Taking a Long View on What We Now Know About Social and Environmental Accountability and Reporting[1]

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Sustainability and social responsibility appear to be occupying a place of increasing importance in the discourse surrounding business and organisation. As this discourse gains acceptance organisations seek for ways to measure and manage their interactions in the field. Simultaneously, societal concerns for the way in which organisations represent themselves with respect to social responsibility and sustainability stimulate a need for wider accountability. This essay joins a steadily growing trickle of papers which attempt to articulate and make sense of social accounting, accountability and reporting and, in so doing, offer suggestions for future directions in research, teaching and/or practice. The primary purpose of this paper is to offer a view of developments in social accounting in the last decade or so and to emphasise something I fear we are in danger of losing – namely that sense of the importance of social accounting and the considerable critical potential of the social accounting project. The paper provides a brief introduction to the growth in the social accounting literature; a typology of research approaches to the area; and a polemic on the crucial potential importance of social accounting. With this background, the essay then takes a broad review of the social accounting literature and seeks to offer some contentious perceptions on that research in the hope of stimulating debate.

Introduction

Sustainability and social responsibility appear to be occupying a place of increasing importance in the discourse surrounding business and organisation. As this discourse gains acceptance organisations seek for ways to measure and manage their interactions in the field. Simultaneously, societal concerns for the way in which organisations represent themselves with respect to social responsibility and sustainability stimulate a need for wider accountability. Accounting research has long been interested in both of these concerns. Interacting actively with organisational and management research whilst drawing freely (even indiscriminately) from any discipline that offered (instrumental) stimulus, insight and conceptualisation, accounting research has sought to derive and evaluate both managerial metrics and new forms of organisational accountability. (Such metrics and accountabilities might or might not be financially based). Of the two, it is with the derivation and evaluation

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of social, environmental (and increasingly sustainability – sic) accountability that this paper is primarily concerned[2].

This paper has a number of motivations. At the very broadest level, the paper represents an attempt to synthesise the last three to four decades of accounting and related research into social, environmental and sustainability reporting and accountability. The hope is that, thereby, it may provide a means for researchers (and practitioners and teachers) in (particularly) management and organisation studies to draw from - and interact with - the accounting literature in this field. Accountants have freely pillaged the management, organisational and wider literature and we would like to encourage others to return the favour.

Accounting researchers, once they break out of their well-established tendency to follow rules and adhere to the specifically financial (see, for example, Gray et al, 2001), tend to bring a broadly systems-based view of the world to bear on the representational and communicative possibilities of (typically) formal information transmissions in (especially business) organisations' interactions with society and its physical environment. "Accounts", of whatever form, represent and construct organisations and are used by various individuals and groups to "do" things. These accounts thereby profoundly affect employees, communities, societies, planetary possibilities, the State and civil society itself. These accounts are the stock-in-trade of accounting researchers and, of these, social, environmental, social responsibility and sustainability "accounts" are potentially the most important of these manifestations of the accounting craft[3].

Previous reviews (Gray et al, 1996; Gray 2000; 2002) have considered this terrain and have, *inter alia*, examined the terminological confusions that can undermine the field (see, for example, Mathews, 1997). I shall seek to avoid issues of terminology by using the term "social accounting" as the generic term for the whole panoply of internal and external accounts of organisational social, environmental and sustainability interactions and then address particular elements of these as the situations warrants and I will use the acronym SEAR (social and environmental accountability and reporting) in the same way[4].

[2] I will return to explain the emphasis on external reporting further later. There is a considerable amount to say also about environmental management and environmental management accounting but that is largely beyond scope of this short paper – not least because I am primarily interested in radical potential here and I am yet to be persuaded that there is (as yet) a substantive radical potential in environmental management accounting.

[3] I should stress that social, environmental, social responsibility, "triple bottom line" and sustainability are certainly *not* equivalent notions. The interactions amongst them and how we might understand each within a broad agenda of pursuing un-sustainability is beyond our scope here – but see, for example, Gray and Milne (2002; 2004). At its simplest within the bounds of this paper, we will see (very poor) examples of reporting upon "sustainability" as one (albeit potentially the most important) of the foci of social and environmental accountability and reporting.

[4] One broad definition of social accounting might be: *the preparation and publication of an account about an organisation's social, environmental, employee, community, customer and other stakeholder interactions and activities and, where, possible, the consequences of those interactions and activities. The social account may contain financial information but is more likely to be a combination of quantified non-financial information and descriptive, non-quantified information. The social account may serve a number of purposes but discharge of the organisation's accountability to its stakeholders*

In addition, this review will seek to depart from prior reviews in two particular ways. First, in seeking to provide an overview of SEAR, I will outline the principal conclusions that I believe we have reached and the key issues that demand our attention as researchers and teachers in the coming years. In doing this, I will try and illustrate how important it is to retain an eye on the essence of the research questions we ask and avoid substituting "practical" and publishable" for "important". The key means of achieving this will be to stay closely in touch with actions and literature that are directly motivated by (for example) the state of the planet and sublimely indifferent to what managers and organisations and/or the management and organisational literature is generally exercised by. Second, as I will explain later, social accounting is not an issue of vague academic interest. It is a passion that I, along with others, have chosen to follow. I, and others, have consciously decided that one would make one's best contribution to a society that has so generously bestowed its bounty upon us lucky ones through engagement with social accounting. Whether that is a foolish and delusional choice is too difficult to decide these days but faced with working in social accounting or helping run soup kitchens I personally chose social accounting. Consequently, for that decision to mean anything, the work in SEAR must forcefully address real problems grounded in the real experiences of the disadvantaged, the oppressed and the wider ecological environment. It must also be afraid of - and seek to debunk - the way in which social accounting can so easily become (or maybe already is) a placebo for the ills of late industrial and financial capitalism. Finally, SEAR must also seek to try and understand and modify, ameliorate or destroy that system which (as the books say) makes good people do bad things – i.e. international financial capitalism. Such a motivation may represent a precious, delusional and massively over-ambitious approach to the trivial act of being an academic but without unrealistic idealism, little or nothing interesting will happen.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section provides a very brief background to the social accounting literature in recent years and indicates some of the major sources of the growth of social accounting research. Section three offers a tentative typology of research approaches to social accounting with a particular emphasis on the need to keep an eye on the bigger picture and a need to explicitly address the radical potential of the area. Section four undertakes a polemic on why social accounting – a fundamentally trivial and manipulated activity – might be important. Indeed, this section argues for the critical importance of the social accounting project and bemoans that too often this is lost sight of. Section five then offers one, explicitly partial and selective, personal view of themes in recent social accounting research and offers some (I hope) contentious and unexpected interpretations of the findings from this work. Section six offers a brief summary and conclusion.

The Growth and Sources of SEAR Research

There is every indication that there has been a significant growth of research into SEAR in recent years. The full extent of such growth is difficult to assess because interest in social accounting does span a very wide range of disciplinary interests and it is, therefore, possible to miss work in the field. The literature I will be drawing from here is, inevitably, dominated by the accounting literature but also picks up from, for

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must be the clearly dominant of those reasons and the basis upon which the social account is judged (Gray 2000).

example, management, organisational studies, business governance and ethics, ecology and philosophy[5].

In the accounting literature, the "social accounting project" of the last 20 years or so has been predominantly built up within three (relatively) mainstream journals: *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, *Accounting Forum*, and *Critical Perspectives on Accounting.* Whilst significant contributions also appear in a large number of other journals (including, for example, *Accounting Organizations and Society*, *Accounting and Business Research*, *Journal of Business Finance and Accounting* and *The Accounting Review*), it is in these three journals that the principal conversations are held. Outside the accounting literature, the literature (that I am familiar with) seems to be dominated by *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business Strategy and the Environment*. Similarly, important contributions appear in mainstream journals such the *Journal of Management Studies* and notable contributions such as the review by Richardson et al., (1999) in *International Journal of Management Reviews*[6]. However, outside the accounting literature accountants have found it difficult to identify substantive and continuing academic conversations around social accounting and accountability within mainstream journals.

Whether or not these observations are either accurate or useful is relatively unimportant in the face of a far more significant concern. That is, for the bulk of academic endeavour throughout the social sciences the state of the planet, the position of its species (including mankind) and any deep-rooted anxiety about the nature of modern economic organisation seem to be matters of sublime irrelevance. This abandonment of a grounding of academic endeavour in the pressing crises of the moment encourages social accounting finding company throughout academe with, for example, those exercised by: critical theory; analyses of modern politics; and sustainable development; and it is from these areas in particular that social accounting increasingly draws its insights and theoretical structures and where it looks for affirmation and recognition (see, for example, Birkin, 1996; Milne, 1996; Lamberton, 1998; Andrew, 2000). Increasingly, social accountants hope to find themselves in an emergent formally interdisciplinary space formed around notions of accountability and the conflicts with sustainability.

My aim here is to try to tease out some key themes in the literature, to try and affirm the current collaboration across (especially) accounting, management and organisational studies researchers and to, most particularly, offer a few assertions and

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[5] CSEAR produces a journal, *The Social and Environmental Accounting Journal (SEAJ)* and has done so for over 12 years. In that time it has carried 306 reviews of academic articles that I (as editor of *SEAJ)* have noticed and thought apposite to a social and environmental accounting research journal. We carried just 8 such articles reviews in total for the two issues produced in 1992, whilst the number of articles reviews peaked at 36 in each of 2000 and 2001 and has pottered along at about 20 per volume since. Whilst this inevitably owes something to my stamina and those journals that I monitor, it does give some indication of the growth in research publication in the field. These reviews involve 306 articles which is clearly only a small part of the "literature" which we (whether accountants, finance specialist, management researchers, geographers or whatever) might use when we construct our view of our subject. The CSEAR website carries a bibliography, for example, which comprises nearly 2000 references, the majority of which are articles and the majority of which relate to social and environmental accounting in some way or other.

[6] Which paper can also be commended for another perspective on the field.

suggestions for how we might frame our future research work. Consequently, the next section attempts to articulate a difficulty that many social accountants have faced – the difficulty of trying to communicate that what they do - and why they do it - is *not just* "different" from (say) refining econometric method or devising new metaphors of organisation (however worthy such endeavours might be). Studying and researching social accounting is not even in the same spectrum of motivations and drivers as more conventional and mainstream academic activity but this distinction seems to be rarely recognised.

Approaches to Social Accounting

The motivations and predispositions that lie behind academic choices of subject (and approaches to those subjects) for research and teaching are certainly complex (Choudhury, 1987; Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978). However, it does seem possible to identify a range of research and teaching endeavours whose (at least apparent) drivers are quite different from those which (apparently) operate closer to the mainstream. That is, across (say) management, organisational studies and accounting there are areas of academic endeavour whose well-spring does not derive from management, organisational studies and accounting – the disciplinary focus is simply the means through which the endeavour is undertaken rather than the source and frame of the endeavour itself. More exactly, for (possibly) a minority of academics, I suspect, issues such as feminism, critical theory, labour studies, ethics and such like are sources of passion whose importance lies in a world view outside conventional business and academe. They are issues placed at the heart of the scholar's world. There is a passion which transcends mere employment (and the categories of such employment) and which seeks to repair, correct, destroy (or whatever) a world in which, for example, masculism, poverty, injustice, overt exploitation, delusion and so on are both rife and subject of institutionalised reverence both within and without academe. Colleagues who are so motivated seek to construct, or in some way contribute to, a world where such matters might be eradicated – or at least exposed and their effects ameliorated. Indeed, the issue of concern – whether it be, for example, planetary desecration or the aesthetic of the economic – exists and motivates regardless of the business school and its curriculum. That curriculum itself and the associated research can then be recognised as either one cause of the concern and/or one (possible) mechanism through which the concern can be addressed. The academic activity is thus *not* only an intellectual activity but is, to various degrees, also spiritual and emotional. Furthermore, to the extent that the academic activity is instrumental (as much business, management and accounting activity is) it is instrumental in the interests of (some, perhaps undefined) utopian aspiration rather than instrumental in the interests of career, business or capitalism more widely[7].

SEAR is of this sort for many researchers and teachers: in essence it is an opportunity to express personal values through an academic subject and to bring to bear expertise on the issue of concern. By contrast, it is difficult to see that, for example: the saving

[7] Of importance is that such aspiration is not only to be associated with left wing, "radical" or "green" activism. There is a case – sadly not much articulated – in which liberty and freedom (including freedom from poverty and the oppression of nature, for example) are the essential aspirations of academic pursuit. In such a view, the growth and liberalisation of capitalism are perceived as the primary means through which this might be achieved. Such right wing idealism, although not one which engages either my sympathy or my intellectual curiosity to any great degree, might be thought to underlie the mainstream of conventional, positivist, right wing business, management and accounting teaching (see, for example, Friedman 1962; 1970; Hayek 1960; 1982; Benston, 1982a; 1982b).

of costs; encouraging a wider consumption of a largely irrelevant product; deriving an increased financial return for already very rich people; or the establishing of how more reliable statements might be made by auditors to the shareholder; could be thought of as this sort of integration of (a) personal values and (b) how one makes one living[8].

If SEAR actually does matter in any substantive sense (see the following section), then how one approaches its study and practice; the questions that one seeks to illuminate through its pursuit; and the priority one gives to the questions of concern over the way in which one seeks to answer those questions (methods, methodology and research design) become important. A simple typology of approaches to social accounting is, therefore, shown below[9].

Figure 1: A Simple Typology of Approaches to SEAR Research and Teaching

1. Ignore it entirely.
2. Recognise its (slight) potential for economic impact, legitimation or moral hazard.
3. Employ it as a management tool to manage stakeholders and demonstrate the beneficence of the corporation.
4. Develop it as a manifestation of accountability in a well-functioning democracy.
5. Recognise its potential as a demonstration of the limits of corporate discretion and of the extent of conflicts between economic, social, environmental and sustainability pursuits.
6. Use it as a means to explore new possibilities, new futures and their limitations.
7. Dismiss it as a self-delusional sticking plaster on the rotting hide of capitalism.

Two remarks are worth making immediately. First, we should not lose sight of the fact that for the vast majority of teachers, students, researchers and practitioners in accounting, management and organisational studies, SEAR is a matter of sublime irrelevance. They know little about it and care even less[10]. Second, as issues like stakeholder management, corporate social responsibility and sustainable development have started to creep towards the mainstream of business and business practice (at least in name if not in detail), we need to be conscious that they are being absorbed and captured. The considerable revolutionary (or even evolutionary) moment that social responsibility and sustainability may have is being sucked from them as they

[8] Of course this does not in any way gainsay the vocation of teaching and the expression of that vocation. It concerns what one chooses to teach and how one articulates and frames that teaching.

[9] These categories are speculative and intended only to be illustrative. Neither are the categories necessarily mutually exclusive. Most notably the critical theoretic view (category 7) is concerned by the (often delusional) beliefs of the preceding 5 categories.

[10] I can make such an assertion based on inference from observing the literature, courses, textbooks and practices in and of accounting, management and business and recognising that the vast majority do not even nod in the direction of issues like justice or sustainability. In accounting in the UK, the *British Accounting Research Register* (Helliar et al, 2002; 2004) would offer a parochial but convincing source of evidence for this assertion (see also Owen et al, 1994; Stevenson, 2002).

are appropriated as "management tools" and such like (see, for example, Gray and Milne, 2002; 2004).

The reason for making these points – and, indeed, the distinctions above - is that research, teaching and practice never entirely abandon their normative groundings. When we come to examine the findings about SEAR over the last few decades we will find that, on the whole, the liberal, managerialist and Marxian articulations (categories 1, 2, 3, and 7 in Figure 1) are sound descriptions of social accounting as practiced. Is this a matter of remark? That depends on the normative moment of the observation. Central to *that* is the notion that SEAR is intended for a purpose and, indeed, if it is only a marginally interesting economic adjunct to the management toolkit, it is of virtually no importance and barely deserves the attention it *is* receiving. What makes SEAR worth the attention is the potential of the activity, the questions that are asked and the answers that are exposed when one investigates the practice with an explicitly (as opposed to *implicitly)* normative framework.

This is what I seek to explore in the next section.

Why Social Accounting Really Matters (Or Might Matter)

I suppose that most researchers tend to take for granted the importance of what they do. In remaining unexamined, however, the basis of the assumption of importance looks flimsy. Despite the pressure from the mainstream, social accountants also tend to take the importance of their subject for granted. Consequently, the opportunity, to proselytise the subject and, more precisely, to challenge the widespread indifference to social accounting exhibited by non-social accountants is often lost. The importance – or at least potential importance – of SEAR is typically not recognised. It therefore makes sense to restate some of the tenets that make a (currently) largely trite and trivial practice like SEAR so (potentially) important.

At the heart of SEAR – or at least at the heart of the emphasis I am pursuing here - is the notion of holding organisations to account on the principal of accountability. Accountability is based on the principal of *rights to information* – rights that derive from a number of sources: legal, quasi-legal, moral and so on. The principal idea is that power and responsibility need to be matched in a fair society. This matching is ensured by the demos who, in turn, require information on which to make the appropriate judgements. The *accounts* of organisations are one of these sources of information and without these accounts, democracy is hollow, the demos is powerless and, depending on the circumstances, the power of the (non) accountable organisations significantly outstrips their responsibility. These accounts are, thus, absolutely and definitionally central to what it is to have a just democracy (see, for example, Gray et al., 1996; Lehman, 1999; 2001; 2002 for further exploration of this point within an SEAR context (more generally see, for example, Held, 1987; Macpherson, 1973; 1977).[11]

[11] I realise that these terms are offered as encompassing simple and uncontentious meanings whilst these assertions are offered as uncontentious truths. These are profoundly complex notions that would take us beyond the confines of any reasonable paper here. Nevertheless, I hope that the broad brush of these comments can be allowed to stand without harming the argument too seriously.

For convenience (although there are theoretical problems with this) it is normal to think of rights, responsibilities and accountability as arising in three dimensions around organisations: the economic, the social (including employment) and environmental[12]. Whilst the financial statements produced by organisations are designed to discharge elements of the financial or economic accountability of the organisation (and are, most notably, governed by both law and an institutional edifice of regulation and monitoring), it falls to the more recent (and notably unregulated) social, environmental and sustainability reports to discharge the rest of an organisation's accountability. It will come as no surprise – and will not significantly undermine our examination of research evidence later – to confirm that the current practice of social, environmental and sustainability accountability is exceptionally patchy, very poor in quality and fails, almost entirely, to meet any measure of accountability (see, for example, Tinker et al, 1991; Owen et al., 2000).

So if, (as we shall see below), current practices of social, environmental and sustainability reporting fail to discharge accountability then what do these current practices actually achieve? And, more substantially, what might they achieve if they were established to fully discharge accountability? It is here that the importance of social accounting lies.

That only a minority of companies undertake social, environmental and/or sustainability reporting beyond legal limits[13] and that such minority reporting is almost universally partial and based on relatively unimportant material or material which conveys good news about the organisation[14] tells us that there is either no overwhelming "business case" for voluntary reporting of a substantive nature or that management are too stupid to recognise that such a case obtains (see also Maltby, 1997). Whilst the latter reason may not be without foundation, the former seems the more persuasive. Consequently we can infer two things: first that full and frank accountability is not in an organisation's obvious self-interest; and secondly, that for some organisations (or for some proportion of all organisations) there is a case, however marginal, for undertaking some form of SEAR.

It may well be blindingly obvious that full and frank accountability is not in an organisation's self interest. However, listening to governments, business representative groups and the like (most obviously groups like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the International Chamber of Commerce, and the Confederation of British Industry), one would not think so when they are pleading against the "imposition" of regulatory accountability or (apparently without any concern over potential contradictions) arguing that "good" environmental and social performance is in the interests of "good" management or good financial performance

[12] Such tri-partite distinctions arose primarily as a result of the growth in environmental concerns in the 1990s. Before this, "social accounting" was used to represent all those accountings that were not economic or financial in focus and nature. The idea behind the "Triple Bottom Line" (Elkington, 1997) can thus be seen and the links between that idea and sustainability/sustainable development are also apparent – although not without difficulties (see again Gray and Milne, 2002; 2004).

[13] There are number of sources of introductions to the legal requirements of disclosure - see, for example, Hibbitt and Collison (2004) for an introduction to the European situation.

[14] See, for example, SustainAbility/UNEP (2002; 2004).

(see, for example, Schmidheiny, 1992; Schmidheiny and Zorraquin, 1996; Willums, 1998).

It almost certainly follows that if full and frank accountability is *not* in the interests of the corporation then it *is* (subject to costs involved I suppose) in the interests of society – which is pretty much what you would expect, definitionally, from an accountability. That a range of efforts would be exerted – including a substantial minority of companies producing weak and partial SEAR – to avoid having regulatory accountability suggests that formal accountability has the potential to have a significant impact on corporations. This, in turn, seems to suggest that companies do not see the potential of social accounting as a trivial matter[15].

Thus, whilst current SEAR may indeed be fairly trivial, what is the potential of this phenomenon that social accountants seek but corporations are so keen to avoid?

Currently, with the exception of NGOs, almost the only view of economic activity, its consequences, conflicts and trade-offs is supplied to society by the companies themselves[16]. The roll-back of the State under the liberal agenda has been both encouraged by corporations and has resulted in a void where the State should be active - but which only NGOs seem able to partially fill (see, for example, Bendell, 2000). The evidence of the impact of corporate activity is far from uni-dimensional however. Whilst the West (or, at least a substantial proportion of its denizens) has undoubtedly increased its material well-being by a very marked degree and, in the process, been taught to believe this to be the best of all possible worlds, there is increasing evidence of environmental degradation, ethical bankruptcy, societal degradation, and alienation as a direct consequence of that very corporate success.[17] One can only assume, *a priori*, that it is exactly this less-than-perfect-world-data which the concern over SEAR is intended to suppress.

If this inference is correct, then the distinctions between the reformist/evolutionary approaches to social accounting (categories 4, 5 and 6 in Figure 1) begin to blur rather. In such a scenario, SEAR becomes an essential component of allowing the demos (and indeed the State) to assess the extent to which the organisational world has fulfilled its responsibility and, more substantially, has been telling the truth and telling the whole truth. SEAR, if it were effective, would expose the hubris of corporate propaganda, dispute the monolithic worldview offered by the large corporations and their agencies, and force the State, via civil society, to take back the mechanisms for the control of economic activity in the name of society. Such a

[15] There is, of course, the problem that the corporate sector always appears to oppose *any* moves that might be seen as acting to place constraints upon them (see, for example, Collison, 2003).

[16] The role of the media is not examined here. However, there seems to be more than a little concern that a combination of placed stories, editorial control, implicit control over journalists, pressure on those journalist (even if they are committed and knowledgeable) plus the fact that most media is part of the corporatist sphere all point to the media not being able (and least reliably and consistently) to offer an independent view on the world.

[17] Nothing here suggests that such consequences are either entirely the result of current economic activity or that they could not arise from other forms of organisation. That is a separate argument – although it seems exceptionally unlikely that the capacity for subjugation, environmental degradation and alienation could have arisen under less economically fierce systems.

change could not but have a profound effect on how we saw and constructed our world. Equally, such a change could have a profound effect on how organisations saw themselves, portrayed themselves and behaved themselves (see, for example, Estes, 1996).[18]

This is why social accounting is potentially so very important. It will show society(ies) what the actual consequences of the apparent economic well-being actually are and offer a counter-claim to the hubris and self-serving nature of corporate propaganda[19]. It will, consequently, demonstrate the extent to which, for example, corporations under international capitalism *cannot* "care for our employees", "respect human life", place the protection for the environment at the head of our priorities", "act in the most responsible of ways" and "contribute to sustainability"[20]. It will show why a world run and dominated by corporations is not the best of all worlds. It will show corporations cannot – almost by definition – have their socially responsible cake and eat their profit seeking needs simultaneously[21]. It may also help show that the internationalisation of capital through MNCs and global stock markets is in danger of placing capital beyond the real control of society and that, given that capitalism cannot deliver utopia, is a cause of concern – and one upon which we need to act whilst such action seems still feasible (see, for example, Bailey et al, 1994a; 1994b, 2000).

Of course, it may well be that this prognosis for SEAR is naïve in the extreme. That is, it may well be that the corporate hegemony is so strong that it will continue to subvert civil society (in often subtle ways) to prevent the case for a substantive and penetrating accountability ever becoming a reality. It may equally be that the more critical of commentators are correct in believing that the State is now so subverted to the whim of capital that civil society could never bring sufficient pressure to force it to act in the public interest and seek the control of large corporations and international capital markets.[22] This may well be so - but there are two responses to offer here.

First, social accounting has succeeded in changing the terms of the conversations that corporations have with society and, in doing so, provide a substantive basis on which to argue about the partial and selective nature of that conversation. More importantly,

[18] Of course, this may well be a very naïve view of social change but it seems plausible as a *necessary* if not *sufficient* condition for potential change (see, for example, Meadows et al., 2005).

[19] I am grateful to David Owen who introduced me to the work of Parkinson (see, for example, Parkinson, 1997; 2003) a lawyer, who argues, irresistibly I think, that organisations can either have their activities closely regulated or they can have their disclosure about those activities regulated. Both are not needed but no democracy can exist without either area being controlled.

[20] These are not precise and accurate quotes from company publications but exemplars that you could find in almost any social, environmental or sustainability report.

[21] Apologies for the badly-developed metaphor.

[22] Note, of course, that the rhetoric of control that suggests that a (variously) limp, jealous and small-minded society and the agents of the state simply want to suppress the exciting and dynamic wealth-creating (sic) entrepreneurs (sic) is largely fabrication. The need for control arises from the actions of corporations and stock markets which, despite protestations, those corporations and markets are unable or unwilling (or both) to control for themselves. The call for control is initiated by corporate action – not by societal whim.

the corporate world has sought to seem to embrace, first, environmental issues, then social responsibility and now sustainable development and, in doing so, has demonstrated both its significant incapacity to deliver on these things and its hubris and dishonesty in its claims in this regard. This has, I would suggest, provided a more empirical basis for the Marxian critique without, necessarily, impugning the integrity, intelligence and morality of all which are associated with capitalism and its bourgeois bag-carriers. Social accounting – whether as a success or as a failure in terms of the practices of accountability - offers a serious and penetrating possibility for civil society to seek to negotiate control – or at least less malign/more benign forms – of corporate activity (see, for example, Tinker and Gray, 2003).

Second, if the search for substantive self-reporting[23] social accounting and accountability is unsuccessful as a strategy, the role of civil society must not be ignored. SEAR has always embraced the "external social audits" as both a significant part of social accounting's possible mechanisms to develop and deliver forms of accountability and as a means through which reluctant organisations (and other "entities") can be held accountable if their self-reporting proves to be trivial (see, for example, Gray et al, 1991; 1996). As a wide range of "external social audits" have shown and continue to show there is a vibrancy to civil society that is willing to challenge corporate and/or state hubris and which successfully seeks to mobilise in the interests of the public. SEAR has a long-standing commitment to research and engagement with these various external social audit mechanisms[24]. It is important that this continues into the foreseeable future.

If SEAR is important – for what it could do, is unable to do and currently does not do – then we may turn to look at what we currently know about SEAR.

So What Do We Know?

The foregoing has provided an overview of some of the issues in SEAR – the intention of which is to provide a sort of *ad hoc* template against which current research themes can perhaps be assessed. That is, what we know may well be important but a more convincing case can be often be made for the *unimportance* of what we know – especially in the lights of what we find that we need to know once we have some idea what it is that we are perhaps seeking to achieve (see, for example, Tilt, 2002).

Reviews of social accounting have taken place before (see, for example, Azzone et al., 1996; Mathews, 1997; Gray, 2002) and many of them are far better syntheses of the field than will be provided here. Furthermore, SEAR is now an exceptionally diverse field. Whilst only 10 or 15 years ago a review of the appropriate literature would have

[23] To re-iterate and emphasise, my concern here is primarily with the accounts produced by the organisations themselves in much the same way as organisations are currently required to self-report on financial matters. Such a focus does not, of course, come close to exhausting the range of reporting possibilities.

[24] The history of social audit is a vibrant one (see, for example, Geddes, 1988; 1991 and Owen, 1991; Owen et al, 2000). Social Audit Ltd (see, for example, Medawar, 1976) and Counter Information Services were amongst the pioneers in the field that leads up to more recent publications such as the Christian Aid critique (Pendelton, 2004) and Christine Cooper's work producing a "social audit" of Scottish students' experiences.

been a relatively simple matter there are now relevant literatures on a bewildering array of foci. Thus, in addition to reporting and accounting in, predominantly large, companies (which is the primary concern here) there is a substantive literature on social and environmental accounting in the public sector (see, for example, Frost and Toh, 1998; Lewis, 2000; Burritt and Welch, 1997); auditing (Collison, 1996; Lightbody, 2000); socially responsible investment (see, for example, Fayers et al, 2000; Friedman and Miles, 2001; Miles et al, 2002; Kreander 2001; Kreander et. al, 2002) and a burgeoning literature on environmental management accounting and its interplays with environmental management systems (see, for example, Bennett and James, 1997a; 1998a; 1998b; Joshi et al., 2001). There are literatures on the teaching of SEAR (see, for example, Lockhart and Mathews, 2000; Gray and Collison, 2002) and on matters directly concerning the accounting profession (see, for example, Wycherley, 1997; Parker, 1997; Deegan, 1997). And so on. It is, however, towards reporting that most research effort has been directed and which, as argued above, is potentially the most important part of SEAR. What do we know about that?

Descriptions of SEAR

SEAR has been around for a long time in both organisational annual reports and (usually intermittent)[25] stand-alone reports (see, for example, Estes, 1976). The steady growth in reporting – especially in the last decade or so, has been as much about standalone reports as it has about increasing the data in the annual report. The bulk of the increase in reporting has been of a voluntary nature and has, consequently it seems, been dominated by larger companies in the more obviously "developed" western nations. We have seen, first, the growth of environmental, then social responsibility (sic) and now sustainability (sic) reporting and many of the parameters of this reporting have been delineated (see, for example, Gray et al, 1995; Hackston and Milne, 1996; Lober et al, 1997; KPMG 1992; 1993; 1999; 2002; SustainAbility/UNEP 2000; 2002).

Whilst it seems worthy and apposite to continue to delineate the parameters of this external self-reporting activity – especially as the signs seem to be that it is levelling off – it is probable that we already know the most important characteristics of this reporting. We know, for example, that:

- Only a minority of companies report;
- Reporting almost never offers a complete picture of organisational activity;
- More detail of a reliable nature is provided on environmental issues than on social or sustainability issues;
- Social responsibility reporting is exceptionally selective;
- Sustainability reporting, despite protestations to the contrary is yet to address sustainability; and
- Accountability is not discharged.

Thus we know enough to realise where we need to go next – even though such steps are no surprise. We need to continue to challenge all arguments in favour of voluntary reporting; we need to challenge all statements about the quality of reporting; we need

[25] There are exceptions to this – as to all the generalisations contained here. The obvious exception is the reporting to and about employees and employment in the 1970s and 1980s. See, for example, Maunders, (1984); Owen and Lloyd, (1985); Day and Woodward, (2004) as well as the reports on operations in Southern Africa under apartheid.

to engage with "standards" of reporting (such as GRI and ISEA) and improve them and we need to understand better the processes of reporting and deconstruct the rhetoric around current reporting. Let us be clear on this, virtually all reporting currently has only one advantage[26] – it changes the terms of the visible debate between civil society and the corporate world. In all other regards it is dishonest, cherry-picking and misleading and, if left unchallenged, is exceptionally likely to do social justice, ecological stewardship and sustainability more harm than good (see, for example, Tinker et al, 1991; Puxty, 1986; 1991; Tinker and Gray, 2003; and see especially, Ball et al, 2000; and Owen et al, 2000).

Analysis of SEAR

The most robust of findings concerning SEAR appear to be that it varies directly with the size of the reporting company, varies by country (and possibly by culture, see, for example, Azzone, et al, 1996; Gamble et al, 1996; Adams et al, 1998; Williams, 1999; Kolk and van Tulder, 2004) and probably varies by industry sector (see, for example, Clarke and Gibson-Sweet, 1999; Al-Najjar, 2000; Purushothaman et al, 2000; Gray et al, 2001). However, even these results need to be treated with care (Neu et al, 1998).

More elusive have been the relationships between SEAR and financial/economic and/or social and/or environmental performance. There is now an extensive and increasingly sophisticated literature (see, for example, Pava and Krauz, 1996; Chan and Milne, 1999; Milne and Chan, 1999; Hughes et al, 2000; Patten, 2002a; Roberts, 1992; Toms, 2002; Tyteca et al, 2002). But whether we can assume that (a) social and/or environmental reporting bears any relationship with social and/or environmental performance; (b) social and/or environmental disclosure bears any relationship with financial/economic performance and (c) social and/or environmental performance bears any relationship with financial/economic performance has advanced little beyond Ullmann's (1985) seminal, if inconclusive, paper.[27]

There seem to be a number of reasons for this inconclusiveness in the literature. Whilst there is increasing sophistication and care with which the disclosure variable is captured (typically through content analysis, especially, Milne and Adler, 1999; and Unerman, 2000),[28] there remains a strange reluctance to follow prior work and studies continue to vary in the unit of measurement and other key decisions intrinsic to content analysis. This, though, probably has only slight impact on results. Of much greater likely significance is the range of proxies used to capture the other variable of interest. Rarely are similar proxies adopted and, in broad terms, the availability of data seems to be a more pressing characteristic than whether or not the proxy interestingly captures some important dimension of (say) social responsibility or ecological stewardship. Thus data on some elements of pollution certainly could be

[26] This comment is not addressed to those who fight within organisations for the level of reporting we now see. They, often acting as individuals, have enough to cope with without being attacked for this level of voluntary achievement. Voluntary reporting is almost never going to be other than biased in favour of the reporter though.

[27] Ullmann's conclusion was that it paid to be good, but not too good. What was missing, as Ullmann suggests, was a reliable explanation as to why this should be the case.

[28] There continues to be some interest in disclosure indices as well – in part, one suspects because they are easier to construct that content analysis.

said to proxy for certain types of pollution and, perhaps, could be assumed (if carefully) to approximate for some elusive characteristic of environmental management. I tend to think, however, that we would need more sophisticated persuasion to encourage us to believe that the measured pollution was related to the company's overall environmental performance or had any relationship with either social responsibility or sustainability[29]. Equally, the more general proxies for social responsibility are rarely, if ever shown to be related to any substantive – as opposed to an apparent – notion of social responsibility[30]. If relationships are found, they are relationships that only dimly inform us about the central issues of concern. Consequently, we would be well-advised to draw inference from this literature with some care.

But more generally though, why should relationships between disclosure and various aspects of performance be expected to occur? Are we actually any further beyond Ullmann's concern about the lack of theory underpinning this research? In essence, it seems that we may know a good deal of a fairly fundamental nature about the three key relationships[31]:

> **Social/Environmental Disclosure and Social/Environmental Performance:** Whilst it is clearly of importance to know, for example, whether the Rockness (1985) and Wiseman (1982) claims that reporting and performance are *inversely related*, that we should have doubts about this relationship at all speaks volumes for the abysmal quality of reporting. If we could suggest that there were systematic doubts about the relationship between financial reporting and financial performance we would draw some fundamental conclusions. Thus, that we need to ask the question at all tells us that the quality of reporting about social or environmental activity is entirely insufficient to make any kind of assessment about the organisation's social or environmental activity itself. This is clearly ludicrous and an abject failure of what one might have thought was a principal role of reporting. (It is even more ludicrous when one recognises that the notion of "environmental or social performance" is very heavily circumscribed – how much worse it must then be if we are concerned with reporting on something as complex as sustainability?) The need to challenge the reports for this absence of quality is essential.

[29] There is the whole implied issue here of perception. That is if we are only concerned with a relatively unsophisticated perception of the organisation's environmental performance then it might well be that a measure of pollution can be said to proxy in the mind of the ignorant for ecological performance more widely. This is a more subtle argument which could deserve more analysis – and to which I will return briefly later.

[30] This, in turn, raises the enormous question of how to define social responsibility and the largely unsatisfying nature of the literature on this topic to date. See, for example, O'Dwyer (2003) for an introduction.

[31] I would want to stress that this is not an attack on positivism *per se* and certainly not an attack on empiricism. Those are issues to be discussed elsewhere. More pertinently, I am very conscious of the fascism of the so-called liberal US academy under which colleagues struggle and the creativity they bring to "conventional looking" studies that ask interesting questions in an uninteresting environment. This is *not* an attack on them – anything but (see Patten, 2002b).

Social/Environmental Performance and Financial/Economic Performance: It is far from clear why one might expect (as opposed to hope for/dream of) a positive relationship between these factors[32]. Of course there are all those statements that a well-managed organisation will reduce waste and manage its stakeholders and these are set against all those equally vacuous statements that the market disciplines all badly managed companies. Equally, if this were the case then all companies would become good as the financial pressures encouraged them to be so. In such a world, only a moron would undertake actions which cause social and environmental ills if it was financially damaging to do so – hence any polluting or socially irresponsible company is run by morons and they will be sacked and disciplined by the market. Doesn't work, does it? *Reductio ad absurdam* works well here: if the relationship is positive and holds, then good companies are rewarded financially. Thus, we may well be encouraged to infer, financially rewarded companies are the best companies and, hence, rich people are better. The consequence of this is that poor companies and, especially, poor people are those who are causing all the social and environmental ills on the planet. The only way in which the relationship might hold is at the level of the win-win (Walley and Whitehead, 1994) when the social responsibility or the ecological responsibility is actually fairly minor in the great scheme of things. It is in the exploration of these absurdities that the potential for SEAR lies – not in the exploration of proxy-driven versions of the relationship itself[33].

Social/Environmental Disclosure and Financial /Economic Performance: This is a potentially intriguing relationship (see, for example, Richardson et al., 1999). As we know that most disclosure is of poor quality, why might it either be (a) correlated with better financial performance and/or (b) influential in shareholders' assessments of future earnings? The first option might occur because an organisation could only undertake social/environmental disclosure when the organisation was financially successful (Gambling, 1984). It is difficult to know how plausible this is. The second option is likely to depend upon signalling – of management quality, of risk management, or reputation management etc. Thus, the quality of the reporting is unimportant but its existence is a signal to the financial markets and other significant (i.e. powerful and economic) stakeholders that management are aware of, and in control of the social and environmental risks associated with the organisation. In such circumstances, the relationship would be a plausible one and, more importantly, would tell us about the nature and purpose of SEAR and why it is generally speaking so *Accountability-lite* (see, for example, Neu et al, 1998).

Investigation of SEAR

The foregoing suggests that we have learnt a fair bit about the "what?", "where?" and "when?" of SEAR, but that such research begs – and, indeed, is largely dependent upon – explanations of the "why?" and the "how?" of SEAR. Investigations in this

[32] This is not to say that there will not be aspects of social/environmental performance that are linked with aspects of financial performance. See, for example, Lorraine et al. (2004); Mathews (2004); and Deegan (2004).

[33] The whole issue of proxies becomes even more important here. All of what was said above applies here in spades as both sides of the equation are relying on potentially spurious proxy measures.

field are growing along with a steady growth in field work concerned with social accounting.

It is becoming clear that the relationship between observable likely influences on reporting practice and that practice itself is complex (Walden and Schwarz, 1997). Direct investigations of such relationships – which have included the relationship between reporting and prosecutions (Deegan and Rankin, 1996), pressure groups (Tilt, 1994) and stakeholders, (Kolk, 1999; Cormier et al, 2004) – continue to identify potential influences but the impact of those influences remains under-specified. In the end, it makes sense to ask – or otherwise investigate directly – why organisations report voluntarily. Such direct investigation has employed methods ranging from questionnaires through a variety of case study approaches to ethnography.

The literature clearly shows the complexity of the reasons for reporting and for continuing to report (a distinction usefully made in Miles et al, 2002). The range of reasons – from intrinsic motives of accountability through to responses to pressure (internal and external) and the management of stakeholders – are present in Bebbington and Gray, (1995), Buhr (1998; 2002); Gray et al (1998); De Villiers, (1999), Solomon and Lewis, (2002), Miles et al, (2002) and Adams (2002) for example. Organisational change and the role of individual "champions" within the organisation appear in Gray et al, (1995), Larrinaga et al (2001), Larrinaga and Bebbington (2001) whilst the importance of culture is flagged in Mathews and Reynolds (2001) and Adams (2002). Even the notion of pressure as a direct influence on reporting is problematised in Freedman and Stagliano (1995) and in Deegan and Gordon (1996). Detailed case studies such as Buhr (2002) and case examples such as Elad (2001) and Rahaman et al (2004) simply expose the extent of the complexity of the reporting process.

Even just this brief taste of (particularly) the field-based research shows us that our simple theories are not yet able to tell us when an organisation will (not) report, why it will (not) continue to report and why it does (not) report certain information. The need for further fieldwork seems inescapable (see also later, when experimental fieldwork is considered briefly).

The Theories of SEAR

SEAR has been well-served by its theories - stakeholder and legitimacy theories in particular (see, especially, Gray et al. 1995; 1996; Deegan, 2002; O'Donovan, 2002) - but they remain under-specified. This also seems to be true for other theories which we see employed in SEAR but which are more obviously drawn from elsewhere in accounting, finance and business – typically, agency theory, decision usefulness and the bourgeois variant of the political economy perspective. Thus whilst such theories are useful as sensitising mechanisms, as aids to focus and as a means to articulate data, they lack the precision and specificity that would be necessary to fully explain reporting or accounting behaviour.

Fieldwork has drawn from and added to the theories in currency around social accounting. Most notably the mimetic attractions of institutional theory (Correa, 2003), the biological appeal of organisational change and autopoesis (Gray et al, 1995; Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001) and the insights derived through structuration theory (Buhr, 2002) are all adding to the theoretical sophistication of the field and, perhaps, showing that a generalised set of theories is not a possibility. This would be no bad conclusion[34]. It would, at a minimum, show that whilst we could not predict what would encourage better social and environmental reporting (other than, probably, a formal regulatory regime), reporting practice is not homogeneous and the possibility for development and change – via engagement – may still exist.

There may well have been a general increase in the standard of (for want of a better phrase) “middle level theory”, (Laughlin, 1995). However, more intense theorising – especially meta-theorising - is still the exception rather than the rule. Whilst important stimuli from, Power, (1991; 1994; 1997) and, most notably, Lehman (1995; 1999; 2001; 2002) have sought to problematise SEAR and, especially, the simple theorising around accountability (Gray et al., 1996), it is still rare to see critical theory explicitly informing social accounting debates (see, for example, Tinker and Gray, 2003). This is especially important because, as far as I can see, it is not possible to consider the future, the urgent potential for the pursuit of sustainability and more immediately the possibilities of responsibility and ecological stewardship, without a serious appreciation of global financial capitalism, the role of the state and the roles played by power in its various guises[35]. This has been the argument behind, for example, Tinker et al, (1991); Puxty, (1986; 1991); and probably Neu et al, (1998; 2001) and Gallhofer and Haslam (1997a; 1997b). It looks increasingly likely – and the research in SEAR often suggests this but rarely explicitly – that a company operating under market capitalism simply cannot deliver any form of social responsibility beyond the utterly trivial. Equally, there seems to be no evidence (despite cries to the contrary - see, for example, Schmidheiny, 1992) that anything like sustainability can be delivered by an increasingly unfettered capitalism. In these circumstances, the role of SEAR in political, experimental and critical research becomes so very important indeed.

The Political, Engaging, Experimental and Critical Roles of SEAR

I have bemoaned elsewhere (Gray, 2002) the relative paucity of literature that directly reports upon the various processes of engagement which are undertaken by academics. Such engagement includes such diverse organs as the Institute for Social and Ethical Accountability, the Global Reporting Initiative, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants Reporting Awards, the United Nations[36] as well as work directly with reporting organisations and NGOs. Nevertheless, such engagement is the means by which research can most directly affect – or at least seek to affect – the world of practice. In this vein, there is, fortunately, a small but substantive literature that reports upon experiment with social accounting and with attempts to derive guides to practice that may contribute to accountability and/or sustainability. Examples of this include the social accounting experiences of Traidcraft (the fairtrade organisation in the UK - see, for example, Dey, 2002; Gray et al, 1997) and the

[34] In financial accounting more generally, no theory is able to explain all aspects of a complex, a*d hoc*¸ practice which, lacking a single imposed theoretical basis, is the victim of haphazard power influences and is, as a consequence, beyond simple rational explanation at any level of detail.

[35] I explicitly acknowledge here the influence – one might even say nagging – of Colwyn Jones and Rob Brier in particular. They have been trying to get social accountants to recognise this for some time. Sorry it has taken so long for the penny to finally drop!

[36] There are a number of examples of this area of engagement in the literature - see, for example, Adams et al, (1998); Gray and Bebbington, (2000) and, especially, Dey’s work in Gray et al (1997).

experiments with sustainability by Landcare (the New Zealand Crown Research organisation, see, for example, Bebbington and Tan, 1996; 1997; Bebbington and Gray, 2001)[37] and with BP and the use of Sustainability Assessments Models (SAMs) (see, for example, Baxter et al, 2004). Other experiments that can be accessed in the public domain include the work by Forum for the Future and Trucost on financial implications of sustainability and variations on external social audits and silent accounts (see, for example, Gray, 1997; Henriques and Richardson, 2004; Adams, 2004).

Research that engages politically is, of course, more diverse than this. Direct critiques of practice (see, for example, Newton and Harte, 1997; Owen et al, 2001) keep our mind focused on the key issues and, as Tilt (2002), so eloquently argues, if our work is not directed towards accountability what is its purpose?

The research work which provides systematic critique and assessment of SEAR in all its forms also has the effect of raising the game of other researchers and those involved in engagement whilst also providing potentially radicalising material for use in the classroom. Examples that come to mind here include Buhr and Freedman (2001) and Tilt (2001).

Generally, the field and experimental based work in SEAR is growing steadily but has yet to reach the same maturity as is apparent in other social sciences where, for example, ethnography, action research and their analogues are almost commonplace. The opportunities for cross-disciplinary work with direct implications for *praxis* in this area seem most encouraging.

Conclusions

SEAR has grown, in a relatively few years, from a very marginal area of interest and practice to a diverse and vibrant area of research, teaching and practice. (And, incidentally, some of this vibrancy may well derive from there being twin sources of literature in the field: accounting and finance on the one hand and the broader management and organisational studies on the other). It behoves all of us interested in the field to maintain the diversity of approaches to SEAR through an active interest in the literatures of social responsibility, sustainability, ecology, sustainable development and social justice through which we can articulate the specifics of our particular subject specialisms. As scholars, despite the pressures on the academy (which is, itself, another story), we have to, I believe, find a means to keep our eye on the bigger picture within which our study takes place. This is especially important when issues such as social responsibility, sustainable development and social justice are the subject of widespread rhetoric but the *a priori* case must be that capitalism – especially in its present form(s) – simply is definitionally incapable of delivering such qualities – the system is so successful because it intrinsically ignores such concerns. If we lose sight of this we are in danger of repeating the circular sterility of the social responsibility debate from, especially, the 1970s.

Such concerns can inform a review of our current "state of the art" in social accounting. In short:

Current practice in SEAR is almost exclusively trivial;

[37] Another experiment in this vein is reported in Lamberton (2000).

Rhetoric to the contrary abounds and must be challenged;

We must not ever forget why social accounting really, really matters – or rather ***can*** matter;

For those with a commitment to SEAR (and related endeavours), there is a crucial need to keep the radical potential of what we do clearly in mind; and

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must take more time to deconstruct our research questions and, I should suppose, deconstruct the processes by which we construct those questions. So many of our common research questions are actually significantly uninteresting and often what is genuinely fascinating is that we can ask such questions at all.

Increasingly it seems to me that we will best achieve our aims in social accounting (as indeed with any area of radical endeavour grounded in *praxis*) if we, as scholars, employ two distinct, if uncomfortable, themes within our work. First and foremost we each need to ensure that we engage in ways that keeps the critical edge alive. This engagement may be with companies[38], NGOs, the State or the grassroots of civil society, for example, but in each the difficulty is then to connect our scholarly work theoretically to that work of engagement. I personally find this exceptionally challenging but it keeps the work lively and prevents any intellectual "comfort zone" developing. Second, and equally challenging, is that each of us must engage outside our disciplinary zones of comfort. (Accountants *have* to do this because, typically, the level of their initial social science education is woeful and only through wide reading can any kind of progress be made.) The challenges of presenting one's work across disciplines and working to the highest levels of scholarly standards in another discipline are, I find, more than enough to keep my humility in particularly good shape and aspirations high. For me, making an academic presentation in geography or philosophy scares me stupid but is an essential component of scholarly endeavour.

Finally if I am to look to the future I am to take refuge in the warnings about the inability of mankind to predict the future arising – at least in part - from the "failure" of human progress (sic) to behave in linear ways. If we in the academy can make as much progress in the next 10 years as we have in the last 10 on social accounting, sustainability and (perhaps) social responsibility then we will have achieved much and I could certainly not predict what that future might look like. On the other hand if we only make as much progress in *practice* in the next 10 years as we have in the last decade, I would think that we had every cause for pessimism. Radical engagement is both our duty and our primary weapon in the interplay between the academy and the market – civil society needs all the help it can get from us - suppressed scholars though we might be.

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[38] Although my rule of thumb is that if a company is willing to pay me a consultancy fee for what I do I should be suspicious of my own work. If that same company invites me back then I *know* that I have lost my critical edge.

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