

The Spanish Discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT. The discourse on CRS began late in Spain. Its permeation into political institutions also began later than in many Western countries. The Spanish government neither contributed nor reacted to the green paper *Corporate social responsibility. A business contribution to sustainable development*, published by the European Commission in 2002. However, the publication of this document gave the definitive impulse for the start of the Spanish debate on CSR. After this initial impulse, the debate rapidly developed into a consolidated field of discourse. This field is the object of the present paper. Here, we seek to elaborate on a concept of corporate social citizenship viewed as a “field of discourse”, which is being produced by an epistemic community, at Spanish yet also at a global level. Thus, we seek to depict the contours of the Spanish discourse on CSR, researching its evolution over the last 5 years. We focus on its main actors, the central topics on its agendas, the conflicts that are appearing, and how they are being dealt with. In order

to achieve these objectives, we focus primarily on the transcription of 61 speeches made by different stakeholders at the Spanish Parliament during 2005. This initiative of the Spanish Parliament is unique of its kind. A special sub-commission was created to discuss the role that Spanish public institutions should play regarding corporate social responsibility. Sixty-one experts from different areas (academia, business, trade unions, and NGOs) were invited to present their views on CSR. Members of the sub-commission had the opportunity to discuss with these experts the nature, limits, results and evolution of CSR, seeking with special interest their opinions on the role that the Spanish Government should play in the consolidation of CSR in Spain. The thesis of this paper is that through an exhaustive analysis of the transcriptions of these interventions at the Spanish Parliament, we can identify who constitutes the Spanish epistemic community on CSR. We can also trace the main contours of this field of discourse, to identify the main actors in its development (particularly, of course, on the binding point between CRS and government) and the main issues discussed, as well as the “hot topics”. The presentation will also locate the uniqueness of this debate generated in parliament within the context of the wider Spanish debate on CSR.

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Social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning. (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3)

Introduction

The discourse on corporate social responsibility (CRS) began late in Spain. Consequently, the permeation of this discourse into political institutions

started later than in many Western countries. The Spanish government neither contributed nor reacted to the green paper *Corporate social responsibility. A business contribution to sustainable development*, published by the European Commission in 2001. This Green Paper was the result of a public consultation by the EU intended to create common ground for developing CSR in Europe.¹ However, the publication of this document gave the definitive impetus for the Spanish debate on CSR to start. After this initial impetus, the debate rapidly developed into a settled body of discourse (Lozano et al., 2008).

This discourse is the object of the present paper. Specifically, it focuses on analysing the positions, arguments, conflicts and actors that have contributed and are still contributing to the creation of a Spanish discourse on CSR.²

By this assertion, we are by no means suggesting that there is a Spanish debate on CSR completely independent of the international debate. In fact, the two are deeply interconnected. Notwithstanding, as we will later argue, we do sustain that the web of relationships within the Spanish epistemic community regarding CSR is a substantial one, clearly delimited from its Latin-American and English-speaking equivalents.

In order to depict and analyse the Spanish discourse on CSR, we concentrate our attention on the transcriptions of 61 speeches on CSR given in the Spanish Parliament by some of the most important CSR experts and practitioners in Spain.³

CSR is not conceived here as a set of practices which, taken together, constitute what CSR *really* is. From the perspective adopted here, it makes little sense to talk about CSR as if it possessed a definition that is stable and fixed and only has to be discovered and applied. Here, CSR is conceived as a discourse, a dynamic field within which reality is constructed as people communicate and act in consequence.

Before entering into an analysis of the empirical data that constitute the material for the paper, let us first focus on the concepts of discourse and field of discourse as well as the perspective of discursive analysis.

A discursive approach to CSR

Seen from the perspective adopted here, language is not simply a way of expressing the world that exists

‘out there’. For the concept of corporate social responsibility is not a concept that (for better or worse) describes an existing reality. Through communication, people negotiate meanings, thereby *producing* a social world and reality. Meanings are not fixed. They are built in a continuous process. Communication is never ‘innocent’, in the sense that it does not merely reflect what already exists, but contributes to creating, reproducing or modifying the reality to which it refers. By talking and writing people create, reproduce and organise social reality.

Within this context, a discourse can be defined as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world – or parts of the world (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), a way of communicating ‘that which is’ and ‘that which should be’.

Discourses are systems of signs as well as modes of action (Schreiber and Moring, 2001, p. 5). People use discourses to shape their sense of the social world as well as to shape the relations by which they engage in it (Fiske, 1982). They can also be described as interrelated sets of texts, “and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception”, that bring an ‘object’ into being – CSR, for instance (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Thus, the production of a discourse does not only imply writing and talking. It also implies all kinds of actions that contribute to its coming into being (by being thought, imagined, and planned), and then becoming disseminated, heard and assimilated by a wider community.

In order to understand a discourse, we must understand the context within which it has been produced. The key to researching discourses lies in individual texts, for “we can never find discourses in their entirety” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 5). This leads us to the concept of text, which in discourse analysis is wider than in its everyday-life definition. Here, texts include “written texts, spoken words, pictures, symbols, artefacts, and so forth” (Grant et al., 1998). It is relevant to note that texts are not meaningful individually. It is only through their relationship, their interconnection with other texts, and thereby with the different bodies of discourse to which they relate, that they attain their meaning.

Thus, discourse analysis works through examining, analysing and understanding texts, their meaning, their interrelations and their context. Discourse

analysis constitutes “a methodology rather than just a method, that is, an epistemology that explains how we know the social world, as well as a set of methods for studying it” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Discourse analysis is a perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the central issues of the social sciences. It involves “a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 5).

The concept of ‘field of discourse’, which will be used later in this paper to depict the arena in which the relevant actors position themselves with their views and arguments, refers to the fact that a discourse is formed by the different communications of different actors on the issue in question. This means that a body of discourse is not free of conflicts and contradictions. Within any discourse, opposite perspectives on the same issue can be found. Therefore, it is useful to view a discourse as a field within which these actors and perspectives face each other, relate to each other, acknowledge each other and sometimes fight each other, hence continuously struggling to impose their own definitions and practices as the only possible definitions and practices within the field. The results of these relationships as well as these relationships themselves constitute what we call the field of discourse. Of course, within these relationships, not all actors have the same power of imposing or negotiating their views, definitions, policies and actions as *the* definitions, policies and actions. Power is unequally distributed in the creation of systems of signs and modes of action. This applies to all kinds of discourse, and thus also to the specific discourse analysed here, that is, to the discourse on corporate social responsibility.

The Spanish discourse on corporate social responsibility

As has already been mentioned, this paper works on the assumption that there is ‘a Spanish discourse’ on CSR. However, while we are not asserting that there are no interconnections between the Spanish discourse and the wider, international discourse on CSR, we have identified some elements that are special characteristics of the Spanish discourse. Indeed, while bearing the international context in mind, we believe that it is of great relevance to study

the differential traits of the approximation to CSR, which crystallise in different national contexts. The importance of this issue is already clear at a descriptive level: if we pay attention to the political approaches to CSR, we find substantial differences between the different countries (CBSR, 2001; European Commission, 2004). These differences are due, on the one hand, to the fact that state governments are clear CSR drivers (Moon, 2004), and on the other, to the fact that the way governments accomplish this function depends on visions and standpoints that are related to the social and political traditions of each country (Albareda et al., 2006; Roome, 2005). Thus, considering the differences between Europe and the United States, Matten and Moon (2008) have underlined the decisiveness of the institutional context in the development of CSR policies. Thus, they have pointed out that in Europe, unlike America, an ‘implicit CSR’ can be identified. This ‘implicit CSR’ is manifested through a body of values, norms and rules which result in requirements for corporations. These authors have also highlighted the fact that the characteristics of the national business system are of crucial importance to understand the approach to CSR developed in each country. This perception has now been complemented and reinforced by the analyses realised by Lozano et al. (2008). In this study, Lozano et al. compare CSR public policies in Europe, and classify them into the following four models: Partnership (Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden); Business in the Community (UK, Ireland); Sustainability and Citizenship (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg); and Agora (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal). The main characteristic of the Agora model, in which Spain is included, is that it has prioritised the creation of forums of debate with the participation of different stakeholders intended to build a public consensus about the way in which CSR should be developed. This Agora approach helps us recognise that in Spain, the main discourse on CSR has focussed on CSR as a crucial key to a better understanding between stakeholders, instead of focussing, as has often been assumed, on issues of sustainability or environment.

The decision to write about a Spanish discourse was taken after observing that, in the Spanish context, there is a group of experts who are always meeting at conferences, political debates and entre-

preneurial forums. The components of this group of experts know each other well and are thoroughly familiar with each others' positions and proposals. When they prepare their speeches or attend a meeting, seminar or round table, they can anticipate the counter-arguments that the other participants will bring to the discussion table, and they effectively write their speeches anticipating these possible objections. Thus, they refer to each others' positions and oppositions when they talk, and build their own arguments bearing their colleagues' counter-arguments in mind. This happens within the Spanish arena of debate, but less so internationally. By this, we mean that, when this happens within the Spanish arena of debate, the discussants know each other by name and anticipate each others' positions as individuals.⁴ The empirical materials that will later be presented and analysed are full of cross-references in which one speaker purports to assume or guess what another speaker will have already said or will be arguing when it comes to his/her turn. Even in the case of international initiatives such as the Global Compact (GC), mediation through the Spanish association of the GC (ASEPAM) is so frequent that most actors involved communicate exclusively with other Spanish-speaking interlocutors (more specifically, only with the Spanish association) without ever relating to the GC Office in New York.

With regard to the intensity of communication between Spanish experts on CSR, we believe that it is correct to focus the attention of this paper on the Spanish discourse on CSR, while also bearing in mind its international connections and context.

We have argued that Spanish CSR experts and practitioners are aware of, and in regular contact with, each other. Therefore, it is a thesis of this paper that the key actors in the construction, negotiation and reproduction of the Spanish discourse on CSR constitute a kind of 'epistemic community'.

By epistemic community, we understand a "network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Epistemic communities play a crucial role in the articulation and organisation of a field of discourse. They articulate the complex cause-and-effect relationships of complex problems, "helping other relevant actors to identify their interests, framing the

issues for collective debate, proposing specific policies, and identifying salient points for negotiation" (Haas, 1992, p. 2). In our use of the term, we have extended the concept beyond CSR *experts* to include CSR *practitioners* who, by what they do and also what they affirm, believe, write and present, decisively contribute to the creation of the reality of CSR. Thus, in our use of the term, the Spanish epistemic community on CSR is not seen as exclusively constituted by representatives of academic institutions. By no means, in fact. This epistemic community is distributed throughout the organisations in which CSR currently plays an increasingly important role. Thus, businesses, trade unions, employers' organisations, governments and public administrations, NGOs, consulting agencies and also universities currently have CSR experts whose works and considerations on CSR are shaped either by the viewpoint of their specific organisation or by the goal of delivering scientific analysis. Therefore, the epistemic community considered here brings together people with different interests, backgrounds and objectives, united by the fact that they have all become experts on CSR.

CSR does not exist beyond what the involved actors define as CSR, and hence act in consequence. A discursive approach to CSR therefore reveals the processes of the concept's social construction. The experts and practitioners who work, deliver speeches, write and debate on CSR all contribute to the creation of a discourse on CSR. That is, by contributing to the creation of what corporate social responsibility will be, by using language, producing texts, speeches and drawing on discourse, the epistemic community is part and parcel of the constructive effects of discourse.

Having defined what is meant by discourse earlier in this text, our attention now turns towards the empirical materials that allow the contours and main lines of controversy of the Spanish discourse on CSR to be traced.

The materials used here are transcriptions of 61 speeches given at the Spanish Parliament during 2005 by different stakeholders, that is, relevant actors within the field of CSR.

In order to contextualise the initiative that led to the interventions of these 61 experts on CSR in the Spanish Parliament, we will briefly outline the evolution of the Spanish debate on CSR, including

the principal initiatives taken to date. Our attention will then focus exclusively on the textual materials (transcriptions of the interventions in Parliament) for further analysis.

As has already been mentioned, the Spanish Government did not respond to the Green Paper. Notwithstanding, since the beginning of this new century, CSR has rapidly begun to occupy an important space in Spanish public debate. In the first place, because a significant number of quoted companies have incorporated CSR into their agendas and are advancing decisively in this direction. Second, because civil society organisations and public opinion are making CSR a requirement for companies. Third, because even more recently, trade unions have also brought CSR onto their agendas. And fourth, because a significant number of organisations and consulting agencies have made CSR one of their axes of action. In contrast, it is surprising, if we compare the Spanish situation to the rest of Europe, that SRI (socially responsible investment) has not yet become consolidated in Spain. In this context, the two most relevant political decisions of the last 3 years have been the creation of the sub-commission of the Spanish Parliament (which is the object of this study), and the creation by the Spanish Government of a Forum of Experts that should generate recommendations for the development of CSR policies in Spain. The two main recommendations made within this Forum were, on the one hand, the proposal of a definition of CSR to be assumed by all the actors involved,⁵ and the creation of a CSR council to advise the Spanish Government in relation to all policies that involve CSR aspects.⁶

As we have recalled, the 61 speeches that constitute the material upon which the present analysis focuses arose from an initiative of the Spanish Parliament. This initiative is unique of its kind and required the creation of a sub-commission of deputies with the objective of discussing the role that the Spanish government and public administrations should play in relation to corporate social responsibility. In order to gather information and begin the debate, this sub-commission invited 61 speakers to present their views on CSR, and in particular, on the role that the Spanish government and administrations should (or should not) play in this field.

The guest speakers were experts on and practitioners of CSR selected from different areas of action and intervention. The intention of the parliamentarians

was by the end of the process to have built for themselves a sort of 'multistakeholder' approach, that is, a picture of the Spanish 'field of discourse' on CSR and in particular, of the role of the government regarding CSR. However, this gathering of opinions and views from the different key actors was not achieved by inviting the speakers to discuss the issue together. Rather, they were asked to deliver their speeches alone in front of other deputies (or in very small groups), hence letting the deputies identify possible lines of conflict or agreement among the different perspectives individually.

The experts and practitioners invited by the sub-commission represented the following interest groups: businesses, trade unions, employers' associations and networks, government and public administrations, consumers' associations, NGOs, investment organisations and consulting agencies. The parliamentarians who participated in this sub-commission had the opportunity to discuss with this range of experts the limits, results and evolution of CSR, occasionally in general but more often only for the Spanish case. They were particularly interested in hearing, comparing and contrasting the different opinions and perspectives on the role that the Spanish Government should play regarding the further development of CSR in Spain. Simultaneously, in their questions and remarks, they also presented the different viewpoints that the Spanish parties represented (i.e. parties with representation within the sub-commission itself) had (and have) on the issue.

In order to prepare their speeches, all experts were given the same instructions by the president of the sub-commission. They were asked not to deliver a general overview of what CSR is and should be, but to concentrate on the particular points of view of the organisation they represented, highlighting the lessons that could be learned from their experiences, and in the light of these experiences, arguing what kind of policies they would consider appropriate for the Spanish government to adopt in relation to CSR. It is interesting to remark that most speakers followed these instructions. However, they also did something else beyond what was requested that has great interest for the present analysis. Besides presenting their views on CSR and on possible governmental participation in this field, in their talks, the invited speakers also related to each others'

positions. They did so to argue for the appropriateness of their particular viewpoints, but in doing so, they often showed that they had a clear knowledge of the positions and theses that other experts had developed on the matter.⁷ We should recall that this is one of the points that allowed us to talk about an ‘epistemic community’ among Spanish CSR experts and practitioners.

In consideration of these issues, an analysis of the transcriptions of the interventions does not only permit us to identify each speaker’s position on CSR (and especially on governmental participation), but also how each speaker interpreted the positions of the others. This meant that a complete picture of the CSR debate in Spain and an accurate picture of the Spanish epistemic community on CSR emerge from the analyses. The main contours of this field of discourse can be traced, underlining its ‘hot topics’, as can its lines of consensus and divergence. The processes for construction of the meaning of CSR can thus be depicted and analysed.

In the following pages, our focus of attention concentrates on the main axes of controversy and negotiation of meaning that have been identified in the transcriptions mentioned above. A core thesis put forward now is that the central issue at stake in the debate was the very concept of CSR, since up to then, no consensus had been achieved on exactly how this initiative should be viewed. Because the Green Paper published by the EC (2002) seemed to deliver the basis for further discussion, it became the text of reference used most often by speakers to refer to what had already been said on CSR. In order to keep this ‘base definition’ in mind, we reproduce the definition given by the EU:

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. It is about enterprises deciding to go beyond minimum legal requirements and obligations stemming from collective agreements in order to address societal needs. Through CSR, enterprises of all sizes, in cooperation with their stakeholders, can help to reconcile economic, social and environmental ambitions. As such, CSR has become an increasingly important concept both globally and within the EU, and is part of the debate about globalisation, competitiveness and sustainability. In Europe, the promotion of CSR

reflects the need to defend common values and increase the sense of solidarity and cohesion. (EC, 2006, p. 2)

The negotiations concerning the definition of CSR do indeed constitute a crucial issue. As will be argued throughout this paper, depending on the definition of CSR adopted, a set of policies, expectations and valuations, also regarding government participation in CSR, can be arrived at.

Let us thus focus on the controversy on the very concept of CSR.

CSR: what are we talking about?

In order to depict the field of discourse on CSR that emerges from the analysis of the speeches in the Spanish Parliament, the procedure will be to concentrate first on the extreme positions, thus tracing the contours of the field. After mapping out opposing positions and creating ideal types, we will be able to identify how many speakers actually insist on the extreme positions, and how many find ways of moving across the field, searching for dialogue or even consensus.

Let us start with the extremes of the discursive field. As has been mentioned, the main controversy emerging from the 61 interventions in the Spanish Parliament appears to be the very definition of CSR. Here, the struggle is highly significant as the extremes of the field (playing with the spatial metaphor implied by the concept) are very far apart.

The most problematic questions in this controversy pivot around the experts’ and practitioners’ visions on CSR concerning: (a) the nature of the initiative and (b) its agents. Let us view these separately.

Definitions of CSR: the nature of the initiative

If we concentrate on mapping out the extremes of the discursive field, the first extreme that appears after analysing the interventions in Parliament is a conception of CSR that views it as ‘something which businesses do/wish to do’.

This is in fact a rather common view in the business world, which characterises CSR as:

(1) a voluntary set of activities, (2) which businesses undertake, (3) without going very deeply into the debate on what might have brought businesses to undertake/desire to undertake CSR policies in the first place.

This approach views CSR as exclusively a business initiative. It is something businesses want to do and decide to do. Occasionally, it is presented as an 'ethical commitment' of businesses. At any rate, it is an initiative that goes beyond the existing legal frameworks. That is, CSR is what businesses undertake as their contribution to a peaceful, just and sustainable society and environment beyond what they are legally obliged to do, 'bearing in mind the impact of their policies on the environment, communities and society in general'.

As examples of this conception of CSR, see the following quotations extracted from different interventions in the Spanish Parliament:

...the concept of CSR that I believe almost all we companies are working with is something like this: to do things well, to take care, to work with diligence at what we do, and to do it excellently. This could in a way represent the concept of the company's social expression.

It is true that there is great confusion regarding the concept of CSR...Conceptually, we like to view it as the social responsibility of companies and not corporations: we understand that this is a richer definition of CSR, since it includes the totality of companies, while the term 'corporate' seems to include only the major companies.

...this CSR..., this would be the desire of companies to go beyond what the legal framework obliges, bearing in mind the impact of the policies of these companies on the environment, on communities, on the communitarian and social networks that they affect.

As a consequence of this conception, when regulation enters the picture, CSR disappears, as the following quotation illustrates: "As a basic consideration, social responsibility...must be presided over by one crucial element, which is voluntariness, as opposed to the temptation to impose by law certain criteria of social responsibility".

If CSR is viewed, by definition, as a free initiative of businesses through which they express their

commitment to society and the environment, from the moment when this commitment is made compulsory by law, it can no longer be seen as CSR.

Now, in order to grasp the scope and complexity of the field, we next concentrate on the position that constitutes the opposite side of this field.

At the other extreme of the field, we find a much wider conception of CSR. According to this position, CSR is:

(1) From the viewpoint of businesses: the exercise of accepting responsibility for the results of one's own policies, decisions and practices, thereby becoming aware of the impact they have on society as well as on the environment. See, for instance, the speech of a representative of a CSR management organisation:

for companies, CSR means integrating economic, social and environmental preoccupations into their management. Responsible management tends towards a model in which social and environmental benefits are part of the definition of corporate success. Responsible companies perceive their current situation: globalisation, social demands, transparency, widening of markets, environmental challenges and so forth, as an opportunity to assert their social role, their potential to lead sustainable development in terms of economic welfare, and also in terms of social welfare and environmental protection. When someone asserts that CSR is a fashion, they do not think that it responds to real challenges and circumstances. These challenges will not disappear, but, on the contrary, are tending to become stronger.

(2) An initiative that results from accepting that what businesses do affects not only businesses but a wide range of stakeholders who are in one way or another intermingled with business activity as economic agents, and without whom businesses cannot work. See, for instance, the representative of an organisation in charge of managing and communicating CSR: "CSR management is not something added on as a luxury, but a way of understanding good corporate management under current circumstances". Or, in the words of the representative of an NGO:

Up to the present, our organisation has observed that the debate on CSR lacks any consensus, any concrete contents or clear solutions to the problems presented. The little success of the efforts made by the UE...or

the little credibility of initiatives such as the Global Compact...demonstrate how far the debate on CSR is merely that, a debate. We believe that the time has come to advance, ... to face with decisions the problems that are the origin and *raison d'être* of the very debate on CSR. In this context, we believe that it is the government, public authorities and state institutions that must assume and define their responsibility in this sense, in the sense of advancing the debate, giving it meaning and achieving solutions for the problems presented. When what is at stake is the most fundamental rights of companies, we cannot afford the luxury of keeping on deliberating on a definition that never arrives, of talking about values, characteristics etc.

(3) From this standpoint, CSR is not only something that businesses should do on their own, but something in which all agents active in the economic field should participate. For instance, the representative of an NGO argued:

We find it appropriate to highlight within this sub-commission that in the context of CSR there is a role, and an important role, for organisations of the third sector in Spain. We have tried, in one way or another, to give an answer to people in situations of exclusion through the creation of productive structures so that they can complement or work together with the public administrations or private companies. Or the representative of a foundation, arguing: For us, CSR has arisen, in a way, as a grassroots response from society, as the identification of a need for control of the activities of great multinational companies that operate globally...CSR is a social movement, a grassroots social movement.

This conception of CSR questions to a certain extent the idea that businesses are the main actors in the economic arena, and accepts that governments, consumers, workers and civil society are also key stakeholders, whose participation is essential and without whom the economy cannot work.

This does not mean that this approach neglects the role of businesses in the field of CSR. In fact, according to this wider view, businesses are still crucial agents of CSR. Yet, however, they are definitely not conceived as the only agents, for they are not the only social agents that currently have an impact on society and the environment and who currently receive the impacts of economic activities. There are other actors at stake whose actions and

experiences are also relevant, and should be borne in mind and managed, be this through self-regulation or through legal regulation or incentives, or even combining both possibilities.

Assuming the shared effects and sometimes responsibilities of the different stakeholders in shaping our current and future society and environment, actions and responses to these effects must be coordinated and agreed upon within the frames of a 'multistakeholder' dialogue, that is, bringing all agents involved to the table of dialogue. As one of the speakers argued in his speech (NGO), "there is too much at stake" to leave it all 'only' in the hands of companies.

In this second conception of CSR, the term 'responsibility' plays a more crucial role than in the first. Responsibility is viewed here as a shared responsibility, in relation to the shaping of society, to the way we deal with our planet and to future generations. This responsibility can only be responded to through coordinated action. And this is so important that it is unacceptable to sit down and wait until particular businesses define it as their own priority and strategy.

Furthermore, if we read between the lines of the speeches delivered by the supporters of this perspective, it is misleading to view CSR as a voluntary enterprise, which can be either undertaken or neglected depending on the will or means of each enterprise. The impacts we are talking about are a reality and are really independent of each actor's consciousness and interests. Not responding to the demands of this responsibility has serious consequences. The very future of society and the environment is seen as dependant on the response delivered. Given the importance and magnitude of the issues at stake, responses can only be agreed upon and multilateral. Otherwise they will not work.

Thus, in the light of this perspective, we could depict CSR as a sort of new social/global agreement. This agreement reaches beyond the mere fact of signing a document or a definition. It emphasises the procedure. The main idea is that everything regarding CSR and its development must be accepted by the widest possible group of involved actors. In the light of this perspective, CSR can only adopt a multistakeholder approach by putting it in the words of the actors involved. In other words, in the light of this perspective, the legitimacy of the

CSR discourse and practices necessarily implies a multistakeholder development.

After these brief presentations, it is clear that these two views on CSR may come to oppose each other. What is necessary for the second is impossible for the first, and vice versa. There are, of course, ‘middle ways’ in the field, standpoints which despite businesses being the main actors on the field, contemplate the possibility of important contributions from other actors. However, the presentations always come to a point at which they either position themselves as viewing businesses as the main actors, or as viewing businesses as one actor among others. And at this point, it seems that no compromises are possible: what from one viewpoint appears to be a legitimate contribution from the other is seen as an intrusion.

This conflict leads us to view the issue at stake (the definition of CSR) from a different perspective: the perspective of the actors or agents involved.

Definitions of CSR: the agents involved

In the light of what has been said up to now, we realise that if we begin examining the definition of the concept of CSR, we will end up discussing who its principal agents are or should be. This is, what actors are (or should be) involved in doing, planning and thinking up CSR. Furthermore, the discussion rapidly leads to one of the hardest questions in the debate on CSR: the debate on voluntariness versus regulation. We will see why in a moment.

In the speeches given in Parliament, the question of who the legitimate actors were in discussing, planning and thinking up CSR initiatives was central. Focusing on the two approaches to CSR presented above as the two opposite extremes of the discursive field, we see that they already include a thesis on who the legitimate actors of CSR are, or who they should be.

According to the first approach (‘CSR is something that businesses do/wish to do’), the legitimate actors of CSR are, by definition, businesses. They are the only agents responsible for identifying new challenges, setting agendas and defining new policies. This does not imply that other actors have to be excluded from the field of CSR, but it certainly means that they have to be invited to participate by

businesses. Such participation is valued positively, but it has to be clear who has been invited, who has the right to invite and furthermore, who has the right to set the agenda and define what should be seen as a problem, as a challenge or as a ‘necessary intervention’.

At the other end of the field, the main actors of CSR are seen as including all involved stakeholders. Hence, CSR has to be managed by all stakeholders, in dialogue, cooperation and discussion. The process might be highly complex and it certainly implies controversies and conflicts. However, according to this view, businesses should not be able to decide unilaterally what affects a greater number of stakeholders, who also partake in the economic process.

In the CSR debate, we often find references to the so-called ‘multistakeholder dialogue’. This multistakeholder dialogue is what is implied in the view just presented, that is, businesses, employers’ organisations, trade unions, consumers associations, foundations, NGOs, consulting agencies, governments and public administrations sitting together and discussing.

From the first perspective, a multistakeholder dialogue might be beneficial on some occasions, perhaps disruptive in others, but it is certainly not a necessary condition for the proper functioning of CSR. From this perspective, sometimes, a bilateral dialogue can be viewed as more helpful than everyone sitting together and not getting anywhere. At any rate, a multistakeholder dialogue is not a necessary condition for CSR to take place.

From the second perspective, a multistakeholder dialogue is a *sine qua non* condition of CSR. Thus, it might still be argued that relatively often, this kind of dialogue leads to the different stakeholders not agreeing with each other, but strengthening their own positions and blocking each others’ proposals. However, it is considered that despite all the difficulties, the communicative and comprehensive effort is worth making, since it is the only way for any CSR initiative to be successful. Hence, what might be perceived as an illegitimate intervention in one’s affairs from the standpoint of the first perspective, can be perceived as a highly legitimate and necessary participation from the second perspective.

After describing how the same intervention or dialogue can be viewed so differently depending on what CSR is conceived to be, we can move on to

the controversial issue of voluntariness versus regulation of CSR.

Indeed, defining CSR as something that businesses do or wish to do does not have the same consequences as defining it as the shared responsibility and commitment of all agents involved in the economy for the construction and reproduction of society, even if within this group of agents, businesses are thought to occupy a primordial position.

In the light of the first conception, any CSR initiative can only be voluntary. This is what businesses do because they are compelled to cannot be CSR, for the very nature of CSR implies that it is something voluntary that arises from the desire of businesses to do something, from their 'personal commitment'. From the moment this 'something' becomes the object of regulation and a norm to be followed, the dimension of CSR disappears, and businesses face a law or regulation that is incompatible with the nature of CSR. See, for instance, the following argument (given by the representative of a company): "We are facing a question that exclusively concerns businesses. We understand that CSR is an exclusively voluntary question, which begins where law ends".

This does not only happen when a particular policy is made compulsory. Even in the case of creation of incentives for companies to join the CSR initiative, some employers' organisations as well as some companies (speaking for small enterprises) are against any kind of public incentives for CSR (such as positively selecting companies that have strong CSR policies for publicly funded works). See, for instance, the following argument:

We believe that the basis of competition must respond to the capacity of one enterprise to deliver a certain service or to carry out certain work, without valuing aspects ancillary to the object of the contract, for this would imply obtaining a system of certificates that is difficult and expensive, and that not all companies can afford to assume.

Beyond this fact, speakers from the world of business argue that CSR is not only about an ethical commitment. It can also imply a competitive advantage for companies who have good CSR policies if their consumers are interested and informed. As the representative of one company argues, "CSR is managing, here it is not social action, it is management,

and management is innovation, and if it is innovation, it is a competitive advantage".

In the light of this fact, the dimension of voluntariness is crucial: if CSR were made obligatory, the competitive advantage of those who willingly engage in it would be lost, for only if CSR is voluntary can it imply a competitive advantage for its pioneers, for its supporters. It is then up to customers to decide if they want to buy the products of a socially responsible company. Hence, if an important fraction of society is sensitive to CSR, those companies who engage with it will be rewarded with profits and recognition.⁸

Since in the light of the second conception, CSR is not something that businesses do or wish to do but a set of practices and policies that all involved actors agree to do in a coordinated way, governments and public administrations are legitimate actors, just as involved in the process as any other actor. They contribute with the tools they have: be it regulation, incentives or positive selection of the companies that apply the most appropriate CSR policies.

It is interesting to note that the two positions presented here are in clear contradiction. The speakers can be divided into two groups that correspond to the groups presented above. While for some, regulation is the end of CSR, for others, it is just another way of bringing CSR forward. Those who affirm that CSR is over when regulation appears tend to be those who asserted that CSR is what companies do/wish to do. Those who assert that regulation can be an instrument (among others) of CSR are those who saw CSR as a multistakeholder initiative and companies as one agent, albeit a crucial one, among others.

This contradiction arises from the very conception of what CSR is, and from the actors that are (or can be) legitimately involved in it. This makes for a contradiction that will not be easy to resolve. It is not a question of detail. It is simply that by the term CSR, the involved actors mean two different types of initiative, with different principles and different main actors. It is not easy (or perhaps even not possible) to end this discussion by satisfying all involved discussants. One perspective will more than likely succeed, and representatives of the other will have to give way. If they remain interested in participating in CSR, they will have to do so by following the rules of a game they did not design in these terms.

At any rate, to bring the two positions a little closer together, we should bear in mind that those who include a dimension of regulation in CSR do not exclude the dimension of voluntariness: their vision would be that they complement each other instead of cancelling each other out. Thus, this second position implies a much wider understanding of CSR than the first. Furthermore, although a great majority of its proponents were clearly against regulation (with the exception of NGOs), most of them argued in favour of incentives to CSR, and also in favour of more transparency in the processes of certification and evaluation of the CSR commitment of each company. The present situation is viewed by many as somehow chaotic.

Earlier we argued that, despite the depth of the disagreements, on some occasions, we found speeches with eclectic visions that incorporated elements stemming from both ways of viewing CSR, thus melding together, so to speak, the rules of the two games of CSR. These intermediate positions can be found in the speeches of the representatives of 'special businesses' (such as savings banks) or foundations (especially the foundations of employers' associations). In these positions, although businesses were still the principal actors in the field of CSR, some 'light' measures of regulation from state agents are not excluded (such as guaranteeing the reports on good practices produced by enterprises) as well as interventions by and dialogue with other stakeholders.

However, let us insist again on underlining that both extreme positions are actually very popular within the 61 speeches analysed. Most speeches delivered at the sub-commission can be situated at one extreme or the other of the discursive field. Those who are against regulation allow little movement in the fields of either incentives or evaluation and transparency.

If we seek to classify the actors' positions by their profiles, we find most polarisation among NGOs and companies. Indeed, almost all representatives of companies and employers' organisations are located at one end of the field, while most NGOs are located at the other.

It is relevant to point out that we are not only facing a fight for the imposition of a particular definition of the field. There is also a conflict regarding the reciprocal acknowledgement and acceptance as

legitimate participants of the agents involved. As long as one agent does not recognise another as a legitimate conversation and planning partner, little will be achieved.

We should underline here that the position of the Spanish government and administrations regarding their role in the CSR arena is quite modest. They recognise companies as the main subjects of CSR, and only argue in favour of making things easier for those who engage through positive selection and incentives, while not punishing failure to do so.⁹ Thus, the stance of some NGOs regarding the need for regulation may be stronger than the stance of the government itself.

Also interesting to note is the position of the two trade unions that intervened in the debate. It is remarkable that trade unions should share with businesses the thesis that CSR is something that businesses do. It only works because here they position themselves as 'part of businesses', and this means that they are legitimate actors in the field of CSR because they are the workers' representatives. Since workers are a central part of businesses, so are their legitimate representatives, and not an alien body, but a crucial part of businesses.¹⁰ Following this logic, trade unions criticise that when businesses engage in CSR, they exclude trade unions (and thus workers). They fear that this strategy might turn CSR into a succedaneum of collective negotiation instead of a real body of policies that allow businesses as a whole (hence including workers and their 'legitimate representatives') to engage beyond what is established by law and collective negotiation. Regarding the trade unions' view, for them, a good CSR would involve mainly businesses (and thereby also employers' organisations and trade unions), and would only to a lesser extent affect and involve other stakeholders. One representative of a trade union, in fact, argued that trade unions are not 'simply another stakeholder', but the legitimate representatives of the workers without whom businesses could not exist. The representative used this argument to differentiate his organisation from NGOs. NGOs are 'simply another stakeholder', and furthermore, are not representative bodies as trade unions are. He demanded that if NGOs are to participate in the process of CSR, they should become representative institutions, and not simply associations in which you never know exactly who they represent, and to what

extent they are democratic and legitimate. Without guaranteeing this, any participation of NGOs in CSR is poorly justified. Thus he asserted:

There is a topic that I think has been coming up in many forums as well, which is the relationship with other social agents such as NGOs. We consider that we are complementary, not in opposition to each other, but to the extent that trade unions are obliged to be representative and to have democratic behaviour, we think that the NGOs that are considered participants in CSR should also be asked to be representative, because it is evident that NGOs are proliferating, and many are almost completely unknown.

On some occasions, between the two extremes presented, a conception of CSR can be found that conceives the initiative as a means of mitigating a deficit or shortfall of social responsibility in the field of economic activity in general. Thus, CSR is seen as a reactive and not a proactive initiative: As the involved actors become aware of the shortfall, they bring the concept (and thus the debate on it) onto the agenda to mitigate *the* shortage in question. From this viewpoint, CSR is a reaction (or a sum of reactions) to a problem (or a sum of problems) – be it by businesses only or by society as a whole.

CSR: description or prescription?

Another key issue in the analysis of contributions to the debate is the question of whether CSR as a concept describes or prescribes attitudes, policies etc. Again, at this point, we find the same two opposite poles that we had before regarding the nature of the initiative and its main actors. That is, there is the faction that views CSR as a descriptive concept, a concept that describes what businesses do to engage for a ‘better’ society and a more sustainable environment. At the other extreme, there is the faction of those who see CSR as an ideal commitment to building a better society and a more sustainable environment, accepted and supported by all key actors in the social world, the fruit of a sincere and committed multistakeholder dialogue. This second faction includes within the conception of CSR what should be done to restrain the effects that business activities have on society and the environment. The first faction only considers CSR to be what businesses actually do.

So, while the wider normative concept seeks to identify the whole of the impacts and effects that businesses have on society, the environment, social relationships, etc. and asks for a response from the stakeholders of the institution that causes the impacts in the first place, the narrower descriptive concept concentrates on only parts of this wide field. These are the parts that (some) businesses themselves have identified and furthermore have decided to commit to, in terms of not viewing these impacts as ‘collateral effects’, but as damage they seek to alleviate, or a social problem they wish to contribute to solving (which is not the same). In other words, the narrower concept identifies as CSR the issues and practices that businesses themselves have viewed as their responsibility and their response. The wider concept identifies as CSR all the issues and practices that all stakeholders consider to be influenced and impacted by economic activities, interpreting these impacts as the responsibility of those who produced them, and demanding a response.

Conclusions

This paper has focused on speeches given to the sub-commission created in the Spanish Parliament to discuss the CSR initiative, particularly regarding the role of government and public administrations in relation to the initiative, and concentrating attention on its definition. From the perspective adopted here, it is important to note that no clear consensus can be found among the epistemic community on what CSR is about. There are several main lines of controversy and debate and a common basis for discussion, but crucial issues remain unclear. This means that in the light of the perspective adopted here, CSR is not evolving in a clear direction. The interpretation of what CSR ‘really’ is and should be cannot be separated from the practical communicative acts on the subject, such as the interventions that have been examined in this paper. The 61 interventions in the Spanish Parliament that have been our material are indeed a central contribution to the consolidation of CSR policies in Spain. All the same, we have observed that the situation faced by those listening to the speeches, and by the epistemic community in general, cannot be easy, as seen from an analysis of the Spanish material. Yet, we firmly

believe that we have not been dealing with a factor exclusive to Spain, but rather with a common phenomenon shared by many other states regarding their positions on CSR.

It has become clear from our analyses that the agents involved in CSR do not all see things in the same light. The legitimate actors and the legitimate actions they recognise as part of CSR may differ greatly from one stakeholder and one actor to another.

We believe that this poses a central question for the development of CSR, from the viewpoints of both public policies and entrepreneurial strategy. We have stated that in the relationships between the diverse actors and their proposals, definitions as well as interpretations are crucial. And we have acknowledged that the latter have a determining role. In the context of the dialogues on CSR, the definitions actually represent an 'overlapping consensus' (the EU proposal is a paradigmatic example). However, in our analyses, we realised that CSR definitions only mark a common field of action within which the different actors adopt positions that can differ remarkably from each other. It is thus necessary to continue researching in other contexts what we present here as our relevant conclusion – theoretical as well as practical: that the difficulties with reaching agreements and with a multistakeholder dialogue depend less on definitions than on the interpretations of these definitions that each involved actor makes. These interpretations are seldom explicit, and they tend to remain concealed behind the CSR definition that has been agreed upon.

This is not an unresolvable situation. But its solution certainly requires a prior awareness of the situation. If, when they communicate about CSR, the actors involved do not see that they are talking about different issues, and try to find a consensus (or dispute a possible consensus) from opposite viewpoints, any debate on CSR will be a rather unproductive and lengthy undertaking. The multistakeholder dialogue is a relevant and necessary activity, but judging from the materials presented, the dialogue should involve more listening and less imposing if it is to be productive. It should above all begin with an acknowledgement of the problem, a public acknowledgement and a honest search for solutions. These steps are not easy to take.

As the Spanish case shows, a multistakeholder dialogue should not only have the function of producing knowledge and mutual understanding (an obvious statement, but not always an easy undertaking) among the different actors. These actors should also become conscious of the crucial function that dialogue has in the construction of understanding. This construction has effects on the setting of the agenda as well as on the creation of the global vision of CSR, and even on the meaning of apparently accepted values such as, for instance, responsibility. A value which no one questions, but which becomes complex and controversial when the issue of the responsibility of businesses is raised: What are businesses responsible for? To whom? Who is legitimised to assert what businesses' responsibility should be?

In consequence, another of our central conclusions is that in the establishment of a CSR definition and approach within a particular economic and social context, the contents are as crucial as the process by which they are discussed and agreed upon. It is the process that bestows legitimacy on the contents, that facilitates a mutual recognition between the involved actors and that enables these actors to redraft their respective interpretations.

The proper functioning of CSR does not only depend on the involved actors sharing some minimal common denominators. For this to happen, the actors also need to first acknowledge and accept each other as *legitimate* actors and partners in the development of CSR. And this, it seems from our analyses, should not be taken for granted. This leads us to our last conclusion, which is concerned with the development of public policies regarding CSR: even if eventually we can find coincidence on the questions raised, and even if different governments can learn from each others' experiences, the particular experience of the CSR Commission at the Spanish Parliament underlines the fact that any development of public policies regarding CSR is highly dependent on the national context (from both the economic and social and cultural viewpoints). This leads us to the conclusion that despite the existence of global issues and proposals, as well as regional recommendations (as in the EU), it is highly probable that the national context will be what will determine their validity and viability.

Notes

¹ This first initiative has been followed by others that also included the possibility of participation. The result of the first consultations, *Communication concerning CSR*, was published in 2002. Another process of debate and deliberation followed this publication: the so-called *European Multistakeholder Forum on CSR*. This forum made public its recommendations in 2004. Finally, *European Alliance for CSR* was published in 2006.

² This means that we are not going to work with an established definition of CSR. This is not the object of this paper. Instead, by analysing the Spanish discourse on CSR, we will depict the way in which the concept of CSR has acquired, and changed, its meaning over recent years. We will elaborate on this point throughout this paper.

³ We should note that the initiative of the Spanish Parliament in creating a parliamentary sub-committee to give impetus to CSR is unique in Europe. As is the fact that this sub-committee has listened to the most significant voices among all the parties involved to draw up a state of the art on CSR and make some recommendations that were unanimously approved.

⁴ This may happen internationally, as they are viewed as representatives of this or that organisation, but not individually, because they are Mr X or Ms Y, as happens at Spanish level.

⁵ This definition is: CSR is, beyond the strict accomplishment of current legal obligations, the voluntary integration in government, administration, strategy, policies and procedures of social, occupational and environmental concerns, as well as those regarding respect for human rights, that emerge in the relationship and transparent dialogue with the different stakeholders, thus accepting responsibility for the consequences and impacts of one's own actions.

⁶ This continuity would be a confirmation of what Lozano et al. (2008) have called the Agora model of public policies.

⁷ Thus, for example, one speaker began by stating:

I have prepared this presentation knowing the number of interventions that have taken place before mine, even this morning, and because I knew that those of my illustrious colleagues were among them, I have tried to complement their speeches intuitively – because I did not know what they would say – perhaps including some aspects that have not been dealt with yet.

⁸ The speeches in Parliament regarding socially responsible investment show a gap between the level of engagement in SRI in Spain and the rest of Europe.

Spain is clearly behind from the side of demand for the kind of socially responsible financial product.

⁹ In the words of one Government representative:

...the voluntary nature of social responsibility. This is one of the most crucial aspects of the question, on which there is a unanimous opinion in the business world: that is the need to respect the voluntary nature of these initiatives. In fact, initiatives in the field of CSR appear in the business world through the practices of the different companies. They might receive some stimulus from outside, even from the public powers, but only if the origins of the initiative are respected, and they can maintain their leadership in the field so that the necessary efficacy can be achieved.

¹⁰ The workers are not simply another stakeholder, they are a business asset, that is, we are also part of businesses, we are not alien to businesses, we are part of business life and part of businesses, and businesses engage, or say they engage, in this kind of policy (CSR), but they do not incorporate their workers into these strategies.

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