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Minding their own business? Firms and activists in the making of private labour regulation

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Acknowledgements

[Ring] [Ring]

“Hello? This is Luc speaking.”

“Luc, hi, it’s me. Can I ask you a quick question? You’re studying Corporate Responsibility for clothing production right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“OK, it’s like this: I’m with my boyfriend in the Kalverstraat, and he needs new jeans and I want it to be ethically produced, you know, no labour abuse, no child labour. At what shop should we buy it?”

“Ermm... geeze. It’s not that I can give you a list of shops where I can guarantee you ethically produced clothes. I can give you some hints though of companies that are doing a lot. Company X for instance, or Company Y.

“Is Company Z also among them? That would really be helpful because we already found a nice pair in their shop. I don’t like Company Y and I don’t think we will find anything his size at Company X.”

“No, Company Z is not among them. I wouldn’t say that their approach is state of the art.”

“Well... can you maybe say that there is...well, something positive about their activities anyway? We don’t have all day for shopping you know...”

[sigh] “If you put it like that...No, Company Z is not the worst of the worst in terms of Corporate Responsibility policy.”

“Thanks, that’s all we needed to hear. We’ll buy their jeans then. Bye bye.”

[Click]

Over the past years this research endeavour has benefited from the encouragement I received from a large group of people taking an interest in its topic and in me as a person. I have often rejoiced over the fact that Corporate Social Responsibility provokes so many different responses in discussion: curiosity, enthusiasm, aggravation, skepticism. This has decidedly inspired me to define and answer the research questions that form the basis of this study. Five years after starting my research I want to thank here the people who I most vividly remember to have made a major contribution to the successful finishing of my PhD trajectory.

I became academically interested in globalization, governance and Global Justice issues during my undergraduate studies through the teaching of Gerd Junne and Jos de Beus at the University of Amsterdam and of Ronen Palan and Kees van der Pijl at the University of Sussex.

After finishing my MA thesis, notably Gerd and Brian Burgoon encouraged me to think about developing a PhD research plan.

Gerd subsequently acted as supervisor to this thesis after I was fortunate enough to obtain a position as AiO at the Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR). I thank him very much for his substantial advice and help, his generosity, constant encouragement and countless hints for references. As an observant reader, a quick communicator and a nice person he has always managed to boost faith in my endeavours.

Brian Burgoon acted as co-promotor. His impact on this study is most visible in the sections that deal with statistics, since his help with the design, execution and report of the business survey has been substantial. But equally important have been his comments on how to fine tune the overall argument, always bear in mind the focus of the study and sharpen the language. Most thankful I am however for his kindness and great sense of humour.

Jan Willem Duyvendak I thank for his very useful comments as the institutionally required third reader to my first ASSR progress papers. With the benefit of some distance to the topic he was able to raise some challenging issues to my work.

I have been lucky to develop my research in different corners of the world. Out “there” I received help from many people. I thank Adrienne Héritier for arranging such a luxurious kick off of my PhD trajectory as a visitor at the European University Institute in Florence. At later stages in the research I profited from the insights of Benjamin Cashore, Graeme Auld and Conny McDermott as a visiting researcher at the Forestry School of Yale University. My research trip to China would not have been successful without the help of Kaying Lau and Oscar Berger. Daniel Muegge was a gracious host during my London field studies. And Cristina Balboa and old ASSR buddy Damian Raess were invaluable during my stay on the American East Coast.

During these travels I was present at seminars, conferences, sourcing fairs and I visited offices of firms, non-governmental organizations and government agencies. I am thankful to all representatives of these organizations who were willing to act as respondent or otherwise assist me in collecting data for this research.

My research also benefited from course work done over the years. I thank Annette Freyberg, Bernhard Kittel and Dick Houtman for their advice within the ASSR Methodology and Theory courses; Jelle Visser for offering a concise introduction to the Institutions literature; Diane Stone for her course on Non-Governmental Politics; and Jan Aart Scholte and Morten Ougaard for their comments on my theoretical framework within the GARNET Business Governance Workshop.

Outside of the ASSR and the educational framework I have also been inspired by a number of scholars: Jeroen Merk, whom I was very lucky to rely on as a constant source of ideas, motivation, critique and practical assistance and whose influence on this work cannot be

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The Political Economy PhD club of the ASSR was usually the first place where I presented work in progress. Comments were always useful and I learned a lot from the work of others as well. The list of people that have inspired me is too large to mention here, but I take the liberty of mentioning in particular VU-comrades Laura Horn and James Perry for their generosity.

Beyond the Club, I have been inspired and motivated by many friendly colleagues in the School. Whether during seminars, workshops, drinks, lunches or chance meetings in the hallway, the ASSR was always a warm place for me largely due to Jasper, Corina, Sjoukje, Hester, Katharina, Eelke, Michiel, Alex, Victor, Mihai, Mafe, Malini, Tjerk Jan, Mara...and many others.

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During my research I was teacher of an MA-course on Corporate Social Responsibility and I want to thank students of this course for their inspiration and suggestions. I furthermore thank Robin van Wechem for her assistance in collecting data on European clothing and retail firms for this study.

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Daar aan de boorden van de Waal, ligt de oude Keizerstad. I feel honoured to have known Joost, Marijn and Jasper for over thirteen years now. In the last couple of years, as in many before, talking about and enjoying life, football and music with them has been a great pleasure.

The last phase of my PhD trajectory was a bumpy ride because of health problems. It was then that I felt most the support from my family: the concerns and the help of my brother and sister and the constant comfort and support offered by our parents. I thank all of them very very much.

From start to finish of this research, my favourite person has been and is Marleen Termeer. I thank her for standing by me, supporting me, occasionally offering practical advice and help, and very often providing the much needed distractions. Now that mine is finished, I wish her all the best of luck with her recently started PhD research!

During this research period, my grandmother Riek Siebum-Ter Bogt passed away. As a young girl she worked in the ateliers of the the East Dutch clothing industry. To relieve boredom while sewing, she and her colleagues would teach each other songs. Because of this, she was later able to humour her grandchildren by showing she had a fitting song for almost every occasion in life. This dissertation is dedicated to her loving memory.

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