**Review of “The End of Corporate Social Responsibility: Crisis & Critique” by Peter Fleming and Marc T. Jones (Sage 2013)**

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It is fair to say that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not a topic that has received a great deal of attention in the business-to-business marketing literature. For example, the index of the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* 1993-2008 ([JBBM, 2009](#_ENREF_6)) includes neither CSR nor any synonyms or closely related terms (such as ethics, sustainability or green issues) in its table of contents. Extending the search a little to the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* and *Industrial Marketing Management* one finds a number of articles addressing ‘green marketing’ issues in business markets ([Fraj, Martínez, & Matute, 2013](#_ENREF_2); [Høgevold & Svensson, 2012](#_ENREF_5); [Polonsky, 1995](#_ENREF_11)), but nothing that seems to address CSR ‘head-on’. A special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management*, published in 2012 and entitled “Green marketing and its impact on supply chain”, accounts for a large proportion of the recently published articles in business-to-business journals that deal with any topic at all related to CSR. By contrast, a quick and simple search for “CSR” at the *Strategic Management Journal* reveals a large number of articles directly related to the central theme (Examples: [Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen, 2009](#_ENREF_4); [McWilliams & Siegel, 2000](#_ENREF_10); [Ramchander, Schwebach, & Staking, 2012](#_ENREF_12)). Perhaps this is an entirely reasonable state of affairs. If CSR is classified as a strategic management issue, and not as a marketing issue, then it is what one would expect to find. However, the fairly healthy representation of articles dealing with CSR in the *Journal of Marketing* seems to contradict that notion (Examples: [Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010](#_ENREF_7); [Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006](#_ENREF_8); [Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009](#_ENREF_13)). For some reason, however, CSR seems to have been relatively neglected by B2B scholars.

For the B2B scholar wishing to find out more about CSR, perhaps with a view to addressing the gap in literature that seemingly exists, might “The End of Corporate Social Responsibility: Crisis and Critique” be a good place to start? Certainly, this is a readable and succinct book with a lengthy bibliography that covers a lot of ground in a fairly slim volume. The authors are manifestly experts in the field, having researched, published and taught extensively about topics related to CSR. It is also readily apparent that the authors are keenly interested in their subject matter. This book is not a textbook but a research monograph, and the authors display a passionate engagement with research into the many manifestations of CSR. The authors also have a clear and explicit agenda, which they sustain throughout and which is implied by the play on words in the main title of the work. The book is concerned with both the purpose (ends) of CSR and with the termination (end-point) of CSR. However, the message of the book is far from complacent. It is not, as it perhaps could have been, that the achievements of CSR have so successfully reduced the damage wrought by global firms that CSR can now wither away because its key messages have become a mainstream part of business activity. Rather, the message is that CSR was never really tried: “*corporate social responsibility never really began*” ([Fleming & Jones, 2013, p1, italics in original](#_ENREF_1)). Given that, as Fleming and Jones freely admit, companies are spending more on CSR than ever before and making CSR one of the most prominent aspects of their public face, while CSR features ever more widely in business school curricula and in the business press, how could such a claim be remotely defensible?

The central contention of the book is that the damage inflicted by global firms is systemic, rather than piecemeal. CSR, operating at the level of the individual firm, and often addressing eye-catching small-scale initiatives, is largely irrelevant to systemic phenomena. A number of ‘gigatrends’ are identified that will affect the future of humanity: climate change, energy depletion, the rise of the BRIC nations, the genome revolution, and massive over-population of megacities largely located in the southern hemisphere. It is argued that the interests of global corporations are deeply intertwined with these gigatrends: “The most powerful causal driver of the gigatrends is the capital accumulation process itself as it manifests across time and space through globalization, embodied most effectively in the institutional forms of the multinational corporation … and the dense networks of financial capital” ([Fleming & Jones, 2013, p25](#_ENREF_1)). Yet CSR research almost completely ignores the gigatrends, while much of the time seeking to demonstrate that corporate goals and social good can be reconciled. Fleming and Jones contend that such reconciliation is fundamentally impossible, rendering most CSR research irrelevant.

According to Fleming and Jones, while the relationship between CSR and corporate performance is the most prominent theme in academic research, academic analysis of CSR has concerned itself with a small number of other themes: corporate citizenship; stakeholder analysis; and, the use of CSR in employee relations. A chapter is devoted to each of these themes. New corporate citizenship theory ([Matten & Crane, 2005](#_ENREF_9)) proposes that global corporations can fill an institutional vacuum left by the withdrawal of the state from key activities in developed countries (for example, through privatization and welfare reform), the absence of a fully functioning state in developing countries, and the existence of citizenship issues, such as environmental degradation, that are beyond reach of the nation state. However, Fleming and Jones argue that corporations continue to act in the interests of a small number of stakeholders (notably, senior managers and equity holders), and so are incapable of delivering outcomes that are beneficial to society as a whole. In passing, it is worth mentioning that their book is also very quotable; for example, on corporate citizenship: “… if corporate citizenship theory is moving in a direction which celebrates firms as ‘good citizens’ when they pay wages on time and meet other contractual obligations … we really are in an increasingly Orwellian world where ‘less is more’, ‘abandonment is liberation’, and ‘unemployment is opportunity’” ([Fleming & Jones, 2013, p45](#_ENREF_1)). The arguments presented against stakeholder theory are similar: stakeholders do not have equal power; the interests of less powerful stakeholder groups may simply be ignored if they contradict the interests of more powerful groups; stakeholder theory runs the considerable risk of being seen as a purely instrumental method of claiming to consider the interests of the many, as a means of diverting attention from the primary concern of maximising the interests of the few. Again, in the case of CSR and the employee (“the new opium of the people” as chapter 4 is colourfully entitled), the main thrust of the argument is that CSR is used instrumentally to achieve the goals of the powerful stakeholder groups, while giving the impression of pursuing a more enlightened agenda. Where corporate citizenship and stakeholder theory are concerned, the instrumental goal of CSR is to protect and enhance the corporate and brand reputation, and where employees are concerned, it is to improve productivity by attracting, retaining, and motivating staff: “CSR provides a medium for people to express their values (that reflect broader societal concern about the effects of big business) and remain employed in the firm with minimum emotional dissonance” ([Fleming & Jones, 2013, p77](#_ENREF_1)).

So far, one might have gained the impression that the Fleming and Jones thesis is that CSR is not a sincere attempt to ameliorate the negative effects of business on society, but that it is a component of a public relations strategy designed to convince important audiences (such as governments and employees) that corporations can simultaneously make money and do good. However, their argument goes rather further than this, proposing that CSR is not just “propaganda”, but is actually a “parasite” on wider social movements, many of which were brought about in response to the damage caused by global corporations. The use of ‘green’ marketing messages, the promotion of organic products by large corporations, and the appropriation of the ‘fair trade’ movement for the interests of global firms would all constitute examples of this parasitism. Having contributed substantially to environmental damage, consumption of junk food, and exploitation of workers in developing countries, so the argument goes, global corporations now exploit the situation that they themselves caused to the economic advantage of their most powerful stakeholders.

Clearly, there are many who would take issue with the main argument presented by Fleming and Jones, and see no need to engage much further with their thesis. For example, one might argue that to try to pin climate change and energy depletion on global private enterprise is excessive (socialist industrial systems pollute as or more effectively than capitalist ones), or that the improvements in working conditions brought about by global firms operating in developing countries are considerable and that CSR is a valuable correction mechanism where things occasionally go wrong. Perhaps paradoxically, Fleming and Jones would be more than happy for their opponents to espouse an explicitly Friedmanite point of view in which the unrestrained pursuit of profits within the rule of law is the only responsibility of business, and where business managers have no place meddling in social issues which should be left to appropriate institutions such as the state or the voluntary sector ([Friedman, 1970](#_ENREF_3)). Such an approach they see as a “useful antidote to the hypocritical clichés that pervade contemporary CSR discourse” ([Fleming & Jones, 2013, p51](#_ENREF_1)). Overall, while the shape of the argument developed by Fleming and Jones is clear, and the reader can agree or disagree with the foundational premises of the argument depending on his or her political persuasion, one feels that the authors might have brought to bear a little more empirical research in their discussions of the systemic damage inflicted by global corporations. The authors might reasonably reply that empirical evidence abounds and can be found in the many sources cited in their reference list or elsewhere. However, much of the evidence is controversial, contested, and capable of multiple interpretations. One would be interested to see what evidence the authors employed to defend their important assertions about the *systemic* damage resulting from the activities of big business. For example, to what extent is such damage an inevitable result of human development (regardless of the socio-economic system within which it takes place), and to what extent is it reasonable to pin the blame on global capitalism in particular?

This book is a provocative read. There are readers of the *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing* who will want to read it for personal interest (and others who may prefer to avoid it). How much professional relevance does it have to B2B practitioners, scholars and students? One can make a *prima facie* case that CSR has been neglected in business-to-business research. In that case, any work of scholarship that provokes B2B researchers to pay greater attention to CSR may serve a useful purpose. However, this book is not just any work of scholarship, since it poses important questions about the appropriate direction for CSR research in general, and CSR research in B2B markets in particular. For example, a too-obvious direction for CSR research in B2B markets might seem to be the investigation of covariance between measures of CSR and measures of corporate performance—in other words, the replication of studies of the relationship between CSR and performance but placed in a B2B context. Fleming and Jones argue persuasively that this is a largely pointless research direction. Finally, for marketing educators, there is the question of where, if anywhere, this book deserves a place on a student reading list. The obvious home for this book is on reading lists for business or marketing ethics, strategic management or marketing, and subjects such as macro-marketing, critical marketing or the social impact of marketing, where these are taught. To say that the book is unlikely to find a home on the typical business-to-business marketing reading list is merely to re-state the introductory remarks about the comparative neglect of CSR in the field of B2B marketing. Perhaps business-to-business research, and the B2B curriculum, should pay more attention to CSR.

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