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***Controlling discourse on CSR:  
An analysis of the Belgian case***

**Paper**

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**Emmanuelle Michotte**

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Centre de Sociologie des Organisations

Institut de Sociologie

44, avenue Jeanne

1050 Bruxelles

BELGIUM

[emichott@ulb.ac.be](mailto:emichott@ulb.ac.be)

+32. (0)2.650.33.38

In this paper, we present the first results of a work in progress that focuses on an analysis of the discourse of social responsibility from large companies that make up the Bel20 index - the main index of the Brussels stock exchange. The issue we will address here is the “hybridity” of the CSR discourse, i.e. the response that companies address to other discourses from civil society (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Burchell & Cook, 2006). In order to do this, we will show how companies legitimize their CSR subjective view according to separate but coexisting justification orders. Therefore, we use the six main logics of justification, called “orders of worth”, identified by the French authors Boltanski & Thévenot (1991). But first and foremost, we will clarify the concept of corporate social responsibility.

## **1. The concept of CSR**

The concept of “Corporate Social Responsibility”, which we call “CSR”, is not easy to grasp. First of all, the words are ambiguous. What do we mean by “responsibility”? What do we mean by “social”? In French, the word “social” essentially refers to the relationships between actors within a corporation, whereas in the English language it refers to wider relationships between corporations and their environment; their stakeholders (Capron & Quairel-Lanoizelée, 2004). Moreover, the concept of CSR refers to different understandings. These differences can be between stakeholders’ groups and within the same stakeholder group. National and international authorities, NGO’s, consumers, financiers, trade unions, etc. use the concept of CSR in different and sometimes opposite ways (Champion, Gendron, Lapointe, 2005). Finally, other concepts are used by corporations as synonyms or proxies of CSR, such as: “corporate citizenship”, “business ethics”, “corporate sustainability”, “social performance”, “commitments”, “philanthropy”, etc. Therefore, there is at the moment no consensus on its definition.

But the debate is not just about the definition, it also concerns the merits of CSR. While some talk about it as something obvious (the European Commission, firms, ...), even as a claim (on the part of some NGOs, consumers, etc.), others are contrary sometimes reluctant (unions), and sometimes profoundly against the CSR (Milton Friedman, and more recently Robert Reich). All this debate highlights the fact that CSR refers directly to the definition that is given to the social role of the company. Should the corporations responsibility concerns goals other than the search for profit?

Today, we have to conclude that we do not find a common definition of CSR. Nevertheless, CSR is not just an abstract word without concrete impact. More and more corporations publish reports and have specific websites dealing with this issue. Some of them recruit CSR-managers and create CSR departments, collaborate with NGO's, and try to obtain internationally recognized labels or certifications. National governments and authorities regularly publish recommendations on this theme. And a new market is rising through fair trade and ecological products in order to meet certain consumers demand for "responsible" products.

## **2. The social construction of CSR**

While the vast majority of academic research focuses on the measurability and the potential financial return of CSR, the so-called "business case", we notice a greater support for a sociological approach. Particularly a constructivist approach has been developed (Rowley & Berman, 2000 ; Chikudate, 2000 ; Griffin, 2002 ; Déjean & Gond, 2003 ; Champion et al., 2005 ; Burchell & Cook, 2006 ; Gond, 2006). Through constructivism, CSR is considered as a social construction, this is a reality socially determined and subjectively experienced. In the tradition of Berger & Luckmann (1966), actors objectivise their subjective views through, among other things, the use of language. In this way, they try to convince others that what they are talking about is "reality". This is fundamental because the big issue, at term, is the institutionalisation and legitimization of "their" reality. The study of the social construction of CSR entails a deep analysis of the use of language and thus of discourse with a specific focus on how it has been shaped and by whom. But as we just said above, it is not right to say that there is only one discourse on CSR. Businesses are not the only ones producing discourses on CSR. Others groups of actors also do produce CSR discourses, but do not necessarily share the same idea of what is or should be CSR. It is important to realize that the discourse on CSR is still the subject of a confrontation between divergent views and is expressed in various forms, through dialogue, negotiation or struggle. The legitimization and institutionnalisation of "a" reality is central: how will the responsibilities of corporations (especially the multinational companies) be defined in the future, who will ensure that firms fully assume them, and if this is not the case, how will they be punished and by whom? If we are conscious of this issue, we directly better understand why companies are producing so much text in their CSR reports or on their websites. Discourse says things that only figures

can not say. It is remarkable to note that CSR reports contain figures and text, while financial reports and what we call in French “les bilans sociaux” only contain figures.

Now, we must qualify our words. To say that we are at a time when the institutionalization of CSR is played only at the level of language would be a mistake. The proof is that there is a rise of new forms of regulation which tend to be more and more internationally recognized. Take, for example, the Global Reporting Initiative (called “GRI”), the standards of the ISO 14000, or certifications as the SA8000. Moreover, we observe that the figures tend to occupy more space in the reports of CSR. Nevertheless, we must also consider that texts are not confined to give solely a description of the figures. They perform other functions that we want to investigate.

In order to do this, we propose to use a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with a particular focus on Fairclough’s approach (1992, 1995, 1999, 2005, to appear). “[the] analyses of power relations and processes of subjectivity and objectivity are central to CDA, in which language, knowledge and power are seen to be inseparably connected” (Francis, 2006: 66). In other words, Fairclough aims to place discourse within its context, i.e. the power struggles within which actors position their knowledges. CDA has already been used to study the CSR discourse, but more especially to analyse the discourse from civil society (Burchell & Cook, 2006). Burchell & Cook published an article where they argued that it would be a mistake to believe that the CSR discourse is entirely the realm of the business community (2006: 126). These authors refer to the concept of “hybridity” of Fairclough:

*“ Fairclough analysis emphasises the “hybridity” of language as a consequence of the merging of different social fields and the mixing together of different genres and discourses. [...]. [B]oth the discourses of sustainable development and CSR are reflective of Fairclough’s arguments. Both reflect a process of transition within which social, ethical and environmental concerns have become central aspects in debates regarding the role business in society, no longer dismissed as “externalities” with no direct bearing on business performance.” (2006: 124)*

In this paper, we follow the research agenda of Burchell & Cook by looking more closely at the CSR discourse from the corporate side. More precisely, we will investigate to

what extent the CSR discourse of the companies of the Bel20-index can be characterized as “hybrid”.

### **3. Les économies de la grandeur**

Based on everything that has been said, we need conceptual tools that allow us to decode CSR discourses from various groups and see to what extent they are shaped by the interactions between those groups. Such tools have been proposed by the political and moral sociology that Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot develop in their book *“De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur”* (1991). The authors seek to explore how, in situation of dispute, people need to justify their action through the use of a principle of worth. The authors identify six "worlds", i.e. six orders of justification which are very general and on which are founded any claim to legitimacy and any reference to the notion of justice (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999: 624). The dispute, i.e. the cycle critical justification, can be terminated only if it is folded on a "test" on which agree the parties involved and allows judging the degree of justice or accuracy of a situation.

We follow here the work of Burchell & Cook (2006) which highlighted the critical-justification game where companies must constantly cope with the criticism and try to respond in a situation of “resistance” (2006: 126). However, these authors did not use the concept of “order of worth” to identify how the various actors legitimize their perspective. We think that this exercise will bring a complementary interpretation of CSR discourses.

#### a. The Civic World

Among these six "worlds", we found that four are mainly mobilized as discursive resources that can coexist. The first world is the “Civic World”. In this world, the higher common principle, (i.e. the principle that allows considering acts, things and people) (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999: 123), is the pre-eminence of the collective and the general interest. The masses and the collectives represent the worthy beings, and are opposed to the one being that is divided or isolated. To achieve this, the individual must renounce its immediate interests and act in line with the general interest. It advocates rally for collective action and expresses itself through its commitment for a just cause in a social movement (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991)

Regarding CSR discourses, we found that *corporate citizenship* is the most representative expression, which is very often used by companies to talk about themselves. There is a clear commitment for causes like climate change, social exclusion, health issues, etc. These major challenges are often presented by companies in reference to international standards such as the Charter of Human Rights, the Kyoto Protocol, or the Global Compact of the United Nations. But the most important thing to remember is that companies broadcast a picture as they are an integral part of society as any other citizen. In other words, the company says it is ready to change its behaviour insofar as the whole of society must also change its behaviour. Broadly speaking, companies formalize these events in their code of conduct and various charters they write. But we find it also in the CEO's message, which in many cases is the introductory text of annual report or CSR reports. The following excerpts illustrate this reference to the Civic World.

*“CSR: acting as a responsible citizen towards the environment and the community within the local markets of operation.” (Delhaize)*

*“It may appear ambitious but the challenges of our 21st Century are neither less ambitious nor less crucial: for the wellness of our communities, it is essential that the technological progresses are accessible to every citizen; for the wellness of our planet, it is crucial that we all together face the climate change challenge.” (Belgacom)*

*“The requirement for a sustainable form of development involves us all. It is only by combining our efforts that we will be able to provide a response to the magnitude of the current threat to our resources, our ecosystems and our societies. Regardless, our lifestyles will change. Such is the reality we need to prepare ourselves for.” (Suez)*

*“InBev is a member of the UN Global Compact, which provides an overarching set of principles which stimulate our progress on Corporate Citizenship.” (InBev)*

## b. The Industrial World

The second world is the “Industrial World”. The higher common principle is efficiency or performance. The worthy being is represented by one who is efficient and productive, which is mostly expressed in the “expert”.

Broadly speaking, there is a rise of this type of discourse in the field of CSR. It is no longer sufficient to say that the company is committed to CSR through a specific policy. Today, results on this subject are expected. It is precisely at this level that CSR reports are playing a crucial role because they present figures to support the companies CSR discourse. Those figures act as "evidences" of the effectiveness of the company in terms of its social and environmental performance. But performance is a matter of control, which means that the company must conduct regular checks to ensure that its commitments have concrete effects. In addition, companies justify increasingly the choice of indicators they use to communicate on their performance (reporting). Often, companies refer to standards which tend to be internationally recognized such as, for example, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

*“Total water consumption decreased by 8.9% compared to 2006. Cooling water consumption went down by 14.0%.” (Agfa-gevaert)*

*“In 2006 we carried out 174 audits. This means that we have screened every one of our toy suppliers. A number of companies where infringements were found have been given a follow-up audit. During the five years since launching this initiative we found very few cases of child labour.” (Colruyt)*

*“Communication on our environmental management is guided by the principles of the United Nations’ Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and recommendations from the national and international chemical federations.” (Solvay)*

*“This report follows the Global Reporting Initiative’s third generation (G3) sustainability reporting guidelines.” (InBev)*

### c. The World of Renown

The third world is the “World of Renown”. The higher common principle is the opinion of others, and the worthy being is represented by who is deemed, known, recognized by others.

Here, the companies go a step further. Apart from their commitments for just and collective causes, and the fact that they measure their efficiency in this regard, the companies have to be also recognized, i.e. legitimized in the eyes of others. Firms are asking for public esteem. The best way to achieve this is to be awarded, to receive a certificate or a label from an independent agency or an NGO. Due to the supposed independence of judgement of these bodies, the companies claim a status of “good citizen”, “green company”, “socially responsible firm”, etc. Another way consist in joining existing networks where companies can meet other companies to exchange best practices on CSR, but also NGO’s, authorities, think tanks, media’s, etc.

*“Fortis has been recognised on many occasions for its work in this area, most recently being named Best Carbon Trader. » (Fortis)*

*“In Belgium in 2007 Bekaert was awarded ‘Top Employer 2008’ status by CRF International, an independent human resources research organization.” (Bekaert)*

*“Bekaert Shandong Tire Cord Corporation (Shandong province) was chosen in 2007 to receive awards as National Outstanding Foreign Investment (CAEFI) Enterprise and Excellent Foreign Investment Enterprise in Fulfillment of Social Responsibility. Bekaert Shenyang Steel Cord was honored with the Excellent Contribution Award for CSR Compliance, in recognition of its support for local educational projects.” (Bekaert)*

*“Suez is an active member of CSR Europe, a European network of companies organized by Jacques Delors and several other business leaders to discuss and share best practices and to coordinate the environmental and social parameters of their operations. During MarketPlace 2007, the annual discussion forum*

*developed by CSR Europe, Suez was recognized for the work it performed for the “Dialogue with Stakeholders” laboratory.” (Suez)*

#### d. The Market World

Last but not least, we found repeated references to a fourth world, namely the “Market World”. The higher common principle is competition, and the worthy being is represented by who is desirable, who has value, who is the best, namely the rich persons.

Words like “leader”, “pioneer”, “best in class” are usually used by companies for whom CSR is also a tool to make the difference between them and competitors. CSR is also a tool to seduce consumers, shareholders, banks, i.e. the capital in a broad sense. Creating value remains the first objective of the company, and CSR is conceived as a pertinent way to achieve this aim.

*“Today, Dexia is recognised as a global actor in financing new infrastructures which are more environmentally conscious. In fact, in 2007, our Group was the world leader in financing renewable energy projects (...). Our capacity for innovation and our pioneering role will enable us to create new products and services fairly quickly to meet the environmental and social expectations of our customers.” (Dexia)*

In the Market World, the rankings are greatly appreciated. Indeed, they are not used only for obtaining a kind of recognition, they especially allow the good classified businesses to join investment funds known as "ethical" or "socially responsible".

*“Socially responsible investment (SRI) at KBC combines traditional financial values with social, ethical, governance and environmental criteria by including them in investment management (saving and investing) in a structural, voluntary and transparent manner.” (KBC)*

*“We are a member of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. We are part of the FTSE4Good Index, have been awarded a “best in class” rating*

*by Storebrand Socially Responsible Investments and are part of the Kempen / SNS Smaller Europe SRI Index.” (Umicore)*

Finally, we add to this analysis that CSR is not a modern version of paternalism in this sense that companies are not deploying a picture of them as benevolent or wise as a good father would be. If this was the case, they would mobilize the fifth world which is the Domestic World.

To summarize, we may say that the CSR discourse from the corporate side highly refers to four orders of justification. This finding allows us to describe this discourse as hybrid, as “mixing” categories (Fairclough, 1995).

#### **4. Coexistence of different worlds and social construction of a coherent system of justification**

The fact that companies are mobilizing, at the same time, elements of grammar from different worlds includes paradoxes. One of the most prominent is probably the paradox between the Market World and the Civic World. How can it be possible, simultaneously, to pursue on one hand economic goals, i.e. immediate interests, and on the other hand, social and environmental goals, i.e. general interest? Do companies explain their position between those two opposite orders of worth, and if yes, how?

Most of the time, it appears that companies do not even mention a possible opposition between the two worlds. We found numerous declarations like this one:

*“We develop our business with respect for solidarity, diversity, environment and economic interests of the society.” (Delhaize)*

Such sentences diffuse the idea that making money for shareholders is not contradictory to the social and environmental goals claimed by stakeholders. Companies tend to minimize the possibility of interests in conflict. In this context, they declare that they incorporate CSR in their strategy, their core values, etc.

*“ This strategy is genetically built on a sense of the long term and respect for the general interest. Within this framework, sustainable development is part of our core vision and values, i.e. respect, ambition and passion.” (Dexia)*

Further, we then observe a semantic shift since the enterprise will no longer talk about sustainable development or social responsibility, but about sustainable growth, long-term approach, responsible management, responsible marketing, etc.

*“Sustainable growth and the survival of industrial companies require investment and a long-term approach to management and risk-taking.” (Solvay)*

*“These are the forces driving our pursuit of Bekaert’s strategic objective: sustainable profitable growth.” (Bekaert)*

*“We are fully aware of our responsibility (...), and in that regard, we’ve been working for a long time to promote responsible use of alcoholic beverages by adults.” (InBev)*

Furthermore, they also promote the idea that creating value is good for all stakeholders. In other words, companies declare that as long as they deliver sustainable growth for their shareholders, they serve at the same time the interests of their stakeholders.

*“For Agfa, Corporate Sustainability is a business approach to create long-term value for all stakeholders. It is Agfa’s mission to be the partner of choice in imaging and information systems by offering leading edge technology and new ways of working, with the fundamental goal to deliver profitable growth. An important criterion for the successful implementation of this mission is the ability to conduct the company’s business in line with the environmental and social expectations of its stakeholders.” (Agfa-Gevaert)*

We found few companies talking about the opposition between the two orders of worth, but they do exist. Nevertheless, they deny this opposition and present CSR as an economic tool, or even as a management tool.

*“For us, CSR is not merely a question of altruism or risk management. Fundamentally, it is about good management. My ambition is that it becomes a valuable management tool that tunes our performance more finely to the world we operate in. We see no contradiction in our determination to be a successful business and a socially-responsible business. CSR and business objectives are complementary, not contrary. Corporate Social Responsibility is a way of improving not just the business, but also the way we do business.”* (Belgacom)

Our analysis would be limited if we just had identified the different orders of worth that are used in the CSR discourse. Their coexistence is more complex, because in doing so, companies deploy a justification system where they respond to all their stakeholders without ever betraying their *raison d'être* which is to create value for their shareholders. Not only do they colonise and appropriate the language of CSR and sustainable development, but they also develop a justification system for legitimizing the pursuit of economic growth as a socially and environmentally responsible goal. Companies, as collective, claiming the status of citizens, are committed in large global causes such as climate change or social exclusion (Civic World). To respond to the criticism that their commitment is pure empty rhetoric, companies need to measure their social and environmental performance and to submit to external experts (Industrial World). When the company is efficient, this needs to be recognized because it is essential to gain public esteem in order to have a better reputation and to calm down anti-corporate campaigns such as boycotts (World of Renown). Furthermore, this efficiency is also a fruitful tool since it is an important criterion for companies to join ethical investment funds or sustainability indexes, to seduce consumers and investors, and at term to make the difference with competitors (Market World). As we analyse their discourse, companies are presenting CSR as a good way to create value for shareholders as for stakeholders.

#### **4. Discussion**

We started our paper with considerations about the problematic concept of CSR. As research already demonstrates (Champion, Gendron, Lapointe, 2005; Burchell & Cook, 2006), different groups of actors have different, and sometimes opposed, definitions of CSR. Once those groups communicate, they use discourse in order to convince other groups that their view is the “real” one. They have to legitimize their view, i.e. to justify their position and

their actions. Within this process of social construction, the big issue consists in controlling the shape of the dominant CSR discourse. As Chouliaraki & Fairclough emphasize, this struggle for domination, which is also a process of resistance, is to find in the hybridisation of discourse (1999: 15). Endorsing an approach based on critical discourse analysis, we raised the following issue, namely to what extent the CSR discourse of the Bel20 companies is a hybrid one? In order to find answer, we used the six logics of justification identified by Boltanski & Thévenot (1991) and observed that four from the six “worlds” were highly mobilized. This coexistence takes the contours of a real system within which distinct “orders of worth” are brought together and presented as something natural, something evident. In other words, companies integrate criticism coming from civil society in a discourse where creating value is presented as a responsible thing for all stakeholders. And if civil society contests the way companies are creating value, they present figures, awards and rankings which tend to prove that they are doing much more than pure empty rhetoric. In fact, criticism can be a real opportunity for companies, not only to defend themselves, but also to turn all this into a new kind of marketing, a way to innovate products and services, and at term, a way to attract and conserve investors.

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