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[What is This?](#)



Michael L. Barnett and Timothy G. Pollock, eds.: *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Reputation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012. 512 pages. \$150.00, cloth.

This volume sets out to consolidate recent research on corporate reputation. Barnett and Pollock convened some of the leading lights on the subject, as well as representatives of closely related concepts such as social status, organizational identity and image, legitimacy, and institutional theory. A mix of theoretical and empirical chapters is loosely arranged into four sections on these topics: What is corporate reputation? What isn't it? What is its importance? and How should it be managed? Chapters are accessible, and each ends with a table listing key papers, so the book should serve as a useful introduction for Ph.D. students, as well as a reference for seasoned scholars interested in reviewing the current debates.

One potential challenge for a volume on corporate reputation research is grappling with the diversity of social science disciplines and epistemologies involved. So I was happy to find several early pieces taking on this challenge, including chapter 2, by Rindova and Martins, and chapter 5, by Fombrun. These pieces offer useful integration across the diverse foundations and point out key intersections and tensions. Other chapters in the first two sections of the book focus on clarifying various aspects of the core construct of corporate reputation and parsing distinctions between it and kindred social-approval constructs—see chapters 7 and 8 on social status, 9 on identity and image, and 10 on stigma. Daunting measurement issues are also inventoried. Some thorny issues are laced through these papers, including this perennial stumper: Should an organization's reputation be viewed holistically, perhaps along with facets that contribute to the whole? Or is it better to think of reputation in a more specific way—specific to issues such as environmentalism (chapter 4) or labor and employment practices (chapter 17), and/or specific to organizational stakeholders such as investors (chapter 18) or consumers? The current trend is toward more specificity.

As someone who studies social movements and contentious change processes, I was drawn to chapters linking corporate reputations to wider societal interests and actors. For example, can reputational concerns substitute for industry regulation, disciplining companies to follow societal norms (see chapters 13 through 18)? Two of those chapters extend the focus from individual firms to whole industries, including Yue and Ingram's study on the reputational "commons" problem in chapter 14. Also related, chapter 4, by Kennedy, Chok, and Liu, provides an intriguing account of how, as corporations respond to societal critics, they can shape the criteria for corporate reputation in ways that benefit them. Of course, corporate reputations can also be potent weapons in the hands of social activists, and it seems there is ample room for further

integration of insights from corporate reputation with the growing organizational literature on social activism (see Soule, 2009).

The issue of globalization also enters this body of research. Two thought-provoking contributions link corporate reputation to nation-states. Newbury (chapter 12) makes a case for linking “country of origin” studies to corporate reputation, opening up an interesting and relatively underdeveloped domain. Brammer and Jackson (chapter 15) provide a complementary view on countries’ regulatory institutions as contexts for the definition, formation, and management of reputation. This latter contribution, drawing on the “varieties of capitalism” tradition, offers an antidote to an otherwise largely Anglo-centric view of the globalization of reputation research—i.e., export theory and methods forged in North America. Going a step further, I wonder if reputation theories that are informed by Asian or other cultures would take a different shape.

The last section is on managing corporate reputation. Of special note here is chapter 19, in which Petkova offers a handy reputation-building primer for startups that is an effective bridge from theory to practice. There are also engaging case studies on Novo Nordisk (chapter 21, with links to branding issues) and Apple (chapter 23).

So how does reputation research advance from here? At first blush, the editors’ future research suggestions—construct validity, micro-foundations, levels of analysis, temporality/dynamism, and process studies—seem generic to any maturing area of organization studies. Yet the volume invites basic progress on many fronts by laying out a series of unresolved—but fundamental—disputes: Is corporate reputation general or specific? Is it affective or cognitive? How does it relate to other social-approval concepts? Can it be measured separately from antecedents and consequences? How does it relate to the reputations of individuals (e.g., CEOs) or contexts (e.g., industries or nation-states)? The list goes on.

All in all, Barnett and Pollock succeed in pulling together a wide-ranging literature and making it more systematic and accessible. Rather than forging new paths, the chapters deepen, clarify, and extend existing paths. Sure, I missed a few salient topics—like the increasingly important role of reputational rating-and-ranking intermediaries that are shaping organizational fields and markets (e.g., Sauder, 2008) and the implications of rising ambiguity in the boundaries of corporations themselves. Nonetheless, I suspect this volume will become an essential reference for those interested or invested in the subject of corporate reputation.

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