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CSR as governmentality

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"CSR as Governmentality"

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Track: Ethics in SMEs

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Abstract

The paper suggests that current developments in governmental approaches to CSR calls for research strategies that are specialized in exploring the often subtle and intricate mechanisms of liberal and indirect means of steering. New ways of asking questions are called for as government increasingly assumes the role of an empowering facilitator of CSR, not a regulatory enforcer. Government becomes a matter not of providing formal or hard regulation but of enabling and encouraging socially responsible self-regulation by companies. The paper proposes to apply a *governmentality analytics* to these developments. Using empirical examples from the, mostly competitiveness-driven, field of CSR-government that is emerging within the EU, it presents a conceptual framework for empirical analysis, which strongly emphasises the socially constructed and strategic nature of activities in the field of CSR. Indeed, there is no single and unequivocal answer to the question of what kind of business CSR is to government. CSR is a contested topic and the object of multiple governmental agendas and strategies. The governmentality perspective allows for an open and critical view of government as a 'beast with many heads', one that speaks in many voices, some of which are closely associated with the state, some of which are not. Hence, government should be understood not as a centralized, state-controlled process but as a heterogeneous and multi-directional field of actors and networks, rationalities, programmes and technologies.

CSR as Governmentality

Introduction

Broadly speaking, government initiatives in the field of CSR fall under three headings (cf. www.csr.gov.uk; for an elaborate overview and mapping of public policies and governmental efforts in the field of CSR: see Habisch, 2005; Lozano et al., 2007). The first is *economic growth and competitiveness*, the second is *social policy and employment*, and the third is *environment and sustainable development*. Although CSR is most often defined as encompassing social as well as environmental concerns (Carroll, 1999), the concept has, for obvious semantic reasons, been most closely associated with the social dimension of corporate responsibilities. In the new millennium, however, the tide seems to be turning towards economic policy and the competitiveness agenda of CSR. And while most larger companies have already, to some extent, in more or less convincing fashion, made a commitment to CSR, government attention is turning towards those companies that have yet 'to see the light', particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (see special issue edited by Moore & Spence, 2006; Spence, 2007).

In this paper we argue that current developments in the government of CSR, in particular the proliferation of the competitiveness agenda, calls for research strategies that are specialized in exploring the often subtle and intricate mechanisms of liberal and indirect means of steering. Thus, we propose to apply *a governmentality analytics* (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1978a; Rose, 1999) to the government of CSR. We suggest that governmentality analysis has a lot of potential for the study of government-business interlinkages. In this paper we take a first step by providing a conceptual framework for such analysis. This is not to

suggest that our interest in the field is merely theoretical. Governmentality provides an analytics, not a full-fledged theory of government, which means that, even if our main concern in this paper is conceptual groundwork, we still need to root our conceptual claims in reality. Thus, we need empirical illustrations with reference to which the relevance and usefulness of the proposed framework can be made apparent. These illustrations will be taken from the, mostly competitiveness-driven, field of CSR-government that is emerging within the EU. However, more in depth empirical analyses will – and, indeed, must – follow from this.

The application of a governmentality perspective implies that we strongly emphasise the socially constructed and strategic nature of activities in the field of CSR. Indeed, there is no single and unequivocal answer to the question of what kind of business CSR is to government. CSR is a contested topic and the object of multiple governmental agendas and strategies. Government thus emerges as a 'beast with many heads', one that speaks in many voices, some of which are closely associated with the state, some of which are not. Government should be understood not as a centralized, state-controlled process but as a heterogeneous and multi-directional field of actors and networks, rationalities, programmes and technologies (Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992).

The governmentality approach allows for critical reflections on the particular means and strategies of government employed in the field of CSR. It is a research agenda that is diagnostic rather than descriptive. Thus, we leave technocratic concerns matters of effectiveness and the instrumental language of best practices, benchmarking, etc., to the side and instead seek "an open and critical relation to strategies for governing, attentive to their presuppositions, their assumptions, their exclusions, their naiveties and their knaveries, their regimes of vision and their spots of blindness" (Rose, 1999: 19). We ask *how* government in the field of CSR is actually effected. How does it work and what does it do? What

rationalities, *programmes* and *technologies* does it involve? And how do these different levels of government interact and relate to each other?

First, we present our particular reading of *governmentality*, the basic assumptions and ideas of this approach, how it relates to the study of CSR, and how it differs from other approaches. Second, we show how governmental initiatives in the field of CSR exemplify key components in the form of political rule that characterises *advanced liberal democracies*. Third, we argue that developments in the field of CSR are indicative of a tendency towards a *governmentalization of the state*, i.e. a decentralization of governmental initiatives. Fourth, we show how an understanding of the government of CSR must locate itself at three, interactive levels: the level of *governmental rationalities*, the level of *governmental programmes*, and the level of *governmental technologies*. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the prospects of applying a governmentality perspective to empirical analysis of the government of CSR.

An analytics of governmentality

In terms of analytical approach, this paper primarily takes its cues from the view of governmentality presented by Nicholas Rose and Peter Miller (Rose, 1996 and 1999; Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992) along with Mitchell Dean (1999). Taken together these presentations constitute, if not a paradigm, then certainly a coherent body of work emphasizing a number of distinctive traits of an analytics of governmentality.

In particular, we emphasize the usefulness of the analytical distinction provided by Rose between government as it is expressed in governmental *rationalities*, *programmes*, and *technologies* (Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992). We argue that the inherent strength of insisting on the analytical involvement of all three conceptual levels, is that this does not allow for the study of government to be merely concerned with top-down policy-making. This insistence calls for analyses looking into the concrete organization of government in

governmental programmes and for exploration of the technological means employed by such programmes. Also, it leads to a questioning of unproblematic, hierarchical and causal relations between the three levels, i.e. that rationalities unequivocally determine the content of programmes and that technologies simply (more or less effectively) carry out the goals set by programmes. The governmentality approach suggests that we need to look closely for all the ways in which 'chains are broken' and different levels of governments attain 'a life of their own', so to speak. Importantly, by providing a multi-directional view of government, the governmentality approach also direct our attention to the possibility of reversal of linkages between levels. It can give rise to studies showing how technologies enable and give impetus to programmes, how programmes enable rationalizations of CSR, etc. (see also Albareda et al., 2006, who apply a "relational state" model to the study of the government of CSR).

As Dean (1999) points out, there are no prescribed limits to the empirical areas to which the analytical and conceptual tools of governmentality can be applied and through which they can be developed. In spite of this openness in principle, governmentality analyses have so far not been overly concerned with business and the corporate sphere. They have mainly devoted their attention to the political idiom and to societal matters in ways that do not necessarily exclude business but which certainly do not award it a focal role. Proponents of the governmentality approach are generally more concerned with political economy and overall discussions of capitalism than with business economics. And they are more concerned with bio-politics and populations of citizens than with business politics and populations of businesses and their managers and employees (cf. Dean, 1999). We suggest that this is an omission and that governmentality analysis has a lot of potential for the study of government-business interlinkages, CSR being a very illustrative case in point. We consider CSR a particularly interesting case because it constitutes a field where indirect government and liberal means of steering are not only gaining ground, but are also, in a strict sense, the only

available means of government. The widespread political will to work towards furthering the cause of CSR can only be effected by means respecting the autonomy and freedom of private companies.

Recent contributions to the literature concerning the government of CSR have tended either to provide a general overview of developments (cf. Fox, Ward, & Howard, 2002; Albareda, Lozano, & Ysa, 2007) or to take upon themselves normative policy concerns regarding regulatory effectiveness a.o. (cf. Aaronson & Reeves, 2002; González & Martinez, 2004; Moon, 2004). Governmentality analysis, alternatively, have critical aspirations, does not side with (but may nevertheless inform and enlighten) policy makers, and may accordingly be able to add an extra layer of reflexivity to the study of this topic.

CSR and government in advanced liberal democracies

Advanced liberal government is very much driven by the desire to 'govern at a distance'. It emphasizes the responsibility, autonomy and choice of subjects and acts upon them by shaping and utilizing their freedom (ibid.). Government, in its essence, involves an effort to affect and direct human conduct. It conceives of human conduct in disciplinary terms as "something that can be regulated, controlled, shaped and turned to specific ends" (Dean, 1999: 11). However, advanced liberal government involves the realization that many policy areas call for indirect means of steering as regulatory enforcement is not considered a viable strategy. Instead, means of steering are employed "which promise to shape the economic or social conduct of diverse and institutionally distinct persons and agencies, without shattering their formally distinct or 'autonomous' character" (Miller & Rose, 1990: 14).

We speak of the predominance of the competitiveness agenda in a very particular sense that has to do with the definition of CSR as encompassing voluntary corporate activities (European Commission, 2001; Carroll, 1999). In the words of the UK government, CSR can

be seen as “the voluntary actions that business can take, over and above compliance with minimum legal requirements” (www.csr.gov.uk). In our interpretation, only forms of government that respect the voluntary nature of CSR belong to the category ‘government of CSR’. Thus, governmentalities of CSR are per definition liberal-minded. Such mentalities are obviously surrounded by other, not-so-liberal mentalities that are critical of CSR and seek to push back the boundaries of corporate self-regulation. But no matter how relevant and pertinent the latter mentalities may be or appear to be, they are, in our interpretation, operating outside the realm of CSR. Their main concern is the responsibilities of the state, not the responsibilities of business. They are representative of a view of government as a regulatory and constraining force. Our concern is forms of government that, paradoxically, operate inside, not outside the realm of CSR but do so by using liberal means of steering and thus maintain a certain distance to the subject at hand. In other words, our concern is advanced liberal ways of governing CSR.

CSR and ‘the governmentalization of the state’

As already suggested, we can, within the EU, speak of a tendency towards public policy convergence with regards to CSR as competitiveness is increasingly becoming the dominant theme – at the trans-national as well as the national level. This development does, however, not mean that the state interest in CSR is unitary or that governmental activities relating to CSR can be described as acts of one (unitary) body. Following Foucault’s famous aphorism (Foucault, 1978b), the governmentality approach strongly emphasizes the need to ‘cut off the head of the king’ – in political theory as well as in empirical analyses of political phenomena. Any notions of an *a priori* distribution of power and authority must be rejected along with centralizing images of the state, “construed as a relatively coherent and calculating political subject” (Miller & Rose, 1990: 3). Political power is seen as being exercised through “a

multitude of agencies and techniques, some of which are only loosely associated with the executives and bureaucracies of the formal organs of state" (Miller & Rose, 1990: 1). The point is not that government does not produce centres, but rather that centres of government are multiple.

In this perspective, following Rose & Miller (1992: 177), "the question is no longer one of accounting for government in terms of 'the power of the state', but of ascertaining how, and to what extent, the state is articulated into the activity of government: what relations are established between political and other authorities; what funds, forces, persons, knowledge or legitimacy are utilised; and by means of what devices and techniques are these different tactics made operable." Here, again following Foucault (1978a), we can speak of 'the governmentalization of the state', a notion signifying that within the wider field of government made visible by the governmentality perspective, we can see "continual attempts to define and redefine which aspects of government are within the competence of the state and which are not" (Rose, 1999: 18).

To illustrate, the department of Enterprise & Industry under the European Commission has run the project: "Mainstreaming CSR among SMEs", which has strongly emphasised competitiveness as a driver of CSR, and which has provided funding for projects supporting this agenda. The projects that have gotten financial support are headed by a variety of different organizations, including chambers of commerce, trade organizations, research institutions, university centres, CSR networks and other intermediary organizations. The EU and individual member states provide funding for such projects and thus the organization and management of the state interest in CSR is to a large extent outsourced to external suppliers. Although each individual project can be considered an extension of public policy, the resulting government of CSR is not a state-controlled, centralized process. Rather, government emerges as a heterogeneous and multi-directional field of actors and networks

involving a variety of interested parties and their particular agendas. Government and government agencies do not monopolize the initiation of governmental CSR-initiatives. They originate from a variety of different centres, and thus the extent to which state government is actively involved in the promotion of CSR may vary from project to project and from setting to setting. Indeed, it is an empirical question what locales emerge as authoritative and powerful and how different actors are assembled with specific powers.

Hence, networking is a crucial factor in the governmentality view of government. Government operates through opening lines of force across a territory (Rose, 1999). In order for 'action at a distance' or 'government at a distance' to effectively accomplish this, or, at least, for such government to maintain hopes of being effective, it has to engage and forge alliances with various independent agents, i.e. intermediary organizations (Rose & Miller, 1992). What emerges is a dynamic and fluid view of government as a process involving the mobilization of networks involving a variety of actors. Thus, the ability of government to make a real impact in the field of CSR does not depend on the exercise of 'strong government' in a traditional, centralized sense. It depends on the ability of government to mobilize strong networks. Such efforts always evoke a particular rationality. Next, we will look at the rationalities of government at play in the field of CSR.

Rationalities of government

At the level of *governmental rationalities*, political discourse emerges as "a domain for the formulation and justification of idealised schemata for representing reality, analyzing it and rectifying it" (Rose & Miller, 1992: 178). In the eyes of government, CSR does not constitute a particular rationality in and by itself. Rather, it tends to be incorporated into existing policy areas and to be viewed through the lenses of already established governmental rationalities. The UK provides a good example of this. It is so far the only EU member state that has

appointed a minister of CSR. However, at closer look reveals that this merely implies that CSR has been established as a formal field of responsibility for the Minister of State for Competitivenes and Consumer Affairs. The ministerial work to a large extent consists in enrolling, mobilizing and coordinating all the governmental departments and areas of activity that are concerned – or may be concerned – with CSR.

The work of the UK government provides a good illustration of the proliferation of different rationalities – as well as programmes – in the field of CSR. Government initiatives fall under three headings: *economic growth*, *environment*, and *social progress*. This does not mean, however, that the matter of rationalizing CSR can simply be reduced to the proliferation of three distinct – albeit not mutually exclusive – language games. That would be to oversimplify matters. Thus, no less than fourteen government departments are involved in CSR-initiatives. They are as follows:

- Cabinet Office – Office of the Third Sector
- Department for Communities and Local Government
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport
- Department for Education and Skills
- Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Department for International Development
- Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
- Department for Transport
- Department for Work and Pensions
- Environment Agency
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- Health and Safety Commission and the Health and Safety Executive
- Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
- Her Majesty's Treasury

Source: www.csr.gov.uk

The same picture emerges in other member states, such as Denmark, where work on a governmental action plan with regards to CSR is ongoing. A host of different government departments are involved, which provides for a broad range of possible rationalizations of CSR. CSR is made meaningful in multiple ways and in accordance with the concerns and priorities of multiple political agendas. The task of governmentality analysis is to entangle this web of rationalities, to diagnose not only their particular characteristics but also the strategies involved in their interaction.

In order to illustrate this task, we will turn again to the three general rationalities that dominate governmental efforts in the field of CSR: *the economic*, *the social* and *the environmental*. As we have argued, governmentalities of CSR are per definition liberal-minded. Some are, however, more liberal-minded than others. The social and the environmental agenda provide the more traditional view of CSR and government in the sense that they call for companies to help solve or alleviate social or environmental problems. They speak a language of obligations that companies are urged to take upon themselves on a voluntary basis. Appeals are made for companies to exercise their freedom and utilize their resources in manners consistent with the public interest. Considering that government may introduce various incentives in order to make companies take on social responsibilities, these rationalities are closely related to notions of soft law (Buhmann, 2006; Joseph, 2003). The ideal of CSR is the company that accommodates government policy by following instructions and making the desired contributions.

The economic rationality of the competitiveness agenda provides a very different ideal. It speaks a language of corporate opportunities, not societal problems. It considers corporate self-interest as a resource, not a risk and the profit-motive as a driver of CSR rather than an obstacle. The ideal of CSR is the company that is able to actively use CSR as a strategic lever

in order to increase its competitiveness and growth prospects. And the role of government is not to burden business with societal problems but to enable and encourage a high level of strategic awareness and a high level of activity in regard to CSR. Government emerges as a provider, not an usurper of corporate resources. Thus, the competitiveness agenda, in its pure form, has little to do with law, even in its softer varieties. It is an overtly liberal form of government that works not to put social or environmental restraints on companies but to help them identify and act upon strategic opportunities in their environment. That is, a kind of government that promotes CSR by pushing (a particular variety of) the profit motive, not by restraining it – which is often assumed to be the role of government in regard to CSR.

Programmes of government

Looking at the level of programmes, we will focus particularly on the programming of the competitiveness agenda and thus the economic rationality of CSR. In terms of content, governmental programmes are the realm of designs. They seek to reconfigure and reform specific locales and relations in ways that are thought desirable from a governmental point of view (Miller & Rose, 1990). Programmes thus presuppose that the real is programmable. That it is a domain subject to certain determinants, rules and norms that can be acted upon and improved by authorities. Also, they make the objects of government thinkable in such a way that their ills appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription and cure (Rose & Miller, 1992). Every programme of government presupposes an ultimate end, a certain *telos* (Dean, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992).

The competitiveness agenda defines its *telos* in economic terms. Which means that it enables and supports programmes, which seek to use CSR as a lever to achieve economic benefits – for companies and for society in general. Under the heading “economic growth”, the UK government lists initiatives that have to do with the business case for CSR, awareness

raising, skills for CSR practice, and support for SMEs a.o. (www.csr.gov.uk). Notably, competitiveness is always a relative measure. Increased competitiveness can only be achieved at the cost of others, whose competitiveness must, relatively speaking, decrease accordingly. Thus, UK initiatives are *national* initiatives. Their aim is to increase the competitiveness of UK businesses and the UK economy, which implies that the EU agenda regarding CSR is not a uniform presence – it is translated into local strategies and local programmes in member states.

In governmentality terms, this is a reflection of the need for programmes to define *a governable space* and thus to render visible – and approachable – the space over which government is to be exercised (Miller & Rose, 1990). In other words, governmental efforts have to mark out a territory in thought and to inscribe it in the real, "topographize it, investing it with powers, bounding it by exclusions, defining who or what can rightfully enter" (ibid.: 34). The government of CSR may hold global aspirations in principle but governable spaces, and thus the scope of programmes, must usually be defined in local terms – either regional or national – to be, indeed, governable. The many programmes initiated to promote CSR to SMEs are another case in point as they mostly have national or regional aspirations. In the next section, we will use the means employed by such programmes to exemplify the technological level of government.

Technologies of government

Government is not only a matter of representation. It is also a matter of intervention. Technologies are what translate thought into the domain of reality (Miller & Rose, 1990). They mark the point of realization for governmental programmes. The emphasis on government as technique serves to contest models of government that view it solely or mainly

as a manifestation of values, ideologies, the articulated intent of strategies, etc. If government is to achieve ends, it must use technical means (Dean, 1999).

"Mainstreaming CSR among SMEs" provides a good example of the employment of technologies. As mentioned, this project has a strong emphasis on competitiveness and has provided funding for programmes supporting this agenda. The projects that have gotten financial support are not only headed by a variety of different organizations. They also have different scopes ranging from the national level to the regional and trans-national level, with some projects involving all EU member states. In terms of their technological content, however, the projects tend to be quite similar. According to the project descriptions, mainstreaming is about disseminating knowledge about CSR to SMEs as well as providing resources for SMEs to work with CSR. The various projects aim to provide baseline data and research about CSR (including surveys and case studies), practical tools, best practice models, strategies and innovation models, sets of indicators and models of performance measurement (relating to the business case of CSR), teaching materials, handbooks, guides and manuals. The means to get the message across include training, seminars, workshops and event as well as various kinds of mass communication.

A governmentality analysis is not just about listing technologies, it is about exploring the organization, work and implications of the use of technologies, down to the last detail – including the actors, interests and strategies involved . The technological equipment of the competitiveness programmes appears quite standardized. It is the same kind of tools that are used in order to get other economical concerns of government, that is, other potential sources of competitiveness such as innovation and entrepreneurship, across to SMEs. In this sense, CSR emerges as 'just another information campaign' in a long line of such campaigns. What emerges is an overtly liberal form of government that has little to do with regulation. It is more like government operating under market conditions, vying for attention and resources in

the attempt to reach and engage the target group, but leaving the matter of acting on CSR up to the self-determination of companies. The governmentality perspective suggests that we need to provide richer descriptions and analyses of the technological dimension of government. It is not just that surfaces – of programmes – can be deceptive. Without a thorough look at the technologies they employ and their actual employment, programmes may seem trivial.

Conclusion

This paper has applied a governmentality analytics to the government of CSR. This has been done in order to lead the way for more in-depth empirical analyses. The government of CSR can be studied at many different policy levels ranging from the local to the global, and we suggest that the proposed framework can be applied to government as it unfolds in a variety of settings, including regional, national and trans-national CSR-initiatives.

However varied a view of governmental relations and processes it provides, governmentality analysis is particularly adept at providing insights into the employment and implications of liberal and indirect means of steering. With the governmental tide turning towards economic policy and the competitiveness agenda of CSR we suggest that there is great potential for application of governmentality thinking in this field. We have argued that 'government of CSR' is inherently and necessarily liberal-minded in the sense that only forms of government that respect the voluntary nature of CSR qualify for inclusion in the category. However, some forms of government are more liberal than others, and the competitiveness agenda must be considered the epitome of liberal steering in the field of CSR. The proliferation of economic rationalizations of CSR is indicative of an identity transformation taking place in government, which is increasingly seeing itself not as a distributor of obligations but as a provider of resources for companies to work with CSR. This development

certainly calls for critical reflection on the programmes and technologies that are being employed. Not a moral critique but a thorough and critical exploration of the implications of CSR becoming a matter of competitiveness in the eyes of government.

To suggest an empirical preoccupation with the unfolding of the competitiveness agenda is, however, not to look for manifestations of a particular political ideology. The approach to steering this agenda implies is not the exclusive domain of liberal or conservative governments. As Miller & Rose (1992: 24) argue, "the language of individual freedom, personal choice and self-fulfilment has come to underpin programmes of government articulated from across the political spectrum." The autonomous subjectivity of the productive individual is increasingly, and across the political spectrum, seen as a central economic resource. Autonomy is thus turned into an ally of – and not an obstacle to – economic success. The question is, what does this mean for the government of CSR?

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