, to be celebrated, to deepen connections, and, in general, to feel good about "making a difference." Although participants in the Forum of COBIS and in its training program attend these events, they are not at their center. In both events, front-stage is occupied by some of Israel's leading political and economic figures.

I arrive to the first event and go through a careful security check, and then enter a reception hall of a big five-star hotel. As a registered attendee of the Business-Society convention, I receive a thick file that includes a book published by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. This book contains information about dozens of companies who are "socially involved." Hundreds of people are already cruising the reception area. I identify many faces, since many here are known public figures: politicians, civil servants, celebrated owners of capital, CEO's, and journalists.

The Minister of Commerce and Industry opens the event and explains that he supports the convention because it is not about charity but about "a culture of business' strategic investment." Moreover, it is not about putting business in place of the state. On the contrary, "the commitment of the state will increase in tandem with the increased social investment of the business community."

As I wonder about these comfortable fusions of state, market and civil society, of commercial and social, of goodwill and strategy, the hall is darkened. We watch a short documentary. It tells the story of a hi-tech company that has a production site in a low-

income provincial town. The company helped establish a few computer classes there and also developed a computer training program for children. Then we watch another documentary, about a company that supports a center for battered women. Two prominent business leaders speak next, each in his turn emphasizing two ideas: CSR is good for business, and technological education for the disadvantaged is the high road to social change.

The sub-title of the convention is “social commitment as a business culture.” The convention halls are full with security personnel and with scores of smiling waitresses and hostesses. I talk to some of them. “Do you know what is going on here?” I ask. They do. More or less. “This is a high-society event,” says one, “they talk about charity.” “Yes,” intervenes another, “they talk about social gaps. There are many talks today,” she laughs. “Are you employees of the hotel?” I ask. It turns out some of them are temporarily employed by the catering company that routinely works with the newspaper in such ceremonial events. Others are employees of the newspaper. “We are paid seventeen Shekels an hour (about 3.5 dollars, R.S.), if that’s what you want to know,” says one, “talking about gaps,” and they all laugh.

Politicians and business leaders step on stage. They talk about “upgrading Israeli society,” about money for education, about technological training programs, about the importance of campaigns designed to educate youngsters to know and get involved in industry. They all speak about the “community” but nobody speaks for any community here. There is a lot about the commitment of the heart. Most of all, there is talk about social change as a function of channeling people to industry, the adoption of a business orientation and the creation of trustful consumers. Many business cards are traded, a cocktail atmosphere prevails, and I join a small group of people who look as outsiders. They are outsiders. They all work for NGOs and they came to see whether they can interest some of those who hold the resources in looking into their activities. They tell me that they do not

see much hope here. “This is not a place to create partnerships,” says one, “here they come to see each other.”

For COBIS, this year’s convention, as well as the one that followed a year later, is a success. “People are beginning to realize that what we do is important,” says one of the women working for COBIS. “They sense the opportunity, and at the very least they feel that if important others are doing it then it must be the right thing to do.” Indeed the convention seems to fulfill an important role. It is here that role models are displayed and it is here that social capital is exchanged. The “haves” are congratulated, courted, appreciated, told that what they do contributes to the general good. At the same time, they bestow their standing and prestige upon the event and its organizers. They are in a position to bestow the needed aura of respectability upon the idea of CSR.

The advisory board of COBIS is another symbolic projection of power and prestige. Sara recruited eighteen members to the board. In contrast to the overrepresentation of women among the community-ties managers, the participants of the training program and the Forum, only four women serve on the board. Anat, the Executive Director of the Jewish-Canadian Foundation that supports COBIS is one of them. The second woman is a member of a well-known Israeli family that owns a big dairy corporation. She is a personal friend of Sara and a role model of CSR in Israel. The other two are commercial lawyers with reputation in the area of social “giving.” Other members of the board include eleven business leaders who manage some big local and multi-national corporations, two accountants, and another lawyer. There are no representatives of “communities,” be them of the Arab minority, or any other social, ethnic or cultural group. I asked several people involved with COBIS about this composition and the answer has always been the same. COBIS is oriented to educate the business world about the merits of doing good, but it has no say about what is good, who should say who needs what, what is the community, and what do “communities” need.

Accordingly, the composition of the board does not reflect concerns about substantive directions CSR should assume, but rather concerns about the integration of a CSR orientation into corporate culture. For that latter purpose, the social capital of those who are on the board is crucial. Yet the implications of this strict separation between form and substance also become apparent. We are faced with a model that seems to be devoid of substance but in fact does create a strong gravitation towards the non-controversial, the consensual, and the “a-political.” If this is the case, then the model is inherently political, as it corresponds to the marketing and packaging of CSR as a corporate commodity that adds up to the surplus value of corporations.

One example of this consensual approach comes up when a community-ties manager is asked to reflect upon the commitments of his company to underprivileged minorities, specifically Arab children who are citizens of the state: “Well we focus on children in the vicinity. I don’t think people would object to help Arab children ... maybe yes. But we never got to it. Personally it is not a first priority. I prefer nearby places, these are not pleasant times.” When asked about diversity in hiring policies as a form of social responsibility he says: “We don’t have Arab workers. It is hard for Arabs to come here. Our cleaners are Arab women but they are not directly employed by the company. ... there is no activity in this area. I think that if the subject would have come up it would have been dismissed.”

As an organization, COBIS is adamantly against a confrontational approach and always situates its activities as geared to help and educate business to be more responsible. For example, COBIS is trying to promote the idea of an institutionalized “Social Standard.” Corporations who will voluntarily adopt the Standard will have the symbolic benefit of carrying a “socially approved” logo. Beyond that, COBIS hopes that such “socially approved” corporations will be prioritized in public tenders. However there seems to be

mounting opposition to the Social Standard initiative from the Israeli Industrial Association. Consequently, COBIS also seems to shy away from a confrontational mode that may be required in order to advance the project. Rather, it currently adopts a cautious stance: “For us,” says an accountant who works with COBIS, “the Social Standard is primarily an educational tool. We are less interested in pushing it forward as a formal device and more in using it to enlighten corporations about various dimensions of social responsibility.” And one community-ties manager, asked about conflicts of interest between social projects and corporate goals, said that such conflicts are resolved by removing the controversial issue from the corporate agenda: “I planned a campaign encouraging the public to use trains and then realized we owned petrol stations, so I gave it up.”

A glimpse at substance is realized in another event organized by COBIS. This is an event that caps an annual competition that invites corporations to submit their candidacy for a “social involvement” prize. The competition is jointly sponsored by COBIS and a leading business newspaper. Candidate companies are asked to fill a standard form and to detail a project that they consider fit for a prize. I have been granted access to these forums and was able to follow the selection process, culminating in a ceremonial evening, for two consecutive years. The competition, like the convention I discussed before, is designed to become an annual event, part of the effort to establish a tradition. I witnessed the events since their inauguration. Unlike the convention, the competition allows us to consider how CSR is being conceptualized by COBIS at the substantive level. Here we have a few dozen companies, many of which already retaining various types of ties to COBIS and its programs, who translate the abstract model to concrete “campaigns.” Here we have a chance to see how COBIS evaluates the importance and meaning of actual projects, some of which undertaken by people who attended the Forum and the training program.

This year, the ceremonial evening takes place at a concert and performance hall located in one of Tel-Aviv's poorer neighborhoods. A symbolic gesture in and of itself, a mixed crowd is invited to attend. Politicians and business leaders are present, but also people "of the community;" various people who benefited from corporate activity this year.

When I arrive, the reception hall is already full of people, standing and walking around, talking and sampling the modest yet high-quality buffet. It is the same old team of waiters and hostesses, cordially welcoming us, but the event is distinctly more casual and less pretentious than the Business-Society convention. I stand near the door, when Naomi of COBIS approaches me and extends her warm greetings. After two years in the field, some early suspicions are eased, and Naomi is more relaxed talking to me, more at ease watching me watch. Then Naama joins us. Naama works as a community-ties manager at a multi-national consultancy firm. I know her for quite some time as she held a consistent and noticeable presence at the Forum and became one of the core devotees. Naama tells me about her project in Jaffa, supporting Moslem single mothers. "Now I am going to leverage them," she says. "What do you mean?" I ask. "To leverage, to leverage," she says, "I am going to ask our public-relations department to help bring these women's story to the mass media." Then she tells me about her plans to register for graduate studies in sociology. "Why would you want to do that?" I ask. "Because after all that I have been through, I feel that I need to see the bigger picture, to get a sense of the broader meaning of it all, globalization, business responsibility, society, you know." We promise each other to speak again.

We are asked to enter the hall. It is almost full. The stage is elegantly arranged. There are many bouquets around and the whole stage is decorated with black and white pictures of smiling happy children. There is a wide screen at center-stage, so I expect some more documentary films about socially involved companies. A well-known singer opens the evening, singing two old Israeli songs. Later, after a number of celebratory speeches, we are

invited to watch a short performance by a high-school dance group. Twelve young girls go on stage, dressed in traditional Russian costumes. They perform a dance to the music of a British pop tune. The school has many students who recently emigrated from the former U.S.S.R., as well as many children of guest workers. We are reminded that last year, shortly after this very same event took place, many school children were killed at a Tel-Aviv music club following a terrorist attack. Many of these children studied at the high-school whose dance company we watch, because the sponsoring newspaper decided to adopt the school after the attack.

The winner is announced. This year, it is a big communication multinational corporation. They are acknowledged for their blessed work in the country's south. We watch a movie that shows how the corporation runs a number of social initiatives and the jewel in the crown is the establishment of "industry classes" for children from low-income families. A number of children speak to the camera, saying how grateful they are, expressing hope that one day they would become employees of that corporation. Last year, it was the Israeli dairy that received the prize. It received it for sponsoring a local basketball team as part of an "education for tolerance campaign." The evening ends with the Israeli song "I have no other country." It is a slight change from last year, when the audience was asked to rise and sing the national anthem.

Conclusion

COBIS embodies a particularly potent orientation in respect to the deployment of the neo-liberal outlook. Ideally situated in "civil society", it operates as an independent non-profit initiative that has to compete for funding, launch sustainable and financially sound projects, and employ or recruit experts to its cause. Formally independent of corporate interests,

COBIS is both a product of and producer of a corporate outlook and a neo-liberal orientation. It is thus a MaNGO that is totally geared towards a non-confrontational approach to the world of business. One consistent feature of COBIS is that whenever potential conflicts between business interests and social concerns seem to surface, considerable efforts are made to avoid tackling them and to “leave it to the market.” COBIS is not out there to tell corporations what to do but to tell them how to “transform philanthropy into a holistic managerial tool.” This feature of COBIS is most clearly seen in its tacit separation of form from content. COBIS tries to establish CSR by showing it to be a state of the art global model that reflects the concerns, interests and tendencies of MNCs not only at the world’s “center” but everywhere on the globe. Its specific mandate is to socialize Israeli corporations to recognize the importance of CSR and to develop the tools that would enable local corporations to develop their own CSR projects. As a basic launch pad, the philosophy of COBIS is that CSR must be regarded as an inherent part of an advanced managerial culture, as a fruitful investment and as a wise business strategy. In pursuing this philosophy, COBIS acts as if CSR is a world scheme that has no specific content and context.

This approach seems to be above politics but is in fact fundamentally political in its implications. It leaves corporate managers with a symbolic commodity – namely CSR and a host of satellite terms - that facilitates the transformation of a potential serious discourse about the duties and obligations of corporations into a discourse of neo-liberal “involvement” in the market. Thus employees become a ‘community’ and labor relations a question of employees’ satisfaction and loyalty (Kunda 1992.)¹⁵ At another level, but guided by the same approach, human rights often become a matter of launching training programs for

¹⁵ In this sense, CSR becomes part of the firm’s normative control apparatus. In speaking about normative control, I refer to attempts to guide employees to act in the best interests of the firm by creating an internal commitment and strong identification with company goals (Etzioni 1961; Kunda 1992, p. 11.)

“democracy and tolerance.” In fact social responsibility thus becomes a tool for swapping “a rhetoric of political empowerment for a rhetoric of socioeconomic empowerment” (Taylor 1999, p. 263.)

However I do not wish to end this article with a bleak view of CSR simply as means for the further rationalization of the capitalist iron-cage (Weber 1978). It was E. P. Thompson, writing in a different context, who noted the internal dialectic of the liberal-bourgeois commitment to the “Rule of Law”. The Rule of Law, he argued, may indeed be a legitimizing ideology for bourgeois interests. Yet in order for the Rule of Law to perform this legitimizing function, it cannot appear regularly as a mere sham. The commitment to the Rule of Law does create an opening, does mean that one can call upon the upholders of the rule of law to make their promises real (Thompson 1975).

Likewise, the idea of CSR may be turned upon his head, used as a venue for exerting greater demands for corporate accountability precisely because of corporate rhetorical adherence to its principles. Indeed, as I wrote in the introduction to this article, the social responsibilities of corporations in this neo-liberal era are becoming a political issue and are becoming a focus for deeply committed social movements and organizations. I believe it is largely in response to such external pressures that CSR emerges as a corporate field of action and rhetoric. Thus the greater question about the social duties of corporations and their trajectory is a contingency of the ongoing tension between capitalism’s dialectical tendencies to produce its own sources of resistance and capitalism’s capacity to absorb and contain such dialectical counter-hegemonic forces.

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