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BOOK REVIEW

Progressive Business: An Intellectual History of the Role of Business in American Society, by Christian Olaf Christiansen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 275 pp. ISBN: 978-0198701033

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What makes this book of interest to potential readers? Mostly because Christian Olaf Christiansen revisits key ideas associated with capitalism and the economy in general which had been challenged during the "trial-by-fire" of the 2008 financial crisis. Additionally, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which business communicates. Having said that, one of the primary aims of Christiansen is to present and discuss the dichotomy of voices and facts as seen currently in business. It was due to 'a fundamental mismatch' between the purpose of business (as we think about it) and the new 'soft' business rhetoric is full of jargon that itself led the author on the path to discovering the history of soft business ideas in America.

The purpose of this book is to present at length, but not limited to, the work and critiques of theorists from business-related fields and complement their stance with a description and overview of the milieu in which they were writing for a greater understanding of their work. Just to name a few authors and their work presented in the book: Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Karl Polanyi, Peter F. Drucker, Chester I. Barnard, and Francis Fukuyama.

In discussing business ideas, Christiansen coins the term 'progressive business' using it interchangeably with the term 'market reformism.' Market reformism, in brief, is an internal reform which is related to beliefs in private property and as such associated with that private control of companies. Central to that internal reform is the scepticism displayed by labour unions (and of the state itself) and an ideology revolving around the idea of the self-reforming potentials of business

(and as a result, capitalism itself). In a way, the author sees it as a fusion of economic concerns with social ethics.

Also, as part of his research, Christiansen identified a gap in the current literature, namely, the discourse on social responsibilities of business and business ethics which was understudied in relation to the role these ideas have played in a greater context. The author sees this book as one describing the history of ideas of the moral self-governance of business, but he also complements that by adding a critical dimension to it. I would argue that *Progressive Business* should not be viewed in opposition to, either or both, Friedman-like or anti-laissez-faire writings (both positioned on occasion as two opposing sides of the same spectrum). Instead, it should be viewed as representing and offering a sort of alternative approach, as the author presents an account (which is in general inclusive, for example, Chester I. Barnard's cooperation) of how business entities and persons should be acting in, and as part of, a society.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Christiansen also embedded in the book an underlying theme, and a fairly balanced account, of the historical development of the concept of corporate social responsibly (CSR), which might be considered by many contemporaries as quite a novel idea that originated around the time of the 2008 global crisis. However, Christiansen takes us through the stages of the development of concepts relating to corporate social responsibility; from the beginning with business ethics, to notions of business devoted to serving the public, through some modern classic and managerial business creed, up until the most recent post-ACTA lawsuits against corporations. He also describes the role of corporations themselves in shaping discussions around CSR.

While some researchers attribute the concept of CSR to Howard R. Bowen due to his work *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*[1] it might come as a surprise to some, that the origins of the concept, according to Christiansen, can be traced back to mid-19th century. Then some theorists from well-established and newly emerging disciplines discussed ideas similar to those espoused in corporate social responsibly. Accordingly, CSR can be understood as a principal factor influencing

[1] Bowen, H. R. (1953). Social responsibility of the businessman. New York: Harper & Row.

business (as an industry), its reforms, movements, and in more general terms, ideas associated with business ethics and moral standards.

It is worth mentioning that, according to Christiansen when it comes to CRS, it is often emphasised that there is a dissonance between what corporations say (self-portrayal and rhetoric associated with their commitments and ideals) and what the same corporations do (practices of these corporations). One of the most vivid contemporary embodiments of the above argument would be a case of the Dow Chemical Corporation's commercial the 'Human Element' (Hu)[2] in the light of its involvement in the disaster at Bhopal[3].

Christiansen provides a balanced account of the views of the intellectuals are representing several fields of inquiry. It does not mean that the book is lacking a critical evaluation of the theories presented or it is in some way naive, quite the opposite. Ideas like corporate social responsibility are, in the eyes of the author, only one of the numerous alternative ways of governing contemporary societies. Similarly, *Progressive Business* is describing the ideas associated with soft business (and less so, its techniques) by looking at the market forces alternatives and how these are protected from the forces of the market regime. That said, Christiansen, an intellectual historian, does not limit his inquiry to one and only one field of study. He also uses and presents the views of practitioners in their respective fields (namely: sociology, anthropology, human resources, history, and economics) or businesspersons and their opinions (e.g., Henry Ford) or, on occasions, their activities (e.g., George Pullman).

Furthermore, Christiansen situates his inquiry into the history of ideas within a 'context of conflicts' which is a relevant economic, political, and intellectual framework. As a result, he is showing 'a gentler capitalism' which is a response to "Wild West" capitalism. However, the author is also suggesting that businesses are trying to persuade us that they are capable of self-governing in

[2] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsCG26886w8
[3] Also, see: http://www.crimetalk.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=227&Itemid=41

accordance with the social norms and expectations (and market rules as well) without the interference from outside.

So again, why is *Progressive Business* important? Because it challenges our contemporary portrayal of the problem of business ethics and revisits some of CSR's key concepts. Some initial ideas originated in the European continent and soon began to gain momentum in the then still-forming United States. Christiansen emphasises that pre-World War I historians in the USA had been under the influence of European thought; a phenomenon that historian Daniel Rodgers describes as the 'Atlantic Crossings' (Christiansen, 2015:25). As a result of that process these ideas became prominent in the American economy, and consequently upset, to say the least, most of the planet during and after 2008 financial crisis in the forms of wave/waves of recession or rather recessions.

Christiansen also interestingly notices that the initial writers on management, organizational theorists, industrial psychologists, and business ethicists were in some way closely enmeshed to the practices of corporations of the day. As a consequence of this connection, their views would represent or overlap with the ones expressed by the owners of capital or corporations even though, as highlighted by the author, their role was relatively minor in their times in comparison to the already established ideas presented by free market liberalism.

Overall, Christian Olaf Christiansen looks through the magnifying glass at the actions of businesses and businesspersons. He also questions the rhetoric, jargon, and language of business people and entities in order to break the façade of information and unveil the daily realities of businesses as hidden behind that façade. The author somewhat boldly states that, to his knowledge, it is the first book to propose and challenge the interpretation of the intellectual history on the idea of moral self-governance and its critics. By some means, intentionally or not, the author is emphasising to a degree a third way of approaching capitalism, a soft or 'gentler' capitalism; a middle ground between proponents of a laissez-faire approach and 'radical or reformist leftists.' Christiansen's work should not be viewed as an attempt to prise businesses for their ethical actions it is rather an account of the easily dismissed history of views on this subject.

In conclusion, *Progressive Business* would make great auxiliary reading for any of the business ethics modules or courses (and respective philosophy and sociology modules alike), as it offers excellent insights into how the social role of business was considered throughout the last century and a half. Christiansen offers a discussion on the historical occurrence and development of specific business concepts, such as corporate social responsibility, and makes these concepts more meaningful and understandable to academics and the lay reader.