

Exploring Corporate Eco-modernism: Challenging Corporate Rhetoric and Scientific Discourses¹

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ABSTRACT: *Despite the fact that environmental problems have been recognised as legitimate phenomena since the early 1970s, they did not really attract the attention of industrialists and management theorists until the beginning of the 1990s. During the last ten years, industry has been central in shaping a new corporate environmentalism. Now, we argue, it is time to take a critical look at the nature and scope of corporate actions and scientific research within the field of corporate environmental management. This paper takes a starting point in the assertions that: (i) available evidence indicates that the carrying capacity of the environment is in several respects being exceeded, and (ii) environmental progress is hindered by an inherent self-interest (both producers and consumers). Based on epistemological as well as empirical analyses, the paper concludes that industry has succeeded in taking over the environmental debate and turning it into a question of self-regulated eco-modernist actions.*

Keywords: Environmental management systems, sustainable development, spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, large businesses, their business associations, norm-setters, and even governments are saying that industry has to become more environmentally responsible - through the use of (standardised) environmental management systems (EMS) and corporate environmental management tools (environmental audits, life cycle assessments, reports, etc.) - and strive for some ill-defined notion of eco-efficiency. Coming from such powerful players, this naturally carries some weight. The question is, however, whether it is radical enough to reverse the growing environmental degradation of the planet caused by the process of production and consumption.

The use of such approaches, termed eco-modernist (Welford 1997), should be seen in the context of growing populations, increased demands for commodities and raw materials, and increased trade and globalisation. They should also be seen in the context of the recent economic problems in Asia, Russia and South America, home to the bulk of the world's population, and where, in the present circumstances of rising unemployment and reduced incomes, environmental issues fall much further down corporate or personal environmental agendas. We have to ask whether the EMS-based approach is applicable in times of economic prosperity and within the context of Western corporate cultures.

Even in this context, however, does the eco-modernist approach really deliver change to an extent, and at a speed, which is consistent with present political demands for sustainable development? Here, we also have severe doubts. In order to consider these issues more fully, the paper is structured as follows. We examine the roots of environmentalism and the ways in which industry has, to date, addressed the challenge of sustainable development via the eco-efficiency and EMS approaches. The paper is based on empirical evidence primarily gathered from Europe and Scandinavia during the mid-1990s.

Further, we examine whether current information on the process of 'corporate greening' is, in fact, representative of the true picture, which up to now has been dominated by a systems approach. In other words, we consider whether the research community has arrived at an accurate conclusion regarding the contributions of the eco-modern approach advocated by industry. It is argued that academics in particular are compromising their independence, and often seem unable to effectively scrutinize industry's underlying values, roles and actions. This section points to a critical lack of theory as well as action-oriented research. We consider alternatives to the eco-modernist discourse which are more honest about the problems we face and the radical solutions that will be necessary. This is based on a more 'spiritual' framework for action, which can be used for re-evaluating one's own values. This, it is argued, may hold the key to a future and more sustainable development.

ENVIRONMENTALISM: FROM IDEALISM/ROMANTICISM TO ACTOR PROFILISM

Environmentalism was perhaps born during the latter part of the 19th. century when Victorian aesthetes, idealists and philanthropists began asking questions about the long-term impact of the gathering pace of industrial modernisation. The oldest environmental groups have been traced back to the last decades of the 19th. century in England and North America (McCormick 1989). The basis for modern environmentalism was not laid until the second half of the 20th. century, however - or, more specifically, the early 1960s and 1970s. The book "Silent Spring" (Carson 1962), which called attention to the implications of the increasing use of pesticides, and the publication "The Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin 1968), which exposed man's preference for the maximisation of self-interest, were among the first publications to tap into an emerging environmental awareness. Two events from the early 1970s in particular - the Club of Rome's report "Limits to Growth" in 1972, and the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 - can be seen as important milestones in the development of international environmental policy (regulation). In the 1980s, the introduction of the concept of "Development Without Destruction" (Tolba 1989), "The Global Possible" (Repetto 1985), and, last but not least, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our Common Future" (Development 1987), shed light on the role of market forces in the development process and the role of poverty and overpopulation in natural resource degradation.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ECO-MODERNISM AND THE SYSTEMS-BASED APPROACH AND UNRESTRICTED SELF-REGULATION?

It is not so much that eco-modernism and systems are wrong per se, only that relying solely on such approaches is inadequate. This has two implications. Firstly, such an approach does not take us very far towards achieving sustainable development. Secondly, and more worryingly, is that because the proponents of eco-modernism (who are powerful) overstate the possible achievements of eco-modernist approaches, they can obstruct the additional change which is required. In other words, people in powerful positions who tell us that environmental management systems and associated tools will take us down the road of sustainable development create so much inertia that we will only go as far along the road as the industrial lobbyists tell us.

Notwithstanding, there are still strong reasons to believe that, not only is the systems approach inadequate, but it might actually be flawed in several respects. The environmental management system was meant to be equally applicable to all types and sizes of organisations, and to encourage businesses to introduce a structured approach to measuring, managing and improving their environmental performance. Indeed, some very bold claims have been made regarding environmental management systems and their associated standards. According to (Rothery 1993), for example, EMS standards are:

..."creating a state of quality greater than the sum of the two parts of quality management and environmental management. This is because the two, together with independent third party accreditation, make truly facilitative industry a reality, that is an industry that is both quality managed from the product and service point of view, and demonstrably so" (p. 4).

While this might be taking the link between quality and the environment a little too far, it does illustrate the almost fanatical belief of a minority who see the systems-based approach as a universal panacea.

However, it is certainly not the case that systems (of any kind) in themselves will lead to a revolution in business attitudes to environmental protection and sustainable development. Systems within the organisation will not address the systemic problem of global environmental change. Clearly, in many cases systems will provide a practical framework for any business intent on improving environmental performance to establish the procedures and tools necessary to do so, and provide some evidence of environmental improvement to other parties. Such parties are likely to include other companies or public bodies who want to ensure that they are dealing with environmentally responsible businesses.

There is, therefore, an even more fundamental question to be addressed. The key question is whether environmental management systems can actually deliver sustainability. Where the inherent logic of such approaches are based on fast incremental cycles of improvement, sustainability will take a long time to achieve (Wheeler 1993, Welford and Gouldson 1994). Moreover, EMSs are primarily about processes and measurements of physical flows (i.e. quantitative issues), whereas sustainability is also about qualitative issues such as human values, social and economic justice, intergenerationality, etc.

A further problem with systems, as defined in standards such as ISO14001, is that firms might think they are adopting the principles of sustainable development merely by adopting a quality-driven environmental management system (Wheeler 1993). This is due to the mistaken view that environmental improvement is the same as sustainable development. While the introduction of environmental improvements attempt to deal with the

environmental impact of the organisation, they fail to deal adequately with (or do not address at all) other key areas of sustainability such as equity, futurity and participation (see Eikin et al. 1991). What is really required is a paradigm shift that would involve industry accepting its ethical and social responsibilities (Smith 1993, Shrivastava 1995, Welford and Gouldson 1994). However, business is unlikely to accept this wider agenda without significant pressure from stakeholders, which at the moment is extremely weak.

The challenge for industry is how to continue to fulfil its vital role in modern society while actively contributing to a sustainable development (SD). Complying with the principles of SD cannot be achieved overnight. However, for both entire economies and individual businesses, there is hope that it can be achieved within the timescale necessary to avoid environmental catastrophe. But the approach needed is a radical one, not a piecemeal one (as has so far been the case), and this can only be changed via a culture shift and a re-examination of the dominant ideology surrounding environmental management strategies. Tinkering with commonly accepted approaches such as systems-based management in isolation from any re-evaluation of underlying values, hidden agendas, or attempts to identify the root of the problem are not likely to lead to a sustainable society.

However, there are even wider issues to be addressed, which revolve around the need to move swiftly towards a sustainable future. The eco-modern approach fails to provide real consideration of the principles of sustainable development. We are not suggesting that current environmental management practice is bad, or that innovations such as standards are a waste of time: they provide principles which all firms should implement. But they do not go far enough. The key concept of sustainable development requires a new approach to business, and we have seen little evidence of a radical paradigm shift either in the EU eco-management and audit scheme or the ISO14001 standards. Indeed, it has been argued that, although current approaches are sub-optimal and inappropriate, they are still likely to be perceived by many to be the cure to all industry-related environmental problems. They therefore tend to be widely adopted because they seem to fit in so nicely with the dominant ideology of production and consumption, which unfortunately panders too readily to materialism, i.e. quantitative growth rather than qualitative development (Goodland 1992). A responsible and pro-active approach to the environment requires new and radical approaches to doing business, including the need for more, not less, legislation. This is something which industry should itself be campaigning for in order to protect notions of competition and ensure a level playing field.

Rethinking business strategy along the lines of sustainable development requires a change in corporate cultures, and therefore opens up new opportunities to reassess other aspects of business. Other issues that need to be addressed include worker participation, democracy in the workplace, the treatment of women and minority groups, animal testing, public accountability and full disclosure, and the impact on developing nations and indigenous populations. Indeed, these issues should not be seen in isolation, but as part of a new overarching paradigm for ethical and holistic business practices. Moreover, the very power which endorses a piecemeal approach to environmental improvement is the same power which continues to deny or restrict the rights of workers and less developed nations. Many of these issues will necessarily challenge the very foundations of a system which is too often seen as everlasting, and will therefore be opposed by vested interests. Nevertheless, such ideas are achievable, and indeed fundamental to global economic, social and environmental security.

MOVING BEYOND ECO-MODERNISM

This paper has raised considerable doubts about the ability of environmental management systems and corporate environmental management tools-based approaches to take us more than a very small step along the path towards sustainable development. Perhaps the main reason for this is that they are an inadequate response to some of the effects of the problem, because they tend to focus on the symptoms, rather than the root, of the problem. The reality is that we consume too much, and in environmentally unfriendly ways, thus creating a demand for products which companies are only too willing to supply. And at the same time, companies are trying to persuade consumers to buy even more, by getting them to believe that consumption and materialism will make them happy. This never-ending cycle of consumption and production is rapidly eating up the planet on which we live, while at the same time depriving humans of their capacity for experiencing fundamental and simple happiness from engaging in meaningful social relationships. The roots of any solution aimed at achieving sustainable development thus lie more in tackling human consciousness than in management systems. As Caldwell (1992) argues:

“The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of mind and spirit. There could be no greater misconception of its meaning than to believe it is concerned only with endangered wildlife, human-made ugliness and pollution. These are part of it, but more importantly, the crisis is concerned with the kind of creatures we are and what we must become in order to survive.”

The eco-modernist agenda is limited because it looks only at the production mode of company activities, whereas an emphasis on consumption (both the creation and satisfaction of) may actually be more fruitful. The root cause of much environmental degradation is consumption in the West, and the reason for much of that consumption is that we see it as some sort of substitute for happiness which can no longer be derived from other sources.

Indeed, trends towards eco-modernism stress objectivity, scientific measurement, technological determinism and eco-efficiency. The rallying cry of the eco-modernists is to link the environment with the economy, linking the greening of industry with market forces. Yet many would see ecology and spirituality just as inextricably linked as ecology and commerce. And to ignore this is to ignore centuries of accumulated wisdom about the environment. However, modernity, with its inherent reliance on scientific achievements, has tended to prioritise knowledge over wisdom, fashion over values, change over continuity, growth over development, materialism over happiness, etc.

Spiritual aspects of our consciousness have nevertheless been progressively and systematically relegated to the domain of the subjective, private, individual or even subconscious. To all but a few, they are not perceived as having direct relevance to society. They have become a set of values subjugated by capitalism, the free market, and the laws of supply and demand, and secondary to the values of wealth creation, security, mobility, comfort, welfare, education and health.

In order to move towards a sustainable future, we must go beyond seeing the environment in sterile scientific terms (with the sometime addition of a less important social dimension) and rediscover, recognise, appreciate and enjoy the spiritual dimension of ecology. Of course, it is vital that we reduce pollution, plant trees, clean our rivers, maintain biodiversity, recycle our products, and so on. However, much more fundamental change is required if we are really going to reverse the destructive tendencies of the modern world. We note optimistically that some active members of contemporary society (although still a very small minority) are beginning to explore new spiritual dimensions and discover simplicity and humility. As a critical mass of enlightenment builds up, such individuals can be a great force for change. They know that to explore the world outside of bounded rationality is to explore a new dimension of living and life more rewarding than blind, head-on materialism. It is not difficult to meditate, to escape, and ultimately to move to a new level of consciousness (self-enlightenment).

Spirituality is not about a single order or set of decrees. It is about self-enlightenment, about breaking free and discovering an alternative dimension. Spirituality includes the intuitive, the non-measurable, the aesthetic, the caring and the loving. Spirituality is encircling us, and its power to change should not be underestimated. Business should beware! Spirituality requires little materialism, thrives on simplicity, and is very adept at removing institutional power. Spirituality is migrating and moving. Buddhism, Shamanism and the nature-based wisdom of indigenous cultures is coming together to produce a sophisticated ecological teaching that is both powerful and appealing.

Many people are now questioning the validity of some scientific assumptions. Even scientists now question the traditional and sterile division between science, philosophy and spirituality. The objectivist, scientific school of thought is beginning to crack. There is an increasing recognition that we simply cannot explain everything in precise, factual terms. This is not to denounce science, which has the potential to repair environmental degradation. But it is to suggest that science alone cannot provide us with all the answers. In parallel with this, we cannot solely rely on technology to pull us out of the environmental crisis.

When we look at what is happening to our world, it becomes clear that a turnaround will be difficult. Huge vested economic interests in different parts of the existing global business system, including parts which are particularly environmentally detrimental, will continue to act as a major barrier for a long time. The fact is, much of the corporate world is currently not interested in such a turnaround, and governments are increasingly powerless to act. Unless we have roots in a spirituality that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion and interconnectedness, a turnaround will be impossible. The spiritual dimension provides the focus for facing the enormous challenges ahead. It stresses interdependence, of the need to see other people, other species, and the physical environment as a part of our own identity, rather than something separate with which we are in constant competition. Therefore, when we talk about the greening of industry, the greening of the self, the greening of the economy and so on, to ignore the spiritual dimensions of this process is to move forward without real passion.

For many, it might seem strange to see the business as having a spiritual dimension. But why not? Business ought to be ethical, honest, and an educator and campaigner. So why should it not have a spiritual dimension, reflecting its connectedness to the world around it? Spirituality may not be a traditional rallying cry for business, but once we recognise that a business's greatest resource has to be the people it brings together to get jobs done, then we must recognise that relationships which already exist within the organisation will have some sort of spiritual dimension.

One source of inspiration for the spiritual organisation could, for example, be Buddhist economics. We too often see labour as a neo-classical factor of production, as nothing more than a cost, and even as a source of

inefficiency which, if eliminated, can increase profitability. The ideal situation for the employer is to have output without employment. In such a hostile work environment, is it any wonder that many people's ideal is to have income without employment?

Recognising and building on spiritual dimensions of work can be the first step to resolving this impasse. In Buddhist economics, for example, the function of work is at least threefold: to give a person the chance to utilize and develop skills and faculties, to help people overcome their ego-centricity by joining with other people in a common and fruitful task, and to provide the goods and services needed for oneself and others. This is hardly a radical departure from good employment practices, yet too often the emphasis is on output and not on the human dimension of the workplace. Thus work is often organised in a manner which becomes repetitive, meaningless, boring and depressing. In effect, it reduces the individual to little more than a ubiquitous cog in an enormous wheel, and work becomes soul-destroying.

Businesses can also be the focus for education. At heart, humans are contemplative and caring, but we have lost touch with that side of our personalities. This is often because we become little more than part of the overall system, and close relationships, trust, loyalty and love get squeezed out. But it does not have to be like that - we simply need to learn and practice what comes naturally to us given the space and energy. That process can happen within the family, within the workplace, and anywhere else where individuals are in social contact with each other.

Communion, compassion and humility have a very important role to play in the business organisation. The spiritually aware, environmentally conscious firm is one where there is less emphasis on top-down management and more on co-operative, collective strategies. The egos of management are replaced by trust, and all members of the organisation are valued for their own skills and qualities. A caring work environment can actually enhance the performance of the firm and make it a more humane place to work. The responsible and caring firm can also develop a passion for its own local environment, initiating local nature conservation schemes, supporting local wildlife initiatives, and getting involved in local education programmes. These are practical strategies, but which nevertheless stem from the recognition of a wider spiritual dimension to both the environment and the workplace.

The firm must also acknowledge its own change and impermanence, and be prepared for changes which are inevitable. Holding on to fixed positions is simply bad business, and the firm must be flexible and capable of change. But part of recognising impermanence is also recognising how transient things are and how unimportant they can be compared with other aspects of the world. The firm does not exist in isolation, nor should it expect unstinting loyalty from its employees. Indeed, it should encourage a sense of attachment and encourage employees to have other interests. A programme of involving workers in community projects, helping them with their own further education, and rejecting an organisational culture which expects managers to work seventy hour weeks is a start.

Finally, any organisation can be part of a reawakening process. It simply has to follow the people within it and allow them to explore new dimensions of spirituality. But the firm itself must be awake to the changes that will occur as a result of a growing tide of spirituality. More will not be seen as better than less. There is likely to be more scrutiny with respect to the environmental and social impacts of products and processes. The company can choose to be a follower, but it is much more likely to be successful if it is a leader. To that extent the company should embark on its own reawakening and ethical and spiritual development through strategies associated with honesty, integrity, accountability and transparency (Welford 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

While there is a far greater level of ecological awareness now than a decade or so ago, it is still not sufficient to redirect the course of basically predatory commercial culture. We too often resist the normal grief that should be associated with everything that is being lost. Because we cannot control our egos, we fail to acknowledge the value of diversity. We are a part of the system which is causing the crisis, but when challenged to do something about it we seem paralysed by the steamroller of large corporations. This is now taking a heavy toll on humanity in terms of helplessness, lethargy and despondency. A few are finding that revitalisation is possible by discovering and developing the spiritual sides of their lives. The growth of this dimension is going to become a significant force for change.

There is a spiritual path, and spirituality and ecological considerations blend into one as we move along it. It is not a singular path, however, but a differentiated and multidimensional one. This is its strength; the greater the differentiation, the greater the vitality and perfection of the whole. In this diversity of expression we are forced to challenge positivism and the supremacy of science. Acknowledging the value and power of subjectivity gives us an interior identity, an understanding of our self, our relationship with the environment and a recognition of the more mystical side of existence. The spiritual dimension offers us a way back from our contemporary alienation

from the Earth. By means of nonviolence, compassion and contemplation we are able to celebrate the awe of nature, the value of every being and intimacy with the physical environment.

Industry will have to be a part of this new spiritual wave, and can even play a productive and positive role if it wishes. It may not do so, however, because it will perceive that its power is being threatened, and to some extent this is true. But how strange that we talk of an inanimate organisation as having power. Ultimately, it is the people within the organisation who have the power - the power to change. As the spiritual wave impacts on their consciousness, so the nature of the organisation will change in harmony.

1 The idea for this paper grew out of discussions during Professor Welford's stay at The Aarhus School of Business. The contents of this article do not in any way reflect the opinions of either the authors' employer or sponsor. The usual disclaimers apply.

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