Structural limits to sustainable development: managers and progressive agency

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Abstract: The ‘contradiction’ inherent in sustainable development has produced a discursive struggle between two paradigms. The ‘business case’ for sustainable development frames the concept as a narrative of eco-modernism that fails to contest the structural bases of unsustainability. The competing radical discourse constructs sustainable development as having emancipatory power to produce a more ecologically rational and socially just metanarrative, challenging the dominant model of economic rationality. Investigations in the area of innovation and sustainable development need to take account of this contestation that revolves around institutional and structural limits that have become normalised to the extent that they sometimes escape examination. This has implications for the awareness, education and level of agency of managers in capitalist organisations. A research inquiry conducted in New Zealand revealed that the ‘business case’ represented the major discursive formation around sustainable development, chiefly promoted by a coalition of government and business interests, although this model and the radical paradigm were both contested by neo-liberal groups. Corporate managers conceived the ‘business case’ as their chief means of exercising agency to negotiate the meaning of sustainable development in the workplace; although the research discourse opened up a conceptual space where counter-hegemonic positions addressing the structural limits to sustainable development and the limitations to the ‘business case’ began to emerge.

Keywords: sustainable development; deliberative democracy; corporate interview; eco-efficiency; counter-hegemony; actor agency.


Biographical notes: Dr Delyse Springett is the Director of the Centre for Business and Sustainable Development at Massey University, New Zealand. She has an interest in applying concepts from critical theory and Foucauldian theory to the business discourse of sustainable development; and in exploring issues of progressive agency with actors working within the business context as a means of opening up an emancipatory discourse of sustainable development.
1 Introduction

… it takes a lot of things to change the world:
Anger and tenacity. Science and imagination,
The quick initiative, the long reflection,
The cold patience and the infinite perseverance,
The understanding of the particular case and the understanding of the
ensemble:
Only the lessons of reality can teach us to transform reality.

Bertolt Brecht: Einverständnis.

The investigation drawn upon for this paper arose from an ongoing programme of
research on business and sustainable development framed in the critical theory (CT) of
the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979; Horkheimer, 1947; Marcuse,
1964) and employing concepts from Foucauldian theory and other non-totalising
readings. The literature on business, sustainable development and innovation has, until
quite recently, lacked a critical perspective (Welford, 1998), even though critical
approaches to management have significantly strengthened the business discourse
(Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 1996). However, a new
theoretical conversation was emerging, to which the researcher aspired to contribute, that
presented a critical discourse of ‘green business’ (see, for example, Hajer, 1997; Levy,
1997; Newton and Harte, 1997). Such a theorisation called for a construction of
sustainable development that was problematic and open to contestation: not a discourse
of environment and conservation and growing ‘ecocracy’, but one of social crisis and
human agency within which business would also have a role as stakeholder.

The theorisation included a critical examination of the ways in which the concept of
sustainable development has been framed at international fora1 and in the literature,
providing a context for examining conceptions of sustainable development held by senior
corporate managers and key informants from the business context in New Zealand.
In particular, it set out to examine the extent to which the ‘business case’ for sustainable
development, based upon eco-efficiency measures, has been substituted for the radical
discourse that calls for innovation at structural and institutional level, thereby
normalising market economics as being fundamental to sustainability. The investigation
set out to explore whether managers who act within the structures of the dominant
business paradigm subscribe to that eco-efficiency model, or reflect on the wider societal
problems of unsustainability. This also called for an exploration of the extent to which
managers believe they might exercise agency to promote a corporate shift to sustainable
development as part of a more genuinely participatory and deliberative society.

Concerns arising from the New Zealand context were based on the perception that the
discourse of sustainable development was underdeveloped and little was being done to
introduce it into the public domain. No New Zealand Sustainable Development Strategy
had been produced for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, 2002),
and the public discourse that was anticipated is still awaited.2 However, since the United
Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992), the semantics
and rhetoric of the corporate debate on sustainable development had been adopted in
some areas of business and its context in New Zealand in what presented as a constrained
and constraining manner. A discursive formation3 had emerged that promoted
‘sustainable development’ as ‘greener’ and more eco-efficient ways of carrying out
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‘better-business-as-usual’. This represented a narrative of management that signalled the danger of ‘gate-keepers’4 dominating and framing the discourse (Eder, 1996), exercising power to control both decision-making and ‘non-decision-making’ (Lukes, 1974). It reflected allegations in the literature that the ‘business’ interest in sustainable development represents little more than the economic capture of the concept (Beder, 1996; Mayhew, 1997; Rowell, 1996; Welford, 1997), and the parallel view that government interests may work to subvert a concept that imposes environmental limits on primary economic goals, or even construct ‘sustainable development’ as a means of promoting government’s own agendas (Munton, 1997). It appeared to signal “processes of competition between collectively mobilised agents who struggle to impose their interpretation on the situation, and to dominate the social rules affecting environmental decision-making”, (O’Mahoney and Skillington, 1996, p.46). It seemed a Habermasian ‘technocratic élite’ (Bernstein, 1985) might be seizing the embryonic debate to control its content and its silences.

Such hegemony promised to safeguard the structural limits to sustainability, offering little challenge to the dominant paradigm of capitalist production and consumption and threatened to impede innovative strategies that would help to realise the principles of sustainable development. It contested the construction supported in this paper of sustainable development as a ‘democratic principle’ requiring the political involvement of all stakeholders (Jacobs, 1991), including business, and calling for a society based on participatory democracy (Dryzek, 2000). The hegemonic5 control over the discourse would make it difficult for the public to understand the institutional arrangements and instruments that were constructing and constraining it (Lukes, 1974), or even to recognise that such a discourse was taking place. At the same time, comments emerged from members of this group that the ‘public’ found it difficult to comprehend sustainable development,6 providing a reason to employ the simplistic language of ‘the business case’ for sustainable development. It appeared that ‘political sustainability’ (Levy, 1997) was being promoted in order to maintain the status quo rather than promote change. A key focus of the investigation was to examine the extent to which this discourse was being adopted by corporate managers. This took into account the perspective emerging in the literature (Hajer, 1997; Levy, 1997, following Foucault) that, through the productive and constitutive power of discourse, the ‘business case’ might itself provide a catalyst for a more discursive problematisation of sustainable development in the longer term. However, a central concern was that a hierarchical and exclusive coalition, an ‘inner circle’ representing largely traditional interests of government and business, would work to inhibit discursivity rather than expand the discourse of sustainable development to foster democratic participation or to develop the ‘truth-making’ that is at the heart of the concept (Gerber, 1997).

These concerns indicated that a theoretical contextualisation of the research inquiry was required that would expose who held power over decision-making about business and sustainable development in New Zealand and make it possible to explore the structural limits to sustainable development and issues of ‘agency’ with corporate managers and others located within the dominant paradigm. This required sensitivity in a research inquiry wherein ‘sustainable development’ was conceived as having the potential to develop the consensual premises of ‘communicative action’ (Habermas, 1972); and where a major goal was to explore the emancipatory aspects of the discourse of sustainable development.
2 The theoretical framework

The focus of the inquiry was not the managerial ‘what?’ and ‘how?’ of the corporate shift to sustainable development, although these have importance, but the ideological conceptions held about the concept and the narratives these construct. It is maintained here that the discourse of ‘green business’ that has emerged since UNCED (1992) largely reinforces the counter-claim that sustainable development is itself a construct of the eco-modernist, positivist paradigm (Escobar, 1996; Sunderlin, 1995), built around the contradiction which the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) promoted. This perspective critiques sustainable development as a vehicle for ‘political sustainability’ built upon modernity, utilitarianism, scientism and a Weberian paradigm of management (Sunderlin, 1995). A theorisation was therefore sought that would promote the examination of issues of asymmetry of power over the concept of sustainable development and open up questions of emancipation and democracy. The central struggle that characterises the concept influenced the decision to position the inquiry within a dialectical process employing concepts from (CT) and drawing upon neo-Marxist theory, while remaining aware of the innate conflicts such a theorisation presents for an inquiry focused on ‘nature’. Since there is no single way of constructing society’s social relationship with nature (Demirović, 1994), and in order to avoid a totalising stance, the theoretical framework also drew upon the broader ‘critical’ tradition, including the Foucauldian theory. This meant that the narrative of ‘green business orthodoxy’ that contributes to ‘political sustainability’ (Levy, 1997), despite its fundamental support for the status quo, could also be examined for its potentially constitutive power for change (Foucault, 1977; Hajer, 1997; Levy, 1997).

The theorisation focuses upon the contestation between the radical construction of sustainable development and the eco-modernist construction. The radical construction conceives of sustainable development as having the potential to contribute to an alternative metatheory that questions institutional legitimacy and envisions a different world order from one scripted for the domination, injustice and environmental destruction that characterises the dominant paradigm. This provided the epistemological starting point for the inquiry: the interest was in the capacity of the radical construct of sustainable development to illuminate a metatheory for natural and social emancipation and ‘a socially just, equitable and ecologically rational society’ (O’Connor, 1998, p.256). Such a construction envisions sustainable development as part of the deliberative turn to a more discursive theory of democracy (Dryzek, 2000), contributing to a more inclusive theory of ‘the good life’ built upon considerations of environment, social equity and ethical issues. This called for a ‘polyphonic’ research narrative (Bakhtin, 1981), allowing for the dialogue, diversity and contestation that emerges from a process of dialectical discourse and the potential for change that such discourse releases.

The theoretical alignment with a ‘political radical’ position raised complications for empirical research with managers in capitalist corporations, where the avoidance of a ‘totalising’ stance was important. However, the theoretical choices made are defended on the basis that research with actors located deep in the dominant paradigm calls for the Frankfurt School’s distinction between ‘enlightening and emancipating’ reason versus ‘instrumental’ reason (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). It provided a critique of the technocratic thinking that is dominant in industry and administration and a chief barrier to emancipatory and innovative thinking about sustainable development. It also raised the theme of ‘actor agency’ that became a focus of the inquiry. Horkheimer’s theory of
the rational individual versus the irrational society (1947) was key to empirical research with actors in corporations and the broader business and administrative context. This focus on actor agency also drew upon Foucault’s theory of taking responsibility for self-identity (Foucault, 1984), including a degree of Pyrrhonian scepticism that critiques and questions the taken-for-granted. The interest in how individuals shape or construct their own subjectivity and identity, shaping their conduct in the world in such a way as to make them relatively autonomous of the processes of ‘normalisation’, assumed increasing importance in the research. The research process was designed to allow participants to find agency and space to negotiate the meaning of sustainable development. This brought to the research the perspective that the discourse of sustainable development ultimately rests upon individuals and their relationships to nature and other people, as theories of education for sustainability maintain.12

The different constructions of sustainable development arising from the literature provided the basis of a research matrix that drove the investigation, and shaped the ‘weak–strong’ heuristic that was employed in framing the interview schedule and in analysing the evidence. ‘Weak–strong’ dimensions of sustainable development have been teased out before (Bebbington and Thomson, 1996; Daly and Cobb, 1989; O’Riordan, 1993; Turner, 1993) and underline the profound implications of sustainable development for innovation in the economy and in business. Neumayer (1999), for example, interprets weak sustainability as an extension to neoclassical welfare economics that produces a ‘substitutability paradigm’; whereas strong sustainability calls for natural capital to be preserved in addition to the total aggregate capital stock, or a ‘non-substitutability paradigm’. The ‘weak–strong’ heuristic employed here differs from this, in that the underpinning matrix was based upon 20 selected criteria taken from the conceptual framework of the research which were not all based directly on the concept of natural capital. These were capitalism, consumption, democracy, discourse, domination, eco-efficiency, ecological sustainability, economic growth, emancipation, equity, futurity, globalisation, hegemony, ideology, management, need, policy-making, poverty, power and values (presented alphabetically, not in terms of priority). This weak–strong heuristic contrasts the two key political positions that arise from the Brundtland Report’s attempt to create ‘semantic reconciliation’ of the irreconcilable ideologies of ecological transformation and economic growth (Paehlke, 1999). It contrasts ‘strong’ sustainable development with the ‘politically sustainable’ paradigm of eco-modernism or ‘the business case’ that is built upon ‘weak’ sustainable development. The ‘strong’ perspective highlights institutional, social, environmental and economic imperatives for change. The ‘weak’ pole emerges as the construct of the capitalist business paradigm, powerful in its hegemony over the radical narrative, and admitting no ‘contradiction’ within the conception of the business case (Table 1).

The dichotomy exposed is that sustainable development may be construed either as a ‘product’ of the capitalist model of production and consumption, constructed to make these practices seem more benign; or as an emancipatory construct that contests that model. ‘Strong’ sustainable development calls for the revolutionisation of capitalist institutions that are ‘the structural determinants of ecological problems’ (Gimenez, 2000, p.196); and underlines the emancipatory potential of the construct to produce other visions. These include formations of ‘eco-socialism’, or even a re-formation of capitalism – ‘sustainable capitalism’ – based on a shift from industrial to ecological Marxism (Burkett, 1999; O’Connor, 1994; O’Connor, 1994, 1998). This reconstructs the sustainable development debate as an ideological and openly political discourse, whereas
it has, hitherto, been chiefly conducted as though it was only an ecological and economic question (O’Connor, 1998, p.254).

Table 1  

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<th>‘Weak’ sustainable development</th>
<th>‘Strong’ sustainable development</th>
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<td>Functional, mainstream positions – maintaining the status quo</td>
<td>Progressive positions seeking emancipation and change</td>
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<td>Sustainable ‘growth’</td>
<td>Sustainable development</td>
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<td>The narrative of ‘management’</td>
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3  Methods

The theorisation influenced the sampling strategies for the empirical research and shaped the ways in which the evidence was sought and interpreted (Sayer, 1984). The open-ended ‘corporate interview’ was employed as the major evidentiary strategy, providing a tool that can be sensitive to institutional and strategic complexity but that can also be used to challenge the economic and social status quo and the way business is carried out. It calls for sensitive ways of understanding reified and evolving corporate views (Schoenberger, 1991). The unstandardised format and open-ended questions employed assisted in teasing out the understanding of complex and ongoing processes within organisations, recognising that companies and managers are institutional agents ‘embedded in a complex network of internal and external relationships’ (Schoenberger, 1991, p.181). The interviews were employed as more than data-collection tools: they represented ‘social situations’ and provided ‘the scene of a conversation’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) where the goal was a collaborative, discursive dialogue that ‘engaged’ participants in the research problem. The researcher role aspired to was that of Gramsci’s ‘organic intellectual’, an emancipatory role with the capacity to become actively involved in practical life (Gramsci, 1971).

Two main samples were constructed for the research, one comprising middle to senior corporate managers, including CEOs; the other representing a cross-section of people in senior positions in the broader context of business who were formally engaged in developing and promulgating policies for and conceptions of sustainable development, or noted for their interest and influence in the area of sustainable development in other ways, as well as members of the conservative business lobby that generally did not support the concept (Appendix 1). This group was secondary to the managers’ group, but important in terms of how issues of sustainable development are contextualised in New Zealand, and made it possible to look for influences that flowed between organisations and companies.

The ‘critical’ nature of the investigation and the focus on actor agency called for two key qualities if the evidence gained from corporate managers was to transcend a superficial level. One was a level of understanding between researcher and participants, and between participants themselves, that created a rich context where people might be persuaded to explore and re-explore their conceptions of sustainable development.
It required something akin to the ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas, 1972), based on equal relationships from which a level of reflexivity – for researcher and researched – might emerge. This takes time to develop and is unlikely to arise from questionnaires or interviews with large, statistically representative samples, where contact between researcher and participants is limited and that between participants non-existent. In this inquiry, the researcher and the corporate focus group members had worked together previously; they had a ‘history’ and could build upon knowledge of and a relationship with each other. There was no constraint, even initially, to work at a superficial level. Group norms and mores were understood by the researcher – there was no pretence of starting with a tabula rasa – and a more discursive and dialogic interchange developed quickly through the prior communicative and social skills that had been built up. The sample was not statistically representative, then it was the focus of a small, intensive study where the goals pursued arose to some extent from the process of engagement with a group of people sharing similarities and exhibiting some differences (Appendix 2). This ‘unrepresentative conjuncture’ (Sayer, 1984) ultimately revealed more about general processes and structures within corporate settings than a more extensive study with a broader population may have done. A level of reflexivity surfaced quite quickly and emergent themes were built into the research process. Familiarity meant that there was little compunction in the group about expressing any ‘resistance’ to the research paradigm itself; and counter questions, dissonances and disputation were not repressed as ‘dissonance’ replaced ‘harmony’ (Sayer, 1984). For example, this occurred as personally held views were shaken and as dissonance was recognised between workplace conceptions and practices and those of participants. This fed into the discursivity of the research process, enriching the story. It allowed the space to emerge whereby issues associated with the structural limits within which the participants operated and their own levels of ‘agency’ within these limits could be safely introduced. There were 16 companies and 10 industry sectors represented in the core focus group, with up to 20 participants at group meetings, including the core group and colleagues they sometimes brought with them.

The second quality sought was that the process should be dynamic, with the evolving story-in-process emerging from the ‘natural performative contexts’ of the participants (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1997). This was achieved in several ways. Group interviews were hosted in turn by members of the group within their own companies, where the ‘host’ was on home ground, and the ‘guests’ were also on familiar territory and in a natural linguistic context. The researcher, as ‘participant–observer’, was also familiar with the settings from paying regular visits to the companies for earlier research; while the change of context between meetings prevented contextual ‘rules’ or norms from developing. Three full-day ‘workshops’ were held over the period of a year, with the ‘corporate interview’ forming the essential focus of an agenda for the day that also included presentations from the participants about aspects of their own in-house programs. The group interviews were supplemented with individual interviews with participants from the group as well as some corporate managers not involved in the group in order to provide a level of ‘control’.

Questions in the interview schedule were grouped within four main categories, although these merged into each other. Questions were addressed in a spiral manner and referred back to when a question had initially failed to elicit discussion, or when ‘readiness’ emerged later in the process. There were four main categories of questions, two of which are addressed here. The first explored individual conceptions of sustainable
development, seeking to uncover how these had been framed and what the dominant influences on these constructions had been and introduced the theme of actor agency. Another set of questions introduced a more overtly ‘political’ theme that invited reflection on the dominant growth paradigm of the capitalist model and its possible influence over the agenda of sustainable development, and also raised issues of actor agency. Questions were framed to unearth whether participants could identify issues that were not up for debate or discussion – the ‘silences’ in the discourse of sustainable development. Another aspect of the interviews that needed to be treated with sensitivity was the language employed, so that issues were couched in a language that all shared; although some of the language of the theoretical framework was gradually introduced, thus avoiding the assumption that research participants would not be able to ‘understand’ the language of the research.

The corporate interview itself appeared to create a conceptual space wherein it was safe to consider alternative, even counter-hegemonic positions and to make connections between personally held beliefs and corporate behaviour; and even, to some extent, to reflect on ‘identity’ issues, although this caused some tensions and personal conflict. Some of the ‘silences’ of the sustainable development debate started to surface, and the research explorations became extended as emergent themes were addressed. In the focus group meetings, managers attempted to assess their own and their company’s stance on the ‘weak–strong’ continuum, making this a tool that all engaged in the research could use. Some exploration emerged here of the relationship between the growth paradigm and sustainability issues, of the exercise of power in organisations and how this might influence the shift to sustainable development and of the potential for the participants’ roles as agents of change.

4 Interpreting the results

4.1 Legitimising ‘the business case’

After they’ve been told for a while, stories can turn into politics, into our institutions, and it is important that they seem just the way things are, and the way they have to go on being.


The discourse that emerged from the corporate interviews with managers and key informants from the business context revealed that, in general, people subscribed to the business logic of the ‘business case for sustainable development’, echoing the major discourse being promoted in New Zealand. However, contestation emerged within the dominant business paradigm. Two business groups with vested interests in controlling the narrative had publicly adopted opposing stances. The ‘green knights’ of eco-efficiency, who were associated with the ‘inner circle’ promoting the business case, were contested by the mainstream conservative business lobby who would hobble the discourse of sustainable development and of the business case. It was a ‘struggle’ essentially positioned within the dominant business paradigm, since neither group conceived of structural change to that paradigm. It did, however, signify the threat that sustainable development poses for the structural and institutional basis of capitalist business. Any reframing of the orthodox model to accommodate sustainable development was opposed, suggesting that some members of the conservative lobby
were not unaware of the possible constitutive role of the green orthodoxy discourse, and that they were prepared to take no chances. Contestation pivoted on the extent to which companies should conduct ‘business-as-usual-with-a-heart’, since both camps suppressed the radical social/eco-justice agenda. The neoliberal lobby set about creating ‘confusion’ around the discourse with accusations of lack of clarity in definitions of sustainable development and claims of its being redundant. They called for the complex principles of sustainable development to be encapsulated in a ‘tight’ definition, the Brundtland definition being dismissed as ‘hopelessly problematical’ (NZBR); while pejorative accounts employed the semiotic device of ‘ridicule’. The sustainable development discourse was dismissed as promoting ‘the industry of Armageddon’ (BusNZ) and ‘the new religion of the millenium’ (BusNZ), with its language deemed ‘slippery, if not downright dangerous’ (NZBR). This semantic means of protecting the status quo was supplemented with claims that business already supported sustainability, characterised as passing on to future generations ‘our current capital stock, level of technology and those things that make for a better quality of life for them in material and environmental terms’ (NZBR). What was to be preserved was the ‘rationality’ of the capitalist means of production and consumption, ignoring the irrationality of environmental externalities created through that model. The contestation underlined the strength of the neo-liberal adherence to the dominant business model, but also signalled why government may not have adopted a stronger stance; and it possibly signifies the structural relationship between the administrative state and business.

For the corporate managers, it was the business case of eco-efficiency that was best understood as representing sustainable development. One problem was that the complex and holistic concept of sustainable development was frequently confused with the more resource-oriented one of ‘sustainable management’ which constrains the concept within the safer, more controllable confines of the maneggiare paradigm.15 The New Zealand Resource Management Act (RMA, 1991) had entrenched ‘sustainable management’ at the heart of the New Zealand discourse. A degree of legerdemain on the part of powerful business interests had resulted in this semantic switch,16 arrogating to management the power to determine how the environment was to be controlled and by whom (Levy, 1997); and encouraging companies to rely on ‘compliance’ as a claim to being ‘sustainable’. This feature of the Act was questioned by managers:

“New Zealand in the mid-90s seemed to go through a bit of debate on ‘sustainable development’ versus the RMA wording of ‘sustainable management’ … Are we talking semantics … or is there something fundamentally different from the RMA structure?” (Manufacturing).

The rhetoric of eco-modernism (e.g. ‘win-win-win’; ‘triple bottom line’) was rife in the group interviews, although corporate managers repeatedly stated that, substantively, they and their companies [had] never really given it [sustainable development] a lot of thought’, (Water Utility). Even in companies that had joined the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development (NZBCSD), the concept was not seen as central to organisational discourse: the focus was on liability and compliance under the RMA, risk avoidance and mitigation, safety, health and business survival, all supporting the structural basis of the dominant business model. Managers had not engaged in discussion about or problematised the construct; and there seemed to be a risk of companies that embraced the ‘business case’ endorsing something that they had not thought through, possibly because it appeared to pose no real threat to the dominant business model.
The ‘business case’ was being promoted by some of those driving it in New Zealand as though it ‘challenged’ the orthodox business paradigm; but it appeared that neither the ‘business case’ nor sustainable development had been rigorously appraised:

“… it’s nice to have a word that brings all the bits together, and I can’t think of a better word than sustainability (sic) … I mean, I haven’t sat down and thought about it too hard” (Water Utility, member of the NZBCSD).

Others confirmed this anomaly that, while they and their companies nominally subscribed to the principles of ‘sustainable development’, it did not feature significantly in their planning processes and business agenda. They did not have company meetings about it or discuss it with shareholders: ‘so it’s not something that … is the driving force of any organisation, but it’s certainly a dimension … of business’, (Electricity Utility). For many of the managers, even eco-efficiency measures were not conceived as ‘normal’ business unless they could be aligned with the orthodox business paradigm: ‘But that’s not done in … terms of sustainability; that’s done in terms of good business practice and sound economics’, (Oil Company).

For a number of companies, sustainable development represented a void – a ‘null’ curriculum – which made the capture and taming of the concept by those driving the ‘business case’ much easier. It appeared that the ‘business case’ presented a ‘formula’ that could be absorbed rhetorically without interrupting the pragmatic processes of business. It was recognised that the ‘business case’ was being promoted chiefly for its profit value: ‘most are in fact practising it for financial reasons … the environmental gains in terms of waste minimisation and resource conservation are dictated by the mighty dollar’, (PCNZ). Furthermore, it seemed that the rhetoric being popularised in New Zealand may have contributed to a somewhat laissez-faire approach to translating ‘sustainable development’ into operations: ‘… there’s no such thing as a right or wrong answer’, (Water Utility); and, ‘… there’s no right or wrong way of doing it’, (Primary Production). This suggested that managers were trying to come to terms with ‘managing’ a concept that was complex; but the comments also echoed statements issued at early NZBCSD meetings that promoted a theory of there being no ‘right or wrong’ approaches.

In terms of the genesis of ‘sustainable development’ and why such a term needed to be coined – a theme intended to explore the structural origins of the concept – participants tended to instance ‘impacts’ of unsustainability that could be ‘managed’ as the drivers (resource depletion, pollution or environmental disasters), without questioning the structural causes. For the most part, the conceptions offered were uncritical and ‘weak’, and in some ways reflected the discourse of the right-wing lobby that clearly must speak for more than itself. For example, there was an anti-Labour government current that echoed that right-wing discourse, particularly its antagonism towards the government’s ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and the social agenda proposed for New Zealand: “… maybe if the government didn’t have such a welfare state sort of mentality in New Zealand they could afford to reduce the corporate tax rate’. (Manufacturing, emphasis added). In these cases, understanding of sustainable development did not include possibilities of ‘business pain’ being part of the equation; although one manager noted that some companies in New Zealand were prominent in promoting the ‘business case’ for sustainable development while also lobbying against international legislation such as the Kyoto Protocol.
There was limited heterogeneity in the conceptions held, and these were frequently conflated with concepts of environmental management. It was acknowledged that ‘sustainable development’ was often understood and practised at a level of quite modest ‘green housekeeping’ programmes of ‘incentivization of staff to do small things’ (Gas Utility): switch off lights, recycle paper and generally be more economical with company resources. For example, this senior manager – a former environmental lawyer with a more comprehensive conception of sustainable development – remarked that, where no broader vision exists, it was natural that companies would make only modest investments of time and money:

“… I’ve got no doubt that in amongst the range of interpretations of sustainable development corporates will start at the easy end versions: they won’t, as I call it, go vegan” (Gas Utility).

One thing that managers made clear and which was important to understand was the difficulty they had in implementing even ‘environmental management’ strategies and the relatively slight support that some of them received for their role. The level of agency they could lay claim to was circumscribed by structural issues such as the focus on economic growth. In the course of the research, there were several instances where the ideological and institutional impediments to sustainable development that operate in organisations saw managers and CEOs quickly become expendable as corporate profits slumped or the company was merged or taken over. Consequently, the daily focus of managers was not on sustainable development, but upon the more tangible and demonstrable goals of ‘resource asset conservation and utilisation’ (Primary Production): ‘emissions; pollution; anything that uses resources and spits out waste’ (Gas Utility); ‘closing the loop and recycling’ (Manufacturing), with an eye on compliance and avoiding risks and fines:

“… we call it product stewardship [which] is all around managing products from the cradle to grave. I have to say there’s some self-serving reasons for that: not the least is liability” (Chemicals, emphasis added).

Compliance appeared to be the best way managers could hope to drive the company shift towards sustainable development, an area where they could exercise a degree of agency. However, it was acknowledged that the result was sometimes increased confusion of the two within the company:

“… we’ll do this [compliance] and we’ll [believe we are] meeting our sustainable development requirement” (Food and Beverages).

Considerable faith was placed in ‘solutions’ provided by science and technology, but without acknowledgement of the problems that ‘techno-fixes’ have also caused:

“I think there are grounds for being optimistic about technology … over that sort of [thirty year] time horizon you’re getting a very rapid evolution of technology” (Mining Company).

Such optimism did not address the scale of environmental problems, the urgency of social problems or the insufficiency of technology to solve these. Technology was clung to as a way of reconciling economic growth with the resolution of environmental problems.
Attempts to raise issues of futurity and intergenerational equity and justice proved difficult where futurity was chiefly interpreted as ‘business viability’:

“As far as industry is concerned [sustainable development is] best expressed by doing what we do best without degrading the environment or resources that we are going to need in the future” (NZCIC, emphasis added).

The ideological conviction that economic growth is the necessary precursor of environmental and social improvement was paramount. One CEO pinpointed the major ‘silence’ of the sustainable development debate – the issue that gets overlooked or ignored – as ‘the need for growth’:

“People [in New Zealand] want the high standard of living and the higher standard of public sector services but they don’t recognize that New Zealand is a slow-growth economy and at the same time they are heavily committed to protecting the environment. That’s not a sustainable package …” (Mining Company).

Consequently, the rebuilding of economic growth in New Zealand was prioritised over the evident social damage that had resulted from the short-lived ‘boom’ of the 1980s–1990s, with no anomaly conceded:

“You’ve got to have a level of economic performance that enables that [social and environmental responsibility]” (Mining Company).

In addition, while levels of dematerialisation of production were lauded, this sometimes meant that greater levels of growth could be factored in, stretching production further without re-orientating business to address the need to reduce levels of production and consumption. This more efficient growth model was therefore linked with increased profit, competitive advantage and drivers such as PR:

“… there’s more efficient ways of doing things … and often they are more economic in the longer term … we’d feel better by using them … we’d get better press if we did” (Electricity Utility, emphasis added).

The most notable barrier, especially in the initial stages of the research process, was the difficulty of getting the radical social aspects of sustainable development onto the agenda, even though a number of research questions were designed to open up such issues and they were probed in several ways. Similarly, the socially constructed nature of the ‘givens’ of the business case was difficult to explore. Some corporate managers appeared to make the connection between these through a reflexive process that emerged from the research discourse itself, for example, after recognising that the social issues that they were aware of on a personal basis were also relevant to business. In a sense, it seemed that the research process provided ‘permission’ to make these connections, opening up the conceptual space within which managers performed their business operations. These connections also appeared to be more easily made when participants thought of the future in terms of the life chances of their children and grandchildren:

“… whatever we’re doing in business, personal life, government policy … we must do in a way, or at a rate, that doesn’t actually undermine my children’s or my grandchildren’s needs to meet their social and economic needs” (Telecommunications).

In general, the role of business in ‘constructing’ social problems was not readily recognised or acknowledged. The ‘social’ responsibilities of business tended to be constructed as looking after employees and having good community relationships, both
important responsibilities and also a requirement of legislation. However, meeting the ‘needs’ of employees often focused on ‘getting good value’ from them by selecting the best people and ‘using them as the catalyst to deliver value’ by ‘paying for top performance and developing people’ (Electricity Utility). The panoptics of management that create further levels of surveillance such as performance evaluation and review were reinterpreted as the ‘social’ responsibility of the company. It came close to viewing people as a ‘resource’, and, as with other resources, extracting best efficiency from them.

The question of whether business had appropriated sustainable development drew a mixed response: for some, it was a harsh judgment that came close to criticising business for its efforts; while a claim was made that business, once it got hold of the concept, would ensure ‘a better, quicker distribution’ (Manufacturing) than, for example, governments. Nevertheless, one participant claimed that business had ‘hi-jacked’ sustainable development, and reconstructed it in the process:

“It seemed quite a radical concept three to five years ago, but now it is so diluted that every company is comfortable talking about it. But the reality is we are not even close to what the original concept was” (Retailing).

In terms of the adherence to ‘the business case’ for sustainable development and the focus on eco-efficiency that emerged from these interviews, it can be conceded that, within a broader debate about economic goals and organisational governance, eco-efficiency has the power to address genuinely important issues and clearly has a role to play. These initial steps, the only ones that managers really had power to institute, may be seen as opening up the space for greater change as part of a longer-term strategy. Against this, it appeared that, in New Zealand, the business case was being promulgated in such a way as to replace the debate about structural and institutional issues that impact on sustainability. The question of the potentially constitutive power of that discourse and its capacity, as part of a broader critical discourse, to generate unanticipated change is a focus of the new phase of the research being conducted with these audiences.

4.2 Counter-hegemonic views and agency

“The sea, I think, is lazy. It just obeys the moon
- All the same I remember what Engels said: ‘Freedom is the consciousness of necessity.’”
Ian Finlay: ‘Mansie Considers the Sea in the Manner of Hugh MacDiarmid’

The corporate interview did provide for a level of complex interaction that made it possible to draw out emergent themes and explore ‘silences’ in the discourse, including the institutional and structural barriers to sustainable development and the need for innovative discourses. This partly arose from employment of the ‘weak–strong’ heuristic by managers themselves in order to assess their own and their company’s stance on that continuum. This helped to open up some aspects of the relationship between the growth paradigm and sustainability issues. Several participants began to reflect on the exercise of power within and over corporations and how this might affect the shift to sustainable development. Some reflection emerged on the basic contradiction at the heart of sustainable development that ‘the business case’ is built upon. In particular, it was the more critical participants from the ‘context’ of business who pointed out the discomfort
felt at placing “the word ‘development’ … with ‘sustainability’”, (CDL); or that there was “almost a conflict between ‘development’ and ‘sustainability’”, (PCNZ). That the ‘business case’ emerges from that contradiction was also identified:

“[T]here tend to be two sets of advocates. One is a set … who advocates it [sustainable development] because it’s ‘a good thing’; and others who advocate it because it’s actually ‘a good thing for business’” (CTU).

A senior manager from the context group also identified structural issues that had an effect, including the asymmetry of Northern/(Western) power over poorer countries:

“… we’ve got the Western world doing all the analysis and then phoning up the Indians (sic) and telling them, no, you can’t do this” (PCNZ).

This was echoed by a manager in the focus group who had held more ‘critical’ perspectives from the start, and who voiced considerable scepticism about the ‘real’ origins of sustainable development, not so far removed from an orthodox Marxist analysis of the earlier environmental movement.²⁰ He identified the asymmetry of power exercised by the wealthy North through colonisation, and cast sustainable development as yet another ‘structural limit’, a ‘gerrymander’, fabricated to extend and maintain that power:

“The very wealthy first world … who were profiting on the back of third world exploitation over the previous three or four hundred years of colonization … had the luxury to sit back and reflect on other things in life than just making a crust … the arrogance inherent in the whole concept of ‘I’m going to tell somebody else how to live their life’” (Primary Production).

It may also be, of course that the participant was expressing such views in order to challenge the research process itself.

It was recognised by some participants that eco-efficient procedures in themselves did not change the basic business model. This was clearly enunciated by one manager who worked for a company that had made considerable savings and some added profit from a focus on energy efficiency and the recycling and sale of waste, and was promoting itself as being a leader in the area of sustainability. He had come to recognise that, fundamentally, the company was promoting a ‘greener’ version of the orthodox business paradigm and that no institutional change had taken place: ‘… we’re actually still working within that … same model’ (Retailing, emphasis added).

Understanding of the genesis of the construct of sustainable development was generally hazy; although it was an area where a degree of reflexivity emerged. For example, people began to note that they would not have considered ‘poverty’ as relevant to business until they engaged in the research, since business was conceived as relieving poverty. The structural relationship between the administrative state, business and people and between that relationship and the distribution of power was a ‘silence’ that was not easy to open up; but it gradually became possible to witness a struggle to come to terms with the reasons for coining the concept and with issues such as intra- and inter-generational injustice in New Zealand as well as developing countries, for example, decisions about where road construction would or would not be planned:

“… the price paid by underdeveloped communities, whether it’s in New Zealand or overseas. People of lower socio-economic communities are targeted … because industries do know that they won’t get away with it in another area” (Construction).
This issue became generalised to thinking about levels of poverty in New Zealand, where ‘some children may not be being fed in some South Auckland schools’, (PCNZ), and the institutional reasons for that.

Issues of ‘actor agency’ and lack of agency began to emerge as managers reflected on the vulnerability of themselves, the programmes they had introduced and even of their companies. The ‘heartlessness’ of the dominant model meant that: ‘You’re always under the scrutiny of nameless, faceless shareholders. You’re expendable’, (Primary Production). Managers had mostly taken for granted that the dominant business model was ‘good’ for society – providing employment (for some), choices and essential services. However, even strong supporters of the business case came to acknowledge the hegemony of the dominant model: ‘[I]t’s hard to get away from the concept that the almighty dollar in profit, or short-term profit, is what’s important’, (Water Utility). Several participants had experienced severe changes dictated by structural issues such as reduced share performance or company take-over and seen gains in corporate sustainable development disappear. One Safety Health and Environment (SHE) manager, constrained by a cut in staff that saw most of the corporate SHE team disappear, reported that he was trying to exercise agency to keep sustainable development alive in the new corporate climate ‘by stealth’ (Chemicals). In fact, there appeared to be a tacit concern that ‘strong’ sustainable development would not be good for business if too radical an interpretation were applied to the concept; and this tended to tip the debate towards the need to produce more growth: ‘[I]t’s sustainable growth that you have to look at … the new business drivers are all about growth’, (Electricity Utility). The means of production and consumption as a basis of unsustainable development was generally not identified, or was defended; but the seduction of seeing the dominant model in full flow was acknowledged: ‘[I]n a sick kind of way, that excites me’, (Retailing). Foucault (1980) points out that we would not otherwise submit to power if it did not have some attraction for us; and the remark underlines Marcuse’s point (1964) that the model provides at least some people with benefits such as this ‘excitement’, which makes it difficult to resist.

The same participant gave an account of the way in which the structural limitations of the dominant model dictate that ‘the business case’ will effect relatively limited change. His company subscribed to that model, but he saw the company’s efforts as circumscribed by the need for growth and profit: ‘I think [the] business deep down knows what has to happen, but they’re stuck with the model … with saying they can only do so much. We understand the needs, but we have to keep making money, we have to keep growing’, (Retailing). This was endorsed by others, one of whom characterised companies as saying: ‘We’re not prepared to compromise one cent of profit. We like sustainable development, but we’re not prepared to budge on performance’ (Manufacturing). The structural limits that dictate this constraint were pinpointed: ‘We’re vulnerable in terms of world economics. If the New Zealand dollar was to dramatically increase, we would be in big trouble’, (Primary Production). As institutional issues began to surface, the general disregard for environmental externalities was identified as an anomaly of the dominant growth model. However, in general, the managers interviewed were politically conservative and generally found criticism of the dominant model or discussion of alternatives disconcerting.

The strongest counter-hegemonic expressions tended to come from managers who had shifted sideways from positions in large companies, or who had become disenchanted with corporate life. One person who had returned to community development work after a period in a senior management role in a large company gave an
account of sustainable development which came close to the Schumacherian principle of ‘subsidiarity’:

“The best way for me to describe the condition of sustainability is the maximum number of people getting the maximum amount of their needs met within the shortest possible distance ... [we] call it the ‘proximity’ principle ... you have the highest responsibility at the lowest level, with materials at the highest use within the shortest distance” (CDL).

Commenting on the power of the dominant model, he identified why corporate leaders turned only to the ‘business case’ for sustainable development:

“It’s the devil’s ride for the short-term return on investment, the quarterly reporting regime; and those guys are looking over their shoulders every minute. The stock market’s the only indicator those guys care about. If they can drive that model, if they can reach [for] a tool that helps that model better – which is what eco-efficiency and business sustainability is about – they’ll reach for it. I have come to truly believe that large companies, by nature of their size, are irresponsible” (CDL).

This participant had played a key role in trying to turn a company towards sustainable development, with some apparent success in terms of eco-efficiency, but was disillusioned. He had become sceptical of strategies he had formerly subscribed to, such as ‘sustainability’ reporting: ‘putting a bullshit statement together in their annual report to placate and soothe ... just syrupy language which people like me have helped people to write ... in the belief that by saying it you might actually get them to do it: but they don’t’ (CDL, emphasis added). He had thought about the deficits of the traditional business model, and made a case against the ‘managerial’ approach in favour of what was termed the ‘inefficiency’ principle that ‘actually makes up the social glue that holds the community together’; whereas, ‘what modern corporates do is they strip out the inefficiencies’, by introducing ‘sterile system conditions’ (CDL). What was painted was a picture of one-dimensional life as it has taken hold in New Zealand, especially since the 1980s; although deep within his scenario is the basic internal contradiction that Marxists maintain will ultimately spell the demise of capitalism. In fact, in his own way, this was the conclusion reached by this participant. One company had stated to him: ‘We don’t want our staff thinking for themselves’, which he saw as ‘their fatal mistake’, and interpreted as following:

“What those guys are doing is designing their business out of business by concentrating on fake sustainability and carrying on the old business model; and I say to them jokingly, ‘Well, who am I to stop you from designing the demise of your business?’” (CDL).

The question of ‘actor agency’ was key to the counter-hegemonic views expressed and reflects the ‘educational’ interest that underlies the overall research inquiry and any normative implications this might signify. Foucault’s conditions for the emergence of ‘self-construction’ raise issues of how individuals in hegemonic institutions shape or construct their own self, their subjectivity and identity; and how such ‘self-construction’ shapes their conduct in the world and makes them relatively autonomous and critical of the normalisation process. Several of these actors came to see beyond the contingencies that have made them what they are in order to think and ‘be’ in ways that are new to them. In terms of working with people exploring notions of the ‘good life’ of ecological and social sustainability which may conflict with the corporate structures of which they are a part, the theory of constructing ourselves as sceptical, non-judgemental but
perceiving people assumed importance. The increasing awareness of the agency for ‘self-production’ brought emancipatory and counter-hegemonic potential to the discourse whereby meaning could be negotiated (Habermas, 1972).

It appeared overall that, when participants explored the contingencies that shaped them as people, they most often felt disempowered by the structures they worked within. One manager described the feeling of powerlessness that was replacing his former enthusiasm for introducing sustainable development within a major company and how this was affecting his self-image. It also appeared to encourage him to shoulder corporate responsibilities over which he had little control:

“I am totally questioning myself that I don’t have the right people skills or the right management skills and therefore haven’t got the message across properly” (Retailing).

He determined in the end that he could have no agency in the corporate world and joined an independent group promoting sustainable development in small business. It indicated that the capacity to recognise taken-for-granted aspects of the corporate world as ideological contingencies rather than structural necessities (Dryzek, 2000) also brings the possibility of confronting difficult and life-affecting personal decisions. Other managers, however, claimed that they could perceive themselves as actors having a significant effect on company values, although some of the methods advocated caused contestation within the group. For example, one participant saw himself being able to change the status quo by emulating its mores: “[I]f this is a sales-focused company, I am one of the greatest salesmen of the organization … because it is me taking the sustainable development concept and how I sell it to my people … you put yourself in their shoes and think what they are thinking …” (Food and Beverages). This was contested by another participant as acquiescing to corporate hegemony: ‘[T]here must come a point in time that we say, I don’t accept your integrity – I’m going’ (Manufacturing). Perhaps the most telling comment on actor agency was revealed in the response of the first speaker, who pointed out that, if he had been dogmatic, ‘I’d be out the door straight away … they will break you and chew you up’ (Food and Beverages, emphasis added). This need for managers to play by the company’s rules rather than exercise agency governed by their own values was emphasised by a very senior manager, who advocated adopting different ‘roles’ for different situations: “[T]o succeed in life you have to behave in certain environments according to the circumstances … you’ve got to be flexible to recognize that, if you’re dealing with one environment, you’ve got a totally different toolkit from somewhere else; and if that means bastardizing yourself a wee bit, well, so be it … you have to learn to ride it” (Water Utility, emphasis added). As Fineman has pointed out (1997), in terms of actor agency, managers clearly experience considerable tension between the ways in which they might prefer to construct their ‘life-world’ – their private moral positions and their ‘green’ roles – and the ‘enacted morality’ of ‘the system’ that is required within hegemonic institutions.

One of the institutional factors that managers did identify, and a central one, was the lack of education for sustainability for people like themselves. Their comments unwittingly reflected the views of critics such as Apple (1979), who defines the role of state education as sustaining and reinforcing societal hegemony rather than exercising education’s potential emancipatory power; or O’Connor’s critique (1998, p.149) that the education system ‘performs most activities that are necessary for the production of labour power’. Several participants noted the narrowness of their own courses and of tertiary
education in general: ‘My engineering [course], when I look back now, had such a narrow focus’ (Water Utility). This participant had also had recent experience of the university system as an advisor for a new university programme that aimed to provide a more holistic education focused on sustainability, and had witnessed the difficulty of instituting interdisciplinary courses in the university curriculum: ‘They’ve [the academics] battled in the university arena because the thing tended to be multidisciplinary and didn’t fit neatly into one particular area’ (Water Utility). Some noted that their own awareness had been raised when their children were engaged in environmental education programmes at school and asked them questions about the environment or about their own work that made them uncomfortable and thoughtful. It was also noted, when ‘influences’ on their thinking was raised, that the research process itself had had an impact on attitudes, opening up the conceptual space for asking questions not frequently posed and endorsing the ‘educational’ agenda of the research.

5 Conclusions

The discursive formation that promotes ‘the business case’ in New Zealand appears, for now, to have exercised hegemony over the discourse at government and corporate levels. It is unclear what influence it had on the New Zealand government decision to put in place a Programme of Action for Sustainable Development (2003) rather than engage in participatory debate to produce a Sustainable Development Strategy. Empirical work with managers in companies promoting the business case generally refuted the idea that the promotion of eco-efficiency and ‘caring’ companies was promoting fundamental change to the dominant model; and their own capacity to influence that model seemed severely constrained. Yet the discourse of ‘the business case’ has caused a ‘struggle’ to surface within the dominant business paradigm, promoting the illusion of ‘green’ business leaders acting for institutional change to the structural limits to sustainable development, and appearing to be innovative; although the research revealed that they are still working and profiting within those limits. Nevertheless, the strength of the reaction of the conservative lobby to the rhetoric of the business case perhaps best indicates the threat to the dominant model that sustainable development represents, and the possibly constitutive role that discourse of the business case potentially represents.

Managers tended to perceive eco-efficiency measures as their strongest opportunity to influence company management; although their understanding of the ‘business case’ itself tended to be superficial. While some of the semantics had been acquired, it still did not represent a discourse that was critiqued or central to corporate thinking or operations, which also limited its constitutive capacity. Nevertheless, the intention here is not to dismiss those initiatives, which clearly are improvements on old ways of doing things in terms of resource and operational efficiency. They represent steps that are essential, but insufficient in the shift to sustainable development. The emerging critique of the limitations of that paradigm, and its maintenance of the status quo, tended to arise through the dynamics of the research process. This was part of a level of reflexivity that emerged from the research, which saw some of the corporate actor–participants repositioning themselves and their thoughts and arguments in terms of the themes raised and the conceptual space opened up. At the same time, not all responses had initially emerged from the ‘weak’ (functionalist/mainstream) end of the sustainable development continuum. There was, from the start, evidence of a more radical understanding by some
people than the one perpetuated by the business case. Other views changed and moved along the continuum towards the ‘strong’ pole; and something akin to a ‘site of political struggle’ emerged where counter-hegemonic views vied with more conservative ones. For some participants, this created an uncomfortable and confusing dialectical process and a transitional, perhaps preparadigmatic phase, where conceptions of sustainable development began to open up that extended beyond strategies to support business growth. Several participants found themselves straddling different positions and hovering back and forth between them. It was uncomfortable for them to critique the structures upon which they were dependent, and to which they were accustomed and generally loyal. Moreover, opening up a dialectical process for conceptualising sustainable development does not in itself change the hegemonic values and practices of the workplaces that participants depend upon. Nor is it assumed that these changing perceptions have no power of agency in those settings: their final effect may be incalculable.

‘Political struggle’ emerged most powerfully from people at the edge of the corporate world or some who had experienced personal conflict within that setting. They occupied positions where they could view more objectively and radically the functions of the dominant business paradigm, being based in a trade union or community development; or having stepped outside corporations to work in the hinterland between business and government, as in the case of industry council executive directors. It was the more radical of these participants who identified the hegemony of the dominant model and something of a ‘deficit of democracy’ that characterised the discourse of sustainable development in New Zealand.

The possible constitutive power of the business case is something that has not yet been channelled in New Zealand. For it to be released, structural changes are also called for, as well as the more rigorous and efficient enforcement of existing environmental legislation. It also needs attention to ‘closing the gaps’ of inequality in New Zealand that was one platform upon which the government was elected; but which has been quiescent in the face of business opposition. For a paradigm shift that opposes the current hegemony over sustainable development, the vision of New Zealand as ‘a socially just, equitable and ecologically rational society’ needs to be created through inclusive discourse in a bicultural and increasingly multicultural society where beliefs about ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ cannot be taken for granted. Sustainable development as part of a discursive theory of democracy calls for a discourse that is inclusive, innovative and that calls on the ‘enlightening and emancipating power of reason’. This might enable government to harness that ‘mass of sense lying in a dormant state’ that Paine (1984) believed to reside in all populations. Through such participatory discourse, the business case might cease to be something of an ‘obfuscatory’ device, and make it possible to seize the benefits of the model while still allowing people to exercise agency to oppose the structural limits to sustainable development.

References


Structural limits to sustainable development


Notes

1’Northern’ hegemony over the agenda was a basis for dissension from the ‘South’ at the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), 1972; at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992, where the ‘South’ produced their Alternative Treaties; and at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), 2002.

2The plans to develop a New Zealand Sustainable Development Strategy were subsequently replaced by a more managerial approach – a ‘Programme of Action’, focusing on issues of air, energy, water and children and youth.

3As far as membership of such a group could be recognised, it appeared to comprise the Ministry for the Environment, the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development and a Crown Research Institute, with other ‘sustainable business’ groupings and a number of consultants.

4Harvey (1996) points out that part of the theoretical and empirical task of the dialectical researcher is to identify where ‘gate-keeping’ or other mechanisms of control might be constructed in order to give a ‘thing’ or system the ‘qualities of identity, integrity and relative stability’ (p.55), thus safeguarding the status quo.

5Boggs (1976) define the concept of hegemony as used by Gramsci as: ‘the permeation throughout civil society – including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches and the family – of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality … that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. Hegemony is diffused by the agencies of social control and socialisation in every area of daily life …’ It connotes ‘a congruence of material and ideological forces that enable a coalition of interests to maintain a dominant position in society’ (Levy, 1997, p.129).


7A Marxist critique, focusing upon people working within capitalist modes of production and the context that supports capitalist hegemony, promised more salient insights into what makes things the way they are than commencing the task, for example, from an eco-centric perspective. In addition, the ‘new’ school of ecological Marxism that arose in the 1990s represented a fresh and contemporary approach to employing orthodox Marxist principles to an ecological situation which, as O’Connor (1998) points out, appears to be defying other modes of analysis.

8Foucault held that ‘left’ values neither prohibit one from being anticommunist nor compel the desire for revolution (Faubion, 1994, p.xiv). I am not seeking ‘that much heralded theory that finally encompasses everything, that finally totalises and reassures’ (Foucault, Preface to Oedipus, in Faubion, 1994, emphasis added).

9However, Dryzek is more inclined to see sustainable development as being ‘accommodated’ to the capitalist economic system.

10This central position was also developed with an awareness of the postmodern challenges to ‘utopias’, grand narratives and dreams of emancipation (Alvesson and Deetz, 1996).

11Levins and Lewontin (1985, p.280) state: ‘The dialectical view insists that persistence and equilibrium are not the natural state of things but require explanation, which must be sought in the action of opposing forces’. Ollman (1990 cited in Harvey, 1996, p.55) comments: ‘… given that change is always part of what things are, [our] research problem [can] only be how, when and into what [things or systems] change and why they sometimes appear not to change’.

12See Sterling’s profile of the environmentally literate citizen, 1996, p.35.

13In Gramsci’s classification of intellectuals into ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’, the former are seen as ‘functionaries’ with a close allegiance to their own tradition and craft; whereas ‘organic’ intellectuals enable people, through the provision of an alternative ideological framework, to possibly see the world anew.

14The group had been involved in an advisory role and as participants in the New Zealand Survey of Corporate Environmental Responsiveness and in workshops on environmental management and sustainable development for the previous two years.
This central anomaly of the RMA has been attributed to the neoliberal freemarket paradigm that seized New Zealand during the period when the Bill was developed (Young, 2001). In the introduction to the NZBR’s ‘Misguided Virtue’ (Henderson, 2001), the Vice Chairman states that the ‘framers’ of the RMA were ‘careful to speak of the concept of sustainable management, not the looser and ill-defined concept of sustainable development’ (p.xiii, emphasis added); but does not explain what were the ‘influences’ brought to bear on the ‘framers’.

To some extent, this opposition had been fired by one of the ‘green knights’ challenging the Executive Director of the New Zealand Business Roundtable to engage in public debates about the social responsibilities of corporations.

This echoed Hawken’s claim (1993) that ‘Business is the only mechanism powerful enough to reverse global environmental and social degradation’. After his involvement in the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, and the experience of police force exercised against passive demonstrators, Hawken began to see the demonstration in terms of citizens struggling against a ‘worldwide corporate-financed oligarchy or plutocracy’, and free markets as ‘subverting culture, democracy and community’. (www.global-vision.org/misc/hawken1.html).

One catalyst for the critical re-examination of Marxist theory in relation to nature was the level of ecological devastation revealed in Eastern Europe after the collapse of Soviet hegemony. Until then, the Marxist critique of the upsurge of environmental concern in the 1960s and 1970s tended to see the movement as the elitist, self-interested preoccupation of the privileged and powerful middle class – an ‘epiphenomenon of capitalism’ (Enzensberger, 1974).

‘Maneggiare’ [Italian]: ‘to handle a horse’.
Appendix A  Composition of the Context Group

Participants represented the following organisations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation/Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prime Minister’s Office (PM’s Office)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ministry of Economic Development (MED)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemicals Industry Council (NZCIC)</td>
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<td>Packaging Industry Council (PCNZ)</td>
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<td>Business New Zealand (BusNZ)</td>
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<td>NZ Business Roundtable (NZBR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NZ Business Council for Sustainable Development (NZBCSD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellington Chamber of Commerce (WCC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU)</td>
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<td>State Sector Standards Board and Japan/New Zealand Business Council (SSSB/JNZBC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Development Leader (CDL)</td>
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<td>Pacific Rim Institute for Sustainable Management (PRISM)</td>
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Appendix B  Composition of the Corporate Focus Group and Other Corporate Participants

(i) Industry Sectors Represented:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals</td>
</tr>
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<td>Communications (Telecommunications)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity Utility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Beverages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gas Utility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing (Fertilizer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturing (Meat Processing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary Production (Forestry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary Production (Fruit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retailing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Utility</td>
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(ii) Other Corporate Participants:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Role</th>
<th>Company</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Gas Utility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Insurance Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Manufacturing (Fertilizers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Mining Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Primary Production (Fishing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Retailing Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>Retailing Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Manager</td>
<td>Oil Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental Manager</td>
<td>Primary Production</td>
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