Editorial: Theoretical Perspectives on Sustainability
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This special issue aims to supply an understanding of how sustainability operates as a theoretical construct that has the potential to inform organisational practice, not least in ways that some might deem radical. The radical defence of sustainability, as described in this special issue, is largely embedded in notions of strong sustainability and a critique of ‘the business case’ for sustainability predicated primarily on sustaining business. Incorporating papers from scholars with backgrounds in accounting, management, marketing, communication and political science enhances, but by no means completes, our understanding of a broad-based concept like sustainability. Potential exists for further social scientific contributions – particularly those with a psychological, socio-political, historical and especially philosophical basis. Put simply, the task of establishing a strong radical theoretical platform for sustainability remains incomplete.

Our Aim
In the call for papers for this Special Issue on Theoretical Perspectives on Sustainability, we began by noting:

Sustainability issues facing business and society are often characterised dichotomously in terms of broad social and ecological concerns versus the organisation’s need to maintain sustainable business returns. In an era when the whims of short-term capital markets dominate corporate decision-making, such binary debates have an increasing tendency to flounder on the practical and invariably negative implications of business decision-making. In coming together they often promote a naïve win-win optimism wherein business can be seen to adopt a weak version of sustainability without the radical and fundamentally challenging change to current practices increasingly seen as necessary to human and planetary survival.

The platform for a radical defence of sustainability is largely embedded in notions of strong sustainability (Turner, 1993) and a critique of what has commonly referred to as ‘the business case’ for sustainability, or sustainable development (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2001; Holliday et al., 2002). A small number of organisation and management scholars explicitly critique the business case that is concerned primarily with sustaining business (eg. Levy, 1997; Welford, 1995, 1997, 2000; Banerjee, 2002; Springett, 2003; Livesey, Milne, Kearins & Walton, forthcoming). There is perhaps an understandable penchant among some others who work in management and organisation studies in sub-arenas of sustainability (eg environmental management, business and society, and corporate social responsibility) for practice-focused incrementalism, sometimes at the expense of considering radical and fundamentally challenging formulations of sustainability. Serving business in this way is not our purpose here. In a journal dedicated to theoretical perspectives, we can and should take on the mantle of responsibility for envisioning a better world and for forging a coherent understanding of our past, present and future. Our warrant includes the exposé of potentially fatal flaws and rhetorical overreach – such as often
occurs in the business case for sustainability. We anticipate a paucity of practical exemplars of strong sustainability of a truly radical nature fostered by organisations. The task at hand is essentially then a theoretical one.

We looked, therefore, for papers that focused on the theoretical incommensurability that occurs in the form of discontinuous arguments between post-modern considerations and variants of eco-modernist thought and that critiqued incrementalism in a way that opened up possibilities for radical engagement. We sought a more fruitful understanding of how sustainability operates as a theoretical construct that has the potential to inform practice.

This Special Issue goes some way to establishing the skeletal framework towards this ambitious aim. We are grateful to our reviewers whose helpful comments across a wide range of submitted manuscripts assisted in our selection of the final set of papers. Set out below is a summary of how these papers contribute, and also an indication of where we consider the ‘radical’ research agenda around sustainability might be directed in the future.

Contributions to this Special Issue

There are, of course, multiple disciplinary strands that run through any discussion of the organisation and sustainability nexus. We have sought to recognise these multiple and interwoven strands by incorporating in this special issue papers from outside the usual ambit of organisation theory. Two papers stand out in this regard. One is from accounting – where some critical commentary has emerged around sustainability or the apparent lack of an intersect in practice. The other is from marketing where radical and more sociologically-inspired voices are less frequently heard, and where there is an even more obvious disjunct between what mainstream marketing theory aspires to and a more sustainable world. In this selection of papers, we have been able to be both backward-looking – with some regrets as to what has not been achieved in the case of Rob Gray’s review of the state of social and environmental accountability and reporting research, and forward-looking in Anja Schaefer’s potential reconstruction of marketing systems in honour of ecological sustainability—recognising though her own doubts that an ideal future in this regard seems improbable. Schaefer’s paper contains echoes of a Marxist reading of economic exigencies that require returns to market that make sustainability a problematic construct likely marginalised and subordinated to the growth agenda that typically drives the marketing function. Mark Starik’s commissioned response, from the perspective of organisation and management studies, to Gray’s review article sits between these articles offering what he postulates as a more hopeful or realistic perspective. We are less optimistic about the possible achievement of sustainability given current formations of capital and the whims of short-term capital markets. Equally, on a less pressing but nonetheless personally important level, our optimism (though not our hope) is tempered as to whether scholars will recognise, realise and be rewarded for synthesising the lessons of the many disciplines underpinning serious discussion of sustainability.

In part addressing the challenge of a multidisciplinary topic such as is sustainability while remaining sufficiently focused, two papers bring together somewhat overlapping ideas from different disciplines. Suzanne Benn and Dexter Dunphy review theory from both political science and management, with a view to proffering
ideas as to new forms of governance that might be needed in the changing relations between corporates, government and the community. They, like Starik, appear more hopeful but the extent of the changes they sense occurring and needing to occur more widely is of huge proportions. Eva Collins, Kate Kearins and Juliet Roper draw out similarities and differences of emphasis in the communication and management literature in relation to stakeholder engagement. They explore how relying on this increasingly popular modus operandi – while appearing intuitively promising – may actually fail to deliver substantively on sustainability beyond what is offered by the ‘business case’. Their message is imbued with scepticism, in the hope perhaps that we don’t delude ourselves that such engagement is either the solution or might pass for it. Both of these papers hint at, but generally avoid a deeper philosophical discussion around a Habermasian theory of communicative interaction and ideal speech (in the case of the Benn and Dunphy paper) and self-interest in terms of egoism and altruism (in the case of the Collins, Kearins and Roper paper).

The issues around sustainability – even allowing for an organisational focus to the subject – are massive and entrenched. They are simply unable to be resolved at an individual or organisational level, though these might be appealing units of analysis. Terry Porter raises the discussion to a discursive level and usefully introduces an analysis of identity subtexts. Hers is a methodological contribution that goes to the heart of the issue, connecting with organisational and personal fears around identity-loss. Embedded in the business case for sustainability, we might note, is the very real possibility of not just a concern with business being sustained, but also with sustaining managerial prerogatives, careers and identity.

Together, these six papers broaden the bases of radical organization theory around sustainability. They both point at possible solutions and problematise them. Individually these papers point at further directions in which scholarship may head. Below, we give our own views as to the latter.

Possible Future Directions

Most obviously, we point to the desirability of interdisciplinary work in the sustainability domain. For business school academics, interdisciplinary must be read as going beyond the business school and our colleagues in accounting, marketing and economics, law and finance. Perspectives from broader social science disciplines such as philosophy, social psychology, sociology, political science and social policy can enhance theorisation around sustainability and contribute towards a deeper and more holistic consideration of radical social theory that embraces a political economy approach to the topic. We also advocate for more explicit reference to underpinning social theory.

It is clear when we intersect with the mainstream and pitch to less radical audiences, in particular in the more mainstream journals, that we need strong theoretical bases both on which to advance the case for sustainability – and on which to advance a theoretical contribution. Whether these theoretical bases are emerging (as in the relatively diffuse and underproblematised corpus that comes under the umbrellas of stakeholder theory or broader social movements theory), relatively developed in this context (as with institutional and ethical theories, for example), age-old or new, their value and applicability to the domain of sustainability could be more systematically
explored. It is our contention that reliance on normative and ethical bases alone to construct theories around sustainability may fail to convince.

As researchers seek to focus their work around sustainability, levels and units of analysis are a further concern. Sustainability, as a broad-based concept, tends to defy a focus on just the individual, or individuals or just the organisation or organisations. Nor does it lend itself to a focus on any one of its major dimensions – ecological, social or economic – without consideration of the others, and the interconnections between them. Theoretical advances will likely derive from small slices that provide context and cross levels, as well as examine activities across time and space. Both historical analyses and problematisation of what is more routinely constructed as progress seem appropriate.

The issues with which organisational theoreticians of sustainability, whether of a radical persuasion or not, engage are huge and embedded. Understanding the history and context of capitalism is fundamental to offering sound critique of the generally acceptable discourse that ‘green is good for business’ or ‘looking after employees enhances productivity’. Notions of sustainability that go beyond ‘the triple bottom line’ are still in the minds of many management and organisation scholars, radical and troubling. Accordingly, owners and their fiduciary agents have become more and more adept at establishing business case scenarios that sand, varnish and polish the sustainability agenda reducing it to a strategy that returns net present values to the business. Thus we continue to challenge the radical scholarly community to strive towards a theoretical space that might break free from inexorable incorporation into ‘mainstream’ business sustainability agenda while still striving to convert its proponents. The latter, we believe, can best be achieved on the basis of robust scholarship - short of perhaps more painful but potentially efficacious environmental and social catastrophe.

References


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1 An ecological basis for sustainability is fundamentally at stake here. There are some issues around the extent to which a radical view of sustainability is socially as well as ecologically sufficient – that is the extent to which human rights and social justice are currently and properly incorporated in this view, as Jem Bendell reminds us. The most radical view would privilege ecology at the expense of humans. The view we take in this special issue accepts the possibility of more inclusive radical viewpoints that engage with people as an integral part of ‘world ecology’.

2 Prasad and Elmes (2005) provide a useful counterpoint here in examining the hegemonic dimensions of the ‘discourse of practicality’ within environmental management and its implications, suggesting it delivers ‘business almost as usual’. A response by Newton (2005) both complements through exemplification and critiques elements of their argument, offering comment on the unresolved tension between idealism and praxis that remains central within green debates.

Jem Bendell, in his discussions with us, advocates a possible middle course in what he calls pragmatic rationalism – helping managers to find: (a) those actions which are sustainable and financially viable today (ie that will have a future in a sustainable world); and (b) ways of changing the framework conditions (eg in terms of regulations, capital markets, culture etc) in order to make more of those things that would be sustainable and also financially viable in the future. He rightfully asks that we extend our call for multidisciplinarity to include insights that might come from the instrumentalist business ‘discipline’!