

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University	
Faculty	Faculty of Social Studies
Procedure field	Sociology
Applicant	Robert Braun
Applicant's home unit, institution	Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna
Habilitation thesis	„ Corporate Stakeholder Democracy “
Reviewer	Linda Madsen
Reviewer's home unit, institution	University of South-Eastern Norway

The thesis is a book consisting of ten chapters following the introduction where the candidate address' his audience, presents his academic ambitions and position himself in the field of CSR, also with references to participatory governance. Each chapter sets of with emblematic CSR case stories, mainly concerning firms' success and failure/rise and fall in terms of corporate responsibility, but also related to policy and standards. The case stories contribute to set the thematic agenda for the respective chapters, each providing overview of relevant theoretical approaches.

The thesis is well structured and clearly formulated in a language that speaks to the audience explicitly addressed: students, scholars as well as business managers. This is an impressive achievement considering the theoretical pregnancy of the text. The thesis offers a well written introduction to the field of CSR in general and to political CSR in particular; with this book the candidate aims to contribute to the field that the title refers to: corporate stakeholder democracy.

With the case stories opening the remaining chapters, the candidate moves from the more common macro and meso level – which tend to be the prevalent levels of analysis in the fields of political science, economy and management and organisation studies, thus among most scholars of political CSR – to micro level.

The thesis and the candidate's explicit ambitions to contribute to an ongoing, radical discourse on corporate stakeholder democracy could have benefited from a more independent, critical, and original presentation of the case stories and of a more active engagement with these stories throughout the chapters. The stories are relevant and entertaining, and they contribute to structuring the thesis and to make the book an easy read. However, to a large extent the stories seem to be retellings of corporate self-presentations (the story of Body Shop og Ben & Jerry) or weekly magazine stories (Enron). Only sporadic use of references in these stories – also on text marked as quotations – is highly problematic. As the introductory case stories are rarely mentioned in the remaining part of the chapters it is not always clear how they relate to the theoretical approaches. There are some obvious connections, but are there other relations that the author takes for granted but which remain invisible for the reader?

In addition to theoretical CSR literature, the candidate mentions other approaches that can certainly add to the classical and mainstream CSR theories introduced and discussed throughout the thesis. However, it remains unclear in which ways a reworking of these CSR theories – possibly inspired by Foucauldian, feminist, Habermasian, STS and other briefly mentioned approaches – contribute to a different understanding of the stories and of corporate stakeholder democracy.

By bringing forth these complementary approaches – all relevant and interesting – the candidate demonstrates an ambition to develop the field of political CSR. Still, he remains close to the classical and mainstream CSR approaches, and the potentials for original and innovative theoretical co-production that lays on the borderlands of these various approaches remain underexplored. More critical discussion with references to common critics of classic and mainstream approaches (thereby TBL) as well as own critical reflections, could have been advantageous both in order to providing a more nuanced and original introduction to the field of CSR and corporate stakeholder democracy, and to reach theoretical novelty.

One out of several relevant common critical concerns – if the candidate's ambition is to encourage corporate democracy for all stakeholders, rather than strengthening corporations' and their most exclusive stockholders' voices in (erosive) democracies – is the challenges of actual and fair participation when participation is facilitated by, and on the premises of, the ruling powers, i.e. large corporations. The thesis relies on rather outdated ideas of public/stakeholder participation where the corporation decides who the relevant stakeholders are; corporation set and/or steer the agenda and informs the (selected) stakeholders with possibly biased facts on which "informed" agreements and consent can be made. Discretionary stakeholders are briefly mentioned, but offered little attention, hence in this and other ways and despite the outspoken intentions (see e.g. p. 10) the thesis brings forth a traditional top-down view of participation in terms of "stakeholder management" – where the corporation manages their stakeholders and acts as democracy facilitator selecting "relevant stakeholders".

A comprehensive presentation of the history and development of CSR is outside the scope of this thesis, still the connection to philanthropy and ELSI/ELSA could have been prioritized. The latter having clear linkages to RRI which is touched upon in ch 8.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

How does "efficient *management* of stakeholders" (p. 60, italics added) relate to corporate stakeholder democracy?

Related to The Body Shop-story a modest prediction is presented: While "the buzz-word of the last third of the twentieth century was "the marketing-driven corporation"", "the successful corporation of the twenty-first century will copy the corporate responsibility-driven model of operation" (p. 17). In relation to this, I would like to hear your reflections on the following questions:

- What are the similarities and differences between these models?
- How does the respective models impact the role of stakeholders?
- What are the roles of stakeholders in this "copy" work?

In theories and practise of corporate social responsibility, the *corporation* tends to be the unquestioned centre, surrounded by *its* stakeholders. Could it be otherwise, and if so, would that affect how to think about corporate stakeholder democracy?

Conclusion

This thesis is a fine piece of work, a good read, and a useful CSR school book. The theoretical ambitions of contribution to the field are welcome, still originality and novelty is lacking.

The habilitation thesis entitled *Corporate Stakeholder Democracy, Politicizing Corporate Social Responsibility* by Robert Braun **does not fulfil** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of sociology.

Date: 15.09.2021

Signature:

