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EDITORIAL

Editorial introduction

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Increasing disparities in wealth between rich and poor, the continuing depletion of the natural environment and the recurrent crises within capitalist systems of accumulation illustrate fractures in the relationship between business and society, notably in Western economic contexts. Yet business and governments are keen to patch up the system, to pursue growth agendas with renewed vigour and to return to 'business as usual' after the Global Financial Crisis. Corporations have turned to ideas of corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, and multi-stakeholder dialogue, and improvements in their governance arrangements and practices, in order to repair and maintain their legitimacy. Such concepts have provoked scepticism among some commentators and academics (see, for instance, Fleming and Jones 2013). The clarion call for 'business as usual' is seen by them as serving an ideological function of leaving unquestioned the contentious systemic relationships between business and society and the ensuing governance challenges that are often at the heart of recurring economic crises.

The emergence of DE-MNCs (MNCs from decolonizing and emerging economies; Frenkel, forthcoming) and the rise of the BRIC nations have generated similar, yet also regionally and nationally distinctive iterations of the fractious relationship between business and society in so-called developing and emerging economies. Of particular relevance in such contexts is the increasing alignment of interests between the state and corporations, characteristic of the emerging hegemony of neoliberal economic policy and institutional practice. This is perhaps most starkly illustrated in the form of so-called 'land grabs', with national governments restructuring land use and enabling the privatization of land ownership for the extractive activities of corporations (Banerjee 2011).These revised governance arrangements beg the question of whether they should best be considered a new or a mutated form of colonialism which caters to global financial interests.

At the same time, there is a vigourous growth of civil society activism that is not only questioning 'business as usual' but also keenly building alternatives and creating spaces for wholesome relations within the various constituents of society. The early successes that the civil society has met with appear to be so powerful that the ruling elite are now actively co-opting activists and social development practitioners into their pursuits.

Against such a backdrop, this special issue was conceived as an attempt to examine the characteristics, changes and continuities in the relationship between business and society within BRIC settings in a contemporary, as well as a historical perspective. Moreover, we set out with the intention to decentre and re-contextualize academic debate in business studies about the importation and appropriation of Western models of modernity and managerialism in non-Western and

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putatively 'post-'colonial contexts. This special issue was envisioned as an opportunity to animate fundamental questions not only for businesses and governments, but also for civil societies, the global citizenry and the global peasantry: Just what is the contemporary nature of the relationship between business and society? And what should it be? 'Society' is often narrowly conceived either as a supply of factors of production (land, labour, capital and information) or as a market of consumers for finished goods and brand propositions from which business can profit. What other kinds of societal goals could and should be 'brought to bear on the governance of economic activity'? How might we work with others 'inside and outside the university for a society that is grounded in just working relationships, human and community development and ecological balance as well as on the efficient allocation of resources' (www.grouponline.org/cms)?

The collection of papers and practitioner accounts that comprise the special issue provide interesting avenues for scholarship and practice of business and governance. This collection of four research papers, two interviews with practitioners, a case study and a roundtable with practitioners on business, governance and society generate a provocative cross-section of ideas on participation, access, governance, development, Indigenous knowledge and the commons.

The idea of participation, a staple both in governance and management today is thoroughly problematised and critiqued both in the scholarly writing and practitioner accounts included here. While Sarkar and Sinha examine the distributive inequalities in the participation-laden development discourse in their case study of a development intervention, Dr. Rao, a pioneering rural development worker and founder of BCT working in rural India for almost four decades, shares his reflections in an interview on what participation has meant for him and the rural communities he has worked with. To quote him, it means, 'keeping eyes and ears open and mouth shut', a position also articulated in an interview with Helene George, the Australian founder of social enterprise company Creative Economy.

As if proving Dr. Rao's contention on people's wisdom, the case study by Mitra et.al., of a village panchayat in West Bengal portrays the innovations developed by the people for prevention of tuberculosis in their area.

The roundtable speakers—Bharat Patel, coming from a grassroots group protesting unjust land acquisition; Ravi Rebbapragada, representing a coalition of partners working for indigenous rights and responsible mining; and Sanjay Upadhyay, an environmental rights lawyer—share the farcical side of participation and the travesties of justice that ensue.

Fahreen Alamgir's paper explores the governance of the jute sector in Bangladesh taking the technology of participation as the starting point and draws attention to the fragility and the continuing fluidity in the governance of the postcolonial third world State. The colonial experience continues to permeate the papers in this volume not just in the accounts of Dr. Rao and Helene George, but in the detailed historical analysis of Lake Vembanad at Kuttanad in the state of Kerala in South India by Kuriakose Mathew. In tracing the transformations in the lake, land, crop, labour and technologies at Kuttanad over a period of over two centuries, Mathew generates pertinent questions about our understanding of commons—its appropriation and production.

The modernist notion of 'access' and empowerment is systematically shown as privileging a gender-insensitive view of development in the fourth paper. In his paper exploring the livelihood challenges being faced by women in the informal sector, Patturaja Selvaraj persuasively shows how 'access' remains a discourse of domination and not something that is located in feminist ethics.

The review of Indian Council of Social Science Research's volume on Research Surveys and Explorations in Indian Sociology by Manish Thakur also underscores the importance of a responsible approach to scholarship and theory from the South.

The roundtable participants too raise very pertinent questions of due process, of voice and the decision-making role of communities in the management of commons and their own fates. They also draw attention to the (in)capacity and (un)willingness of governments and businesses to deal with the just questions of the communities. Their appeal for a genuine engagement with the community is too pressing to ignore, either by businesses or governments.

References

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