



***'WE CAN'T RUN... BUT WE CAN HIDE...'* ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AS PALLIATIVE RATHER THAN CURE.**

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of the environmental fervour of the late 1960's is demonstrated in the new millennium in socio-political, socio-economic and technical realms. One of the predominant expositions of this move towards 'greenness' is found in the corporate arena - demonstrated not least by the ever-increasing volumes of business and management literature on the subject. Environmental Management (EM) has thus been accepted, integrated and even proclaimed as the latest route to competitive advantage by multinational corporations worldwide and smaller companies in alert nation states. Whilst the problems of environmental degradation are not over and some as yet seem indefatigable, we do at least have the problem in hand – or so proponents of corporate environmental management would have us believe. Innovative technologies, imaginative policy measures, improving standards and continuing consumer pressure will in time, yield benign industrial processes and effective material and energy conservation systems. Corporate Environmental Management (CEM) is born, is thriving and will lead us along the path of ecological enlightenment. Or at least, so the powers that be – what Gramsci refers to as the dominant hegemony (Gramsci cited in Levy 1997) - might have us believe. Indeed 'as a narrative, EM tells a reassuring story of redemption and enlightenment' (Levy 1997 p134.)

The radical voice, that is one from outside the dominant hegemony might disagree, asserting that CEM has become simply one more element in that hegemony. It becomes another socio-economic construct which preserves the status quo in two related ways: i) companies are being seen to acknowledge environmental concerns and react to them and ii) in so doing the corporate world refutes further, potentially more threatening challenges. Thus CEM becomes only a palliative, that is a mechanism that alleviates the symptoms but does little to cure the disease of environmental degradation. This paper explores this tension between incorporating environmental management into a 'business as usual' mindset and thereby normalising it, and the urge to resist such incorporation in order to maintain sufficient challenge to the status quo.

- ◆ Levy D (1997) Environmental Management as Political Sustainability. *Organisation & Environment* Vol. 10 No 2 June. p126-147.



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INTRODUCTION

The cliché is, of course, that ‘you can run but you can’t hide.’ With regard to the environmental issues currently threatening Planet Earth, the reverse may hold – ‘we can’t run, but we can hide.’ There is no doubt that we cannot outrun environmental issues. Indeed, even as the pace of technological development increases, we are conceptually becoming concerned with phenomena such as ‘long time’¹ (Elkington J (1997)) and ‘inter-generational equity’² conceiving of points hundreds of years ahead and determining that our actions now will have implications then. Outrunning environmental problems is a race we simply can’t win. Hiding from those problems and perhaps more significantly the changes which may resolve them, is however, a more accessible option.

The focus of this paper is Corporate Environmental Management (CEM) and thus it seeks particularly to analyse the behaviour of corporate organisations with regard to environmental threats. This is not however, intended to absolve the wider society of its responsibilities but rather to illustrate, using the microcosm of corporate behaviour, the extent to which society is indeed prepared to overlook the liabilities it is creating. Business (perhaps particularly big business) provides us with a vehicle for so doing. The assertion of this paper is that such ‘sidestepping’ may in fact be an insidious process, but one which is being positively advocated and reinforced by the approaches inherent in CEM. That is to say we may be unaware of the extent to which we are in fact relinquishing both the decision-making and thus the control over environmental issues to the structures of the corporate world. The latter necessarily re-interprets and redefines those problems according to its context. As a result the apparent resolutions offered to us by the efficiencies of CEM may be no more than reassuring but ephemeral delusions. By allowing CEM to be incorporated into what Gramsci refers to as the ‘dominant hegemony,’ we are in fact, hiding, courtesy of *Corporate World Inc.* from the fundamental nature of the environmental problem.

¹ ‘Long time’ refers to the concept of generational time spans.

² Inter-generational equity (IGE) refers to the notion of equity between succeeding generations.



THE DOMINANT HEGEMONY

Before proceeding with the paper's argument both Gramsci's notions of a dominant hegemony and the concept of Corporate Environmental Management bear some explanation. According to Levy, 'the Gramscian concept of hegemony is used to conceptualise the situation of a historically situated coalition of business, government, professional and intellectual elites that is at once dominant in society but neither stable nor unchallenged' (Levy 1997 p126.) The hegemony is not then a completely fixed concept but does tend to resist significant challenges in order to persist in its dominance. Thus its proponents tend to protect the currently incumbent systems and ideologies and may effectively resist more radical concerns: '...there are always some groups who stand outside of the dominant ideology but lack the political strength to challenge the hegemonic bloc' (Levy 1997 p129.) In this case we might consider that it is some of the smaller eco-charities who are in this position. Intensifying concern with regard to environmental issues may be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant hegemony particularly if it focuses on scrutinising corporate activity. Corporates increasingly derive their own 'legitimacy' from public opinion (see Rodgers 2000) and are therefore becoming more sensitive to stakeholder concerns. As CEM addresses these concerns, it 'serves to deflect more radical challenges to the hegemonic coalition.' (Levy 1997 p127.)

CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

CEM is a relatively modern phenomenon, beginning perhaps in earnest in the 1960's following the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring*³. It has re-emerged in stronger form in the 1990's and now appears, at the start of this millennium, to have become a firm and accepted item on the business agenda. In fact it is sufficiently well established to be integrated into modern management texts and even proclaimed by some as the route to the latest competitive edge (see for example, Johnson and Scholes 1999.) But this is perhaps not as radical as it may at first seem. For a start, CEM is very firmly ensconced in the dominant western rationalistic perspective that the environment can indeed be 'managed.' Indeed it has 'deep roots in the modernist paradigm founded on notions of anthropocentric positivist science (Egri and Pinfield 1996 quoted in Levy 1997 p138.) However CEM can appear both appealing and perhaps more importantly in this argument, revolutionary: 'If growing environmental concern is no longer to be treated as a threat but increasingly as an opportunity... then a whole new strategic approach becomes crucial. The implications are far reaching, and include a redefinition of the corporate mission, a realigning of the corporate value system and a change in behaviour throughout the entire organisation' (Ulhoi (1995) p7.) By

³ Carson R (1962) *Silent Spring*. Penguin.



appearing to address the concerns of society (interpreted in strategic terminology as ‘stakeholders’) and particularly by proclaiming major change, business is actually forestalling further remonstrance. Indeed the process may be so effective that it ‘legitimises corporate management as the primary societal agent responsible for addressing environmental issues’ (Levy 1997 p127.)

The intention is not to suggest that this is a pre-meditated deceit on the part of industry. Indeed, when considered from the hegemonic perspective, business is simply fulfilling its role by meeting and incorporating challenges to the dominant structures, taking control of the issue rather than resolving it. Industry is actually further assisted in this process by flaws in the articulation of the environmental challenge. ‘While it’s undeniable that a green wave has indeed swept through business in the last decade – witness the spread of environmental reporting – there seems to be a general haziness about sustainable development’ (Nicholson-Lord D (2000) p51.) The lack of definition in concepts such as ‘sustainable development’ makes them a prime target for interpretation and incorporation into the dominant political ideology. Perhaps the best known definition of sustainable development is from the World Commission on Environment and Development⁴: ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED (1987) p43.) This definition is actually very difficult to interpret from a business perspective. With a remit to maximise shareholder wealth, discount rates alone defeat the notion of a business preserving anything for a future generation. However the notion of ‘the sustainable business’ is becoming common parlance and thus the corporate world necessarily attempts to impose its own interpretation, defined by its own context, and therefore generates a version of ‘sustainability’ which is consistent within the remit of CEM. Neither is this an easy process; ‘the ambiguity present in the definition of sustainable development was deliberate in the Bruntland Report because it was intended to be popular amongst a diverse constituency. Thus while the report provided the global community with a psychology of direction, it signalled the beginning of a confused and confusing debate’ (Chaharbaghi and Willis 1999 p42.) However, if we can be certain that ‘throughput growth... is not the way to sustainability...’ (Ulhoi (1995) p9), then CEM, based on a system of capitalist materialism is unlikely to deliver sustainable development. What it may very effectively do is to incorporate and assuage the environmental challenge thus preventing more radical options from being considered. CEM has effectively become a palliative; the gloss, the veil, a sugarcoat veneer which hides from us the problems of environmental degradation alleviating our discomfort without beginning to cure the disease.

⁴ Commonly referred to as The Bruntland Commission. (1987)



This tension between incorporating environmental concerns into a ‘business as usual’ mindset and thereby normalising it, and the urge to resist such incorporation in order to maintain sufficient challenge to the status quo needs exploration. Here this issue is treated in two distinct parts: the case for business becoming the predominant agent in addressing environment issues, and the case against. Whilst neither of these ‘cases’ is watertight in terms of their boundaries they form a useful delineation. The reasons that endorse businesses taking on environmental issues are dealt with first. The arguments include:

- the power that large corporations now wield and thus the responsibility that might accompany such power;
- the stakeholder arguments for increasing accountability now becoming mainstream in the strategic management literature;
- the increasing cost of externalities⁵ and
- the potentially huge impacts that business may have upon the environment and therefore the potential for changes of equal significance.

The second area of examination is associated with the dangers of the approach outlined above and presents the ‘case against.’ Discussions here include:

- Agency-Principal theory⁶;
- Conflicting requirements and therefore the potentially conflicting behaviours demanded of business (specifically the conflict between the short-termism of profit-making organisations and the long termism required by sustainable development concepts;)
- The notion that significant improvements generated via proactive businesses may delude us into believing that the problem is ‘being’ solved and
- A tendency to focus on the ‘wrong’ issues precisely because they are the ones business can influence/manage.

It is possible to conclude not by deciding between the two approaches but rather by suggesting that what is required is an increased awareness of the role and therefore of the limitations of business activities in tackling and remediating environmental problems.

⁵ An externality is a cost to society incurred by a firm but which remains ‘external’ to the firm and is therefore ‘charged’ to society.

⁶ The essence of this theory is that managers are acting on behalf of a firm’s owners, that is, in a public limited company, the shareholders.



ENDORISING THE PRO-ACTIVE BUSINESS APPROACH: 'THE CASE FOR CEM'

Power

'The world's ten largest industrial corporations employed three million people in 1991. Their gross sales were over eight hundred billion dollars. They have power and authority and demand the right to pursue their interests, generate wealth, innovate and change. With great power comes great responsibility.' (Cannon T (1994) Preface.) If businesses are increasingly controlling the resources – both natural and social - in the world today then it follows that it is they who can have most impact upon the way those resources are managed. According to Milbrath, 'evolution under civilisation developed a new selection principle: POWER' (Milbrath 1989 p43) and indeed the corporate world is evolving rapidly and becoming increasingly powerful as it does so. Milbrath goes on to make the point however, that 'selection for power favours those who exploit nature and discards those who revere it' (Milbrath 1989 p44) and this has certainly been the case to date in the corporate world.

Accountability/Stakeholders

The requirement for companies to take account of a variety of 'stakeholders' is now mainstream in the strategic management literature and is disputed by few. 'The days when companies were judged solely in terms of economic performance and wealth creation have long disappeared. Today, companies have far wider responsibilities to the environment, to local communities and to broader society' (Fay 1998.) However there is a spectrum of arguments as to the *raison d'être* of acknowledging stakeholder concerns. For some it is simply an extension of good business practice which will serve to maximise shareholder wealth. It is a necessary response in a changing business environment where corporates are facing a crisis in terms of being able to legitimise their operations and their behaviour (Rodgers 2000.) 'Industry has found that its environmental performance is under increasing public scrutiny. Schott & Fischer note that, "Caught in a tide of rising expectations, industry is experiencing something of a crisis of credibility and faces considerable public mistrust." (Levy 1997, p.130.) Being seen to be more accountable to a wider remit of stakeholder influence and opinion can be interpreted simply as a smart management tactic ensuring the continued viability of the firm in a hostile environment. Indeed in this sense stakeholder management becomes a microcosm of the dominant hegemony process. It seeks to assimilate perpetrators of potential conflict from a hostile environment into the managed environment of the firm thus negating the hostility. However, for others the move towards greater accountability is perceived as something more fundamental. 'Leaders are tending to question the *raison d'être* of their company's and their own activities and are searching for an expanded



repertoire of explanations and measures of success than are provided by the bottom line' (Zadek S (1999) p24.) Whichever view explains the reasoning of firms (and it is perfectly plausible that both extremes can co-exist in the corporate world) the outcome is that firms are becoming more accountable and will respond to public criticism over environmental impacts. It can be argued that the most-profit motivated of firms will be the most responsive, conscious that they are being measured daily on the world's stock markets. Public policy initiatives by contrast are measured at much greater intervals reflecting changes in overall political mood in a country.

The increasing cost of externalities

Firms have traditionally used 'free' resources as exactly that. Privately-owned resources have to be paid for; commonly-owned resources (fresh water, clean air) do not⁷. These externalities are becoming increasingly expensive to society as their impending rarity and/or degradation threatens to change lifestyles and environments. The process by which firms internalise, that is meet the cost of these externalities (and therefore adjust their behaviours accordingly) are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Acknowledging, mitigating and paying for externalities that are currently disregarded is a very strong argument for making the corporate world a primary agent in managing environmental problems. It is not a new one. Schumacher, writing much earlier this century, recognised the problems of externalities. '[Modern man]...has developed chemical substances which are unknown to nature and do not fit into her immensely complex system of checks and balances; many of them are extremely toxic, but he none the less applies them or discharges them into the environment, as if they would be out of action when they had fulfilled their specific purpose or could no longer be seen' (Schumacher EF (1982) p21.)

Potentially huge impacts may generate changes of equal significance.

The three points above amalgamate into this final reason for advocating CEM. The increasing power of corporates, the trend towards their greater accountability, and the internalisation of externalities all suggest that the potentially massive negative impacts of industry upon the environment can be precluded. If CEM can deliver this, then very significant progress towards environmental protection can surely be made.

⁷ For a full discussion of the economics of externalities see authors such as Turner, Pearce and Bateman (1994) Environmental Economics. Harvester Wheatsheaf.



THE DANGERS WITH CEM: 'THE CASE AGAINST.'

The Agency-Principal Theory

The essence of this theory is that managers are acting on behalf of a firm's owners, that is, in a public limited company, the shareholders. Managers should therefore act always and only in the interests of the owners resulting in the overriding remit of maximising long-term shareholder wealth. With regard to diverting corporate funds towards environmental protection, this may generate problems. Conflicts in the strategic aims of the firm that arise as a result will be dealt with in the following section, suffice to say here that managers may find their agency/principal remit increasingly difficult to deal with. At the extreme, the firm's owners may demand one set of results whilst 'society' demands another. The strategic management process has perhaps already become divorced from that of agent/principal as management has become a phenomenon in its own right and one that is characterised by Milbrath at least, in none too pleasant terms. 'Corporations are hierarchically governed by a small patriarchal elite pursuing male values: money, power, domination and control. Their control over serfs, workers, women and children has been mitigated somewhat by growing community awareness of the inhumanity of such domination, but their encroachment, enslavement, and mutilation of other creatures – all of nature – is still virtually unchecked' (Milbrath 1989 p49.) CEM as a management infrastructure sits firmly within the management paradigm and, if we accept this view, is perhaps less than ideal as a vehicle for the effective protection of our environment.

Conflicting requirements and therefore conflicting behaviours imposed upon businesses

If business is organised primarily to maximise long-term shareholder wealth then it will inevitably find difficulty in dealing with some of the precepts of environmental management and particularly with those of sustainable development. This is perhaps most acute with regard to timescales - the conflict between the short-termism of profit-making organisations and the long-termism required by sustainable development concepts is self-evident. The management function is currently ill-equipped to deal with notions of sustainability: 'the longing for success built into most business training has little to do with [the] strategic conservation of resources' (Piasecki et al. (1995) p331.) This weakness is doubtless reinforced by a similar issue in the wider community - 'society lacks the capacity to foresee more than the dim outlines of the future, even a decade or two in advance..' (Myers (1985) p477.) Providing a materially based 'high standard' of living for today's generation has typically precluded restraining the use of capital and technology, and there are arguments to suggest that such restraint may not be a good way to proceed. A technocratic perspective for example, points out that had the Victorians conserved coal for future generations we may not yet



have moved on from the steam engine. In short, the conflicting roles we are attempting to impose upon business (wealth generators and nature's protectors) may simply not be viable bedfellows and we should perhaps be looking to other agencies, to generate the level of significant change required to progress sustainable development. Although as Ulhoi points out we require changes in industry; 'the seriousness of the problem demands radical changes of attitudes, not least in the organisation of production..' (Ulhoi 1995 p3) they may need to be derived from outside the business function. Korten suggests one alternative: 'Since the dominant institutions of modern society are creations of a growth-centred development vision, the leadership for change must necessarily come from voluntary citizen action' (Korten (1995) p5.) This is a debate about the very role of business within our societies and may ultimately challenge the increasing concentration of responsibility, and thus of power, in the corporate world.

Significant improvements generated via proactive businesses may delude us into believing that the problem is 'being' solved

There is no doubt that changing business practices can yield significant environmental improvement and this paper is not suggesting that CEM is anything other than a positive response by industry. It may however be blinding us to the real nature of the problem and thus to its effective remedy. As business has begun to take action we can for example, note a move 'from adversarial politics to beyond blame strategies' (Piasecki et al. 1995, p.331) which suggests an acknowledgement that business is mending its ways and the road to ecological enlightenment is being laid. However there are suggestions that exactly the opposite is actually occurring: 'The conventional development practice espoused by most conservatives and even liberals is a leading cause of – not the solution to – a rapidly accelerating and potentially fatal human crisis of global proportions' (Korten (1995) p3.) At a global holistic level we may be getting this wrong – meantime our comfort zones are being well padded by 'local' (business?) level successes. How do we tell?

A focus on the 'wrong' issues precisely because they are the ones business can influence/manage

Perhaps one of the most insidious elements of this process is the emperor's new clothes syndrome. If we are persuaded that the bejewelled robes of environmental protection are in place, we will not believe that there is anything more to fear or to be changed. For some critics this phenomenon may already be at work: 'If our global physical environment is not to be degraded, then we must alter our conceptual environment.... For this reason the worst environmental pollution is perhaps mind



pollution' (Shrader-Frechette 1985, p97.) Business will reinterpret the environmental challenge in ways that it can influence, so whilst we will re- route end-of-life oil rigs for on-land disassembly and so 'avoid' polluting the seas, we will continue to burn oil. The forces in the dominant hegemony will act where they can, focusing on issues that can be managed. Piasecki interprets this in terms of technological development: 'The desire for an easy ride in the search for answers will often be frustrated by confusion and fears. In response the technocratic elite may propose to repave the road in order to give the issue the appearance of certainty.' (Piasecki 1990 quoted in Piasecki et al, 1995.)

Finally it must be acknowledged that there are limits to the solutions the corporate world can provide: 'Few [if any] companies have the capacity or market power to alter unilaterally entire sociotechnical systems' (Hart 1995 quoted in Levy 1997, p.134.) In addition, the 'voluntary citizen action' that Korten refers to as an alternative source of 'leadership for change' (see above) may also be lessening as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) become subject to the integrating forces of CEM. Businesses are now electing to work with, rather than against, these organisations and as they do so may be neutralising their previously radical positions. 'As corporates seek the endorsement of those NGOs which are perceived by the public to be 'good and worthy causes,' financial or other corporate support may be offered in return. Even where corporates do not seek to manipulate, the cause of the NGO may be compromised as a result of such transactions' (Rodgers 2000.) What Grove-White terms 'potentially significant reconfigurations' - 'the growing range of interactions, and even of prospective coalitions, between particular industrial actors and NGOs across previously unbridgeable divides, boosted by reflection on the Brent Spar episode, appears itself to hint at modest but potentially significant reconfigurations within civil society' (Grove-White 1997 p120) - may in fact simply be the integration of NGOs into the extant hegemony, once again deflecting another source of radical challenge.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the corporate world has a significant contribution to make towards the mitigation of environmental degradation and that it will be made largely through mechanisms implemented under the umbrella of CEM. Internalising the increasing level of externalities for example, is in fact industry simply meeting its true costs which previously it has routinely escaped. This must become a priority and probably resides in the realm of the policy maker. 'Business as usual' should involve paying for all the facilities exploited by a business including the environmental resources traditionally perceived as free goods. However these and other 'industry



initiatives' must not be perceived as 'problem solved' and this is the danger to which we must become alert. This type of inclusion of externalities no matter how far reaching it may become, is only a business solution to a business problem. Thus this paper asserts that CEM is a normalising phenomenon which protects the dominant hegemony from radical challenge. This is clearly demonstrated in the following critique of Shell's Report to Society – a report perceived as leading the way in multinational moves towards corporate social responsibility. 'It's fair to say that even two or three years ago, a Shell UK Report to Society would have been met with widespread cynicism and even disbelief from a wide range of our stakeholders. But today, I believe that constructive dialogue and positive criticism have replaced hostility and point scoring on both sides. And that's an entirely positive development.' (Fay 1998a.) CEM (of which Shell's Report is a proud symbol) has defeated 'hostility' – radical challenge – and replaced it with 'constructive dialogue' – assimilation into the dominant hegemony. So 'rather than dismiss[ing] EM out of hand as mere tokenism or embrac[ing] it as a panacea, we need to understand it as an accommodation that addresses some of the worst environmental excesses while deflecting demands for more radical change' (Levy 1997 p129.)

The philosophies and ideologies which underpin environmental protection and those which support economic growth may be so significantly different that to accommodate the one within the other is to compromise it beyond recognition. This may be exactly what we are asking business to do. There is a danger of believing, in a free-market system, that the direct agents of that free market can resolve all of the system's problems. 'Intersocietal competition has produced in modern times a single global competitive system that is bringing all cultures towards convergence. Increasingly there is but one way into the future' (Milbrath 1989 p45.) Critical issues of sustainability are too complex for short-term profit-motivated organisations to resolve and we should not therefore leave the problem in their hands and assume that even the considerable power they wield is sufficient. Neither should we allow business, as representative of the dominant hegemony, to be its own judge: 'Is a state of affairs unthinkable in which the malefactor calls himself to account and publicly dictates his own punishment, in the proud feeling that he is thus honouring the law which he himself has made... Such would be the criminal of a possible future, who, to be sure, also presupposes a future lawgiving – one founded on the idea 'I submit only to the law which I myself have given' (Nietzsche 1881 cited Hollingdale 1977, p234.)

The discourse of strategy clearly illustrates the power business can yield in managing the environment – 'industrialists have to adapt strategic decision-making processes to incorporate not only economic success but also a sensitivity to the natural environment...as with technologists business can step into the gap at the macro level between the proponents of economic growth and



those of environmental protection' (Chaharbaghi and Willis 1999 p46.) However by acting in this way 'environmentally and socially responsible organisations' as they may be known are not even beginning to solve greater social and longer-term environmental problems – and perhaps neither should they be. Poacher may well have turned gamekeeper but even the gamekeeper's sphere of influence is limited. The danger is that, 'although EM will not produce the kind of ecotopia that some radical ecologists might desire, it does have the potential to curb environmental impacts sufficiently so that life for the majority will at least be tolerable and those wanting more radical change will be politically isolated.' (Levy 1997 p132.) Allowing the process of incorporation and normalisation to continue unrecognised and unchallenged, indeed to celebrate such acquiescence as substantial progress towards sustainable development is to fall victim to the same process – that of being subsumed into the dominant hegemony. Much more radical change is and will continue to be required and additional forces within society need to de- and re-construct the dominant hegemony such that aspirations towards sustainable development become a reality rather than simply business rhetoric. Corporate environmental management is but one box of tools in the workshop. Building a sustainable future will require more than simply the increasingly forceful application of the blunt instrument of business.



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