Engaging with the contradictions of capitalism

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Introduction

We live in an era of environmental and social crisis. Humanity's inventiveness has over the last two centuries created unimaginable wealth for a small part of the world's population. However, this has come at a huge environmental cost in terms of biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and climate change; degrading the very ecosystems upon which we depend as a species. In order to be relevant in the future, business schools need to play a central role in confronting this most critical of issues. However, much of what passes for 'sustainability' education remains wedded to a defence of the system which has generated this crisis; free-market capitalism. Naïve best case scenarios are promoted to justify continuous economic growth and consumption, albeit in a marginally less unsustainable fashion. In this chapter we argue that we are facing a far more profound sustainability challenge.

The chapter explores how sustainability education might contribute to a reimagining of our economic system and the role of business. Based on our experience in developing and teaching sustainability curricula in business schools, we highlight some of the challenges such a concept highlights. For instance, sustainability defies the hierarchy of our thinking in business schools by placing the environment, not the economy, or even society, at the centre of our understanding. How might we then re-imagine a new hierarchy in which nature sets the boundaries for what is doable and desirable? Genuine sustainability also confronts the idea of a simple market justification for human action. How can we imagine other values and justifications where relations between individuals, society and nature are based on more than market fetishism? Tomorrow's citizens will also need to understand how to manage organisational and social change in an era of unprecedented environmental and social crisis. How can we teach the concept of managing the unmanageable? While these ideas are heretical to the established order of business education, and hence require that we use materials from

the broader arts and social sciences, we argue that they are central to the future relevance of the business school in our changing world.

Sustainability: The problems we confront and how we got here

Humanity's impact upon nature and the environment has become increasingly evident as a product of our technological innovation, the expansion of consumption, and our growing population. Dubbed the 'Great Acceleration' (Steffen, et al., 2007), human activities in the period since 1950 have not only brought improved health and living standards to many millions around the world, but have also irrevocably changed our planet, resulting in an unprecedented degradation of natural resources (McKibben, 2010). In the words of the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment:

> Over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber, and fuel. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth. (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005: 2)

The dominant factor underlying such environmental degradation has been our species' economic and technological inventiveness, such that we now have the power to fundamentally change the very nature of our atmosphere and ecosystem, with likely catastrophic effects (Anderson and Bows 2008). Indeed, we are currently poised to cross a number of interdependent 'planetary boundaries' including climate change, biodiversity loss, changes to the nitrogen cycle, ozone depletion, and ocean acidification (Rockström et al. 2009, Whiteman et al. 2013). Crossing these boundaries is likely to result in irreversible environmental changes limiting human development. Despite increasing discussion of climate change 'adaptation' and even 'geoengineering' as a solution to some of these problems (Hamilton, 2013), scientific projections emphasise likely catastrophic outcomes from a continuation of 'business as usual'. We are on the track for 3-6 degrees Celsius average global warming by 2100 resulting in significant sea-levels rise and likely societal breakdown, with much of this locked in within the next decade or so (IPCC, 2013; Stafford Smith, et al., 2011).

Clearly there is little that is 'sustainable' in our current economic and environmental trajectory. Graphs of greenhouse gas emissions, aggregate consumption patterns and population growth all demonstrate an almost exponential increase over the last four to five

decades. The disconnect between our economic imaginary of endless economic growth and the natural limits of our ecosystem are at the heart of the debate about sustainability. Indeed, harking back to Karl Marx's original observations about capitalism's reliance on the unending exploitation of nature (Foster 2000), the current destruction of the environment is not so much an unfortunate by-product of industrialisation, but rather an essential feature of our dependence upon continued economic growth and the expansion of consumption (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994, York 2004). This process of environmental destruction aligns with the depiction of capitalism as based upon crises and the 'enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces' (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998, p. 42). Later conceived by Schumpeter (1942) as a process of 'creative destruction', the technological innovation and entrepreneurship that characterise capitalist dynamism also involves the destruction of previous forms of capital accumulation and natural resources.

Given what is at stake (the future of our society and indeed the existence of our species), you would think this would be an issue of major concern for governments and forward thinking companies. However, you would be wrong. What has perhaps been even more shocking than the procession of increasingly dire scientific projections of our future has been the collective denial exhibited by governments and industry to the crisis that we now face. Climate change and the broader environmental catastrophe that awaits us is the biggest issue of our time and yet the response from government and business has been to largely ignore the threat. Partly this has been the product of the orchestrated misinformation that vested interests (such as the fossil fuel industries) have promoted (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). However it is also the result of the nature of the problem – the hegemonic belief that we are dependent on the global economic system for our quality of life. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore the debate over climate change (the most prominent manifestation of our unsustainability) has very quickly become a political lightening rod in a broader culture war (Hoffman, 2012).

It is this broader context which informs many of the challenges of teaching sustainability in a university business school. This is the most critical issue we will face in our life-times – yet it is also hugely controversial, political and ultimately threatening to our conventional view of business, economics and our self-identity as consumers, employees and citizens. So how have business schools responded to the challenge of sustainability we now face?

What role for the business school in sustainability research and teaching?

Businesses have of course played a key role in the creation of many of the environmental problems we now face. For instance, one recent study has found that nearly two-thirds of the greenhouse gas emissions generated since the dawn of the industrial age were caused through the activities of just 90 large companies including such well-known brands as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, BP and ConocoPhillips. Moreover, half of these emissions were produced in the last 25 years, a period in which governments and companies have been well aware of the dangers of anthropogenic climate change (Heede, 2014). However, just as businesses have been the major (and knowing) contributors to our current environmental crisis, so many observers look to business as the actor best placed to respond to these threats through technological innovation and economic reinvention. Indeed, concepts of 'ecological modernism' and 'corporate environmentalism' in which businesses are seen as contributors to environmental well-being, have become increasingly evident, not only in academic circles (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000; Mol and Spaargaren, 2000), but also amongst consultants and businesses themselves (Esty and Winston, 2006; Orsato, 2009).

For business schools, consideration of social and environmental issues has traditionally been given short shrift. In reviewing the history of the business school as an institution, its purpose was seen in largely instrumental terms; to educate future managers in the technical and functional skills central to their future role as custodians of shareholder capital. Invariably this led to a focus on the teaching of finance, accounting, operational efficiency, strategy and organisational behaviour. Echoing the concerns of neoclassical economist Milton Friedman (1970: 33), business schools concurred that 'the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits' (see also Siegel, 2009). Where controversy did exist, this focused less on the business school's social impact and more on the relative weighting of applied skills as opposed to management theory (Khurana, 2007). For example, recent critics of the burgeoning Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs, argued that US business schools focused too much on the teaching of the 'science' of management to inexperienced young graduates, ignoring the need for organisational experience and reflection (Mintzberg, 2004, see Srinivas, this volume). While these are important insights, simply getting managers to reflect on their experience says little about the substance of such reflection beyond better ways to maximise profits and shareholder value.

Rather than change coming from within business education, in the last decade or so a range of external factors have driven a reconsideration of the need to better consider social and

environmental concerns in business school curricula. For instance, a procession of corporate corruption scandals (e.g. Enron, WorldCom, Northern Rock, Lehman Brothers), human rights abuses (e.g. Nike and Apple supply chains, Raza Plaza), and the on-going global economic crisis, have led many to point the finger of blame at deficiencies in the way business leaders are themselves educated (Podolny, 2009). In addition to a recognition of the need to better address issues of business ethics, business educators have also focused increasing attention on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability (Christensen, et al., 2007). Evidence for such change can be seen in the growing number of business schools that now promote CSR and sustainability courses in their MBA programs. Initiatives include the development of new courses on sustainability and social entrepreneurship (some programs even seek to embed a minimum percentage of sustainability issues in all core programs), as well as specialist degree programs, such as so-called 'Green MBAs' (Runnalls, 2013).

Sustainability issues then appear to have become fashionable in many US and European business schools and some have sought to make business ethics and sustainability a point of differentiation in their marketing to potential students and corporate sponsors. Indeed, there are influential backers for such a trend. So in responding to the growing social criticism of global capitalism, leading management authorities such as Professor Michael Porter from Harvard and Dominic Barton, Managing Partner of leading management consultancy McKinsey & Co., have argued for a new approach to corporate-social relations. In Porter's case this has involved a focus on corporate-environmental concerns (Porter and van der Linde, 1995), as well as his more recent promotion of the concept of 'creating shared value' (CSV), billed in *Harvard Business Review* as the answer to 'How to fix capitalism – and unleash a new wave of growth' (Porter and Kramer, 2011). For management consultancy, the need for a new approach is driven by the fear that 'Business leaders today face a choice: 'We can reform capitalism, or we can let capitalism be reformed for us, through political measures and the pressures of an angry public' (Barton, 2011). These calls have been matched by activity within corporations worldwide, evident in the growth of new sustainability functions and practices within corporations (Hoffman, 2007; Wright, et al., 2012). Nor is this simply 'greenwashing' and 'spin' but often strategic and operational programs aimed at improving efficiencies and supply chain synergies, reducing costs and carbon footprints, attracting and retaining staff, and developing new products and markets (Dauvergne and Lister, 2013; Lash and Wellington, 2007). This has extended to increasing political activity as 'corporate citizens' seeking to shape legislative outcomes, and the promotion of business as a 'leader' in social and environmental action (Barley, 2007; Nyberg, et al., 2013).

However, there is also much about the 'mainstreaming' of sustainability in business schools that is problematic for critical scholars. In particular, in embracing sustainability, business gurus and educators are often explicit about the limits of such engagement. Businesses need to do this, we are told, in order to respond to the critique of their activities, to restore their 'social licence to operate', and most importantly as a source of future value creation (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Business engagement with sustainability is then essentially a form of risk management. Much as corporations sought to incorporate earlier forms of social criticism by accepting and then adapting critique for their own purposes (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), so we can see the incorporation of sustainability in a similar manner. Capturing the terminology of sustainability allows for some level of definitional closure and a limiting of the true potential of a sustainability critique (a theme we return to in the next section of this chapter).

Secondly, in promoting 'sustainability', businesses and business schools explicitly frame this as a source of value creation. This caveat is evident in the dominant discourse of the 'business case'. While promoters stress the many 'win-win' outcomes that are being achieved by major companies through their sustainability initiatives (Esty and Winston, 2006; Orsato, 2009), this raises the question of what happens when there is no 'business case' for action (Banerjee, 2008)? While sustainability texts make much of the 'three pillars' of sustainability (economic, social and environmental), in practice these are rarely accorded parity and the economic is implicitly defined as the dominant concern. Indeed, in our own research we have found that where the interests of the market conflict with the environment (or society), the former invariably wins out (Nyberg and Wright, 2013). As a result, the enactment of corporate sustainability involves a steady 'corruption' of the good of the environment in favour of the market. This is despite the obvious fact that as environmental economist Herman Daly (1992: 25) noted many years ago, '…what use is a sawmill without a forest?'. Indeed, as John Ehrenfeld argues, what we are often really talking about in the corporate re-conceptualisation of sustainability is being just a little less 'unsustainable':

> It is encouraging to see firms show that they are thinking about sustainability, but they have got it mostly or completely wrong. My concern is not that this new awareness is the wrong thing to do, but it can, at best, produce only incremental Band-Aids... At worst, they are creating harm by fooling us into thinking we are solving the problem. (Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013: 50-1)

In this sense Milton Friedman, if he were alive today, would probably be fairly happy with the direction of corporate actions regarding social and environmental 'responsibilities' and even

perhaps business schools' embrace of sustainability as a subject of study. Sustainability as conceived of within corporate environmentalism aims at improving business profitability while potentially being a 'little less unsustainable'. There is no danger that these corporate initiatives will harm shareholder value, but their positive social and environmental impacts remain at best a useful coincidence. Change from such initiatives remains incremental and based on existing understandings of 'business as usual'. However, in claiming some greater impact this vision of sustainability is also potentially harmful in convincing civil society that this is sufficient to deal with the critical social and environmental problems we now face (Wright and Nyberg, 2014).

Towards a critical teaching of sustainability in business schools

So what might alternative possibilities in teaching sustainability in the business school look like and how might we move forward in building a genuine critical approach to this issue? We don't pretend to have the answers here, however we can reflect on our own experience in developing specialist Masters courses on organizational sustainability in business schools at the University of Sydney and the University of Nottingham. In developing these programs we have used a number of methods to both frame our focus on sustainability in ways that placate faculty gatekeepers, and yet also build student enthusiasm for the empirical specifics of social and environmental challenges, as well as deeper conceptual complexities.

Our first point is that sustainability, if taken seriously, is potentially a heretical, and possibly even, revolutionary concept. Clearly this comes back to how 'sustainability' is defined and how the implications of this definition are drawn out. Indeed, this is often where we have started our sustainability teaching; going back to a very basic understanding of the concept of sustainability and then unpacking what this might mean for our understanding of business and capitalism more broadly. For instance, in contrast to the mainstream interpretation of 'sustainability' in which social and environmental values are compromised in favour of the market, we suggest sustainability is better understood as the ability of humanity and its economic activities to live within the carrying capacity of the planet. This framing draws on the classic definition of sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, '…development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commision on Environment and Development, 1987: 44). However, we also stress the growing scientific evidence that we are now exceeding planetary boundaries (Whiteman, et al., 2013). For instance, humanity globally is consuming the equivalent of one and a half planets' worth of resources every year (and for

those in the developed economies like the US the equivalent of four planet Earths!) (Global Footprint Network, 2011). This ecological overshoot continues to grow as our population and consumption expands. Moreover, our current economic thinking is reliant on ever-continuing growth, hence the concept of living within the carrying capacity of the plant is, despite its physical necessity, revolutionary. It challenges the very basis of our economic system (Jackson, 2009).

Given the above, a common opening discussion in our sustainability teaching is whether 'sustainability', as we are defining it, is in fact possible in an economic system reliant upon 'unending' material economic growth? Core concepts we include here are Kenneth Boulding's metaphor of 'spaceship Earth' (Boulding, 1966), the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968), the limits to growth (Meadows, et al., 1972), and a more realistic depiction of the 'triple bottom-line' conception of sustainability in which environmental well-being underpins the existence of society and within that, an economy (Elkington, 1997). Beginning the teaching of sustainability from these basic, and interdisciplinary, concepts is essential in breaking the established paradigms of 'business as usual' and also questioning the assumptions that we uncritically accept in business education. This then opens up space to query other features of global consumer capitalism, in particular the normalisation of hyper-consumption and how this blinds us to the broader connectivity of our actions (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005; Wood, 2012). Going to the heart of what 'sustainability' means, forces students to reconsider the nature of our economic system and the inherent unsustainability of our way of life. If anything, this is perhaps the long-term objective of our teaching in these types of courses; allowing students to go to a more fundamental questioning of business and capitalism and relate this back to their own personal values and goals.

Pointing out the limits to finite resources limits the possibility to promote sustainability within the conventional 'win-win' optimism of corporate environmentalism. Framing the society and economy within environmental boundaries also enables us to delve deeper in exploring the contradictions of sustainability as popularly understood. For example, one exercise we often use to demonstrate the problem of a neoclassical economic understanding of the 'tragedy of the commons' is the 'fishing game' (Hardin, 1968; Prothero, 2011). Here students in groups act out the role of atomistic businesses competing with their colleagues for a finite fish stock under time pressure (they are racing to collect paper clips in a table that represent fish in the ocean). In the context of a game in which they first believe the winner takes all, they quickly deplete the 'fish' on the table and then realise there is little left to enable regrowth for the next 'season' (round two of the game). By allowing students to then talk to

one another and collaborate, students realise some of the advantages of collaboration and the need to manage scarce resources. We supplement this activity with videos, readings and social media on fisheries management, the debate over 'sustainable fisheries', and other relevant examples. Considering planetary boundaries, this particular example can then be used to discuss a range of sustainability issues, such as, climate change, ocean acidification, fresh water and land use. Following Hardin (1968), the key lesson is that there are no easy technical solutions *deus ex machina*. Moral and social developments are required to live sustainably in a resource constrained world.

Considering that there are no technical solutions, how can we think differently about the dire state we are in? This arguably requires shifting our understanding away from the impersonal, apolitical, and technical thinking underpinning business schools towards the 'subjective, situated and normative imaginations of human actors' (Jasanoff, 2010: 235). Considering the grip of free-market capitalism, it is as Jameson noted (2003: 73) 'easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'. Taking the cue from Jameson, is it possible to engage in alternative imaginings of the present, both from the future and the past? In challenging students to imagine an alternative present, the history of science and fiction provide useful resources. For instance, Oreskes and Conway (2014) blend science fiction with history to imagine a future historian looking back on a climate changed past that is our present. The future historian concludes that the ideological fixation on free-market capitalism disabled any action on climate change with disastrous results (Oreskes and Conway, 2014). The view from the future is a powerful heuristic device to imagine alternative presents. Another alternative is to use fiction to imagine a future. For instance, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2003; 2009; 2013) trilogy is speculative fiction about environmental destruction that allows students to imagine the future of the present trajectory. Atwood is adamant that she is not writing science fiction, since everything that happens in the trilogy is possible and parts of the events she depicts may already have happened (Atwood, 2011). This is how creative arts can help student to extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and stretch these to a near-future. Other novels that fulfil a similar purpose for students are Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy (*Forty Signs of Rain* (2004); *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005); *Sixty Days & Counting* (2007)) on a climate changed future.

The alternative to imagine a different present is to use the past. In doing this, we have found Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed* helpful. Diamond (2005) uses the history of previous civilizations (from the Polynesian cultures on Easter Island to the flourishing American civilizations of the Anasazi and the Maya, and to the doomed

Viking colony on Greenland) to forecast our current suicidal tendencies on a societal scale. The parallels between previous collapses and our present situation can help students to think and talk about, current issues such as climate change. The past can be used as a resource to imagine the devastating consequences of current environmental destruction, but also challenge that which blinds us to see the obvious parallels. What are the functions of present stories and narratives in 'hiding' what is in plain view; that we are heading towards environmental and social crisis.

Using these alternatives to imagine the present, students are equipped to challenge our narrow thinking in business schools in regards to the workings of capitalism and corporate strategies. With an emphasis on the role of business, the programs and courses can then set out to answer the question: why despite evidence of emerging sustainability crises, humanity has been so reticent to respond in some meaningful way to avert disasters? Following this, sustainability requires us to re-think or re-imagine how we conceptualize business at different levels of student experiences: societal, organizational and individual. The topicality of sustainability, with examples emerging daily from media, ensures that students recognize the challenges and complexities these issues bring to each of these levels of reflections. Using creative arts and other disciplines allow a broader horizon in understanding these complexities. Since space does not allow us to discuss curricula in detail, the following paragraphs are indications of issues raised teaching sustainability courses.

On a societal, or even global level, sustainability challenges such as climate change, ocean acidification, and freshwater usage, represent truly complex problems. Sorting out the distribution of responsibility and consequences on a global scale in terms of present and future generations, developed and less developed nations, and biodiversity loss without a global jurisdiction or consensus, require compromises with disastrous effects. For business students it is essential that they understand corporate roles in adapting to and influencing societal and global constraints in dealing with sustainability. For example, corporations are increasingly facing carbon emission targets, and trading schemes (Newell and Paterson, 2010). These are frameworks affecting business decisions, both in terms of adapting to the external environment and influencing it through political activities, such as, lobbying, funding think-tanks, astroturfing and media campaigns (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; Nyberg, et al., 2013). The evaluations of these types of activities are well-suited for class debates and group discussions. We have also engaged students in acting out multi-stakeholder meetings and deliberations over proposed legislation, developments (e.g. fracking, tar sands) and distributions (e.g. quotas, tax,

market mechanisms), with students playing corporate, government, regulatory and community roles.

On an organizational or industry level, it is possible to frame the course from the perspective of mainstream business strategy; what are the key business risks and opportunities that businesses face in the next 10 to 20 years? As we have pointed out above, it is not hard to make the case that issues such as climate change, planetary boundaries, and population growth pose profound risks for businesses. Sustainability shapes the resource-constrained world businesses operate in and here we engage students in classifying different risks corporations and industries are facing. So for example using the case of anthropogenic climate change, how might some of the second and third-order impacts of different 'climate change' scenarios impact on different industries and businesses? Here we have used brainstorming and scenario planning exercises around examples such as:

- Risk management for resource, manufacturing and insurance companies for projected increases in extreme weather events such as hurricanes, typhoons and superstorms (e.g. Superstorm Sandy, the 2012 Bangkok floods and Typhoon Haiyan) (C2ES, 2013; Linnenluecke, et al., 2013);
- Strategic planning for defence and national security contractors of climate change as a 'threat multiplier' regarding increasing geopolitical conflict over scarce resources such as water, climate refugees, or access to newly available fossil fuels (Dyer, 2010);
- Implications for the health industry from changed disease vectors and potential pandemics via a warming climate (Martens, 2013);
- Planning for major financial institutions of 'stranded assets' and a carbon bubble re investments in fossil fuel extraction and use (Carbon Tracker Initiative, 2012).

The conclusion of this type of exercise is that all corporations and industries are facing major strategic challenges in regards to their own and others' sustainability.

On an individual or community level, we are reluctant to promote 'green consumerist' discourses since this reinforces a simple green capitalism message (Hamilton, 2010). Rather, we engage students in identifying dissonance between individual practices and beliefs and the identity crises that occur in seeking to narrate a coherent self in a period of ecological crisis (Festinger, 1962; Ricœur, 1991). Considering the possible fragmentation of our beliefs, identities and interests within consumer society, class discussion often surfaces a variety of sustainability issues around consumption, transportation, and energy and water usage. Here we

also allow for self-reflection in term of how students themselves justify their consumption patterns despite understanding the importance of sustainability. Students are also given 'tools' to analyse how they reconcile cognitive dissonance and identity fractions. Examples of frameworks for reflection here include Hirschman's (1970) model of 'exit, voice and loyalty'; how we tamper with or disregard information (Hamilton, 2010); the development of narrative genres or plots (Wright, et al., 2012); and the use of metaphors and metonyms in bridging identity fragmentation (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014).

The discussion of identity work allows students to explore how they can act as change agents within corporations and through social movements, link their personal values with their professional lives, and decode some of the ethical dilemmas we face in an age of resource scarcity. Indeed, the emergence of sustainability discourses has also led to the formation of new roles and departments within organizations dealing explicitly with sustainability issues. While positions such as environmental managers and sustainability consultants are now legitimate within business settings, engaging with sustainability challenges the dominant and privileged discourses of shareholder value and economic growth (Wright and Nyberg, 2012; Wright, et al., 2012). These positions, similar to engaging with social movements, are thus political positions in personifying change and influencing others. The aim of these discussions are thus to prepare students for challenging mainstream business 'thinking', meet criticism, and deal with doubts and uncertainty in an emotional and volatile organisational and political context.

Finally, developing this more critical understanding of sustainability requires an inherently eclectic academic orientation that goes well beyond the usual business framings. While we have developed a critical political-economy perspective on business sustainability linked to critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism (Wright and Nyberg, 2015), in our teaching we also emphasise insights from the fields of environmental politics, geography, sociology, history and critical social theory. Engaging with the broader social sciences is essential in challenging business students' often limited understandings of the world and exposing them to a very different form of writing and sensemaking. So in contrast to the beloved Harvard case method with its formulaic approach, we believe far greater value lies in exposing students to works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) or Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1966). These works not only address sustainability but do so through a personal style that blends literature and political advocacy. Getting students to read these founding classics in parallel with contemporary activists such as Bill McKibben (1989; 2010) and Naomi Klein (2014), or viewing films such as *Gasland* (Fox, 2010) or *Bidder 70* (Gage, 2012) offers insights

into a world that business studies rarely comprehends; the world of wonder, beauty, compassion, loss, fear and anger as our environment is exploited and degraded. These works offer the opportunity to promote a very different subjectivity to that encouraged in traditional business studies; less a concern with the self and provoking a greater awareness of community.

Future challenges in teaching sustainability in the business school

There continues to be significant constraints and challenges to the teaching of a more critical conception of sustainability within the business school. Unlike an arts or social science faculty, the business school purpose is often defined in narrower terms; educating managers, or those who aspire to be managers, and undertaking research which benefits the business community. Sometimes it can be even more instrumental, as a former Dean stated to one of the authors 'it's all about how we make businesses more efficient and effective'. Often there will be some acknowledgement that this also includes other social actors such as government, not for profit and non-government organisations, however in practice most business schools seem to focus their attention on the big graduate employers – financial and professional service firms, manufacturing, resource and fast-moving consumer goods companies – the 'big end of town'. So a first constraint to consider is to what extent the purpose of the business school allows space for (or tolerates) challenging and critical perspectives of sustainability?

In practice, the degree to which such heretical thinking is allowed in the curriculum varies from institution to institution. As we have seen, there are many business schools worldwide that are now focusing on sustainability as a central feature of their teaching and research and use this as a point of differentiation in their marketing and promotion. Moreover, individual academics may be able to develop a consideration of sustainability in their teaching of individual courses. Against this however, is the increasing tendency towards centralised control over curriculum design, evident in the process of business school accreditation, and the potential for direct intervention by more senior colleagues regarding what should be taught. This can become particularly vexed in the 'turf wars' that often accompany curriculum discussions over 'core' courses. Here discussion will often come back to debates over 'what is nice to know and what students need to know'. A topic such as 'sustainability' which lacks a defined disciplinary home is often at a marked disadvantage in the competitive battle for 'core' program space. This is even more likely when it proposes a fundamental critique of the institutions and economic system the business school is charged with upholding!

Beyond the potential marginalisation of sustainability in business school curricula, it is likely that when sustainability is taught, Deans and senior administrators will prefer a soothing message and ideally one that emphasises the 'win-win' outcomes that dominate 'green business' and corporate environmental messaging (Wright and Nyberg, 2014). Here, the business school fulfils the ideological purpose of political myth narration – that we can have economic growth and hyper-consumption and that technological innovation and market mechanisms will solve any resulting environmental and social problems. This is of course an appealing message, but as we have suggested above, ultimately counter-productive in dealing with the urgent environmental crisis we are now facing. One strategy to counter this slippage is perhaps to broaden our imaginations in confronting where this view leads us. It is important to situate the current narrow thinking in an expanded temporality. It is only then students can confront the implications of current trajectories. For specific industries and businesses, using the language of business 'risk' and 'opportunity', while potentially problematic, does provide a framing that can potentially engage business people and students of business. Here the 'burning platform', so beloved of organisational change theorists (Kotter, 1995), becomes a very apt metaphor for broader social and political change.

Finally, there are individual constraints upon business school academics embracing a more critical view of sustainability. In particular, as the academic labour market has become increasingly competitive (and determined largely on individuals' abilities to publish in so-called 'top tier' journals), so the risks for younger academics of researching and teaching outside of the mainstream increase. Within the 'top-tier' (largely US) business and management journals, sustainability-issues remain fringe areas of interest. For instance, business academic discussion of critical environmental issues such as climate change is rare and, despite the significant business implications, often limited to journal special issues (Okereke, et al., 2012; Wittneben, et al., 2012; Wright, et al., 2013). Where sustainability issues are published these invariably take the form of buying into the 'mainstreaming' of sustainability as a contributor to business success (i.e. improved profitability and shareholder value). Indeed, the growing adoption of journal rankings and academic assessment exercises, such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) or the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) are having a profound impact on even critical management scholars, who in the chase for a 'top-tier' publication often tone down the critical intent of their work (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014).

Moreover, the few journals that do publish critical research on sustainability appear endangered under the commercial imperative of publishers seeking to maximise their 'impact

factors'. A good example of this process occurred recently at the journal *Organization & Environment*. Founded in 1987, *Organization & Environment* was one of the leading journals bridging the fields of environmental sociology, critical social theory and organization studies. In 2012, the journal's publisher, SAGE, announced a revamp of the journal and the replacement of its editors with the aim of increasing submissions and the journal's impact. For the previous editor's these changes came as a surprise and led to accusations that the publisher had undertaken 'an editorial coup designed to displace environmental sociology and a leftist critique of environmental issues with an emphasis on the more business-friendly concept of sustainability.' Indeed, the publisher's actions led to the wholesale resignation of the journal's broader editorial board (Angus, 2012). As one-time co-editor and contributor to the journal, John Bellamy Foster lamented:

> *O&E* is being transformed from a self-designated "eco-social" journal with strong links both to critical organizations theory and environmental sociology to one in which environmental sociology will be excluded, in favor of a sustainability-management (or green-capitalist) policy orientation...This represents a major setback for environmental sociology, if not environmental social science as a whole. (Jaschik, 2012)

This example, highlights how mainstream 'business-friendly' depictions of sustainability can in fact result in a further narrowing of critical thinking and the potential of sustainability teaching to challenge business as usual. One response to this narrowing of publication outlets for a critical understanding of sustainability in business and management is to look to other disciplines such as critical social theory, sociology, politics and geography, although the career implications of such choices are unclear.

Conclusion

Our experiences in teaching sustainability in a business school have evolved from our research interests in areas such as climate change and business ethics and as a result are somewhat idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, they are driven by a strong belief that sustainability is a critical issue for students to be aware of, think about, and hopefully act upon in their roles as managers and citizens. Moreover, we think sustainability is an ideal space to expand critical management studies in the business school, as the concept lends itself to deeper questioning of the nature of our economic system and its relationship to society and the natural environment. Sustainability challenges the hierarchy of our thinking in the business school. Sustainability places the

environment in the centre of analysis, not the economy, or even society. While the market has a role to play and human ingenuity can help, the best responses to the numerous environmental crises we face such as biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and climate change, would be to reduce our consumption of the environment. However, with an increasing world population and affluence, this solution is not imaginable. So, how can we re-imagine a business school where economics, or even human beings, are not in the centre of decision making?

This type of question provokes numerous challenges in understanding the role of societies, business schools, and ourselves as employees, consumers and citizens. We need to re-imagine the hierarchies, where nature, rather than the economy or society, sets the boundaries for what is doable and desirable. We need to re-imagine production and consumption, where relations between individuals and society, as well as people and nature, are not based on the ever-increasing consumption of natural resources. And we need to re-imagine the role of the business school, and the knowledges produced by the wider university, in managing the unmanageable. Environmental crisis has clearly illustrated that we cannot 'manage' the environment, we need to build new relations based on new verbs, where human mastery of nature is not taken for granted. The role of business schools would then be to understand the limits to growth, how to let the environment 'manage' the market, provide meaning to identity projects and relations that are not based on material consumption, and develop truly sustainable businesses. Less unsustainable is not sustainable. Are we up for the challenge?

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