

12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Papion, Sarah, "Free Trade and Corporate Social Responsibility: Ethical Dilemmas in Global Economic Development" (2018). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 423.
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Free Trade and Corporate Social Responsibility: Ethical Dilemmas in Global Economic Development



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GS401- Senior Capstone
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December 20, 2018

Introduction

The notion that free trade can promote economic growth in developing regions of the world seems like a plausible and practical solution to global poverty. Through the lens of the free-trade-optimist, it is black and white: corporations bring jobs, and jobs equal a happy and healthy economy. A major oversight in this neoliberal Utopian ideology is that corporations are not in the business of building communities, nor do they have an interest in keeping their operations stationary enough to allow economic growth to occur over a span of years. Instead, what we are seeing in free trade zones is an unfair game of morally corrupt musical chairs, where corporations abandon communities as quickly as they arrive to find their next cheap labor hub. Quite contradictory to the original purpose of free trade, economic growth in Free Trade Zones (FTZ) is not long term, or secure. If anything, the neoliberal global economic system is abusing developing communities by exploiting their human and environmental resources with little concern for legality or ethics.

This subject is of great interest to me as my area of focus is international labor relations and I have worked in the Human Resources field in a manufacturing company for the last four years. Nowhere is my focus more relevant than in the exploration of how the neoliberal economic system is impacting the global labor force. In my research, I will highlight ethical issues presented to the global community by free-market fundamentalism. I will also analyze pro and con viewpoints for neoliberalism, and critically look at the role of corporate social responsibility in stabilizing communities and encouraging economic growth in free trade zones.

Literature Review

The spread of capitalism is creating a world of winners and losers, rich and poor, developed and under-developed as some economies depend on stocks and dividends and others

rely on their production capacity. The Global North is considered developed (i.e. United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, etc.) and the Global South consists of countries in the developmental stage (i.e. Central and South America, Africa, India, and East Asia). The subject of workers' rights abuses in Free Trade Zones covers many economic concepts, but the primary concepts I chose to represent this issue are Laissez-faire economics/ Neoliberalism, Supply and Demand, and New International Divisions of Labor.

It is important to understand New International Divisions of Labor to see both sides of the coin in the way our modern global economic system is set up. Basically, it describes the shift from manufacturing in developed parts of the world to third world countries. I will use case studies to exhibit how and why neoliberalism and New International Divisions of Labor are current and dire global issues that can be addressed through international trade and labor regulations, and responsible corporate practices.

In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argues that the division of labor in manufacturing is one of the "greatest improvements to productive power (Smith, 1)." His theory is that division of labor is necessary for mass production, especially in large factories, and it is vital to maximizing the labor output of each individual human and mechanical asset. Smith states that parceling out portions of labor for one complete product results in an "increase of dexterity in every particular workman...saving of the time which is commonly lost in passing from one species of work to another; and, lastly, to the invention of a great number of machines which facilitate and abridge labor, and enable one man to do the work of many (3)." For corporations, such a practice makes sense as increased production through division of labor is proven to be highly effective. However, it also shows that human assets are seen mathematically, not humanely, which was a

fear that was also mentioned by Smith in regards to the division of labor theory. The value of the employee as an individual gets lost if the measure of a worker is limited to labor output alone.

New International Divisions of Labor and corporate freedom to choose the location of each sector of their workforce are widening the wage gap between the Global North and the Global South. Additionally, it is creating the same economic divide in the Global North, where white collar workers benefit from cheap labor and blue collar employees frequently lose their jobs to outsourcing, but the neoliberal environment wouldn't prefer it any other way.

Socio-economic disparity is the undesirable, yet inevitable outcome of a successful capitalist system. However, such a system is still praised by classical economists that claim capitalism presents developing regions unprecedented opportunities to benefit from global market exposure. Simon Clarke summarized Smith's philosophy in his article *The Neoliberal Theory of Society* when he states:

The division of labour developed as a result of the initiative and enterprise of private individuals and would develop the more rapidly the more such individuals were free to apply their enterprise and initiative and to reap the corresponding rewards...The immediate implication of Smith's argument is that any barriers to the freedom of exchange limit the development of the division of labour and so the growth of the wealth of the nation and the prosperity of each and every one of its citizens (Clarke).

Regardless of this sentiment, we are witnessing the increase of worldwide economic inequity. Injustices and inequities are profitable for those on top of the socio-economic pyramid.

American economist Milton Friedman romanticized the relationship between freedom and capitalism by claiming that one cannot exist without the other. The capitalist argument is that when governments step in to regulate business practices, we all lose our freedom. Of government oversight, Friedman states, "Even though the men who wield this power initially be of good will and even though they be not corrupted by the power they exercise, the power will both attract and form men of a different stamp (2)." He continues that government should be limited and that

the primary role of government should be to keep citizens safe. I find it to be ironic that the same argument can be made to defend regulations in free trade zones, as some men within corporations can abuse power and harm/exploit citizens.

In Simon Clarke's analysis of Marx's critiques on capitalism, Clarke notes Marx's sentiment that capitalism is the opposite of freedom in that it opens up opportunities for human greed to permeate the socio-economic landscape. "Marx's social theory...provided the basis for a moral and political critique of capitalism, in establishing that the evils of capitalism were not merely the contingent effects of human greed, ignorance and superstition, but were necessary aspects of the social form of capitalist production (6)." The notion is that humans are inherently evil and will relentlessly exploit resources unless prohibited by regulations.

In their article "Trade Liberalization, Economic Crises, and Growth", Rod Falvey, et al. explain the correlation between free trade and economic development of third world countries. They state, "Trade liberalizations have been widespread in the last three decades, particularly among developing and transition countries. The reasons for this include the perceived limitations of import substitution as a development strategy; the weight of empirical evidence suggesting a positive relationship between openness and growth." Plausible as this may seem, many economists that study free trade and growth claim otherwise.

Another modern economist, Iskra Stanceva- Gigov, echoes the notion that free trade will only benefit developing regions. Stanceva- Gigov states, "Trade liberalization significantly encourages foreign trade and cross-border financial flows, a greater volume of output and specialization, which ultimately leads to higher economic growth (166)." While one cannot deny the immediate ways in which the presence of foreign corporations can positively impact a free trade zone, the growth is typically not sustainable.

According to Kalim Siddiqui in his article, “Trade Liberalization and Economic Development: A Critical Review”, opening borders for corporations can make developing countries vulnerable to predatory practices from financial institutions. Siddiqui explains that, “...international institutions strongly advocate trade liberalization in the developing countries. Such policies may increase vulnerability and make the developing countries further hostages to international finance capital. It seems that trade liberalization is being presented as a suitable developmental strategy for developing countries despite weak empirical findings. It appears that with the current agenda of universal trade liberalization, not only will development space shrink but also self-determination and economic sovereignty will be undermined (228). The economic independence of a country and the ability to create wealth from local resources, entrepreneurial endeavors, and innovation may be inhibited by dependence on foreign companies.

In terms of development, David Harvey’s theory of uneven geographical development perfectly explains the conundrums present in free trade and regional growth. His theory consists of six sub-theses based on Marxist views of the *spatial*, but I will focus only on the first two sub-theories. The first subcategory is geographical concentration, where corporations flock to cheap free trade zones to expand their bottom-line; this creates a concentrated hub for foreign companies in developing regions. For a time, this will cause an influx of laborers, jobs and urban development.

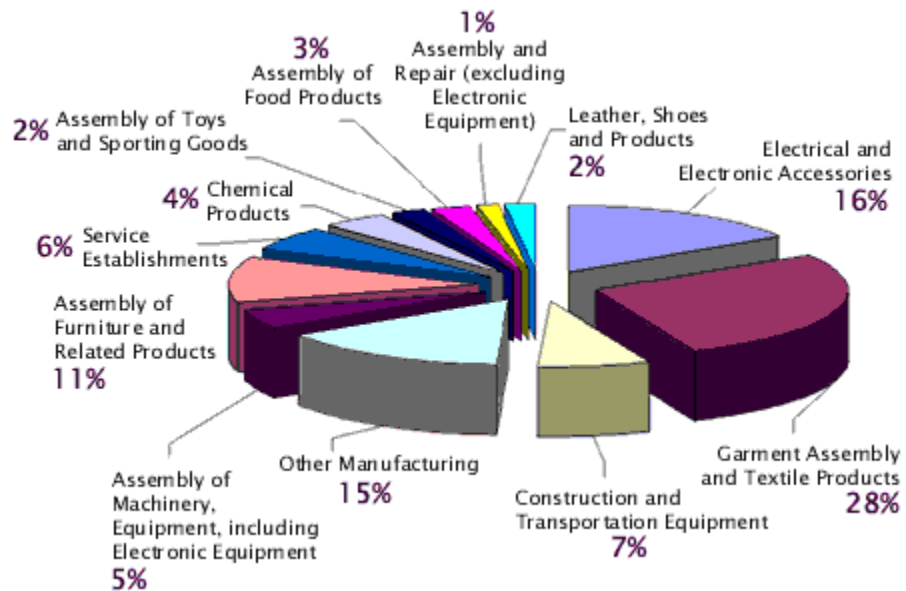
However, Harvey’s second thesis of geographical dispersal explains how concentrated areas cause rent and home prices to increase, traffic becomes congested, pollution worsens, and people will demand higher wages. Harvey states that, “In a city/region where there is a lot of capital investment, costs of doing business gradually rise” (Das 513). This will cause companies to find a new location to operate, which is the reason that long-term economic growth will fail.

The first case study I am using to make my point that free trade is an exploitative system is the maquiladora workers fighting for their rights as a laid-off labor force seeking severance pay in Tijuana, Mexico, from the documentary *Maquilapolis*. Latin America has felt the negative effects of free trade to a great degree since Free Trade Zones (FTZ) were set up in the 1970s to attract domestic and foreign investors. Many of these investors were, and still are, garment companies like Nike, Liz Claiborne, Gap, Levi's, etc. These garment factories are known as *maquiladoras*. Due to lax regulations at FTZs, few codes of conduct are enforced, causing laborers and the surrounding environment to suffer. As Prieto, et al. state, "Long hours, forced overtime, lack of basic health and safety conditions, physical violence, denial of social security and employment rights, lack of access to healthcare and maternity rights, and sexual and psychological harassment are among the many forms of abuse that have been documented" (146). The first case is an excellent example of what can go wrong in free trade with no monitoring system or body of oversight to enforce codes of conduct that are already set in place.

The women in the *Maquilapolis* documentary were true victims of a failed promise made by corporations to economies in the romance phase of US-Mexico free trade. Factories emerged on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border, because this location was enticing to companies; it was just a short distance from the United States making it easy to keep an eye on production, while existing outside the jurisdiction of American labor law compliance.

In this documentary, we did not see thriving communities living in newfound financial comfort. We looked into the lives of women who work long hours for little pay, in unhealthy and unsafe labor conditions, women with families that live in illegal homes made from scrap material, women who rarely see their own children, and children who play in streets riddled with

electrical hazards and splash in rivers plagued with toxic waste. As a look into the many types of factories that are leaving their mark in Mexico today, please refer to the following chart:



The second case study I will focus on is women workers' rights organizations in the article "The Potential of Codes as Part of Women's Organization's Strategies for Promoting the Rights of Women Workers: A Central America Perspective", written by Prieto, et al. for Jenkin's book "Corporate Social Responsibility and Labor Rights: Codes of Conduct in the Global Economy." The Central American women perspective's case shows the ways in which workers and advocates are taking monitoring into their own hands and using codes of conduct as a strategic tool to effect change in labor practices in free trade zones.

In the Central American women perspectives article, female labor forces throughout Latin America, in this case Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica organized with help from the Central America Women's Network (CAWN) to help create a labor rights doctrine that pertains to both the Northern and Southern parts of Central America. The goal of this coalition is to build strength in numbers for their cause.

Involving the workers in the code crafting process allows workers to evaluate their treatment, become educated about their rights, and realize the issues that they find to be the most important to them as an employee. According to Sandra Ramos, the Director of the Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC), “For us, codes are...an instrument for raising and highlighting what is contained in our national legislation.’ She adds that in Nicaragua the experience has been very positive, because the Ethical Code placed the issues that concerned women on the public agenda” (Prieto, et al. 152). This shows that grassroots movements mixed with social pressure through media and public exposure of labor violations are vital to code compliance.

The third case study that I will explore is that of Mattel’s effort in the late nineties to incorporate a self-imposed set of labor codes. According to the article written in 2011, “Mattel, Inc.: Global Manufacturing Principles (GMP) – A Life-Cycle Analysis of a Company-Based Code of Conduct in the Toy Industry” the codes were originally adopted to thwart off bad press in the light of other local Chinese manufacturing companies being exposed of exploiting their workforce. “Called the Global Manufacturing Principles (GMP), the code covered such issues as wages and hours, child labor, forced labor, discrimination, freedom of association, legal and ethical business practices, product safety and product quality, protection of the environment, and respect for local cultures, values, and traditions” (Sethi, et al. 483-4). The issue presented in this case is that the lifespan of the Global Manufacturing Principles was only 9 years.

Within Mattel, the codes were received well and gained momentum in the beginning, creating the first half of what the authors call a bell curve of compliance. However, it is noted in the article that the codes faded from regular practice until it eventually died out completely. The speculated reasons behind this was that the top management no longer saw the financial benefits

from GMP compliance, and that the codes were simply too time consuming and labor intensive to sustain; management's focus was on other pressing business matters. To sum up their reasoning, following their own set labor codes was not top priority.

The China Mattel case is an excellent example that "Companies are more likely to respond forcefully, and even take radical action, when they are confronted with an external crisis, which has the potential of adversely impacting their core business operations and a diminution of the corporate reputation" (Sethi, et al. 486). Social pressures are effective, but likely to only produce abrupt, extreme and temporary results.

Analyzing free trade using Blowfield and Frynas' Critical Perspectives theory took me down a rabbit hole of questions pertaining to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in this arena. Without International regulation in trade we have a Wild West situation, where law and order are meaningless and corruption is defined and monitored by the corrupt. Within their article, Blowfield and Frynas define CSR:

(a) that companies have a responsibility for their impact on society and the natural environment, sometimes beyond legal compliance and the liability of individuals; (b) that companies have a responsibility for the behaviour of others with whom they do business (e.g. within supply chains); and (c) that business needs to manage its relationship with wider society, whether for reasons of commercial viability or to add value to society (503).

Blowfield and Frynas argue that too often this definition is ambiguous and up for interpretation when corporations create their own CSR programs and set of codes.

Adding to their critique of CSR in International Development is that frequently, CSR is expected to expand beyond the company's intentions. For example, companies that move into HIV/AIDS plagued communities may be asked to somehow give assistance for that issue. Blowfield and Frynas claim that corporations aim for their programs to be ideologically neutral, so not assisting with humanitarianism, politics, etc. However, that may pose a problem when

including stakeholders outside the company in crafting codes of conduct. They state, “But stakeholder engagement presents particular challenges in a developing-country context where factors such as language, culture, education and pluralistic values can all affect the process of negotiation and decision-making.” (507) Different stakeholders have different interests, which leads me into my next theoretical perspective: Freeman’s stakeholder theory.

Freeman’s stakeholder theory is simple: all stakeholders are equally important in the success of a company. So, while the individual stakeholders can have their own interests, a corporation must seek to please all involved parties to the same degree. Freeman states that customers, suppliers, communities, employees, and financiers must all be happy for a company to thrive; one group of stakeholders cannot exist without the other, thus making each group vital. He states that they cannot live in isolation and their interests must go in the same direction.

On the subject of labor and the employee stakeholder group, “In return for their labor, they expect security, wages, and benefits, and meaningful work. In return for their loyalty, the corporation is expected to provide for them and carry them through difficult times” (Freeman 42). This is a beautiful description of the transaction between employer and employee, yet this mutually beneficial arrangement does not exist in Free Trade Zones. The loyalty is quite one-sided with workers showing incredible dedication, while their company leaves abruptly to avoid taxes or to find cheaper employees. In FTZs, employees are not seen by the corporations as crucial stakeholders that are of key value to the success of the business.

Care and appreciation for the community stakeholder is lacking, as well. Freeman notes, “In return for the provisions of local services, the firm is expected to be a good citizen... The firm cannot expose the community to unreasonable hazards in the form of pollution, toxic waste, and so on” (43). In *Maquilapolis*, it was very clear that the areas around the maquiladoras were

treated like wastelands where companies dumped their toxins without consequence. Free trade operates outside the stakeholder theory, where not all stakeholders must be pleased equally. One could argue that rather than being socially responsible, in the case of the Mexican maquiladoras, the corporations were downright sociopathic.

The key stakeholders in the *Maquilapolis* case were the women who worked in the factories and their families, the people living in *Maquilapolis*, the corporations that moved to Mexico, the Tijuana government, the labor rights organization formed by the workers and their legal representation. The United States government also played a part as our lawmakers craft the trade policy. Additional stakeholders are the stockholders, suppliers, customers, and other financiers.

To support the stance that free trade does more harm than good to developing regions, as was the case in *Maquilapolis*, Perry Grossman states that “trade agreements are created in an undemocratic manner and...economic development increases environmental threats. [Also] problems in the theory of middle-class formation and post material values, suggest that increased inequality, heightened competition, and economic pressures limit environmental protection policies”. This was evident in the ways the manufacturing companies exploited not only the labor force, but the natural resources in the surrounding areas as well.

The first CSR concept that pertains to my topic is equitable development, which is defined by *Nonprofit Quarterly* as “development activity with a triple bottom line, taking into account the interests of the business community and local developers, fairness in the treatment of employees, and sustainability in protecting and enhancing resources (human and others) in responding to an array of social and environmental needs.” I think this is a great notion that needs to be at the heart of free trade. The current free trade practice allows economic justification

for moral deficiency. A country cannot have economic growth when they are being taken advantage of; corporations that come into an area must value the community as in Freeman's stakeholder theory.

The second CSR concept for my cases is the Global Sullivan Principles. In the words of Leon Sullivan, "The objectives of the Global Sullivan Principles are to support economic, social and political justice by companies where they do business; to support human rights and to encourage equal opportunity at all levels of employment, including racial and gender diversity on decision making committees and boards; to train and advance disadvantaged workers for technical, supervisory and management opportunities; and to assist with greater tolerance and understanding among peoples; thereby, helping to improve the quality of life for communities, workers and children with dignity and equality." I believe that if this was the standard for all free trade zone arrangements, then free trade would indeed bring prosperity to developing regions.

Laura Hartman, Bill Shaw and Rodney Steven wrote in their article, "Exploring the Ethics and Economics of Global Labor Standards: A Challenge to Integrated Social Contract Theory," about creating a code, similar to The Global Sullivan Principles, that covers what is considered to be universal basic human rights. They also explore if "market-driven decisions can identify the boundaries of labor rights, or at least assure that market outcomes are compatible with maintaining labor rights (193)." The Integrated Social Contract Theory has the same major pitfall as the Global Sullivan Principles; nobody can enforce and monitor codes besides the corporations, which is not an effective way to regulate labor rights.

However, in the article, "Corporate Social Responsibility. A Critical Review" Eduardo Ibáñez Ruiz Del Portal and Juan Antonio Senent de Frutos argue that Corporate Social Responsibility indeed could be the answer to the lack of labor regulations. They state, "At a

moment when global capitalism is under revision and the environmental and social unsustainability of the current economic system has become evident, CSR could play a role or at least make a proposal to improve not only the visibility of companies, but also the legitimizing of a category of practices that could ultimately be unsustainable. (125). Their ultimate claim is that proper CSR will put a positive spotlight on the company, boosting public opinion, thus increasing profits.

Theoretical Perspective

I am analyzing theories behind neoliberal ideology and practice using Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, and critiques of neoliberalism will be through Marxist theory and critical analyses of capitalism by David Harvey. My intention is to present the arguments for and against free trade, and to support my own belief that capitalism cannot be compassionate.

In addition to this, the role of corporations in social responsibility and environmental sustainability in Free Trade Zones will be explored using Blowfield and Frynas' Critical Perspectives theory of Corporate Social Responsibility and R. Edward Freeman's Stakeholder theory. These theories will be used to identify issues within CSR and monitoring, and to propose possible solutions.

Methodology

I will be using mixed methodology in my research to present the case studies and examples of moral dilemmas that exist in free trade practices. Since I do not have the ability to interview laborers in the Global South, my research findings will rely heavily on literature on the topic. I will use perspective comparison and theory analysis to explore different viewpoints on free trade, capitalism, and corporate social responsibility.

Findings/ Analysis

I have identified some flaws in the current monitoring systems within free trade. The first issue is the lack of clarity in what should be regulated and the lack of official bodies set up to monitor regulations and codes of conduct. Secondly, corporations often self-regulate their own standards, which is much like a restaurant running their own health inspections; there lies a major conflict of interest. Another key problem with monitoring is that social monitoring is effective, but not permanent and companies will only be as socially responsible as necessary to continue operating without consumer backlash.

The missing voice in free trade is from the workers in the Global South that are subject to the changing tides of neoliberal practices. These individuals are hopeful and hardworking, yet they are the most ill-treated humans on the planet due to capitalist greed. Workers' rights organizations, monitoring groups, legal representatives, and NGOs are working towards a solution to the social and environmental problems that exist within FTZs. However, we can only hope for legitimate regulations and monitoring systems.

Currently, corporations primarily self-monitor through CSR, and do so to avoid consumer backlash. Consumer backlash is an effective tool for getting companies to follow fair practices, but the problem with this is that consumers do not regulate constantly and thoroughly. It may only be a matter of time before the public again turns a blind eye and the organization resumes exploiting its labor force and/or the environment from which it benefits. Proper regulations and an international oversight organization are the best means for countries to work side-by-side with corporations to create a mutually beneficial development plan.

Free Trade Zones can have a positive impact on the economy, but for the economy to develop equitably corporations must have a sense of moral obligation to improve communities, and governments must hold companies accountable. My recommendation would be for the international community to require transnational corporations to follow the Global Sullivan Principles, and Freeman's stakeholder theory-based codes of conduct. It would also be wise to create a global monitoring force, because free trade without regulations and sufficient monitoring will lead to exploitation.

Conclusion

Reminiscing the past, the women in *Maquilapolis* recalled fondly the days when they swam in their local waterways. Now their bodies are scarred from rashes caused by chemical waste in the air and rivers. At no point was economic prosperity evident in this community; these mothers could barely afford groceries for their children on their meager salaries. Perhaps, there may have been some economic development, but at what cost?

What we witness through the experience of these women is how corporations can take advantage of people and the environment when given the political license to do so. Which brings up some key issues in free trade and monitoring: Can there be compassion within capitalism? Who defines the terms of compassion? Can corporations be held to such human ethical standards? Can corporations have a sense of *responsibility* to a community? With proper monitoring, can free trade lead to true, long term economic improvement?

Through my analysis of capitalism, I do not believe that it can coexist with compassion. Monetary gain and human/environmental well-being will always clash if profits can be made by cutting corners on safety and human kindness. Additionally, when corporations outsource their

labor, they create an out-of-sight-out-of-mind operating system. The neoliberal economic system has resulted in a global capitalist culture that encourages putting profits over people.

Corporations are driven by the sole purpose to make money, therefore I do not believe that corporations can feel a sense of responsibility to the community nor have compassion. It is a trend for companies to have CSR departments, but unfortunately many of these departments are more of a marketing angle than an actual function.

I am proposing that the only way to ensure true economic growth and sustainable development is to regulate “free” trade through monitoring by an independent international regulatory body. I understand that goes against the concept of free trade and neoliberalism by definition, but we must stop corporations from being the deciding power of how, when, and why regions can flourish or fall into ruin.

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