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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: EUROPE, RUSSIA, AND TUNISIA
An introduction

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ABSTRACT

This special issue includes papers related to Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Sustainable development discourse and practice, analyzed from an international perspective. CSR appears basically as an institutional tool, which compels the enterprises to act either proactively or reactively. While the mechanisms of globalization exert undoubtedly a stronger push towards standardization, insights from Europe, Russia, and Tunisia show how specific regional and national contexts may influence the perception and involvement in CSR.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Sustainable development, Institutions, Sectoral and territorial dynamics.

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The papers collected in this special issue of East-West Journal were first presented at the International Conference 'The evolution of the societal role of business in Europe' held in Paris on 29-30 November 2012. This conference was organized by LADYSS, ICT and SPHERE research centres of the University Paris Diderot in association with the International College of Territorial Sciences. The conference aimed at studying - in economic and historical perspective - the transformation of business involvement in society since the 19th century regarding environmental problems, stakeholder relationships and companies' contribution to territorial attractiveness.

The four selected articles deal with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a recent socio-economic issue in Europe and its eastern (Russian) and southern (Tunisian) neighborhoods. While CSR in developed countries has been relatively well documented, there is a need for better understanding of its forms and peculiarities in developing/emerging/transitional countries (Crane et al, 2014). We assume that specific regional and national contexts may influence the concept and practice of CSR. For example, the switch from planned to capitalist market economy in the former communist bloc led to the dismantling of former far-reaching social model based on state-operated business. Yet the societal acceptance of the market remains an issue that challenges the Western understanding of CSR (Koleva et al, 2010).

Corporate social responsibility in the context of sustainable development

Most papers in this issue link explicitly CSR to sustainable development. This relation could be explained by a recent evolution of the CSR concept. According to Capron & Petit (2011), during the last decades, the international genesis of CSR 'movement' has witnessed three major stages of conception interacting with each other and corresponding to specific economic, geopolitical and cultural contexts. The first stage, which started in the United States during the 1950s, and remains influential across the American continent, gave rise to the Business Ethics approach that emphasizes the personal ethics of managers as the main driver of CSR. The second one emerged in the same country in the 1970s and became prominent across the world in the next two decades; it set the basis for a new academic approach called Social Issues in Management, which considers that firm responsibility to stakeholders should serve its economic performance. The last conception has come to light only recently, especially in Europe, and is closely related to the idea of sustainable development as an overarching policy objective, included in the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy. As the European Commission stated (2011, p. 3): 'through CSR, enterprises can significantly contribute to the European Union's treaty objectives of sustainable development'. Some emerging economies with close ties to Europe, such as Tunisia, have been also influenced by this trend and draft their legislation along the same lines. However, as demonstrated by the articles of Marie-Pascale Senkel and Jouhaina Gherib, the growing importance of the topic of sustainable development in the business lexicon of Europe and Tunisia does not necessarily mean a real understanding of what it is about.

Sustainable development as a frame of reference has been internationally recognized since the famous Brundtland Commission's Report in 1987. Defined as 'a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', this concept has been invested by various theoretical approaches. According to mainstream economics, sustainability means keeping individual well-being (measured by utility, income or consumption) stable in time. This aim requires the maintenance of a constant stock of capital through time (provided a sufficient savings rate) to ensure that future generations will enjoy the same wealth level than the current one. Substituability among the different forms of capital is the main hypothesis. The depletion of natural resources could then be replaced by an increasing volume in physical or human capital. Additional conditions are actually necessary to meet the objectives of the model : the existence of backstop technologies, a specific investment regime satisfying Hartwick's rule and unchanging generation preferences. In other mainstream approaches, externalities play a major role and environmental policy is designed to internalize them. Companies are involved in this process by exchanging their greenhouse gas emissions permits on regional or national markets, paying green taxes or participating in voluntary agreements aiming at circumventing the negative effects of their activity to the environment. This vision of sustainability could be considered as 'limited' to the extent that it neither generates deep organizational changes at a micro-level, nor throws back into question the current institutional hierarchy of capitalism dominated by finance. As Petia Koleva pointed in her article, the concept of sustainable development does not upend the neoclassical approach to transport analysis, which asserts that the creation of a free market for common goods, such as access to cities and clean air, would be enough to balance transport demand and supply, and hence to reduce pollution.

On the contrary, the 'radical' conception of sustainability assumes the complementarity among production factors, as well as radical uncertainty about the renewable natural capital and the appropriate technological solutions (it is impossible to predict the negative externalities that might arise from a highly innovative process). It gives more room to political regulation rather than exclusively relying on market mechanisms. Ideally, this regulation would result from an international cooperation process aiming at setting the basis for a global governance, likely to deal not only with ecological problems (as in the case of the Kyoto Protocol) but also with global social issues such as poverty, social exclusion, various forms of inequality, vulnerability, etc. The coordinated distribution of efforts and the move to harmonization of environmental and social policy would need the setting up of a coalition of interests at international level involving a quadrilateral of forces: state, market, corporation, civil society. The creative tension between them could both deliver entrepreneurial innovation and put restraints on the inequality of power, and lead to the establishment of a "macro-convention" (Magnin, 2013) in favor of sustainable development, hence providing an alternative to finance-dominated capitalism. The recent elaboration of ISO 26000 norm on corporate social responsibility involving corporations, governments, trade unions, consumers, non-profit organizations, consultants and researchers is a step in this direction despite a legal power weakness which is limiting its institutional impact. However, the generalization of this experience is not self-evident. On the one hand, the specificities of national configurations of capitalism (Amable, 2003) slow down the elaboration of compromises conducive to new global governance. These specific features refer to the capacity to spread some stakeholders' unilateral commitment across a whole range of actors; the participation of local communities to the diffusion of social responsibility; the modes according to which a country transforms its international relations (Capron & Petit, 2011; Ashley & Crowther, 2012). On the other hand, as demonstrated by recent international summits on climate change, uncertainty about the duration of economic crisis and specific national interests make some governments reluctant to pursue costly environmental measures for future generations that do not vote in the present time, hence limiting the chances of global solutions. Last but not least, pressures from corporate lobbies against binding regulation should not be underestimated. In this context, tensions between conflicting interests regarding sustainable development are more likely to find a temporary solution on a less inclusive level (sectoral, national, regional...).

The levels and territorial scope for social responsibility

Sectoral dimension seems currently to be an important feature of CSR phenomenon closely linked to concerns about both environmentally sustainable development and forms of competition (not simply on price but also on quality labels). In addition to the petroleum and chemical industries, which have been strongly criticized by the newly emerging international civil society since the end of the 1980s, new sectors have been concerned such as transport and logistics. In their respective articles, Petia Koleva and Marie-Pascale Senkel note that the necessity to deal with negative externalities induced by transport activity has been integrated in the European agenda since 2001, followed by a focus on logistics in 2007. In order to avoid a company's image as a polluter, firms in these sectors were then gradually compelled to design strategies in line with environmental concerns. For example, a longitudinal study of Deutsche Post-DHL CSR policy shows that the latter went through four stages from 1998 onwards: absence, awareness, acceptance and finally active responsible leadership. These strategies involved cooperation with different stakeholders: customers, employees and shareholders are the most frequently quoted. Despite claims about sustainability, CSR strategy in transport and logistics sectors seems to be still influenced by the utilitarian view (see above) and its business case statement according to which the idea of sustainability opens up new business opportunities and becomes a factor of 'competitive advantage'. In fact, this economic-led soft compromise in favor of sustainability mirrors the influence of Social Issues in Management approach on official EU doctrine based on concepts such as 'responsible competitiveness' or 'sustainable market economy'. The latter tries to re-legitimate big European corporations against the aggressive competition coming from emerging countries with poor environmental and social legislation. Consequently, the lack of consensus on main environmental and social issues at international level tends to transfer the responsibility for promoting sustainable development to key sectoral corporations through voluntary measures. The resulting drawback is a reversal of the sustainable development issue : 'the latter is shown to be favorable to the competitiveness of a given firm while the stake in coupling CSR and sustainable development is the responsibility of all firms' (Quairel & Capron, 2013, p. 143, original emphasis).

Study of CSR in Tunisia conducted by Jouhaina Gherib offers an interesting insight on sustainable development commitment of a larger number of firms operating in that country. She demonstrates that the interaction between specific features of national capitalism (e. g. significant weight of the state, dominance of small and family-owned companies), the influence of globalization (integration of some sectors in global supply chains) and relations with the EU (the perspective of free trade agreement on industrial products), shaped the perception and involvement in sustainable development. The search for differentiation and enhancement of the brand image turns to be the most important motivations for this commitment, especially as far as large Tunisian industrial companies are concerned. But the pressure of law is also a discriminating element. According to the author, isomorphism phenomena in the field of CSR could be spurred by the state, because of a legacy of strong state intervention in Tunisia. This argument has been also put forward in the context of Central and Eastern European countries in transition, where the lack of local political leadership as well as the European Commission's reluctance to level the CSR playing field beyond business self-regulation, make it difficult to bridge the CSR regional gap (Steurer et al, 2012).

The analysis proposed by Pascal Grouiez puts social responsibility at the crossing of sectoral and regional levels. The concept of ‘productive configuration’ is used to study strategies of various agricultural stakeholders in the Orel region in Russia. Each configuration is based on a specific institutional arrangement in a highly competitive transitional context that leads farmers and ‘communities’ to reach a compromise on a bunch of social services previously offered by collective farms. These services range from helping owners of a plot of land to sign contracts with food-industry (as in the case of independent farms) to financing roads, housing, gas networks and public schools in rural areas (as in the case of private agroholdings). The author shows that incentives from local authorities played an important role in two out of four ‘productive configurations’ during the 2000s. They interacted with the rules co-produced among actors at the micro-level. By mobilizing some analytical tools of the French Régulation theory, this work is a part of a promising institutional approach to CSR that combines the study of two processes: on the one hand, the emergence of new rules (or ‘conventions’) of responsibility in a situation of radical uncertainty; on the other hand, the formation of social compromises that reproduce fundamental social relationships (Lamarche, 2011).

CSR discourse and practice

As summarized by Crane et al. (2014), various and contrasting uses of CSR are coexisting today: ‘a misguided attempt to divert money that should rightly go to shareholders ; a smokescreen behind which large multinationals can maintain a discredited, unsustainable business model; a genuine opportunity to help leverage millions out of poverty in the world’. In order to grasp the meaning of CSR, various methods could be mobilized, as illustrated by the articles in this issue: information diffusion on web sites and case studies (P. Koleva), longitudinal study of annual report (M.-P. Senkel), large sample of companies and factor analysis (J. Gherib), sectoral approach by qualitative monograph (P. Grouiez). Most of these studies underline the gap between discourse and practice, which is typical to institutions with a relatively low activity and consequently unable to modify fundamental social relationships.

The structuring role of discourses makes CSR a symbolic policy that gives a pivotal role to managers. CSR has developed as a result of social demand for a more ecological society, but it may also be considered as a response to the crisis of shareholder governance. Using the notion of ‘conception of control’ (Fligstein, 1990), we can argue that CSR has given rise to a new ‘conception of control’, which is ‘shareholder compatible’ (Lamarche & Rubinstein, 2012). Such a conception reflects how governance changes when environmental and societal responsibilities are combined with responsibility towards shareholders. Shareholder value is still central within the enterprise, but top managers are now adopting a position of intermediation between these various imperatives. This intermediation can lead to a variety of compromises. The political role some big firms are intending to play clearly appears in the recent evolution of their discourse and their participation to the United Nations' Global Compact Initiative (see the articles of M.-P. Senkel and P. Koleva). However, the scope of this role is far from being stabilized as the changing nature of 'core' and 'peripheral' issues regarding CSR disclosure would attest.

CSR appears basically as an institutional tool, which compels the enterprises to act either proactively or reactively. Consequently, it is important to highlight the interactions between this tool on the one hand and productive or strategic dynamics of economic activity on the other. The issue at stake is to understand to what extent CSR is a part of an emergent set of rules, norms, conventions, patterns of conduct which can stabilize and shapes productive and political relations between economic actors. Undoubtedly, the mechanisms of globalisation exert a stronger push towards standardization of CSR discourses and institutions. Yet the effective implementation of CSR within the production structures remains patchy. In other words, there is no convergence of CSR realities as national, historical and institutional peculiarities keep on shaping its forms.

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