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Fear and Loathing in the JCC

Unleashing the Monster of 'New Corporate Citizenship Theory' to Confront Category Crisis

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This article is an invited response to a paper by Jones and Haigh in issue 27 of the *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*. We argue that their attempt to caricature our paper in the *Academy of Management Review* (2005) is a manifestation of widespread unease around the shifting roles of business and government. We conclude, highlighting the necessity of ongoing research into the political role of the firm.

- Corporate citizenship
- Government
- Political responsibility
- Institutional boundaries
- Monsters

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HERE IS ALWAYS A DEGREE OF SATISFACTION WHEN ONE'S IDEAS RECEIVE attention—when they are read, debated, assessed or dissected in some way. Even if, as with Jones and Haigh's (2007) article, you are wildly misinterpreted and misquoted, you can always take comfort in Oscar Wilde's aphorism that 'there is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about'.

Of course, it is interesting for us that our rather modest, short, research note in the *Academy of Management Review* (Matten and Crane 2005) should be the subject of such a galloping (or is that galumphing?) assault from Jones and Haigh. To be sure, it is not a perfect article, and we have had the opportunity to address some of its shortcomings in an earlier published dialogue (Crane and Matten 2005), and in a subsequent book-length treatment (Crane *et al.* 2008). But the fact is that, as far as we can see, Jones and Haigh's attack is primarily directed towards a theory that is as much their own invention as it is ours.

Now we could discuss at length all the aspects we disagree with in Jones and Haigh's article. However, not only would that require another full-length article, but we are also somewhat unconvinced that the readers of *JCC* are really interested in ploughing through a point-by-point refutation of that sort (though we will of course happily step outside for a bit of academic fisticuffs next time we run into Jones and Haigh on the conference circuit).

So, suffice to say that nowhere in our article do we 'advocate' anything very much, still less a 'wholesale replacement of the state' (p. 57). Nor do we suggest 'comparative efficiencies of the private sector in the provision of basic services' (p. 55), or refuse 'to countenance possibilities of non-benign motivations of corporate strategy' (p. 66), to name just a few of their many exaggerations and distortions. In addition, it is clear that much of Jones and Haigh's critique rests on a description of our supposed 'unarticulated assumptions' (p. 54), or what we have left 'unsaid' (p. 66) or 'tactic' (p. 66). Although Jones and Haigh helpfully offer to speak for us regarding these assumptions, their creation of 'new corporate citizenship theory' (as they have chosen to call it) is largely unrecognisable from the conceptualisation that we, its supposed architects, actually provide in our article. The assumptions they proffer are not ours, the purposes they infer could not be further from our own, and the implications they discern are not ones we agree with. In short, Jones and Haigh have created their own gross caricature of our concept, their own monster to fear and loathe.

What is interesting to us then is why our friendly foes have found it necessary to construct this monster of 'new corporate citizenship (NCC) theory' to terrify us all about the imminent collapse of civilised society. Fortunately, there are always cultural studies researchers on hand to offer intellectual insight on such esoteric matters. Proponents of 'monster theory' (yes, there is such a thing) suggest that monsters can be read as cultural expressions, as symbolic manifestations of cultural unease that pervades society (see Cohen 1996). Monsters, they tell us, are 'harbingers of category crisis'—that is, they appear at a time when our binary divisions begin falling apart. Monsters 'are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions' (Cohen 1996: 6).

The category crisis that we are talking about here, of course, is that between business and government, the state and the market. Jones and Haigh, we suggest, have created the NCC monster not because they want to engage Matten and Crane in a nice sensible academic debate about how to develop a theory, but because they are suffering from a bad case of the unease we all feel about the blurring of institutional boundaries in contemporary society.

The seepage of certainty about roles and responsibilities in business and government (not to mention civil society) has created a fertile environment for all kinds of monstrous

imaginings, from David Korten's (2001) corporations that 'rule the world', to Joel Bakan's (2004) creepier 'psychotic' corporation, to Naomi Klein's (2007) recent 'disaster capitalism' shocker.¹ These are all, as far as we are concerned, rather more eloquent and original reads in the business and society 'monster' genre than Jones and Haigh's effort. But that is not the point. The important issue here is that it is anxieties about the category crisis that confronts us which appear to animate the strange incarnation of NCC—an incarnation that positions our theory as the object of fear and loathing rather than addressing the underlying phenomenon itself.

The interesting thing, then, about Jones and Haigh's paper is that they actually do not really seem to disagree all that much about the underlying phenomenon of private authority increasingly extending into the public sphere of citizenship that forms the subject of our article. In fact, in one of the better-researched and -argued passages in their paper (pp. 55-56) they provide a fairly comprehensive account of changes in citizenship from the political to the economic realm (or 'economistic' to give it their rather more grisly label). In their lengthy elaboration of the outsourcing debate they also specify in detail how this changing context puts corporations in a pivotal role with regard to basic status and entitlements of laid-off workers. Where we differ then is in how we respond to the problem. While we attempt to analyse, however imperfectly, what this might mean for corporations, Jones and Haigh's invocation of the NCC monster prompts them into a nostalgic retreat to a Keynesian post-war world where the lines between business, government and civil society were sure and certain, and children could still sleep safely in their beds at night.

It is, we have to say, a real shame that Jones and Haigh do not take up the opportunity to do more than simply battle with a monster of their own creation (NCC) in a bid to return us to a life less complex and frightening. Their paper shows a lot of potential to contribute positively to an important debate that we sought to ignite with our article about how different sectors, their institutions and their modes of governance overlap, intersect and change.

The problem some of our critics seem have with our work (see also van Oosterhout 2005; Thompson 2006) is that we unambiguously identify a political role for the corporation in society. Initially we did not think this to be such a spectacular contribution; rather we saw it as something others had said before, albeit not always in the highest echelons of the academic management literature. For instance, the recent Naomi Klein (2007) blockbuster horror story can be read as just another empirical illustration of how corporations have taken over core governmental functions in defence, homeland security and disaster relief. It seems, though, that our critics, including Jones and Haigh, are so uncomfortable with this idea that—despite their articulated disdain for 'neo-liberal' ideas²—they still cling to the belief that the domains of business, state and civil society should remain distinct, unadulterated categories. Only in their monstrous nightmares does the spectre of category crisis rear its admittedly not-very-pretty head.

The fact is, though, that the boundaries *are* blurring, and this makes life messy and, yes, scarier. The blurring boundaries between government, business and civil society challenge many of our existing constructs in the social sciences, of which citizenship and governance are just two prominent examples. For Jones and Haigh, the appropriate scholarly response seems to be to put one's head in the sand, rather than analyse

1 Klein's (2000) earlier portrayal of 'brand bullies' are no less menacing, but somehow her labelling of them as 'bullies' doesn't seem very monstrous.

2 It is ironic that Jones and Haigh's views are strikingly similar to the ones espoused in *The Economist's* trenchant critique of CSR: "The proper guardians of the public interest are governments, which are accountable to all citizens. It is the job of elected politicians to set goals for regulators, to deal with externalities, to mediate among different interests, to attend to the demands of social justice, to provide the public goods [. . .] and to organise resources accordingly" (Crook 2005: 18).

head-on the situation that confronts us. They suggest that ‘the claim that this analysis does not constitute advocacy is not tenable’ (Jones and Haigh 2007: 66) as if those that descriptively analyse contemporary ‘boundary’ problems (whether corporate citizenship and public–private partnerships or, more broadly, illegal immigration, cosmetic surgery, even paedophilia) are necessarily advocates of the practices they examine. Their argument that ‘scoping out the descriptive feasibility of a concept is part of establishing its legitimacy’ (Jones and Haigh 2007: 66), wittingly or otherwise flies in the face of the epistemological differentiation between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ (e.g. Hume 1739).

Ultimately, though, to deny the changes that confront us just because they have some rather problematic or undesired implications will not make them go away. In times such as these, monsters will inevitably emerge from the swamp. It is in the nature of the crisis that confronts us. So even if their grotesque forms repulse us (and, from our point of view, Jones and Haigh’s NCC creation is pretty gruesome) we have to go beyond the fear and loathing and see what lurks beneath. It’s time for all of us to pluck up the courage and look under the bed.

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