CSR, Co-optation and Resistance - the Emergence of New Agonistic Relations Between Business and Civil Society

Dr Jon Burchell (University of Sheffield): j.burchell@sheffield.ac.uk

Dr Joanne Cook (University of Hull): joanne.cook@hull.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the theoretical implications of the changing relationships between NGOs and businesses that have emerged as a response to the evolving agenda around CSR and Sustainable Development (SD). In particular it focuses upon examining whether greater engagement from NGOs in this area reflects a process of appropriation and co-optation of protest by the business community. To examine this process, the article considers two forms of appropriation - appropriation of language and appropriation via participation- as a basis for discussion. While co-optation pressures are identified within both areas, the article argues that co-optation is identified almost as an inevitable outcome of engagement without significant consideration of the ability of movements to identify and respond to these processes. In identifying an alternative approach, the article utilises Mouffe's framework of agonistic pluralism. Mouffe's framework, it is argued, provides an understanding of the way in which agonistic relationships are emerging between NGOs and businesses while highlighting the continuance of conflict between parties struggling to influence the contested interpretations of responsible business.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a rapid growth in protest focused less upon governments and more towards businesses as the representatives of modern global capitalism. In particular campaigns have focused upon the ethical and environmental impacts of their activities, questioning the moral basis upon which contemporary business practice is structured. Where once companies were able to accept a largely antagonistic relationship towards their NGO critics, the increased pressure and support for NGO claims among civil society, has resulted in companies being forced into a more direct relationship with their critics (See for example Bendell 2000).

This pressure to engage is evident within much of the discourse of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In particular there has been increased recognition that companies have a responsibility to a far broader range of stakeholders than the traditional focus upon customers and shareholders (Andriof et al 2003). While businesses have responded to these pressures in diverse ways, there has been an expansion of stakeholder dialogue strategies and a desire by many companies to present themselves as more open and transparent. Corporates' apparent desire for greater openness has been received with mixed reactions from civil society actors. The opportunity to engage with the focal point of protest - often traditionally the political system but in this case corporations - raises a significant challenge for movement actors. Opportunities for engagement have brought concerns over the possibility of co-optation, a de-radicalisation of the movements and a diluting of issues to accommodate them within the established political order. This article examines the theoretical implications of these changing relationships between NGOs and businesses. It contributes to an emerging research agenda around stakeholding that is moving away from business-centred perspectives and towards a greater focus upon the stakeholders themselves (See Friedman and Miles 2002, Frooman 1999) and focuses upon how the pressure to engage and the experience of engagement is changing business/NGO relationships.

Established social movement analysis consistently emphasises the extra-institutional focus and unconventional action repertoires,[1] as key dimensions to social movement identity (See for example Tarrow 1998, Touraine 1981, Melucci 1989). Inevitably therefore, processes of engagement with established institutions of power and authority are often identified as evidence of the institutionalisation of the movement and the end of its challenging potential (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Institutionalisation[2] in this context, sees social movements undergo a transition from confrontation to negotiation and co-operation; involving processes of co-optation, marginalization and routinization (Meyer and Tarrow 1998).

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[1] Such as applying pressure by going outside of the traditional political channels and using direct action.
[2] As Morgan (2007) notes the concept of 'institutionalization' carries multiple meanings. Traditionally social movement analysis has focused upon the usage outlined by Seippel (2001), namely 'a process by which vibrant movements turn into rigid formalized and hierarchic organisations, leading to a shift from disruptive to rule-abiding behaviour (Morgan 2007; 286).

This article examines Business/NGO engagement within the CSR realm and considers whether these forms of stakeholder engagement reflect processes of co-optation. Taking its lead from previous research into co-optation and institutionalization (Murphree, Wright and Ebaugh 1996, Coy and Hedeen 2005) the first part of this article examines the potential for CSR to be viewed as a system of co-opting protest activity along two key dimensions. First, appropriation of the language of CSR - located within the overarching discourse of ecological modernisation (EM) and Sustainable Development (SD). Second, appropriation by engagement via an increasing emphasis upon stakeholder dialogue and partnership. The article questions the extent to which these processes can be usefully understood as co-optation. Reflecting upon Campbell's (2001) assertion that engagement is not necessarily a stark choice between 'disengaged purity' and 'politically engaged capitulation' (Campbell 2001; 362), the article draws upon Chantal Mouffe's (1999, 2000) conceptualisation of 'agonistic pluralism' as a method for contextualising the changing relationships between businesses and civil society actors.

Business - NGO engagement: social movements and the threat of co-optation

Since the early work of Freeman (1984) a significant literature on stakeholder engagement in CSR has emerged. However, much of this research has centred on stakeholder identification (Harrison and Freeman 1999, Kaler 2002), measuring stakeholder salience and influence (Frooman 1999, Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997) and the development of frameworks for stakeholder dialogue (Andriof et. al. 2003, Bendell 2000). Prevalent gaps in knowledge of stakeholder dialogue have been well documented over recent years (Frooman 1999, Friedman and Miles 2002, Streurer 2006) and new research on stakeholders has sought to focus more directly on business stakeholder relations in the realm of partnerships (Murphy and Bendell 1997, Seige et al 2006, and Kourula and Laasonen 2010), dialogue (Burchell and Cook 2006, 2008), and activist tactics (den Hond and de Bakker 2007, 2008). Within these approaches, an emerging literature can be identified drawing from outside of traditional management theory and re-focusing analysis away from the management of stakeholders by firms and towards the impact of CSR dialogue on the stakeholders themselves, and the reshaping of business civil society relations (for expansion see Burchell and Cook 2011, 2012). Much of this work has drawn upon

social movement theory to examine NGOs who are situated as key secondary stakeholders and find themselves increasingly in direct contact (through dialogue and/or protest) with businesses around their CSR practices (den Hond and de Bakkar 2007, 2010, Valor and Merino de Diego 2009, Van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010, Burchell and Cook 2006, 2011, 2012). Critical Management scholars have also contributed to this debate, arguing that CSR and its associated stakeholder dialogue, is a tool for containment with outcomes being eternally constrained by 'business case' logic (Palazzo and Richter 2005, Banerjee 2007, Fleming and Jones 2013).

Ensuing debates have emerged regarding the risks of CSR dialogue for civil society organisations in terms of containment, cooptation and institutionalisation. It is at this juncture that this article contributes to these debates, by drawing upon Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' to develop a critical understanding of business/civil society engagement. The remainder of this section examines how research has connected social movement approaches to stakeholder theory and discusses how movements have sought to influence business practice. It then goes onto discuss processes of incorporation through an examination of Coy and Hadeen's (2005) dimensions of cooptation. Finally, the section examines more closely the concept of incorporation and its potential application for business/NGO relations.

While the utilisation of social movement theory outlined above has provided significant insights into the action repertoires which NGOs have utilised to gain influence as 'secondary stakeholders' and moral watchdogs of corporate activity, it utilises only a partial aspect of the processes of social movement activism and analysis. One can also examine the contribution of social movement analysis to understanding the challenges that develop from the response of established institutions to new issues (Burchell and Cook 2012). Social movement research has paid particular attention to the potential for co-optation and institutionalisation, suggesting that institutionalisation often signals the end of the movement (Andrew 2010). Meyer (1993) argues movements end when they reach some sort of accommodation with the state and are 'no longer interested or able to mount extra-institutional challenges' (Meyer 1993; 157). Morgan (2007) suggests that the dominant paradigmatic view is that movements experience an institutionalization process by which:

both the form and content of protest undergo a shift from confrontation to negotiation and
co-operation (Morgan 2007; 274)

For theorists such as Della Porta and Diani (1999) and Lo (1992) this institutionalization process
is reflected in a structural change within movements as they become more 'professionalised' and
focused upon established political channels. For Meyer and Tarrow (1998), institutionalization
carries the threat of co-optation as movements are forced to modify their claims and give up
more disruptive forms of activism.

Analysis of co-optation has a long and varied history extending across a range of interactions
between civil society and both political and business actors. Selznick (1949) identified co-
optation as a process of absorbing challenging elements into established decision-making
structures, thus averting threats to an organisation's goals. Similarly, Murphree, Wright and
Ebaugh (1996; 451) define the process as 'attempts to influence the opposition and dilute its
resistance by incorporating its members into the legitimate structure of the negotiating process.'
Co-optation has been utilised to examine a broad range of interaction processes with a strong
emphasis upon conflict and the perceived threat to the power and resources of established
organisations (See Lacy 1977). It thus focuses upon attempts by established actors to resist new
challengers (Gamson 1990) and to control and restrict their actions; what Campbell describes as
the establishment's ability to 'bend without breaking' (Campbell 2001; 354).

Processes of co-optation have also been identified within institutionalisation studies, looking at
broader business-stakeholder relationships. Oliver (1991), combines institutional and resource
dependence perspectives in predicting strategic responses to institutional processes. Identifying
five types of strategic response on a scale from passivity to active resistance, Oliver identifies co-
optation as a key tactic within a strategy of manipulation.[3] By utilising co-optation tactics, Oliver
argues, organisations seek to 'neutralize institutional opposition and enhance legitimacy' (1991;
157). A broad range of differing strategies have been identified as part of the co-optation
process, including bringing protest leaders into the political system (Dye and Zeigler 1987), and

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[3] Manipulation is here defined as 'the purposeful and opportunistic attempt to co-opt, influence or control
institutional pressures' (Oliver 1991; 157).

adopting protest issues without implementing significant policy change (Buttel 1992). Murphree, Wright and Ebaugh (1996) categorise these differing strategies in terms of channelling, inclusion/participation and salience control, discussed later.

While the work above highlights the broader significance of co-optation as a potential response to institutional challengers, Coy and Hedeen's (2005) work connects directly with this current discussion as it examines the multi-faceted nature of co-optation processes surrounding the institutional challenges of social movement activism. As an attempt to 'bring some conceptual coherence to what is a complicated process of social interaction' (Coy and Hedeen 2005; 409) their division of the co-optation process into inception, appropriation, assimilation and regulation stages helps to provide an evolutionary picture of the different aspects of institutional responses to social movement challenge.

The first stage of the model, 'inception', focuses upon the emergence of the challenge and movement mobilisation. As identified above, this is where much of the analysis regarding NGO engagement with business has been focused, with work centred upon NGO's use of unconventional tactics to gain secondary stakeholder status. The second stage of the model focuses upon processes of appropriation, and it is here that the model offers potential insight for advancing knowledge around business/civil society interactions around CSR. Coy and Hedeen describe a dual process of appropriation, both through the appropriation of the language and methods of the challenging movement, and by the appropriation of the work of movement actors via opportunities for participation/inclusion in decision-making processes (Coy and Hedeen 2005; 413). The third stage of the model focuses upon assimilation, as 'the state and vested interests assimilate both the individuals and goals of the challenging movement' (Coy and Hedeen 2005; 420). This process is designed to make it increasingly difficult for the social movement organisation to maintain its challenge. The final stage in the process focuses upon 'regulation' in which the established actors 'routinize, codify and regulate' activity within the area of challenge.

While presenting the process of movement co-optation within a four phased, stepped model, Coy and Hedeen stress that this progression is rarely distinctly linear. Further they emphasise that 'the social dynamics of co-optation are not made up of some inexorable force progressing toward a preordained and complete co-optation of challenging movements' (Coy and Hedeen 2005; 426). What the model demonstrates, however, is the range of potential co-optation pressures facing movements and the distinct organisational, tactical and linguistic challenges they must confront. By examining the different stages and breaking down processes of co-optation into constitutive parts, they argue, one gets a clearer understanding of the pressures for co-optation and the potential for movements to resist and challenge these pressures. While scholars may rightly identify, and seek to examine, co-optation processes around CSR reflective of the third and fourth stages, our discussion in this article focuses predominantly upon the second stage. In the subsequent discussion therefore, the article will look in detail at the dual processes of appropriation via language and participation and provide a theoretical reflection on the potential to view developments within CSR dialogue as evidence for the co-optation of NGOs.

Appropriation of Language: The Emerging Discourse of CSR

Coy and Hedeen's analysis demonstrates how appropriation of language occurs both through the appropriation of terminology and through the redefinition of terms (Coy and Hedeen 2005; 414). Within CSR, and more extensively within discussions of the related concept of SD, significant attention has been paid to the appropriation and redefinition of language by the business community, seeking to identify connections between sustainable and responsible practice and the core business commitments to economic growth. Often evolving from a Foucauldian discourse perspective, a number of theoretical and empirical analyses of CSR highlight how the language of the environmental and anti-capitalist movements have been appropriated into a framework for responsible business practice based upon maintaining 'business as usual'. Discourses reflect and sustain social practices and institutional forms by helping to arrange the world in specific ways that then come to be accepted (Livesey 2002, Fairclough 1992, Foucault 1972). Foucault's work examines how knowledge is constituted within particular domains and its connections to the institutionalization of power (See Livesey and Kearins 2002; 237), while critical discourse approaches examine discourse as a dialectical struggle over language and meaning, involving the

colonisation and appropriation of different discourses. Changes in discourse, it is argued, are rarely based upon the direct substitution of one discourse for another, but involve the creation of a new articulation of discourse.[4] The ability to hybridise discourse and colonise or appropriate a practice or social field with ones chosen discourse is closely related to power dynamics.[5]

Discourse analysts have contributed significant insight regarding the appropriation and co-optation of language, identifying both CSR and SD as reflecting a process of transition within which social, ethical and environmental concerns have become central to debates regarding the role of business in society. Examples from the SD field show the importance of controlling discourse, especially when the central concepts are open to contrasting interpretations. Escobar (1995), for example, argues that the discourse of SD has been utilised to allow established actors to paste the notion of environmental managerialism onto established models of development economics. Similarly Ganesh (2006) stresses the processes of containment within SD discourse, claiming that:

> the tendency to discuss sustainable development in terms of the ecological stress on economic endeavours rather than on the ecological impact of the economy reflects a key assumption of conventional sustainable development discourse: that environmental crises are solvable within the limits of the current global political economy (Ganesh 2006; 16).

Such approaches suggest that SD discourse has experienced a transition, redirecting it away from a radical call for societal change and towards a neoliberal reformist agenda emphasising piecemeal change, framed within a capitalist framework of ecological modernisation (EM). Welford's (1997) discussion of the 'hijacking' of environmentalism, for example suggests that industry has appropriated the radical environmental debate and placed it within a mainstream liberal-productivist framework. The growing predominance of EM from the late 1980s onwards (Hajer 1995, Mol and Spaargaren 2000) has undoubtedly been core to this process.[6]

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[4] Bernstein, for example talks about the process of 'intertextuality' in which texts are appropriated and utilised within differing social environments. Fairclough in a similar vein talks about the 'hybridity of discourse' as new developments bring together previously different and distinct fields.

[5] i.e. to the power that one has to establish a particular discourse as the dominant interpretation. See for example Chouliaraki and Fairclough

[6] For more detailed summaries of ecological modernisation theory see for example Pataki (2009), Mol and Spaargaren (2000).

EM has encompassed a broad set of parameters in a relatively short period of time. As Pataki (2009) summarises, theorists have approached it as a distinct social theory (Cohen 1997, Buttel 2000), as a dominant public policy discourse (Hajer 1995) and as a framework for environmental policy change from local to international level (Gibbs 2000). At its core however is the contention that economic development and environmental protection are not as deep adversaries as previous ecological theory implied and a focus upon the increased economic value that is possible from a more respectful use of ecological resources. Hence,

> EM theorists point to the possibility to 'channel' the competitive dynamics of advanced market economies, constantly producing new products, processes and forms of organizations, into an ecologically SD path (Pataki 2009, p. 83).

Through the development of EM, it is argued, processes of co-optation have involved not only the organisations and parties championing the environmental cause, but also the language of the environmental critique. Research by Dryzek (1997) and Hajer (1995), amongst others, highlights the importance of controlling discourse within such a contested environment. While Dryzek argues that the ability to influence the environmental discourse represents a significant weapon in defining its parameters and subsequent responsibilities, Hajer (1995) identifies EM as a framework for environmental discourse which fits with existing institutional structures. Both highlight EMs ability to dilute the drive towards environmental change by masking the contradictions between successful environmental protection and economic growth and increased consumption.

While the impetus for more ethical business practice has been influenced by a range of external pressures, such as the anti-capitalist protests (see Aguilera et. al. 2007, Clark and Hebb 2004), CSR has been perceived as the business reaction to these concerns and their impact upon notions of 'legitimate' business practice. Like the EM debates above, CSR is often identified as a hybrid discourse appropriating the language of social responsibility, citizenship and ethics within a framework for continued business growth (See Grayson and Hodges 2004). Livesey and Kearin's analysis of sustainability reporting, for example, identifies the process as an attempt to:

reestablish discursive regularity and control in the wake of discursive ruptures by the rise of environmental, consumer rights, and social justice movements. This is to be accomplished by broadening the narrowly economic definition of progress to include notions of environmental and social justice (Livesey and Kearins 2002; 253)

Similarly, Shamir (2004; 680) argues that the standardization of social responsibility transforms the 'politically loaded and morally debated notions of corporate responsibility into a measurable set of indicators that can be exchanged and traded'. One can therefore interpret the evolution of CSR as a new hybridity of discourse, as companies appropriate the language of 'social responsibility', 'citizenship' and 'ethics' within their business plans. As Athanasiou (1996) argues, CSR allows companies to discuss ecological aims without giving up the primary focus upon profit making.

The developing language of the 'business case' for CSR and the 'triple bottom line', it is argued, have been effectively utilised to realign ethics and profit as equally compatible targets. In this context, CSR is perceived as being naturally and inevitably engrained within the core values of a successful, sustainable organisation, without which companies will lose their 'license to operate'. By implication only companies with responsible strategies will survive as self-regulation and consumer awareness will define what is 'acceptable' business practice. Equally, CSR discourse implies that social and environmental responsibility 'is only possible when it does not compromise a corporation's financial/commercial performance' (Munshi and Kurian 2005; 517).

The business response to the anti-capitalist/anti-corporate challenges, framed within the language of CSR, has therefore produced a significant form of hybrid discourse designed to quell concerns over the ethical nature of contemporary business practice; reflecting Springett's (2003; 73) claim that one of the most powerful ways to silence radical critique is to 'own the language of the debate'. Engagement with stakeholders and the development of ethical and environmental strategies are being formulated under the CSR rubric; a framework that allows businesses to manage the process for themselves within a language of their own choosing. Furthermore it emphasises responsibility but not at the expense of profitability; placing the primary responsibility upon the voluntary actions of 'good' companies rather than developing a

regulatory framework. As Boff (2003) suggests, both the discourses of CSR and SD appear to provide a 'magic formula with which the world system of production pretends to solve the problems that it itself has created' (cited in Munshi and Kurian 2005; 515). Hence, a challenge that initially rested on questioning the very rationale of corporate activity has been co-opted and appropriated into a discourse in which companies are seen as providing the solutions. As Windsor (2001) argues, the relationship between business and society continues to be constructed around a discourse based upon corporate interests, not societal interests (cited in Banerjee 2008; 52).

Appropriation via inclusion/participation: Co-optation through stakeholder dialogue and engagement

While discourse and language provide one channel for appropriation and co-optation, the more direct processes of engagement and dialogue presents another. Coy and Hedeen's stage model identifies three different processes through which co-opting agents seek to appropriate social movements through opportunities for participation. Firstly, 'channeling', reflects the dominant group's efforts to redirect movement activities away from substantive challenge towards modest reforms. Secondly, 'inclusion' focuses upon bringing movement activists into more direct roles in decision-making ; increasing their sense of ownership even if these decisions don't reflect substantive change. The third strategy is 'salience control' whereby movement activists gain the perception that their concerns are being addressed and can be deprioritised.

Given the potential of participation to act as a framework for co-optation, the following discussion considers the expansion of CSR-related stakeholder engagement and dialogue processes within this context and highlights two key themes. First, an over-emphasis within stakeholder literature upon a business-centric analysis of emerging relationships. Second, it reflects on existing social movement research to demonstrate how theorists have examined the threats of co-optation within the environmental movement; highlighting the connections to the role of discourse in encouraging a restricted, more pragmatic, form of participation.

Stakeholder engagement strategies have become key to many companies' CSR processes.[7] Central to the stakeholder concept are the emerging relationships between business and civil society; what Waddock describes as 'the embeddedness of the corporation into a network of stakeholder relationships' (Waddock 2001; 9). However, analysis of these relationships has remained relatively one-sided, with a significant over-emphasis upon the role and impact on business in contrast to the stakeholder groups they are interacting with (Frooman 1999, Friedman and Miles 2002).

Where research has focused upon business - NGO interaction, the majority of this analysis has focused upon the development of formal partnerships (See for example Andriof et. al. 2003), while little work has examined the changing nature of interaction between business and civil society organizations. As Friedman and Miles note:

> Previous literature has led to a lack of appreciation of the range of organization/stakeholder relations that can occur. In particular, extremely negative and highly conflicting relations between organizations and stakeholders have been ignored or under-analysed (Friedman and Miles 2002; 3).

Van Huijstee and Glasbergen (2010; 251) note a similar prioritisation in research on Business-NGO interactions, claiming that this literature is 'often prescriptive in the sense that it aims to provide advice on how to manage new business-NGO relationships' rather than examining the impact of these relationships.

Social movement research has highlighted the threat of appropriation and co-optation through participation, and reflecting on these experiences can undoubtedly aid our understanding of changing business-NGO relationships. In particular, much can be gained from examining the experiences among environmental movements during the 1990s (Burchell and Cook 2011). The growth of the environmental movement and emerging electoral power of green parties led to increased pressure from established political organisations for direct forms of engagement. This created significant challenges for the environmental movement as Brand's (1999) analysis of the German environmental movement demonstrates.

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[7] A series of high profile dialogues have developed like the British Nuclear Fuels five million pound investment and the supermarkets involvement in 'the race to the top' dialogues.

Direct confrontation on the basis of mass mobilization lost prominence. The struggle for ecological change shifted to different arenas and demanded organizational and strategic changes… The growing discrepancy between the institutionalisation of environmentalism and the preserved fundamentalist self-concept of activists at the grass-roots level caused disorientation and, especially within the Green Party, fierce internal fights between 'fundamentalists' and 'realists' (Brand 1999; 40).

Similarly, Jimenez's (1999) analysis of the Spanish environmental movement highlights an increase in more conventional forms of participation.

As the process of institutionalization progresses, conventional forms of action and negotiation with the authorities prevail, while the role of members shifts from activism to that of mere supporters (Jimenez 1999; 151).

Linking closely to the appropriation of language, theorists have connected the predominance of EM discourse with a growing pragmatism within the environmental movement. Mol (2000; 47) for example, suggests that the increased prevalence of EM has influenced the ideological positioning within the movement, its changing interactions with other organizations and strategic operations. As a consequence the movement was:

oriented towards reforming and fine tuning the institutions of modernity in order to let them fulfill environmental goals (Mol 2000; 48).

If, as Mol claims, the predominance of EM has provoked a deradicalising of the ideology and tactics of movement organisations, has the increased emphasis upon the language of CSR and the increased practice of stakeholder dialogue had a similar pacifying impact? Friedman and Miles provide one of few detailed theoretical attempts to examine the relationships emerging between businesses and NGOs, utilising a 'realist theory of social differentiation' to explore the ways in which stakeholder relationships change over time. They identify an emerging culture around the concept of SD which has 'encouraged both sides to come together to develop solutions-based approaches' (Friedman and Miles 2002; 16).

This development of a 'solutions agenda' appears to mirror Mol's claims for EM, encouraging a reshaping of the context and discourse of debate. As greater emphasis has been channelled towards reforming existing social, political and business frameworks, the debate has moved from questioning the nature of the capitalist system to finding ways to combine social responsibility with established business practice. As a consequence NGOs have been increasingly directed towards dialogue and engagement as a route to influence; as evidenced by the increased engagement from 2000 onwards of NGOs, whose core activities were once policy lobbying and campaigns[8], into direct dialogue with large corporations around their CSR practices.

For NGOs therefore, a significant dilemma accompanies the stakeholder engagement process, reflecting the threat of co-optation. Their position as a key stakeholder rests with their ability to gain public support and maintain their role as some form of 'moral and environmental guardians' for civil society. While direct action campaigning has enabled these groups to develop this position, ultimately they also need to show an ability to develop constructive solutions to maintain support. Direct confrontation gains support when those they are challenging refuse to recognize their shortcomings. However, when businesses seek to engage , NGOs are forced beyond mere critique. An example of this is demonstrated by the British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) dialogues that took place between 2001-2006. Research by Burchell and Cook (2011) identified how some NGO's felt that choosing not to engage provoked challenging questions:

> I thought well what have I been campaigning for all these years, I've been banging on the doors of the nuclear industry, nobody wanted to know and here they are open door saying come in, what if I don't do that, …, it makes a nonsense of the whole groups work over all that time (anti-nuclear NGO interview) (Burchell and Cook 2011; 928).[9]

Challenging the inevitability of co-optation: Emphasising agency in action and language
The discussion above has examined literature from both discourse analysis and stakeholder engagement fields in order to explore the potential for NGO appropriation and co-optation through engagement with SD and CSR. Co-optation pressures are evident regarding both the

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[8] Such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Amnesty International, Oxfam and Age UK, among others.
[9] Interestingly many of the higher profile national environmental groups eventually pulled out of these dialogues but many of their local representatives remained.

processes through which groups engage and the language and discourse framing this engagement. However, while in many cases co-optation is identified almost as an inevitable outcome of engagement, one must always consider the ability of movements to identify and respond to these processes. In this respect, currently too little research focuses on the activities and strategies of the movements themselves, focusing instead upon the ability of the business community to 'manage' and contain these challenges (Valor and Merino de Diego's 2009, Van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010, Burchell and Cook 2012).

With regard to appropriation through participation, analysis of CSR multi-stakeholder dialogue from a movement perspective, suggests that NGOs are in no way walking into dialogue blind. A far more complex relationship exists in which all sides are learning about the challenges of engagement (See Burchell and Cook 2006, 2008, 2011). On some levels, the embrace of dialogue has led to the development of more open relationships and new forms of Business-NGO interaction (Collins and Kearins 2007). While some examples imply that companies are utilising these forms of engagement to neutralise protest, Burchell and Cook (2008) argue that the 'dialogue equals containment' argument is flawed on two fundamental levels.

First, it neglects the diversity of the NGO community. Research by den Hond and de Bakker (2007) and Valor and Merino de Diego (2009) demonstrate how NGOs are developing more complex engagement strategies with companies. While some engage in new dialogic relations, others choose to pursue more traditional relations of protest and campaigning. As Burchell and Cook (2012) summarise, although the threat of co-optation through appropriation is evident, NGOs have maintained an important strategic balance between co-operation and confrontation, not only within individual organisations but across the NGO community.

> While one group may be seen to be following a relatively co-operative, passive strategy towards its relationship with business, this may well be framed within a context of ongoing confrontational external activities which may play a strong role in pushing companies towards engagement which they may otherwise have avoided (Burchell and Cook 2012; 12).

Consequently on the one hand, public pressure is maintained, while on the other this pressure encourages business to engage in meaningful relations with 'friendly' NGOs; thus supporting

Haines' (1984) conceptualisation of a 'radical flank effect'. Second, it is clear that learning through new forms of engagement is a two-way, if often uneven, process. NGOs have gained strategic information about business practice and decision making, which they admit has enabled them to campaign more successfully against companies while remaining selective about engagement decisions (Burchell and Cook 2008).

Similarly, the case for co-optation through the appropriation of the language of CSR can also be questioned. Accepting the critical management claims that CSR will only ever reflect a hollow form of ethical rhetoric masking 'business as usual', arguably underestimates the reflexive potential within this language. Coupland (2010) argues that too much emphasis has been placed upon an assumption that 'CSR can be shaped and controlled by business', suggesting that:

> CSR necessarily invokes legitimacy from beyond the boundaries of an organisation, an industry sector, or business organisations generally. This suggests that CSR may not be managed in a bounded manner. In any interaction both within and beyond the confines of any organisation the concepts and practices of CSR are up for renegotiation (Coupland 2006; 355).

Coupland's analysis reflects a recognition within critical discourse analysis that appropriation and hybridisation of discourse represents not just a struggle for domination, but also a process of resistance (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). As Fairclough notes, an order of discourse is not a closed system, but an open one 'which is put at risk by what happens in actual interactions' (Fairclough 2001; 235). The emphasis upon the contestability of the concepts of CSR and SD should encourage more focus upon the way in which the business appropriation of this language is scrutinised and challenged. Shamir for example, identifies this process of contestation as being between:

> Those players who associate the term 'responsibility' with an ever increasing set of moral duties and corporations and a host of other players who tend to associate the concept of CSR with a voluntary and altruistic spirit and insist, at best, on self regulatory schemes (Shamir 2004; 671)

For Shamir, notions of CSR are shaped by the interplay between popular pressure on corporations and the subsequent response of those corporations. While corporations have utilised

CSR to bridge the gap between traditional business practice and issues of responsibility and sustainability, their adoption of this position has not been without challenge. There is clear scepticism surrounding the business claims to responsibility and sustainability; reflecting a significant loss of trust from within society for the established economic expert system. While companies utilise the language of responsible business, producing a vast array of material to support their claims, societal trust in these organisations as sources of accurate information has diminished. In contrast, company information is challenged from a range of alternative sources from within the NGO community; often perceived to be the more trusted, ethical experts.[10]

Palacios (2010) suggests that the adoption of the language of corporate citizenship opens up channels for challenge as NGOs seek to develop new roles as 'civil regulators', constructing a governance framework challenging the power of multinationals. Movements, such as CorporateWatch, NoSweat and the Clean Clothes Campaign reflect an expanding group of contemporary social movements creating an information and protest network which challenges corporations and presents an alternative picture of responsible business practice which doesn't start from a 'business case' perspective (Burchell and Cook 2006).

The business appropriation of the language of responsibility through CSR discourse has, in some respects changed the parameters within which companies operate and justify their actions. Again, while we may remain sceptical regarding the rationale behind the move to adopt the language of responsible business, the utilisation of such language inevitably generates different expectations of business; expectations that are continuously scrutinised by 'secondary' stakeholders who hold significant public influence and trust. Palacios suggests these movements represent:

> a tangible and effective agent of global civic society's double movement by way of which peoples around the world can protect themselves from the most negative and devastating effects of the unregulated operation of an 'uncaring' capitalism (Palacios 2010; 398).

The adoption of CSR, therefore, has resulted in the business community seeking to appropriate a discourse from a social field in which they are not perceived to be the most trusted voices.

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[10] For example, in the Clean Clothes Campaign's Nike Case File, Nike's Code of Conduct regarding wages and conditions for workers is quoted directly, The study then examines these claims in relation to wages for workers in Indonesia, Vietnam, El Salvador etc. A similar level of scrutiny is undertaken regarding the Code of Conduct's commitments on Overtime, rights to collective bargaining and many other aspects (www.cleanclothes.org/companies/nikecase99-11-1.htm).

Seeking a framework for understanding business-NGO engagement

The discussion above, suggests that if one accepts the potential agency of movements and actors for change, it is then necessary to develop an understanding of business-NGO engagement around CSR which recognises both the ability of actors to adopt a range of differing strategies to engagement and also the contestability of the precise meaning and language of CSR itself. In doing so, one develops a picture of engagement which does not fit comfortably into a 'CSR equals co-optation' scenario. This is not to deny that a significant power imbalance exists between the parties, but a more nuanced picture needs to be developed to fully understand the interactions developing within the CSR field. If more than simply a process of co-optation, how then do we understand the impact of these new interactions? The work of Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2000) may provide one framework, raising the prospect of an alternative interpretation of interaction.

Mouffe's analysis focuses upon an evaluation of democratic processes, an exploration of the hegemonic power relations situated at the heart of political systems and a critique of existing notions of deliberative democracy. Mouffe argues that power and antagonism are core to the democratic process and that conflict is essential to the formation of collective identities. She distinguishes between 'the political' which consists of 'the dimension of antagonism that is evident in all human society' and politics which she defines as 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence' (Mouffe 1999; 754). Politics, she argues, consists of trying to defuse antagonism. It is not, as in deliberative democracy, about removing antagonism through the creation of consensus, but about seeking a framework within which such conflict can be contained within the boundaries of pluralist democracy. Whereas deliberative democracy identifies consensual decision making as a significant end point in the political process, Mouffe identifies 'conflictual consensus' merely as the starting point from which the discussion begins (Machin 2012; 860). Given that antagonism represents an immovable and core aspect of 'the political', democratic processes that aim to remove antagonism represent, by definition, flawed frameworks. Consensus, for Mouffe, is merely 'a temporary expression of a hegemony, of a specific pattern of

power relation' (Cited in Yamamoto 2011; 165) As Laclau and Mouffe note in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001):

> It is vital for democratic politics to acknowledge that any form of consensus is the result of a hegemonic articulation, and that it always has an 'outside' that impedes its full realization (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; xviii).

Mouffe recognises the necessity of interaction between groups, however it is the nature of this engagement that is significant. Examining these processes within the structural frameworks of 'politics', she identifies a transition from states of 'antagonism' in which conflict takes place between enemies who seek each other's destruction, towards a position of 'agonism' wherein conflict exists between 'adversaries' who oppose one another but who regard each other as holding 'legitimate' views; i.e. 'somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question' (Mouffe 1999; 755). Within an agonistic relationship, groups are not expecting to negotiate an acceptable compromise or to reach consensus. They are simply seeking to gain a position of hegemonic control within accepted parameters; what Mouffe describes as the democratic art of 'domesticating hostility' (Mouffe 2000; 101).[11] Conflict is not removed by engagement with this process. Indeed, Mouffe recognizes that agonistic pluralism cannot exist without an antagonistic 'outside'. Conflict, she argues, is the basis of 'the political', but through agonistic pluralism, it is channeled into a relationship in which competing groups:

> while acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents' (Mouffe 2005; 20).

The framework of agonistic pluralism therefore rests upon recognising the centrality of conflict within the democractic process, and identifying this as a strength not a weakness. Agonistic pluralism encourages the development of a political space which facilitates difference and debate. In such an environment, Mouffe suggests, it is possible to share with an adversary a set of basic ethico-political principles but experience 'disagreement concerning their meaning and implementation' which cannot be resolved 'through deliberation and rational discussion'

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[11] For more detailed discussion of these concepts see Mouffe (1999), Ramsey (2008).

(Mouffe 1999; 755). Tension, disagreement and debate are core to a democratic ideal for Mouffe. As she summarises:

> a great part of democratic politics is precisely about finding more or less precarious ways of
> negotiating that tension. What is misguided then, is not the attempt to negotiate the tension, but
> only the search for a final rational resolution of it ' (Mouffe 2000b; 120)

Within this framework, groups will interact and decisions will be made. What is significant however, is that these interactions and decisions do not represent a consensual final outcome. Decisions merely represent 'temporary moments, fleeting resolutions between competing options with potentially lasting effects but no enduring closure' (Machin 2012; 859). This framework of agonistic pluralism offers an insightful approach towards the processes of business-NGO engagement surrounding SD and CSR.

Mouffe's work has significant resonance if one considers placing the core tenets of 'SD' and 'CSR' within the parameters of 'basic ethico-political principles'. While Mouffe notes that a level of consensus is required regarding the significance of these core principles,[12] she argues that 'there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of those values and the way they should be implemented' (Mouffe 2009; 551-552). The hegemonic struggle lies in shaping the interpretation of these principles (Yamamoto 2011; 166). Machin's (2012) analysis of Green citizenship expands on Mouffe's conceptualisation of core principles. Conceptualising an 'agonistic green citizenship' rooted in notions of 'responsibility', she argues:

> Responsibility would be valued, despite the lack of agreement about its interpretation; it
> would be understood that consensus on the substantive meaning of responsibility was an
> impossibility. However, responsibility also exists in the very absence of possibility of agreement on
> its substantive meaning. Cherishing conflict regarding the definition of responsibility is itself a
> responsibility. (Machin 2012; 860-61).

Following Machin's lead, one can locate notions of 'sustainability' and 'social responsibility' within the parameters of ideals which provide a space for difference and debate but remain essentially contested concepts over which there is a hegemonic battle of interpretation. This is

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[12] She focuses predominantly upon notions of 'liberty' and 'equality' as key principles underlying democracy,

reflected in both Jacobs' (1995) claim that SD is not merely ambiguous but essentially contested, and Peterson's (1997) description of sustainability as a social goal as much as a scientifically determinable characteristic. Bosselmann's (2006) identification of over sixty definitions for SD, highlights Jacobs' claim that these interpretations reflect 'very divergent and at times incompatible conceptualizations of how the concept should be put into practice' (Jacobs, 1995, 5).

The increased utilisation and engagement with these concepts, has enabled some businesses and NGOs to take engagement beyond a simplistic antagonistic relationship in which both sides merely sought to criticise, damage and discredit one another. Hence we have seen the development of a range of more agonistic relationships, in which there is at least a limited agreement that contemporary business has to engage with social and environmental issues and responsibilities and seek a sustainable future, even if perceptions of that sustainable future vary wildly. McNeill's analysis reflects this, suggesting that concepts such as SD help to 'loosen entrenched positions' and 're-shape debate' (McNeill, 2000; 12), primarily because they remain definitionally vague and open to interpretation. Livesey similarly sees the value in ambiguity surrounding SD:

> Its broad goals served as an umbrella for, and forged common bonds among, those with widely divergent interests precisely because such broad goals permitted radically different responses to understanding, representing and solving the problems of the natural environment and social development (Livesey, 2002; 315).

Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism helps to contextualise this ongoing battle surrounding the discourse of SD and CSR, suggesting a process of continual hegemonic confrontation over their precise meaning and application and emphasising the innate contestability at their core. In this context, Chouliaraki and Fairclough's conception of 'discourse as resistance' is significant here, but is a theme that has been lacking from the majority of CSR analysis. Analysis, both positive and critical, has tended to start from a presumption that we accept a definition of these concepts rooted within the language of EM and driven largely by the business community. Consequently, significant attention has been devoted in both academic and practitioner literature towards the

shaping of a 'business case' for CSR and an emphasis upon 'win-win' scenarios.[13] The significant hegemonic strength of this interpretation is also reflected in the majority of CSR analysis being devoted to assessing and critiquing its role, potential and impact from a business perspective[14]. However, as Shamir (2004; 680) notes, these concepts are 'politically loaded and morally debated notions of corporate responsibility'. The appropriation of the language of social responsibility by the business community undoubtedly demonstrates the power of these actors to redirect and redefine discourse within this field. However, the presumption that we should then view processes of engagement as reflecting a consensual compromise framed within this 'business case' and business focused interpretation of CSR and bound by the demands of the business community is misleading.

Accepting the importance of creating a 'sustainable' society does not in itself, provide the basis for evidence of a consensus between business and social movements, or grounds for claiming that the business community has successfully co-opted the challenge to 'business as usual' through engaging stakeholders in dialogue around CSR. Adopting an agonistic perspective allows us to highlight the innate contestability of these concepts and the processes that surround them. As Machin emphasises, in order to act responsibly towards the environment one must 'acknowledge the impossibility of total agreement' and 'celebrate rather than disguise the inevitable existence of disagreement over what an environmental good is' (Machin 2012, 862). This disagreement is further highlighted in Brown's (2010) analysis, which notes that:

> the ways in which the radical NGOs conceptualize their ecological concerns are not the same as the ways in which green business understands them. (Brown 2010; 94).

While ideas of 'Responsibility' and 'Sustainability' provide a framework for engagement there are significant tensions between 'competitive market model, western stage notions of development, and values of ecological sustainability and social equity' (Livesey and Kearins 2002; 253). Dialogue has brought some groups closer together, resulting in moves from directly hostile relations towards less confrontational forms of interaction - from antagonism to agonism – but this does not necessarily remove the underlying difference in perspective between groups.

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[13] for a detailed discussion of this process and the limitations it imposes see Nijhoff and Jeurissen 2010.
[14] For a detailed critique of these perspectives see Frooman 1999, Friedman and Miles 2002, Steurer 2006, Van Huijstee and Glasbergen (2010), Kourulla and Laasonen 2010).

It certainly does not remove or lessen the significance of more antagonistic relations between groups from both business and NGO perspectives. This includes not only the groups engaged in dialogue but also those who have chosen not to engage, but are still able to influence the debate.

The application of an agonistic model to business-NGO engagement therefore provides a framework for analysis which allows for engagement, but does not necessarily equate this with co-optation. NGOs' willingness to enter into dialogue around the contested notions of SD and CSR, should be examined within the context of an agonistic 'politics' in which engagement with these debates does not equate to a consensual acceptance of the limitations of 'the business case language' and business led stakeholder frameworks. Further, the necessary existence of antagonism within 'the political', is reflected in NGOs' ability to engage in such dialogue, yet retain their more radical campaigning perspectives and ideological critique of contemporary business practice.

Such practices were highlighted in Burchell and Cook's previous analysis of changing relationships through stakeholder dialogue. NGOs described a strategy of 'pragmatic professionalism' within dialogue whereby their engagement was undertaken within the context of critical scepticism regarding the aims and objectives of the businesses involved and the setting of a threshold of ethical practice before dialogue could take place. Further, groups such as Amnesty International spoke of their refusal to accept that participation in dialogue precluded them from direct campaigning against the same company. NGOs have been prepared to engage in dialogue, but have often done so from a position of caution and distrust. Failed dialogues, in a number of cases, were characterised by a failure of both sides to move beyond the underlying tensions and disagreements at the heart of interpretations of responsible business, with both businesses and NGOs talking about the 'unrealistic' expectations of their counterparts. This has resulted in some NGOs withdrawing from dialogue entirely and returning to more antagonistic forms of interaction, while others have adopted a more strategic process of selective engagement (Burchell and Cook 2012).

An agonistic framework also encapsulates the broader picture of engagement beyond individual business-NGO relationships and helps to contextualise the important interaction between organisations. Burchell and Cook's (2012) analysis argued that;

> While the threat of co-optation through appropriation is evident, NGOs have quite clearly maintained an important strategic balance between co-operation and confrontation, not only within individual organisations but across the NGO community (2012; 10).

Similar complex dynamics between conflict and co-operation within and between NGOs were reflected in Valor and Merino de Diego's (2009) research. Both studies re-enforce the importance of Haines' (1984) 'positive radical flank effect' scenario, and demonstrate that agonistic relations continue to be shaped and influenced by the context of more antagonistic relations, beyond the dialogue process. A prime example of this process involved a major retailer initiating a dialogue process with WWF regarding ethical sourcing of materials, which WWF felt had been directly driven by an ongoing protest against the same company by another NGO utilising direct action techniques (See Burchell and Cook 2011).

Conclusion

This article has focused upon business-NGO relationships and examined whether patterns of engagement and dialogue surrounding the CSR agenda represents a co-opting of movement protest. By examining the potential for co-optation through the appropriation of language and participation in stakeholder engagement processes, the article demonstrated that while there is potential for co-optation within such processes, there is a tendency to view co-optation almost as an inevitable outcome of engagement. This is largely due to two key misconceptions. First there is a failure to consider the ability of movements to recognise the threat of co-optation and develop different forms of engagement strategy. Second, there is an underplaying of contestability within the discourse of CSR and SD and the potential of 'discourse as resistance'. By emphasising the potential agency of movements as agents of change, the article has presented an understanding of business-NGO engagement around CSR which recognises both the ability of actors to adopt a range of differing strategies to engagement and also the central role of the contestability of meaning and language of CSR itself. By doing so, we have suggested a picture of engagement which does not fit comfortably into a 'CSR equals co-optation' scenario.

Adopting Mouffe's framework of agonistic pluralism, the article has re-emphasised the importance of conflict and challenge into the discussion of stakeholder dialogue. Mouffe's conceptualisation helps to explain why NGO engagement in stakeholder dialogue processes does not necessarily equate to an acceptance of 'business case' led interpretations of social responsibility and how these forms of engagement can sit within a broader pattern of more antagonistic engagement. Movements possess the potential to be agents of change and their ability to contest the meaning and language of CSR and employ multiple strategies to influence change is key in CSR's evolution. Rather than connecting dialogue with containment and a search for consensus, Mouffe's framework enables us to understand the continuance of conflict between parties struggling to influence the interpretations of responsible business.

As conflict is not dispelled by shifts to new agonistic relationships and because not all parties engage, pressures upon business to address the more critical/radical concerns of NGOs do not simply disappear. They are in fact an essential part of an agonistic pluralist perspective and play a fundamental role pressurising businesses to engage in dialogue with those they perceive to have more 'reasonable' claims and holding business claims of responsibility to account. In this sense engagement around CSR does not represent the end point in the debate on responsible business practice. Groups are engaging around CSR not in order to negotiate an acceptable compromise or to reach consensus through rational debate. They are, by contrast, seeking to gain a position of hegemonic control over the definition and framing of responsible business practice while continuing to exert pressure through more conflictual tactics.

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