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# CSR as Governmentality

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## *Abstract*

Modern governmental approaches to CSR (corporate social responsibility) have two distinguishing traits: they tend to define competitiveness as their primary concern and to make use of liberal and indirect means of steering. Contributing to a political understanding of CSR and focusing empirically on developments within the EU, this paper approaches CSR governance in general and competitiveness-driven CSR governance in particular from the point of view of an analytics of *governmentality* – thus introducing governmentality studies to the field of CSR. The aim of the paper is first, *conceptually*, to make sense of the governmentality approach in terms of the practical brand of critique it embodies and its positioning vis-à-vis other comparable contributions to our understanding of the government of CSR. And second, *analytically*, to propose a framework for analyzing the governmentalities of CSR.

## **Introduction**

CSR (corporate social responsibility) is usually defined as being voluntary. It refers to corporate activities beyond law and labour agreements (Carroll, 1999). This is, for instance, reflected in the much-quoted definition of CSR offered by The European Commission: “A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (EC, 2001). CSR is defined from the corporate point of view, but it is nevertheless an issue that government seems more and more concerned with and eager to address, and which is increasingly becoming object of governmental activity at the level of EU policy and at national, regional and local policy levels (cf. Habisch, 2005; Lozano et al., 2007).

We suggest that there are two overall reasons for this increasing governmental interest in CSR.

First, we are witnessing the emergence of a new and seductive ‘truth’ about CSR, namely that it is good for business and good for the economy. In the eyes of government, CSR have formerly been about social issues, social cohesion and inclusive labour markets. The aim has been to engage business in solving or alleviating social problems. The language has been one of societal obligations. Now, CSR is increasingly seen as a strategic advantage and therefore as a lever for economic growth and competitiveness. The language is one of economic policy, and the message from government is that business should engage in CSR to do well rather than good. This view of CSR conveniently reconciles possible tensions between the interests of society and the interests of business as it is all about creating win-win situations. It dispels fears of government standing in the way of free markets and hindering the free flow of trade and competition when concerning itself with and acting upon corporate responsibilities. Before, government intervention in CSR would be associated with undue and potentially harmful interference imposing additional costs on business. Now, increasingly, government works not to put social or environmental restraints on private companies but to help them identify/create and act upon strategic opportunities in their environment. Curiously, government promotes CSR by pushing the profit motive, not by restraining it, and this is, we argue, indicative of emerging neo-liberal tendencies in governmental approaches to CSR (Shamir, 2008).

Second, the governmental interest in CSR is closely related to what may be termed *the next wave* in the diffusion of CSR. Whereas most larger companies have already, to some extent, in more or less convincing fashion, made a commitment to CSR (cf. Roberts, 2003; Smith, 2003), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have generally been

much slower in adopting the concept and the practices it involves. This is not only due to their limited resources. It also, speaking in general terms, has to do with their being less visible and less exposed to market and public pressures in regard to CSR (special issue edited by Moore & Spence, 2006; Spence, 2007). Therefore, the focus on SMEs potentially entails a more active and significant role for government in CSR. In terms of resources and competencies in the field of CSR, government is certainly no match for big business, but it now envisions a new role for itself as an active promoter seeking to reach and affect those managers of small and medium-sized enterprises that have yet to commit to CSR. And many of these efforts are, as we will show, made in the name of competitiveness.

But what kind of government and what modes of governing are then emerging in the field of CSR? Keeping in mind the voluntary nature of CSR, we are, paradoxically, seeing government operating inside the sphere of corporate self-determination, and this can be accomplished only through liberal and indirect means of steering. Government assumes the role of an enabling and empowering facilitator of CSR, not a regulatory enforcer. We can, in this regard, certainly speak of a disciplinary intent in the sense that government seeks to instil a certain mentality in the minds of corporate managers. Efforts are made to affect, direct, and provide guidance about CSR, and to align corporate policies with public policy – but a controlling influence is ruled out.

We will explore what happens to government in the process of a language of restraint and social obligation being replaced by one of opportunity and business strategy. The questions we ask are as follows: How can we address and problematize the liberal and indirect modes of steering that characterize modern CSR governance? And how can we provide an understanding of the governmentalization of CSR and competitiveness that is at

the same time critical and able to transcend instrumental and ideological reasoning (cf. Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Shamir, 2008; Vilanova, Lozano & Arenas, 2008)? Answers are, we propose, to be found in *an analytics of governmentality* (Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999).

Governmentality studies build on Michel Foucault's groundbreaking work on power and rule in modern society (Foucault, 1977, 1978b, 1986 and 1994) and specialize in exploring the often subtle and intricate mechanisms of (neo-)liberal and indirect means of steering. That is, modes of governing which aim to shape the economic and social conduct of, in this case, business without shattering its formally distinct and autonomous character (Miller & Rose, 1990), and thus "acts on the governed as a locus of action and freedom" (Dean, 1999, p. 15). With a critical mass of public policies and governmental activities within the EU increasingly turning towards such indirect modes of governing, we believe it is time for governmentality analysis to interact with CSR. So far, the meeting has not really taken place. A recent search on the EBSCO Host Research Databases produced only a handful of journal articles so far published that make use of both the terms "CSR" and "governmentality" (see also Barry, 2004, and Gibbon & Ponte, 2008). Of these, only Banerjee (2008), Blowfield & Dolan (2008) and Shamir (2008) have CSR as a main concern, and neither of them deal with governmentality at length.

Considering the lack of prior contact between the realms of CSR and governmentality, the aim of the paper is first, *conceptually*, to make sense of the governmentality approach in terms of the practical brand of critique it embodies (in our reading), and its positioning vis-à-vis other comparable contributions to our understanding of the government of CSR. And second, *analytically*, to propose a framework for analyzing the governmentalities of CSR. Here, we emphasize the usefulness of the

distinction provided by Rose & Miller between government as it is expressed in *political rationalities*, *governmental programmes* and *governmental technologies* (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1999; Rose & Miller, 1992; see also Gibbon & Ponte, 2008). We argue that the inherent strength of insisting on the analytical involvement of all three levels, is that this does not allow for the study of government to be merely concerned with ideological matters or 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. Throughout we use examples from EU policy documents and programmes as well as developments from within the EU to illustrate our points.

### **A Governmentality Approach to CSR Governance**

In terms of contributing to a political understanding of CSR (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2004; Matten & Moon, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), governmentality provides a fruitful departure for exploration and problematization of ‘the art of government’ (Foucault, 1978a) as it unfolds in this field. Government, however, refers not only to public policy and the regulatory measures that are usually associated with the authority of the state (Preston & Post, 1975; Vogel, 1996). Foucault (1978a and 2008) provides a broad and inclusive definition of government as *conduct of conduct* and thus as a form of conduct that relates to how others conduct themselves. This definition, which applies not only to the political sphere, but to the varied forms of governing that are involved in human relationships in general, emphasizes how government consists not in determining how others should act, but in opening a space for self-government on the part of the governed (vis-à-vis the voluntary nature of CSR). Parallel to this, power can be defined as ‘actions on other’s actions’ (Foucault, 1982), although power, to be governmental, has to



take on a technical and more or less systematic form and to follow a specific form of reasoning (a rationality), which defines the *telos* of action and the adequate means to achieve it (Lemke, 2000).

Importantly, the state does not monopolize this activity. Governmentality points to an open field of governing practices that involves a host of non-state actors and intermediaries, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry and trade, businesses, experts and citizens (Barry, 2004). In more mainstream terms, the application of a governmentality perspective directs our attention to an emerging field of *CSR governance* that can be described in terms of actions on the actions of private companies to behave responsibly. Which is to say that CSR governance, as we understand it, is not CSR: it provides directions as to how other could or should do CSR. It is, to iterate, a form of conduct – or conducting – that relates to how others conduct themselves (see Kooiman & van Vliet, 2000, on the relation between self-governance and societal governance). This is reflected in communications from the European Commission acknowledging that “enterprises are the primary actors in CSR” (2006, p. 2), and that

[i]n principle, adopting CSR is clearly a matter for enterprises themselves, which is dynamically shaped in interaction between them and their stakeholders. Nevertheless, as there is evidence suggesting that CSR creates value for society by contributing to a more sustainable development, there is a role for public authorities in promoting socially and environmentally responsible practices by enterprises (2002, pp. 7-8).

It is characteristic of EU policy formulations on CSR that they define an active, yet indirect and, indeed, de-centered and restricted role for public authorities. This is exemplified in the final report from the now defunct CSR European Multi-Stakeholder

Forum (which was established by the European Commission and operated from 2002-2004), according to which:

... public authorities at different levels (EU, national, regional and local) [should] recognize their contribution to driving CSR, alongside others, and in cooperation with stakeholders, assess and strengthen their role in raising awareness of, providing information on, promoting and supporting the take-up, development and innovation of effective CSR, and the development of environmentally and socially responsible products and services (quoted from de Schutter, 2008, p. 215).

The role of public authorities is considered on a par with other corporate stakeholders and relevant conduct is defined in terms of communicating and supporting activities only. What emerges – theoretically as well as programmatically – is a networked and polycentric view of CSR governance as a self-organizing form of governing without clear, sovereign authority (Rose, 1999). In methodological terms this means that we, instead of a state-centered *a priori*, have to ask questions as to *how* government is actually carried out, *how* it works in multiple ways, and *how* this or that locale is able to act *as* a centre (Rose & Miller, 1992), i.e. “how different locales are constituted as authoritative and powerful, how different agents are assembled with specific powers, and how different domains are constituted as governable and administrable” (Dean, 1999, p. 29).

This way of asking does not – again, *a priori* – deprive the state of possible influence and leading status in regard to the ongoing development of CSR governance. The implied dispersion of power and authority has been referred to as ‘a hollowing out of the state’ (Rhodes, 1994) and as ‘governing without government’ (Rhodes, 1996), but the latter heading can be misleading as governments take active part, indeed, often centre stage in

the development and promotion of new configurations of governance (Swyngedouw, 2005). We will return to this point.

On a conceptual level and in terms of analytical approach, governmentality can be considered as the radical cousin of the more mainstream notion of *governance* (Kooiman, 1999; Rhodes, 1994 and 1996). Having said that, it is occasionally difficult to keep the two concepts, and the work that is produced under their respective names, clearly apart as they share many of the same insights. Rhodes (2007), for instance, uses the notion of governance to describe a networked view of governing indicating that boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors are shifting and becoming opaque. Governance usually signifies a “transition in socioeconomic regulation from state-centrist command and control systems to horizontal networked forms of participatory governance” (Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 2002). The field of government (and thus governmentality), according to Foucault, is essentially the same as the field of governance, so the difference is a matter of perspective. Generally speaking, governance as a leading concept indicates a search for mechanisms that foster coordination, cooperation and harmonization. The governance discourse provides democratizing narratives that stress the value of political consensus, mutual accommodation and collective problem solving (Lemke, 2007). Thus, it tends to promote technocratic models of steering and managing that builds on a realist understanding of the objects of governance, and to assume “that political decisions are based on neutral facts and rational arguments, thereby ignoring the role of strategic options and political alternatives” (ibid., p. 54). It seeks to minimize frictions and in that sense constitutes an ‘antipolitical politics’, whereas, in contrast, the governmentality approach stresses the constitutive role of political conflicts and confrontations (ibid.; Walters, 2004). The post-structural leanings of the latter conception imply a preoccupation not only with

the constitutive dimension of language, but also, and importantly, with the practice of governance. Whereas the notion of governance points to the democratic implications of governing becoming polycentric, governmentality provides a rich vocabulary for analyzing how polycentric governance actually works.

In the field of CSR, it is governance that has so far been providing the conceptual impetus for explorations of the changing roles of governments – with the term *New Governance* being used to capture the networked forms of governing that are taking place outside the confines of regulatory or legislative command and control (Lepoutre, Dentchev & Heene, 2007; see also Eberlein & Kerwer, 2004; Salamon, 2002). It is characteristic of the contributions so far published (we return to their findings), that they either have a normative, an empirical, or an instrumental edge (cf. Donaldson & Preston, 1995) – or combine these features. They provide prescriptions or recommendations, they map and make visible the field of emerging activities, and/or they are concerned with effectiveness. They generally tend to be imbued with a spirit of good governance (vis-à-vis the above characterization). Applying a governmentality perspective, we have a different ambition in regard to the New Governance of CSR. Our primary aim is not to promote it or improve it, and we make no prior assumptions about its material impact and its current or future significance in the wider picture of CSR. We are interested in providing a critical understanding of how it works and what it does.

Focusing on government/governance as practice, our approach is problem-centred and present-oriented (Dean, 1999; see also Barry, 2004). Our main concern is the here-and-now of CSR governance within the EU along with recent developments in this field (which is to say that we do not provide a basis for a historical analysis – a genealogy – of the development of government in regard to CSR). Importantly, we seek to avoid

tendencies towards schematism and over-abstraction that are otherwise prevalent in the governmentality literature – due to its emphasis on the programmatic nature of rule and its methodological focus on texts of government rather than the ‘messy actualities’ of governance (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997; Barry, Osborne & Rose, 1993). Often, the assumption of governmentality studies seems to be that programmes and technologies of government, after some initial friction, “roll out smoothly and generally succeed in normalizing the range of objects to which they are addressed” (Gibbon & Ponte, 2008; p. 367). No distinction is made between the ideal and the real, and governance failures are not taken into account (ibid.). In our reading, a governmentality perspective does not imply an analytical preoccupation only or primarily with the (programmatic) texts on CSR that are produced by governments and other bodies but also, and even more importantly, a strong focus on the dynamic and polycentric networks through which the governance of CSR actually works and have an effect. By critique we do not mean a principled, normative or ideological critique, but a practical critique concerned with the organizational means by which the promoters of the competitiveness agenda, in particular, seek to achieve results. Indeed, we recommend attentiveness to the micro-politics of governance as it comes to the fore in the ‘messy’ practices of CSR programmes employing various technological means.

An analytics of governmentality is empirical but not realist (Rose, 1999). Its role is diagnostic rather than descriptive as it seeks “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” (ibid., p. 19). In a similar vein, Blowfield & Frynas (2005) suggest that in order to properly understand how CSR is developing, we need to look not only at what is happening within

the field, but also at what is being overlooked, taken for granted, ignored or excluded. We concur with Blowfield (2005) that it is important for the discipline of CSR to develop means for internal critique and for recognizing its own assumptions, prejudices and limitations. To adopt a governmentality approach is one way to open such critical lines of inquiry – particularly in regard to addressing and problematizing implications of liberal and neo-liberal forms of governing (cf. Larner & le Heron, 2005).

### **(Neo-)Liberal Governmentalities and CSR**

Governmentality as a neologism linking government and rationality (Gordon, 1991) or, in French, ‘gouverner’ and ‘mentalité’, suggest that it is not possible to study government and the technologies of power it makes use of without analysing the political rationality or mentality that underpins them (Lemke, 2000). As long as its voluntary nature is upheld and respected, CSR per definition belongs to the realm of liberal government. Hence, it is liberal governmentalities and their effects we need to understand better. As Lepoutre, Dentchev & Heene (2007) argue, most studies of CSR governance have focused on the policy instruments that national or supranational governments can use in the context of CSR, while neglecting or even rejecting its conception as a voluntary effort. Whereas prior studies have failed to address the inherent paradox and the tensions, intricacies and subtleties involved when government operates inside the sphere of corporate self-determination (practicing conduct of conduct), we will strongly emphasize the mechanics of indirect means of steering.

Governmentality studies are particularly adept at addressing the ends, means and implications of liberal and neo-liberal forms of government, and this, as already suggested, has to do with the Foucauldian notion of power which underpins these studies.

Government is not considered to be about domination and determining how others should behave. It presupposes a certain amount of freedom on the part of the governed. Indeed, power is only power (as opposed to mere physical force or violence) when addressed to actors who are free to act otherwise (Gordon, 1991). Putting aside conventional notions of political authority and control, governmentality studies have a keen eye for the intricacies of liberal modes of steering that are driven by a desire to ‘govern at a distance’ (cf. Latour, 1986), and which are concerned with creating subjects “who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves” (Rose, 1996, p. 45). Power in the Foucauldian sense need not imply restrictions, it can result in ‘empowerment’, ‘individuation’ or ‘responsibilization’ of subjects (Lemke, 2000; Shamir, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2005), which is what we are seeing in CSR with the widespread use of enabling forms of government – that are, in particular, addressed to SMEs due to their lack of awareness and resource constraints (EC, 2002).

The need to address the implications of liberal and indirect means of steering is accentuated by the emergence of competitiveness as a dominant governmentality in CSR. This development is indicative of emerging neo-liberal tendencies (Shamir, 2008), and these have in turn been heralded by the programmatic statement of *strategic CSR* provided by Porter & Kramer (2002 and 2006). That neo-liberalism is making a difference in regard to CSR is nothing new. What is new, however, in fact it is a recent occurrence, is the emergence of a neo-liberal mindset that is not in opposition to CSR but which operates *within* CSR, and which is becoming governmentalized (as conduct of conduct) through programmatic and technical application. To illustrate: Porter & Kramer (2006) argue that CSR is only good to the extent that it creates value (that is, *shared value*, value for the business as well as for society), and that value creation should be *the* guiding principle for

CSR. This principle is governmentalized in the Danish government *Action plan for Corporate Social Responsibility* (The Danish Government, 2008), which explicitly focuses on ‘business-driven social responsibility’ and suggests that CSR-work should pivot around strengthening core business. In the action plan it is stated that responsibility is increasingly becoming a competitive parameter, and that “[b]usinesses and society each reap the optimum benefits from CSR work, if it constitutes a natural part of its business strategy and core competences” (p. 6).

At the level of EU policy and in the European discourse on CSR in general, the strategic mindset has been if not all-pervasive then certainly ever-present since the European Commission Green Paper of 2001 (cf. de Schutter, 2008). The Green Paper states that the prime responsibility of a company is to generate profits, but that “companies can at the same time contribute to social and environmental objectives, through integrating corporate social responsibility as a strategic investment into their core business strategy, their management instruments and their operations” (EC, 2001, p. 4). It has also been suggested that while socially responsible initiatives have a long tradition in Europe, “[w]hat distinguishes today’s understanding of CSR from the initiatives of the past is the attempt to manage it strategically and to develop instruments for this” (EC, 2002, p. 5).

The proposed “business approach” to CSR (ibid.) has also been adopted in regard to SMEs, as reflected in projects such as “Mainstreaming CSR among SMEs” (EU, 2006-2008) and “People & Profit” (Denmark, 2005-2007), to name two of the most notable initiatives that have been targeting SMEs while strongly emphasizing the business case for CSR. Most of these efforts have been based on the assumption that focusing on competitiveness is the best and most effective way to encourage the uptake of CSR (EC, 2002). Hence, the governmental aim has been to assist SMEs in adopting not just CSR, but



a strategic approach to CSR. In the “Mainstreaming CSR among SMEs” project, ‘mainstreaming’ has been a matter of disseminating knowledge about CSR to SMEs and providing resources for SMEs to work with CSR – including baseline data and research about CSR (surveys, case studies a.o.), practical tools, best practice models, strategies and innovation models, sets of indicators and models of performance measurement (relating to the business case), teaching materials, handbooks, guides and manuals. Other means of getting the message across have included training, seminars, workshops and events as well as various forms of mass communication. “People & Profit” has similarly produced research along with training materials, training modules, and a variety of different communications about CSR. As part of the CSR effort conducted by the Danish Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs, the project has made appeals not only the responsible self-government of SMEs, but also, and particularly, to their awareness of and ability to act on the strategic opportunities of CSR. In line with overall policy priorities within the EU, both projects have defined relevant governmental conduct in terms of communicating and supporting activities only. They constitute strategic and instrumental modes of responsabilization (Shamir, 2008) as they emphasize business opportunities rather than social problems or obligations. The technologies applied are, obviously, representative of indirect means of steering. They are offered as a service – free of charge – to help businesses help themselves.

The competitiveness agenda subjects CSR to economic reasoning and market thinking with its strong focus on the business case, value creation, innovation and win-win situations. While such an economic approach may, on the one hand, be considered crucial for a widespread mainstreaming of CSR to take place, it may, on the other, be considered as a reflection of an economic colonization, appropriation or takeover of CSR at the public

policy level (cf. Deetz, 1992). Indeed, it can be seen as a hollowing out of general societal interests, regulatory modes of governance, a.o.

With Shamir (2008) we can inscribe the success and dominance of the competitiveness agenda in a grand narrative of political economy (see also de Schutter, 2008, who argues that EU policy developments in CSR have come to be dominated by corporate interests to such an extent that all other considerations have been subordinated to the project of securing economic competitiveness and growth). Shamir suggests that we are witnessing an economization of the political domain that marks a transformation of the instruments of public authority, “replacing laws with guidelines, relying on self- and reflexive regulation and treating normative prescriptions in general as commodities that are to be produced, distributed and consumed by a host of agencies, enterprises and non-profit organizations” (ibid., p. 2). He proposes that the discourse and practice of business and morality is, across the board, grounded in a neo-liberal epistemology that dissolves the distinction between economy and society with ‘the social’ being encoded as a specific instance of ‘the economy’ (see also Banerjee, 2008). As a result, moral concerns become embedded in the rationality of markets. Moral problems and issues are recoded and re-emerge as business opportunities, and this process is driven by the proliferation of governance, which “signifies a moving away from the legalistic, bureaucratic and centralized top-down configuration of authority to a reflexive, self-regulatory and horizontal ‘market-like’ configuration” (Shamir, 2008, pp. 3-4).

We see a need to correct this analysis in two respects. First, we need to maintain a differentiated view not only of the business and morality/CSR discourse as such (it is certainly misleading to suggest that it is based on a common epistemology or set of basic assumptions – see, critically, van Oosterhout & Heugens, 2008), but also of CSR

governance. The neo-liberal imagination is one of the vital forces at play in this field, but it is not the only one. Second, it is misleading to unequivocally associate governance with neo-liberalism. As we will show, CSR governance of the ‘New’ or liberal variety can accommodate a number of governmentalities. We need to maintain that there is a certain amount of freedom and strategic liberty on both sides of the govern-governed relation. To reduce CSR governance to a singular rationality is to gravely underestimate the complexity of the field.

To iterate, instead of a grand narrative assuming or suggesting the all-pervasiveness of a neo-liberal mindset in CSR, we need to look at the empirical facts of how this kind of mindset is actually brought to bear and connects, interacts and competes with other governmentalities. A discussion of prior contributions to the field of New Governance in CSR will serve to further elaborate our methodological point of departure and critical position.

### **New Governance and Governmentality**

The notion of New Governance was first introduced to CSR in the late-1990s (Moon & Sochaki, 1998; see also Moon, 2002), and the spread of New Governance initiatives related directly to CSR must be considered a recent phenomenon. Within the EU, the European Commission Green Paper from 2001, which acknowledges the voluntary nature of CSR, marks the beginning of a New Governance era. Latter years have seen an explosive growth of activities in the field, and this can in large part be attributed to the proliferation of the competitiveness agenda. Research has, accordingly, focused on the changing roles of government in regard to enabling and promoting social and environmental practices. There has been a strong focus on public-private partnerships

(Gribben, Pinnington & Wilson, 2001; Nelson & Zadek; 2000), soft policy approaches (Joseph, 2003) and multi-stakeholder dialogue (Fransen & Kolk, 2007; Payne & Calton, 2002 and 2004; Perrini, Russo & Tencati, 2007).

In terms of approaches to New Governance we find two general directions in the, as of yet, relatively sparse literature, one providing a broad and descriptive exploration of the emerging field of New Governance in regard to CSR, the other being concerned with the limitations of New Governance. Albareda, Lozano & Yza (2007) exemplify the former approach. In their comprehensive study of public policies on CSR in the EU-15 countries, they classify policies according to whom they are addressed: government itself, business, civil society (NGOs), or networks of collaboration between governments, business and civil society stakeholders. Thus, they strongly emphasize the relational and multi-directional character of governmental activities in this field, i.e. how there is a web of activities emanating from government and giving rise to self-organizing processes and networks (see also Albareda et al., 2006, who apply a *relational state* model to the study of the government of CSR). Based on their analysis of policies and programs, they propose an ideal typology model for European governmental action on CSR in which they distinguish between *the partnership model*, *the 'business in the community' model*, *the sustainability and citizenship model*, and *the agora model*. The language is one of best practices and effective governance expressing underlying ethical and/or democratic concerns. In the same vein, Lepoutre, Dentchev & Heene (2007) are concerned with governance gaps and deficiencies as they provide an analysis of the uncertainties – substantive, strategic and institutional – that reliance upon voluntary behavior entails.

The spirit of good governance is also present in contributions that are more critical towards the New Governance of CSR. González & Martínez (2004; see also Moon, 2004)

exemplify this approach as they juxtapose and focus on the tensions between voluntary and obligatory approaches to CSR. They associate the former with *the business case for CSR* and the latter with *the society case for CSR*, although this is not entirely adequate as the voluntary model can certainly accommodate socially motivated initiatives.

Competitiveness is not the only available and applicable means of operating in the voluntary domain, and therefore it is important to avoid a conflation of the business case with voluntary CSR. The main point, however, is that González & Martínez (2004) discuss the problems of New Governance in terms of the need to transcend it and replace or complement it with 'Old Governance', i.e. mandatory regulation. This approach is in line with the general distrust of voluntary modes of governance that permeates the critical literature on CSR (see, for instance, Banerjee, 2008; Kuhn & Deetz, 2008; Reich, 2007), although the authors emphasize that proponents of the obligatory approach need not be against voluntary initiatives as such. They are only against the idea that voluntary modes of governance should be the only or the primary means of ensuring corporate accountability (González & Martínez, 2004). de Schutter (2008) argues that there is a clearly identifiable need for a regulatory framework to be established if CSR is to work. He envisions a framework that will not contradict the voluntary nature of CSR, but instead "attaches its meanings to voluntary commitments" (ibid., p. 219). He finds that CSR tools "only function effectively if they are transparent and based on clear and verifiable criteria and benchmarks", and that the function of public policy should therefore be to lend credibility to voluntary initiatives through verification schemes, effective monitoring a.o. (ibid., p. 208).

Applying a governmentality perspective, we propose a different kind of critique. Instead of seeking refuge from the problems and possible inadequacies of New

Governance outside the realm of New Governance, we point to the need for critical reflection on New Governance as such. We are not looking outside for solutions, but inside for problems. To iterate, we seek an open and critical relation to the workings of CSR governance, the competitiveness agenda in particular, attentive to its presuppositions, assumptions, exclusions, regimes of vision and spots of blindness (Rose, 1999).

In more concrete terms this means that we must be aware of the ambiguous role of government and of politics in regard to CSR governance. As already mentioned, the dispersion of power and authority that is implied when we speak of governance and/or governmentality can be referred to as ‘a hollowing out of the state’ (Rhodes, 1994) and as ‘governing without government’ (Rhodes, 1996), but the latter heading can be misleading as the state, through its various governmental bodies, takes active part in the de-centering process. According to Foucault, who refers to this process as a ‘governmentalization of the state’, “it is the tactics of government that make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not” (1978a, p. 221). In this perspective, even neo-liberal efforts to accomplish a ‘withdrawal of the state’ must be considered as techniques of government (Lemke, 2001). To illustrate, the latest European Commission communication on CSR states that “[b]ecause CSR is fundamentally about voluntary business behaviour, an approach involving additional obligations and administrative requirements for business risks being counter-productive and would be contrary to the principles of better regulation” (EC, 2006, p. 2). This kind of statement should not be seen as a retreat or evacuation of politics from CSR – with public authority (and thus, some would argue, public interests) giving way to the rule of market forces (cf. de Schutter, 2008). Rather, it is an instance of politics by other means as it expresses an expansion of a (neo-)liberal mindset. Hence, the restriction of governmental

action is self-imposed with governmental bodies taking centre stage in the development and promotion of new configurations of governance (Swyngedouw, 2005). This means that we must be aware of the role and influence of governments in regard to CSR governance in a positive as well as negative sense, that is, not only in terms of what is included in CSR policies and programmes, but also, and some would say that this is even more important, in terms of what is excluded in this process (regulatory measures a.o.).

In all, prior studies of the New Governance of CSR have provided a relational view of structures, programmes and range of activities in the field, but what has been absent is a more elaborate critical reflection on the mindsets and views of CSR that direct and organize activities, and their implications in terms of priorities (inclusions and exclusions) and scope of action. With governmentality we are arguing for a multi-level analytical design operating interactively on the level of political rationalities and the level of governmental programmes and technologies (Rose & Miller, 1992; Rose, 1999).

### **Rationalities, Programmes, Technologies**

First, at the level of *political rationalities*, we must reflect on the kinds of political reasoning that inform and guide activities in the field of CSR governance. In other words, we need to understand the political differentiation that CSR is subjected to. The state appears as a complex, differentiated system that involves many, often competing policy areas (cf. Luhmann, 2000), and we must therefore resist the temptation to speak of it as a uniform, monolithic entity. It is, to use a crude formulation, a beast with many heads that speaks in many tongues and embodies many different agendas and governmentalities. And apart from that, centers of activity may be located outside formal government – contributing further to the differentiation of the field.

The level of political rationalities does not so much provide us with alternative theories of CSR, as with more or less elaborate ways of approaching and articulating the subject. In governmentality terms, we can specify and differentiate rationalities in terms of the particular languages within which its objects and objectives are construed, and the grammar of analyses and prescriptions (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose & Miller, 1992). Political rationalities emerge as “discursive fields characterized by a shared vocabulary within which disputes can be organized, by ethical principles that can communicate with each other, by mutually intelligible explanatory logics, by commonly accepted facts, by significant agreement on key political problems” (Rose, 1999, p. 28). To illustrate, the body of knowledge produced by the Danish “People & Profit” project is concerned only with the economic and pragmatic aspects of CSR. The project defines a discursive field in which only ‘the economic truth’ of CSR matters, where all inputs are translated into an economic language, and where other considerations are at best peripheral.

Historically, within the EU, the two dominant political rationalities in CSR have been social policy and economic policy. Whereas the former discourse was dominant throughout the 1990s (Gribben, Pinnington & Wilson, 2000), the latter has been gaining considerable ground in the new millennium. Apart from these rationalities, we can also, for instance, speak of CSR in environmental sustainability terms (reflecting environmental policy concerns), or in regard to uses of codes of conduct in public procurement (and thus as a financial policy issue). The different rationalities and the way they are enacted need not be in conflict with each other, but they reflect different priorities and concerns as well as different criteria of worth and measures of success. From the point of view of economic policy, CSR is a means to an end which is defined in terms of economic progress, i.e. improvements in terms of competitiveness, economic growth and value creation. From the



point of view of social policy, in contrast, CSR is a means to solve or alleviate social problems and to engage business in societal matters. Here, measures of success may include the contribution of CSR programmes to employment, integration of minorities a.o., along with the level of business engagement in public-private partnerships.

‘Rationality’ is to be understood not as a form of transcendental reason or a normative judgment, but as a reflection of political practices (Lemke, 2000). Following Foucault, our use of this notion is restricted to an instrumental and relative meaning. We are not “assessing things in terms of an absolute against which they could be evaluated as constituting more or less perfect forms of rationality, but rather examining how forms of rationality inscribe themselves in practices or systems of practices, and what role they play within them” (Foucault, 1991, p. 79). In this perspective, political rationality is obviously not a pure, neutral knowledge reflecting and representing the governed reality. It constitutes an active and creative process of rationalization, by which new ‘truths’ and forms of knowledge come into being (Lemke, 2000).

Hence, when speaking of ‘rationality’ and ‘truth’ in regard to CSR governance, we are not making ontological assertions about certain forms of knowledge being superior or inferior compared to others. We are speaking about ‘processes of rationalization’ and uses of truth’ as categories for action and strategy. We may accordingly speak of competitiveness as a ‘truth regime’ (Al-Amoudi, 2007) in the realm of CSR. It is an agenda seeking to attract resources and attention and to promote a certain understanding – among other competing understandings – of CSR that implies certain priorities in regard to public policy as well as corporate action. It establishes its own, more or less explicit set of normative assumptions about what constitutes a good and valuable argument, and it provides a basis for producing knowledge/discourse and countering other ‘truths’ about

CSR that reflect other values and priorities. Of course, there is no singular truth about CSR. There are only strategies in the political idiom.

Neo-liberalism constitutes one of the dominant strategies in the field. Whereas classic liberalism has called on government to respect the form of the market and has argued for a clear separation of business and politics (Friedman, 1962 and 1970), neo-liberalism dissolves the distinction between economy and society as it subjects all human action to economic rationality (Lemke, 2001). This mindset is, as we have suggested, reflected in the notion that value creation should be *the* guiding principle for CSR (Porter & Kramer, 2006), which implies that moral concerns are embedded in the rationality of markets (Shamir, 2008). The strength of the governmentality perspective in regard to understanding this kind of governmentality is that “it construes neo-liberalism not just as ideological rhetoric or as a political-economic reality, but above all as a political project that endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (Lemke, 2001, p. 203). In other words, neo-liberalism in CSR governance is not just ideology (as reflected in political programmes) and not just reality (as in reflecting an already given reality), it is *political practice*: an emerging agenda promoting strategic approaches to CSR and simultaneously assuming and aiming to establish empirically that such approaches are superior to others – in economic terms, in terms of getting the message of CSR across to businesses a.o. To iterate, neo-liberalism in CSR governance reflects an ongoing effort to establish ‘an economic truth’ of CSR, namely that it is good for business and good for the economy. In order to understand the practical side of political rationalities, however, we have to turn, first, to the level of programmes.

*Governmental programmes* represent an articulation as well as an organization of political rationalities. Whereas rationalities are general in nature, programmes are specific.

They break down rationalities into concrete ends and means. Programmes are thus 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). It is in programmes – policies, strategies, action plans, projects a.o. – that CSR governance finds its concrete expression. Programmes are always manifestations of particular political rationalities, although a singular programme can contain elements from multiple rationalities – as when a CSR programme draws on economical as well as social and environmental reasoning. Most often, however, a particular rationality will turn out to be dominant within a programme – as exemplified by the aforementioned “Mainstreaming CSR among SMEs” and “People & Profit” projects, which both involve a variety of considerations in regard to CSR, but do so from the point of view of competitiveness.

It is in the nature of programmes to be programmatic, which is to say that they tend to contain a utopian or ideal element and reflect certain normative/ideological/strategic investments. Therefore it is important to study their organization as well as their articulation, that is, the concrete means by which they translate ideals into practice along with their rhetorical means of expression. Otherwise, we run the risk of merely reproducing political rhetoric that has little or no bearing on practice. Importantly, the workings of programmes have to be understood in network terms. In order for ‘action at a distance’ or ‘government at a distance’ (cf. Latour, 1986) to achieve results, it has to engage and forge alliances with various independent agents, i.e. intermediary organizations (Rose & Miller, 1992). Governments can only operationalize their programmes “by influencing, allying with or co-opting resources that they do not directly control” (ibid., p. 189). Political power is thus conceived as being relational and performative. It is emphasized that a “[a] powerful actor, agent or institution is one that, in the particular

circumstances obtaining at a given moment, is able to successfully enrol and mobilise persons, procedures and artifacts in the pursuit of its goals” (ibid., p. 183). Which means that 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.

Finally, in order to get really close to the implementation and point of realization for programmes, we need to look closely at the level of *governmental technologies*.

Technologies mark the point of realization for governmental programmes. The emphasis on governance as technique serves to contest models that view it solely or mainly as a manifestation of values, ideologies, the articulated intent of strategies, etc. If governance is to achieve ends, it must use technical means (Dean, 1999). And so, if governmentality aspirations of being attentive to the microphysics of power are to be fulfilled, it is necessary to focus on “the complex of relays and interdependencies which enable programmes of government to act upon and intervene upon those places, persons and populations which are their concern” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 8). It is through technologies that political rationalities and the programmes of government that articulate them become capable of deployment. In a governmentality perspective, this deployment is not just a matter of the ‘implementation’ of ideal schemes in the real. Rather, it is a question of the complex assemblage of diverse forces. The focus on technologies calls for a need to study the humble and mundane mechanisms by which authorities seek to instantiate governance: including all kinds of techniques, devices, systems, procedures, professional areas of expertise, vocabularies, designs – including means of measurement, calculation and evaluation (Rose & Miller, 1992).

We do not provide a formula for effective implementation and execution in regard to the three levels. One of the distinguishing features of the proposed analytics is that it calls for attention to the often fragile relays between different policy levels, which is to say that directives and impulses are translated rather than transmitted between levels (Rose, 1999; see also Latour, 1986).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The governmentality approach allows us to address and problematize the liberal and indirect modes of steering that characterize modern CSR governance – without resorting to instrumental or ideological reasoning. Thus, we have proposed a practical form of critique that is not preoccupied with effective implementation or with a principled (moral or otherwise) debunking of economic thought and practice, but instead concerns itself with the organizational means put to use in CSR governance.

Modern CSR governance makes CSR available to business as a space for self-government. It operates at a distance and applies such undemanding and non-intrusive modes of governing that it often makes little sense to speak even of soft regulation when describing its impact. Indeed CSR programmes can often seem as commodities that primarily serve a legitimizing purpose and make a difference within the self-referential and operationally closed system of political debate and policy-making (cf. Luhmann, 2000; Shamir, 2008). They can seem inconsequential outside a public policy context due to a lack of tangible achievements in terms of governmentality effects. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the empirical scope of governmentality analysis in regard to CSR is broader than we have suggested. Competitiveness-driven modes of New

Governance, with their neo-liberal reliance on economic reasoning and economic measures of value, constitute a field of obvious analytical relevance as they are the very embodiment of indirect government. But the proposed framework and the governmentality approach can also be applied in other ways. We suggest that it can provide a point of departure for elaborate reflection on the rationalities and mentalities that inform and guide the governance of CSR in the broadest sense. Thus, it can be put to use at different levels of analysis and in different contexts.

At a public policy level (national, regional or local) it can be used to explore the governmentalities at play in public policies and governance networks, and thus how different political rationalities interact and compete for attention and resources. CSR is increasingly becoming a governmental priority, and to speak of the interests of ‘the state’ in this regard fails to properly capture the resulting complexity – including the often networked and collaborative nature of CSR governance. We need to understand the political differentiation of CSR, that is, how it is translated and appropriated/made useful within different policy areas emphasizing particular aspects of the concept and the practices it involves. In the same vein, governmentality can provide tools for comparative analyses – making way for reflections on the different policy orientations of nations or regions, and the explanatory variables underlying such orientations (cf. Matten & Moon, 2008, on the significance of business systems and institutional frameworks for a contextual understanding of CSR). In addition, it can be concerned with developments at a supranational or global policy level and focus on EU policy trajectories or the global governance of CSR (i.e. the codes of conduct involved in the UN Global Compact or the Global Reporting Initiative).

Governmentality can also be put to use at the corporate level, in order to explore the rationalities and mentalities of CSR programmes and practices. This could contribute to a differentiated understanding of the modes of governance, and thus the kinds of governing, that CSR gives rise to within corporate structures and in corporate networks – whether the emphasis is on philanthropy, corporate communication and public relations, risk management, human resource management, stakeholder management, or environmental sustainability, to name but a few of the relevant orientations. The aim could here be to explore the range of corporate governmentalities or regimes that are operative in CSR, the programmes and technologies they make use of, and their implications and impacts – again, with a critical attentiveness toward their presuppositions, assumptions, exclusions, regimes of vision and spots of blindness (Rose, 1999).

In this paper we have focused on governance developments preceding the big financial crisis. Whether the crisis will have an impact on governmental approaches to CSR as such, and whether it will put an end to the reign of the competitiveness agenda, is still to be seen. No matter the outcome, we believe that there is a continued need for analyzing and reflecting on the intricate modes of governance in CSR, and that governmentality analysis has vital contributions to make in this regard.

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