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***Waiting for the Mountain to Move: The Role of Multinational Corporations in the Quest for Global Justice***

Multinational companies have been at the forefront of driving global markets. Concordantly, they have been labeled “drivers of globalization,” “agents of change,” “engines of growth” or “central organizers” of economic activity in the past. While this role of multinationals in shaping globalization and thus in bringing about a new world is largely undisputed and such seemingly value-neutral labels for them rarely opposed, the explicitly normative call for them to become “agents of justice” raises more concern. This seems peculiar; after all, any substantial change in the structure of society should arguably be a change for the better, that is, a change toward more, rather than less, justice in society. Thus, any agent who is instrumental in bringing about such substantial change, that is, any “agent of change” should, at the same time, be an agent of justice.

However, while multinational companies have played instrumental roles in shaping the world in the past three decades, they have done so with seemingly little genuine interest in and concern for the systematic advancement of global justice. Granted that the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement is still making strides among large companies, but it arguably only scratches the surface of a more holistic understanding of corporations as agents of justice. Such an understanding crystallizes around corporations’ impact on the structure of society. In other words, a perspective on justice, rather than “merely” on social responsibility, addresses the political role and stature of multinational companies. It is, fundamentally, about corporate power and influence – and about the political responsibilities that are inevitably connected to it.

CSR, on the other hand, is often still limited to isolated activities and projects with little impact on the structural root causes of injustice. Granted that the recent push to tie CSR closer to a company’s core business may be a welcome improvement in this regard, but it also threatens to push the political dimension of corporate responsibility even further to the periphery. Symptomatically, with only a few notable exceptions, no voluntary corporate code at the global level addresses the political role and responsibility of companies adequately and in a systematic way. Instead they formulate principles only for companies’ core business processes.

Based on a demanding account of cosmopolitan justice, I will argue that a potential role for corporations as agents of global justice aims at the regulatory structures in which markets are embedded. Accordingly, it requires that corporations rethink their political role and responsibility in a fundamental manner. CSR may be a start – but it will not make the mountain move.