"If You Are Looking for a First Class CSR Reader . . ."

The Corporate Social Responsibility Reader
Jon Burchell (ed.)
(London: Routledge, 2008

A review by William C. Frederick, June 2008

". . . then try this one." If I were still in the classroom, I would use it, and I highly recommend it for both undergraduate and MBA levels. The book is timely, clearly written, authoritative, balanced in viewpoint, informative, just the right length, with an occasional touch of humor, and offering a visionary look at CSR's several potential futures.

Among its other virtues, this CSR Reader signifies once more that many of the most interesting initiatives about the CSR field are coming these days from European sources. The editor, Jon Burchell, is lecturer in the Management School at the UK's University of Sheffield, and author of several journal articles and book chapters.

However, my first impression wasn't exactly positive upon reading editor Burchell's Introduction where he declares, "Personally, I can still not decide exactly what value to attribute to the development of CSR . . . ." I thought to myself, What's wrong with this guy? If he's not sure of CSR, why is he bothering to write a book about it? But you know what? By the time I had read through the entire book, I then understood exactly what he meant—and I even found myself almost, but not entirely, agreeing with him.

The book is set up in 6 chapters, each with an introduction followed by 4 to 6 readings on that chapter's theme. Burchell's 6-page introductions alone are worth the price of admission for their clarity and straightforward explanations of controversial issues. For that reason I intend to recommend them to several business executive friends. Students will welcome the brevity of the readings that average around 6 pages, the longest 16 pages, the shortest 2 pages, and several 3 pages in length. But make no mistake, the heft is there when needed to pinpoint a key issue, describe a supply-chain sweatshop, skewer a holier-than-thou corporation, or—yes, it's there—praise private enterprise and condemn CSR do-goodism. That latter entry is thanks to Milton Friedman's classic 1970 *New York Times* piece repudiating the whole CSR concept (so if you've frequently cited it but never read it, here's your chance). Each chapter's Guide to Further Reading contains a carefully selected short list of key authoritative works, plus something to gladden the heart of today's students—3 to 4 website addresses for finding additional materials, cases, and viewpoints. Of course, that's where they will go, assuming they go anywhere.

Here is a flavor of what you will find in the 6 chapters:

- **Chapter 1. Globalization & sustainable development.** Until you delve into these selections, don't be too sure you really know what globalization and sustainability are all about—or what should/can be done about them. And, look,

dude, be sure to catch Dave Gorman's wacky experience in Seattle's Starbucks coffee house world. Hilarious.

- **Chapter 2. Challenging the corporation.** Multinationals take their lumps in these readings. MNCs are likened to psychopaths, criticized for exploitive labor policies in developing nations' industrial zones, blamed for "killing from behind a desk," and being McDonalds-like by "exploiting workers," "robbing the poor," "damaging the environment," and "murdering animals." The charges are well documented.

- **Chapter 3. CSR: What is it, really?** This is not your same-old/same-old complaint about CSR being a vague idea, which has been hanging around for years (decades, actually). The readings summarize the variety of possible approaches as well as the practical ones companies have actually taken, plus both neocons and left-leaners who just don't buy into it at all. In the middle somewhere, you find sensible pieces by Archie Carroll and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a compact review of the business case for CSR, and NGO SustainAbility's way to link CSR and business purpose.

- **Chapter 4. Codes and guidelines: Do they work?** All you want to know about the CSR benchmarks promoted by some of the key codes of conduct: OECD; UN Global Compact; Global Reporting Initiative; plus an in-house example by Adidas. Are they effective? The jury is still out, given the global complexities of choosing a code, enforcing it, auditing results, reporting to the public, not to speak of lax, friendly, and/or corrupt governmental policing of the codes. But take a look at Kelly Dent's account of Sri-Lanka's free trade zones where anti-code and anti-labor practices make a mockery of CSR humanitarian guidelines.

- **Chapter 5. Corporate CSR actions: Transparent? Or smudgy?** While a fair number of MNCs have been dragooned into engaging with their stakeholders, the process is messy, confused, uncertain, and often inequitable in outcome. The readings here are split on the virtues and visibility of stakeholder engagement. Anne Lawrence's comprehensive account of Royal Dutch/Shell's efforts gives cause for rejoicing, as do Vodaphone's and Cadbury Scheppes' outreach programs, which make one believe some progress is possible. But then read of the community woes suffered at the hands of Coca-Cola, Tesco, McDonalds, BP, and Shell (again!), topped off with Deborah Doane's bitter take on "the dance of the slaves."

- **Chapter 6. What next for CSR?** No surprise here, opinion is divided. One CSR doubter prefers that "hard-faced uncommitted calculators" judge the purported wisdom of CSR undertakings; and a similar view is held by another commentator. These pro-business perspectives are nostalgic reminders of Theodore Levitt's 1950s *HBR* warning about "the dangers of social responsibility." Allen White, rather gingerly, holds that CSR is here to stay simply because the corporate wealth-producing footprint is too big to ignore. Two other authors focus on CSR's rocky future in the developing world. But Simon Zadek, who expresses "sceptical optimism" about CSR's long-term impact, gets the last word—and the book's most intriguing idea—by predicting the demise of the corporation as we know it, as firms morph into "*value-webs* or simply communities-of-interest," thus blurring the boundaries between all of the pro-and-con participants in the CSR debate.

Now, after all the good things I've said, I need to scold the editor and the publisher about a flaw that could conceivably compromise the book's acceptance and usage: the authors are not identified except by name. Users, whether students or faculty, are given no basis on which to judge the professional source of volatile and sometimes severely critical viewpoints of business firms. If I may say so, that's not the kind of responsibility generally advocated by the book as a whole. Don't editors and their publishers understand that credibility rests on knowing who's saying what? Even if some readers are familiar with at least some of the authors—I know far fewer than half—students should be given a complete roster. End of rant.

So try it, you'll like it. A slender paperback, it slips easily into backpack or PC case.