

Uneasy Partnerships and Contradictions: Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility

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Introduction

Corporate social and environmental responsibility (CSER) is a concept which has permeated the lexicon of global capitalism since the 1990s. Alternatively known as “sustainability”, “corporate citizenship” and “corporate governance”, CSER has many interpretations but can be defined generally as a set of ethical obligations owed by corporations to society or to the environment. The three pillars of corporate sustainability, also known as the “triple bottom line”, are the equal weighting of social, environmental and economic factors. This is in contrast to the legal obligation of a corporation, which is to ensure maximal profit to shareholders above all other considerations. The depth and breadth of the CSER credo has increased during the past decade in tandem with the elusive and contested term “globalization”. The link between globalization and CSER is one of the themes this paper seeks to explore.

The term “globalization” has catapulted into popular discourse at an exponential rate, its meaning amorphous and shifting. To scholars of the hyperglobalist school such as Friedman and Giddens, globalization signifies the end of all borders, a move towards ultimate placelessness in which the ‘national’ has been superseded (Dicken, 2003, 10). To sceptics such as Hirst and Thompson, globalization exaggerates the extent to which the world economy has integrated (Dicken, 2003, 10). Many scholars link globalization with the expansion of capitalism into a global market economy, and more specifically, with the political and economic ideology of neoliberalism. Other interpretations make a distinction between different types of globalization.

Sornorajah, for example, argues that a “clash of globalizations” is taking place between neoliberal capitalist globalization on the one hand, and “globalization from below”, driven by international ideas of social justice, on the other hand” (2002, 31).

This paper argues that the discourse of CSER is a strategy employed by and for proponents of “neoliberal globalization” to ensure the continued health of global capitalism, implemented in response to repeated crises of legitimation and market pressures. In this analysis, the terms “neoliberalism” and “globalization” are used to describe the economic, political, social and ideological foundations of global capitalism in general, but by no means as a monolithic, rigid or inflexible system. Rather, neoliberal globalization is a complex and often contradictory process, with ever shifting tendencies, and CSER must be considered in relation to this process.

Driving factors behind an increasingly global CSER include crises such as corporate scandals, the anti-globalization movement and threats of binding international corporate regulation rather than voluntary corporate self-regulation. Other factors in the rise of CSER include the drive for competitiveness and innovation in the commercialization of new environmental technologies and increased exposure to social and environmental expenses and liability. In short, the main factors behind CSER stem from the social, environmental and economic impacts of globalization in its varied manifestations.

The discursive strategy of CSER is hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, whereby a social group needs to secure ideological consent in addition to political domination in order to maintain continued power. The shift towards an increasingly global discourse of CSER marks a shift in the strategy of proponents of neoliberal globalization from a rampant and destructive

accumulation strategy resembling the early days of industrialization to a form of self-regulation similar to the early days of the welfare state and the Fordist mode of production. This strategy does not represent a departure or a retreat from the overall project of neoliberal globalization, but rather a deeper retrenchment.

My research will canvas the hegemonic discursive strategy of CSER across a broad spectrum of sites operating within capitalism. I will examine public statements, policies documents and texts of corporations, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business organizations and other actors within global capitalism. In addition, I will draw examples from the Globe 2004 8th Biennial Trade Fair and Conference on Business and the Environment held in Vancouver, Canada between March 31- April 2, 2004, which I attended as a case study into the verbal dynamics of the discourse of CSER. Through the critical unpacking and analysis of the form, function, and implications of the discourse of CSER, my research will seek to reveal the mechanisms and dynamics of this trend, its key assumptions, what it neglects, and how this trend fits into the logic of global capitalism. My paper will analyse the extent to which this hegemonic project coheres discursively, the social forces recruited, and how it is articulated within neoliberal globalization as a distinctive accumulation strategy. I will seek to create a discursive map, linking the networks of social forces within this hegemonic project, drawing comparisons between heterogenous manifestations of CSER, and through this process, will unveil spatial, discursive and temporal potentialities for counter-hegemonic social movements. Through mapping the hegemonic discursive strategy of CSER, this paper exposes material limitations and contradictions inherent to CSER as an ideological and political project which stem from the fact that profit is ultimately the single bottom line in any capitalist system.

CSER is fraught with internal tensions and conflicting interests. This poses challenges for counter-hegemonic movements who engage with CSER, for these movements are precariously situated between cooperation and compromise. At the same time, recognition of these very contradictions may in fact pose opportunities for social and environmental change. My proposition is that there are numerous sites for resistance and counter-hegemony across society as a whole, manifest in social and environmental movements, protests, web-sites, and popular discourse, but these movements are situated in a precarious position between mobilization against and cooption by the hegemonic project.

Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility: A Brief History

The concept that corporations bear certain obligations to serve the public interest dates back to the late-19th-century, when early industrial enterprises in the United States were kept under state control through the use of corporate charters (Richter, 2001, 6). Government regulation of the corporation has evolved over the past century in most democratic countries to ensure at least minimal protection of workers and society in general, including legislation on minimum wages, maternity leave, occupational health and environmental protection, amongst others (Richter, 2001, 7). Varied corporate social responsibility models have emerged throughout modern history in response to legitimacy crises. Public relations campaigns were launched in response to popular discontent over corporate power during the early-20th-century merger movement, at the end of World War I with promises of better wages and working conditions under a “New Capitalism”, and again during the 1930s as a response to the perceived failures of corporate America during the Great Depression (Bakan, 2004, 16-19).

One of the first authors to employ corporate social responsibility in the modern sense of

the term was Howard R. Bowen in his 1953 book Social Responsibilities of the Businessman, which defined the social responsibilities of businessmen as “... the obligation of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of objectives and values of our society.” (Bowen, qtd. in Anderson, 1987, 6) However, most leading businessmen at the time maintained an opposing view of corporate social responsibility, articulated perhaps most famously by Hayek and Friedman. Friedrich A. Hayek argued: “If we want effectively to limit the powers of corporations to where they are beneficial, we shall have to confine them much more than we have yet done to one specific goal, that of the profitable use of the capital entrusted to the management by the stockholders” (Hayek, 2004, FP19). Similarly, Milton Friedman in his book Capitalism and Freedom, concluded that other than upholding the basic laws of society, the only social responsibility of business is to make profits: “... there is one and only one social responsibility of business– to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud” (1962, 133).

The term “corporate social responsibility” began to be used in the 1960s in the United States and gained increasing currency after 1970 (De George, 1996, 18). The global implications of corporate social responsibility became a subject of wider discourse in the mid-1970s, when the ethical responsibilities of multinational corporations were taken up as a topic for social debate. The UN Centre on Transnational Corporations, established as the research and administrative body of the new UN Commission on Transnational Corporations in 1972, began to discuss codes of conduct for corporations, while churches, universities, foundations, trade

unions, and other social institutions began to call for greater social accountability from corporations (Smith, 1981, 79). Some of the primary targets of criticism were Newmont Mining Corporation for its deplorable working conditions in Namibia; Nestlé for its promotion of infant formula in “developing” countries, which contributed to malnutrition and death of infants; and companies operating in the South African apartheid regime (Smith, 1981, 80). People concerned with corporate social responsibility took action through divestiture and boycott strategies targeted at specific issues such as apartheid, animal rights and infant formula.

Over time, the concept of business ethics and social and environmental accountability for corporations gained currency, and the general trend from the 1980s onwards was towards a greater corporate acknowledgment of social responsibilities. Factors contributing to this trend included highly publicized corporate scandals and the increasingly global nature of corporate activities. The 1980s also brought strong resistance against regulation of transnational corporations, particularly in the Reagan and Thatcher era of neoliberal conservative economic policies, and efforts to create a UN Code of Conduct for TNCs were basically abandoned (Richter, 2001, 10). A few issue-specific international codes of conduct were adopted, such as the 1981 International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, the 1985 UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, the 1985 FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides, and the 1988 WHO Ethical Criteria for Medicinal Drug Promotion, and even these measures were implemented only as a result of intense international public pressure (Richter, 2001, 10). The early 1990s brought new corporate actors to take up issues of corporate governance such as the Business Council for Sustainable Development, which was invited during the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development to write recommendations

for sustainable development in industry in lieu of the UN Centre of Transnational Corporations' policy recommendations (Richter, 2001, 11).

To date, there is no legally binding global code of conduct for transnational corporations or for foreign direct investment. CSER is largely voluntary and self-regulated. Corporations can selectively adhere to international standards, such as the UN Global Compact and the ISO 14000 and ISO 14001 environmental standards developed by the International Standards Organization in Switzerland. The UN Global Compact, established in January 1999, includes nine principles of core values in the areas of human rights, labour and the environment. The compact is a voluntary network with no legally binding regulatory authority, as it “relies on public accountability, transparency and the enlightened self-interest of companies, labour and civil society” (UN Global Compact, 2004). As well, certain companies may be under increasing pressure to conform to ISO 14000 and 14001 standards of environmental policies, assessments and management, but the standards remain voluntary. Finally, since there is no agreed upon definition or understanding of CSER, it has proven difficult to apply strict standards or sanctions to firms which do not comply with codes (De George, 1996, 20).

Issues of corporate governance continue to be raised at the transnational level, for instance in 1999 when the OECD and the World Bank together created a “global corporate governance forum” in response to a series of corporate governance crises, the latest of which were the Asian and Russian financial crises of the late 1990s (Sklair, 2001, 154). The transnational corporations in turn argued that they deserved the right to police themselves rather than be policed through outside arbiters (Sklair, 2001, 154).

The trend towards widespread corporate adoption of social and environmental

responsibility in theory is manifest in the web-sites, advertisements and public statements and documents of most leading factions of capital. This trend has become ever more pervasive in the past decade and can be seen in many ways as a corporate response to growing popular dissatisfaction with the negative social and environmental effects of neoliberal globalization, evident in the rising anti-globalization movement. The debates and issues surrounding corporate accountability, responsibility and transparency have continued to brew, with the swelling of protest movements since Seattle. Corporations, financial institutions, business organizations, think tanks, and other factions of capital have responded with a growing web of a discourse of CSER, including words such as “partnerships”, “corporate citizenship”, “corporate governance”, “sustainable development”, “dialogues”, “sponsorships”, and “forums”. At the same time, many NGOs, social justice and environmental groups, and social democratic or “progressive” organizations have engaged in the discourse of CSER, encouraging good corporate citizenship, condemning bad corporations, and engaging in limited partnerships and dialogues with corporations and governments.

Ideology, Hegemony and Counter-hegemony

My analysis of CSER as a hegemonic discursive strategy is situated within international political economy literature inspired by the works of Marx and Gramsci. Certain readings of Marx ignore the dialectical nature of original Marxist methodology and tend towards economic reductionism, while certain readings of Gramsci overemphasize the cultural and ideological implications of his work, ignoring his close relationship to Marx, and tend towards relativism. Mark Rupert observes that there is “an absence of an explicit interpretation of the relationship of Gramsci to Marx, the fundamental vision of human social life which they may have shared, and

the relationship of any such Marxian-Gramscian social ontology to the theory and practice of IPE.” (1995, 15). My research sees both Marx and Gramsci as complementary, and draws from both Marx’s concept of bourgeois ideology and capitalist crisis, and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony as tools for critical analysis of the discourse of CSER.

Although there is no single Marxist definition or conception of ideology, in any Marxist analysis, ideology essentially serves to conceal the contradictory nature of social relations premised on class. Marx famously wrote, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch its ruling intellectual force” (1978a, 172) He argued that the ruling class is compelled to represent its own interests as the common interests of all members of society: “put in an ideal form... [the ruling class] will give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones”(1978b, 173). That is, ideology serves to misrepresent and to conceal social contradictions in the interest of the ruling class by presenting a world view of cohesion and universality. Marx argued that ideological contradictions manifested in political, conscious and intellectual antagonisms are the expressions of basic material considerations, such as the division of labour and other conditions of capitalism (Larrain, 1983, 1).

Bourgeois political ideology is premised on the idea that the sphere of circulation of commodities:

is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents and the agreement they come to is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a

simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. (Marx, 1976, 280).

The appearance of freedom and equality within the sphere of circulation of commodities conceals what goes on beneath the surface, in the realm of production, where workers are forced to sell their labour-power to owners in order to survive, and the worker is neither free nor equal, but rather is exploited and alienated (Larrain, 1983, 36). Marx argued that the sphere of circulation is the source of ideological forms of consciousness, and bourgeois ideology highlights concepts of freedom and equality operating within the circulation of commodities while concealing class conflict and contradictions within capitalism at the level of production. In other words, the separation of the political from the economic is vital for the maintenance of the capitalist system because the internal relationship between the two is concealed by ideology.

Marx's analysis of bourgeois ideology illustrates ways in which ideology can function to disguise social realities and to legitimate capitalism. The exploitation which occurs on the level of production today, for instance in sweat shop labour and cash crops, is masked by the liberal dictum that trade benefits all, and that the market rewards enlightened self-interest. Marx's concept of capitalist accumulation is crucial to understand the inequalities in capitalism which ideology seeks to mask.

The tendency for owners to accumulate more and more capital, according to Marx, drives the conquest of new markets and the further exploitation of old markets, resulting in the destruction of the labour force:

The conditions of the bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by

them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented. (Marx and Engels, 1978b, 478).

Lenin elaborated upon Marx's conception of capitalist accumulation through constant expansion in his Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism, in which he presaged the globalization of capitalism in the twentieth century, advancing the notion of an ever-expanding, highly destructive form of monopoly capitalism (Lenin, 1939). Increasing polarization across axes of class, race and gender, entrenched and deepening inequalities between "developed" and "developing" countries, and intensifying global ecological crises all point towards crises in the neoliberal globalization of the twenty-first century.

Marx's theory of capital accumulation has recognized limitations insofar as it was a product of its time; it did not predict the flexibility of capitalism, specifically its ability to adapt to crises of legitimation. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful for understanding the ways in which dominant classes in capitalism continually re-legitimize themselves to maintain political power. In Gramsci's conception, a social group manifests its hegemony through both "domination" and "intellectual and moral leadership" (Gramsci, 1971b, 57). A social group must already exercise "leadership", or secure consent, from the rest of society before attaining political power, and can only maintain continued power through a continuation of "leadership". When confronted with what Gramsci terms an organic crisis; that is, when the ruling class loses its consensus and is only "dominant" through coercive force, hegemony is weak and must be

replaced by something “new”. In this context, hegemonic projects are begun, reinforced, launched, and reinvented in order to maintain a firm consensus, a transformation termed “passive revolution” in Gramscian terminology. According to Gramsci, a “passive revolution” occurs when “no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement.. (and) a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated” (1971b, 106-7) .

In Americanism and Fordism, Gramsci provides a systematic analysis of the characteristics of American Fordism, and of the social and cultural implications of the advent of higher-wage mass production. He argues that Fordism involved the rationalization and manipulation of “subaltern” forces to create “a new type of worker”, whereby workers were offered “high wages” in a “progressive” new production mode, and dissuaded from any type of worker militancy (1971a, 279-81). Gramsci leaves open the question of how the contradictions within the development of Fordist capitalism could be resolved, and does not venture to classify it as “good” or “bad” but describes its dynamics.

Gramsci was concerned with creating a “revolutionizing praxis”, or an intellectual revolution drawn from the working class. A key difference between Marx and Gramsci lies in the latter’s insistence that ideas and the social forces behind ideas must be confronted before a revolution can occur (Gramsci, 1971d, 323). In other words, for a revolution to be effective, it must not only physically overthrow the dominant classes, but it must confront the hegemonic ideas of the dominant classes which create a “common sense”-- for example, the common sense notion that the market can regulate itself. Gramsci underscored the need for an effective “counter-hegemony” to permeate the social, cultural and ideological foundations of society in

order to sustain power and consensus. Gramsci advocated a “war of position” as opposed to a “passive revolution” as a counter-hegemonic strategy for social change, a constant maneuvering in spheres of culture, ideology and politics while keeping in mind “that in political struggle one should not ape the methods of the ruling classes, or one will fall into easy ambushes” (1971c, 232). One of the difficulties with Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies is making the distinction between what is a concession and what is a gain in the “war of position”.

The discursive strategy of CSER qualifies as a hegemonic in the Gramscian sense for three main reasons. As the neo-Gramscian political economist Bob Jessop argues, three factors are essential for a successful hegemonic project: its form or structural determination, the social forces recruited into it, and its relationship with a particular accumulation strategy (1983, 106). CSER is omnipresent in the lexicon of capitalism today, which, while fraught with contradictory impulses, is coherent as a discourse: a proposition this paper will set out to demonstrate. The corporate world has adopted the discourse of CSER in response to crises of legitimation, in order to secure consent and to become a pervasive, “common sense” concept. This makes CSER hegemonic. Finally, the hegemonic discourse of CSER is being used as a strategy by proponents of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberal globalization itself is a larger strategy, and it is the defining political, economic and ideological strategy of capitalist accumulation today. This accumulation strategy is shifting from a form marked by outright domination and exploitation to a softer form.

Peck and Tickell’s theory that “neoliberalization” is distinguished from “neoliberalism” helps to explain the use of neoliberal globalization in this context. Peck and Tickell argue that neoliberalism as a fixed “ism” can be distinguished from neoliberalization as a process, which

changes over time. While at first the process of neoliberalization aimed at the deregulation of the welfare state (or a “roll-back”), now that it has secured greater domination within the world economy it has initiated new “roll-out” forms of neoliberal regulation, such as adherence to international financial institutions and free trade, devolution of federal obligations to local governments, and workfare programs (Peck and Tickell, 2002, 390-91). It is within this second roll-out phase of neoliberalization, concerned with legitimation and self-regulation, that CSER is embedded as a “particular accumulation strategy”.

This paper is not the first to examine CSER from a perspective informed by political economy. In his book The Myth of Green Marketing, Toby Smith examines and unpacks green consumerism as myth wrapped into the “discourse of productivism” or “productivist hegemony”, a popular, common sense acceptance of the world view which promotes industrialization, consumerism, and “progress” in the modernist sense (Smith, 1998, 7-8). Leslie Sklair identifies four elements of global corporate citizenship in his book The Transnational Capitalist Class: employee relations, corporate philanthropy for community development, the safety and health of people who are impacted by corporate activities, and the environmental challenge (2001, 159-60). Sklair describes in Gramscian terms how the transnational capitalist class has created a “sustainable development historical bloc”, whose ideological mission is “to deflect attention from the idea of a singular ecological crisis and to build up the credibility of the idea that what we face is a series of manageable environmental problems.” (2001, 207) The piecemeal reforms of CSER, plagued with tensions between self-interest and altruism, are doomed to fail, for they do not address fundamental ecological crises or the ever-intensifying polarization of class on a global scale (Sklair, 2001, 301). Like Sklair, my paper avoids a discussion of the true

“intentions” of corporations, and posits a structural critique of CSER in its relationship to global capitalism.

Marx’s concept of bourgeois ideology and capitalist crisis, and Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony are useful for understanding how the discourse of CSER functions both ideologically and hegemonically, and how contradictions in the practice of CSER are hidden through the separation of the socio-political (social and environmental movements) and economic (corporate) spheres. The following sections will explore CSER as a hegemonic discursive strategy rife with contradictions.

Unpacking the Discourse of CSER

The discourse of CSER can be critically challenged on a number of levels. Probing the discourse helps to answer questions such as how the discourse coheres in a hegemonic fashion, what social forces are recruited into it, and how it is related to the latest “roll-out” phase of neoliberal capitalist globalization. The techniques involved in producing the discourse are also important to examine. Judith Richter notes six important corporate public relations strategies in the discourse of CSER: 1) intelligence gathering of public opinion on issues of corporate social and environmental responsibility to be used as a kind of “global issue alert system”, 2), suppression of public issues, for instance using secrecy and censorship to keep environmental or social issues off the public agenda; 3) fostering a good image, often through image transfer, or using partnership with another organization of good reputation as a means of attaining a good image; 4) manipulating public debate through delaying, de-politicizing, diverting and fudging through issues; 5) excluding divergent voices; and 6) engaging in “dialogues”, “partnerships” or

“sponsorships” in order to splinter or coopt groups in opposition (Richter 146-59). These techniques, amongst others, will be explored in my analysis.

The discourse of CSER as practiced by corporations takes many forms, mostly in public statements available through web-sites and publications, but also in company compliance codes, corporate credos documents, codes of conduct, compliance certificates, journal articles, fora, committees, conferences, and in many other ways. The function of the corporate discursive strategy is multifaceted. On the one hand, there is a straightforward propaganda or public relations aspect to the discourse, which is dubbed “issues management” by many corporations (Richter, 2001, 149). On the other hand, there is an effort to promote corporate self-regulation as a “common sense” practice and to prevent or at least to forestall the development of internationally binding regulations.

How CSER Coheres as a Discourse

The concept of CSER is not only unique to corporations and the corporate world but is apparent across a broad spectrum within capitalist society including among non-corporate actors such as NGOs, governments and agencies. There are a number of approaches to CSER, although the differences between them relate to the weighting of the three “pillars” of sustainability or CSER, the social, environmental and economic. Certain groups emphasize parts of this “balance” more than others; for instance human rights NGOs emphasize the social, environmental NGOs emphasize the environmental, and corporations, despite increasing rhetoric about the equal balance of all three, emphasize the economic, which reads as profit in their definition.

Two dominant approaches are identifiable within the wide spectrum which constitutes

the discourse of CSER as a whole. The first, which I term the “corporate approach”, is advocated by most leading transnational corporations, business think tanks, international financial institutions and business organizations, and, despite some variations, it is ultimately concerned with the bottom line of profitability. The second, which I term the “social-environmental approach”, is advocated by liberal or social democratic organizations, institutions, think-tanks, and intellectuals concerned primarily with the adverse consequences of corporate social and environmental *irresponsibility*. The approaches are distinct yet deeply interconnected, and the appearance of separation between the political and the economic approaches serves to mask the underlying relationship, following Marx’s concept of bourgeois ideology. In particular, since the “social-environmental approach” positions itself in contradistinction to the “corporate approach”, the dangers of cooption of social-environmental movements are less obvious.

By far the most research on corporate responsibility has been done by adherents of the corporate approach. The scope of this research ranges from advocating little or no social responsibility to advocating a great deal of social responsibility, but the profit motive of the corporation is invariably the guiding principle. Examples of the corporate approach include business ethics journals such as Journal of Business Ethics, Business Ethics Quarterly and Business Ethics Magazine, numerous books and other publications. These publications generally advocate targeted principles of business ethics and CSER to improve corporate public relations and profit. The magazine Corporate Knights, an insert into the Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail that was featured at the Globe 2004 Conference, takes a firmer line in advocating business ethics, showcasing good corporate citizens as exemplars and pointing out bad corporate citizens as tyrants. As the vision statement of “Corporate Knights” states, The vision of Corporate Knights is to create a global organization that is trusted as the Canadian and global source for who is good in the corporate world and who is not. The easier it is to make this distinction, the greater the reward for companies that are onside, and the more pressure to change for those that are not. (Corporate Knights, 2004)

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2000, President James

D. Wolfensohn of the World Bank Institute launched “Corporate Social Responsibility” and “Corporate Governance” programs. (World Bank Group, 2004). These themes have been regular topics at conferences and discussions hosted by the World Bank “Development Forum” since 1998. Another prominent international advocate of CSER is the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a coalition of 170 international companies drawn from over 35 countries and numerous regional and national business networks (WBCSD, 2004).

While the discourse of CSER is arguably strongest at the transnational level, given the power and suspicion surrounding transnational corporations, national corporations, particularly in western countries, are attempting to keep pace. One national coalition organized around issues of CSER is Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR), a “non-profit, business-led membership organization of Canadian companies that have made a commitment to operate in a socially, environmentally and financially responsible manner.” (CBSR, 2004) The United States Business Council for Sustainable Development and CSR Europe address similar business-driven CSER issues. The fact that the discourse of CSER is being adopted both transnationally and within western countries, albeit unevenly, points to its pervasiveness.

There are also numerous web-sites which serve to guide corporations on issues of CSER. For instance, the Manaxis CSR Reporting web-site, a New Jersey-based company, provides “environmental, health and safety, and social accountability consulting, training, and auditing services to businesses in the Northeast USA and worldwide...” (Manaxis, 2004). The AFX Global Ethics Monitor (AFX-GEM), a news service for business and financial professionals, provides global news coverage of financial markets, companies and economies to professional and private investor communities, and highlights issues surrounding corporate social

responsibility (Global Ethics Monitor, 2004). The CSR Forum web-site provides a comprehensive list of companies around the world and their individual responses to the issue of corporate social responsibility, as well as a list of “key players” engaged in CSR issues (CSR Forum, 2004). These web-sites demonstrate the extent to which CSR has embedded not only in the rhetoric of corporations, but in a vast array of interconnected “key players” in the global market economy.

The second “social-environmental approach” is connected to the “corporate” approach and in some manifestations seems almost inseparable from it. This approach is situated in liberal and social democratic concepts and responses to CSER. It spans areas of law, public and social policy, social justice think tanks, university departments, organizations such as the United Nations and Greenpeace, and non-governmental organizations. In general, this approach is critical of corporations and questions their capacity, ability and inclination to adopt meaningful programs of social and environmental responsibility. The body of literature associated with this approach emanates from UN reports, law and social policy journals, social science research journals, “progressive” web-sites and “left” organizations and think tanks, which have written more critically of corporate misdemeanours, of the failings and hypocrisy of corporate philanthropy and CSER, and of the gap between theory and praxis.

Most research in this category advocates a move towards stronger CSER and stronger regulations. The United Nations Environment Program is an international organization set up “...to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.”(UNEP, 2004). Other examples include the Institute

for Global Ethics, whose mission is “to promote ethical behaviour in individuals, institutions and nations through research, public discourse and practical action” (2004) and think tanks such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, which provides critiques of current trends in neoliberalism and globalization.

The approaches overlap considerably and in some cases, given the “cooperation” model inherent in the discourse of CSER, the division between the two is blurred. The spectrum of approaches, from CSER how-to guides for management to corporate-critical NGOs, forms the discourse of CSER. Despite vastly different strategies, objectives and definitions, these approaches share commonalities. They assume that CSER is a worthy and viable project, they tend to view CSER in terms of good versus bad corporations, and they use the same language. Whether this consensus is driven by altruistic, ambivalent or Machiavellian intentions, is beside the point. The real question is whether CSER is feasible as a long term strategy— whether capitalism is sustainable, whether corporations are capable of self-regulation, and whether CSER as a strategy resolves, forestalls or exacerbates social, environmental and economic crises systemic to global capitalism.

Techniques of Obfuscation: Ambiguity and Selectivity

Different groups understand and interpret commitments to the social, environmental and economic in very different ways; there is no single agreed upon definition of what constitutes “responsibility”, “sustainability” or “good governance” in these areas. For instance, many groups advocate “sustainability” yet differ in their definition of the term. Sustainability is a fuzzy term, brought into wide usage after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to stand not only for renewable resource use but more broadly for: “meet(ing) the needs of the present without compromising the

ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission, 1987). The literal and tautological definition of sustainable is “capable of being sustained”. The coupling of “corporate” with “sustainability” in literal terms only connotes the prolonged survival of the corporation, and by extension, the capitalist system as a whole. The environmental implications of the term “sustainability” work as value added, to use economic language, to the literal definition. The literal definition of corporate sustainability– the sustenance of the corporation– is at the heart of the discourse of CSER.

Most corporations take a narrow, piecemeal approach to sustainability, evident in BP Amoco’s statement: “For us, sustainability means the capacity to endure as a group by renewing assets, creating and delivering products and services that meet the evolving needs of society, attracting successful generations of employees, contributing to a flourishing environment, and maintaining the trust and support of customers, shareholders and communities” (BP Amoco, 2004). Alcan privileges the increase of “social and economic benefits”, while committing only to the decrease of environmental damage, in its partial definition of sustainability as: “...increasing the social and economic benefits and reducing the environmental impacts of our activities over the short and long term, and becoming a more profitable and competitive organization” (Alcan, 2004).

By contrast, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development is committed to deeper goals than “minimizing environmental impact”, such as radically changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production and eradicating poverty (UNDESA, 2004). Sceptics question the compatibility of capitalism and sustainability, evident in the following

statement: “For capitalism, sustainability is taken to mean sustained growth; technology is the vehicle of an irreversible ascension; and accumulation is asserted to be a destiny for all individuals and nations who work hard at it.”(M. O’Connor, 1994a, 1) In the article “Is Sustainable Capitalism Possible?”, James O’Connor highlights the ambiguity of the term “sustainability”, explores the very different concepts of sustainability used by greens and corporations, and posits that competing discourses of sustainability are ideological and political rather than ecological and economic. He explores contradictions between capitalism on the one hand and ecological sustainability on the other hand and casts serious doubt on prospects for sustainable capitalism (1994, 152-55).

Sustainability is only one of many examples of the fuzzy and ambiguous language of CSER; others include words such as “citizenship”, “governance” and “partnership”. The vagueness of this language allows different groups to advocate the same term yet differ fundamentally in their actual idea of its implementation and implications. This works to perpetuate the capitalist system, for “...environmental crisis has given capitalism a new lease on life. Now through purporting to take a hand in saving the environment, capitalism invents a new legitimation for itself: the sustainable, rational use of nature.” (M. O’Connor, 1994b, 125-26).

At the same time, the ecology of the planet is undermined by the continued exploitation of resources, the waste of rampant consumerism, and widespread environmental destruction wreaked under the proviso of “sustainability”. For example, Suncor Energy, a company which is involved in the highly energy inefficient business of oil extraction from oil sands in Alberta, Canada, was present at the the Globe 2004 Conference held in Vancouver, Canada between March 31- April 2,

2004. Suncor Energy Vice Presidents John Rogers and Gord Lambert spoke at a March 31 morning session entitled “How Do You Communicate the Business Case?” and noted that while the scope of Suncor’s operations makes it a challenge to be environmental, their “vision is to be a unique and sustainable energy company”. At the March 31 opening “Sustainability Plenary”, , CEO and President of Alcan Canada Travis Engen promoted Alcan’s world-scale production of aluminum as sustainable because aluminum is “highly recyclable” despite an energy-intensive initial extraction. If energy-inefficient and environmentally damaging extractive industries can latch onto the “sustainability” wave, perhaps the term needs to be re-examined.

While most corporations share overarching concepts such as “sustainable development” and “social responsibility”, individual corporations have branded particular approaches to the issue. For instance, CocaCola sponsors education and sports, but AOL Time Warner focuses their corporate philanthropy on “areas where [their] expertise can have the greatest impact”, loosely supporting the “ethic of volunteerism” and “civic engagement”(AOL Time Warner, 2004). By contrast, Starbucks engages in the CSER discourse through a particular vision of “contribution” to communities and environment, realized by giving “back” to these sources of their immense profits in specific but limited projects and ways, such as through donations, or through the support of more “equitable” coffee practices in limited areas: “Giving back to our communities is the way we do business. Contributing positively to our communities and environment is so important to Starbucks it is listed as a guiding principle of the company’s mission.” (Starbucks, 2004). In this sense, corporations create an individualized, “signature” version of CSER that enhances association of the corporation with its limited sphere of engagement.

Shell highlights its recent commitment to human rights in the “core values” section of its web-site. “Our core values of honesty, integrity and respect for people define how we work. These values have been embodied for more than 25 years in our Business Principles, which since 1997, have included a commitment to support human rights and to contribute to sustainable development.” (Shell, 2004a). This is Shell’s response to the pressures of international human rights organizations in the aftermath of its controversial involvement in Nigeria. Shell also devotes a section of its web-site to clarifying the historical circumstances surrounding its behaviour in Nigeria, where it portrays itself as a victim of the difficult circumstances entailed in operating in a country without “standards” of human rights, thus shifting moral responsibility to the “corrupt” government of Nigeria while aligning itself with the cause of human rights (Shell, 2004b).

McDonald’s prides itself in its long-standing tradition of corporate social responsibility, as compared to the newly adapted versions of corporate responsibility advocated by competing transnational corporations. McDonald’s promotes itself as a leader in the “philosophy of doing good”, and equates this philosophy with the very “heart and soul” of the corporation:

... McDonald's commitment to social responsibility is an important part of our heritage and has become increasingly more important as our business has grown to span 119 countries. More than ever, we are focussed on and committed to doing the right thing for the local communities in which we operate and for the customers we serve... Before there was even a name for "social responsibility," McDonald's was setting the standard, and we've been a leader ever since (McDonald’s, 2004).

One of the most ironic expressions of CSER is from Enron. Despite the fact that the name “Enron” is now synonymous with “corruption”, “scandal” and “failure”, Enron stubbornly asserts its continued existence with a concise “business as usual” introductory statement on the home

page of its web-site: “Enron is in the midst of restructuring its business with the hope of emerging from bankruptcy as a strong and viable, albeit smaller, company”(Enron, 2004a). Moreover, the Enron web-site still stakes claims to corporate responsibility on the issue of “climate change”— a concept that invites ridicule given Enron’s dramatic corruption exposé: “As the scientific, economic, and policy debates continue on the best approaches to address climate change, Enron will continue to promote open, competitive markets for fuels, power technologies, environmental technologies, and energy services that will provide a wide range of meaningful choices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,”(Enron, 2004b).

This small sampling demonstrates how the discourse of CSER is being utilized as a hegemonic strategy for the legitimation of capitalism, in part through techniques of obfuscation. Generalized concepts such as “sustainability” are adopted because of their ambiguity, which provides a manoeuvrability of interpretation. Particularized issues of CSER are adopted individually by corporations, serving the dual purpose of branding a particular value or image and of selectively omitting broader, farther reaching issues. The following section will outline some constraints and contradictions involved in both “corporate” and “social-environmental” adoption of CSER.

Limitations and Contradictions

The fact that the “corporate” and “social-environmental” approaches are different in appearance yet share an overarching discourse poses limitations on the possibilities for counter-hegemonic strategies engendered in social and environmental movements. Some NGOs such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International refuse to join partnerships with or to receive funding

from corporations or governments. Increasingly, however, other NGOs are seeking partnerships and cooperation with corporations, international institutions or governments for various reasons, often for financial support but also to achieve short term goals or to forge strategic alliances. For example, Pollution Probe and the World Wildlife Fund, both environmental NGOs, have adopted strategies of cooperation, collaboration and partnership in dealing with business on issues of CSER. At the Globe 2004 Conference, representatives from each of these NGOs spoke at a panel session on March 31, 2004 entitled “NGOs and Business: Cooperation or Confrontation?” alongside panelists from two Canadian corporations.

Ken Ogilvie, Executive Director of Pollution Probe, noted in his speech that the 1990s was a “sustainable development principle” decade in which NGOs experimented with a “fusion with business”. During the discussion period, I raised the issue of the “capacity gap” between corporations and NGOs, specifically the dangers of NGO cooption. Mr. Ogilvie responded that the partnership model is only a temporary strategy, and that, in the meantime, Pollution Probe is “sharpening its weapons in the backroom”. Tina Wallace also warns against the dangers of NGO cooption in her article “NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism?”, which argues that NGOs increasingly rely on donor funding with conditions attached and thus “they are inevitably drawn into supporting and even spreading many aspects of the dominant global agenda” (2004, 203).

One leading site of resistance to the contradictions of CSER is the organization “CorpWatch”, the slogan for which is “holding corporations accountable” (2004a). CorpWatch has spearheaded international campaigns such as the “Alliance for a Corporate-Free UN”, which rallies against UN corporate partnerships with “known human rights violators, or despoilers of

the environment”. CorpWatch also issues bimonthly “Greenwash awards” for corporations which spend more money, time and energy on public relations campaigns promoting their ecologically friendly images than on actually protecting the environment and more recently, “Bluewash awards” for corporate humanitarian advertising. CorpWatch is engaged with social movements, non-governmental organizations, and various institutions, coalitions and networks within civil society who are actively concerned with corporate accountability.

The dominant trend in political, social and economic discourse is towards a positive approach to CSER, albeit one with a vast range of contested definitions, visions and applications. The two prevailing approaches together constitute the discourse of CSER but a third approach exists which is opposed to CSER. The neoliberal critique of CSER, expressed in the policy paper of David Henderson entitled “Misguided Virtue: False Notions of Corporate Social Responsibility” (2001) acknowledges that the doctrine of CSER enjoys widespread support from a range of individuals, institutions, agencies and governments, and traces its rise as a dominant ideology, including its roots and factors, and its contested definitions and applications. But Henderson concludes that the doctrine ultimately reduces competition and economic freedom, serving to undermine the logic and functioning of the market economy. In this sense, he is a contemporary Friedman, subscribing to the concept of profit before social accountability, and convinced of the value of a largely unmitigated market economy. Henderson attests that there are few, even among the business community, who would go against the global “trend” and refuse to include at least token statements on human rights or sustainability in their companies’ publicly stated policies.

Like Henderson, I argue that CSER is a doctrine which has pervaded the social-

environmental and business spheres. I also argue that the profit motive is incompatible with social and environmental responsibility, and that corporate self-regulation poses dangers. There are further contradictions and dangers involved in corporate self-regulation of social and environmental issues, as these issues are bound at least in some instances to come into conflict with the profit motive of corporations. Corporations are created and bound by law, and “the best interests of the corporation” principle, which is the corporate law of most countries, stipulates that corporations are legally bound to put shareholders’ interests of profit above all other interests (Bakan, 2004, 37) Social and environmental commitments are thus consigned to the realm of cost-ineffectiveness. The uneasy alliance between corporate, social and environmental objectives wrapped in the discourse of CSER is by definition fraught with disjuncture and even impossibility. As Joel Bakan, the author of The Corporation concludes, “Corporate social responsibility is thus illegal– at least when it is genuine.” (2001, 37). For Bakan, the shift in corporate discourse is illusory at best:

Corporate social responsibility is their (companies’) new creed, a self-conscious corrective to earlier greed-inspired visions of the corporation. Despite this shift, the corporation itself has not changed. It remains, as it was at the time of its origins as a modern business institution in the middle of the nineteenth century, a legally designated “person” designed to valorize self-interest and invalidate moral concern. (Bakan, 2004, 28)

Experiencing the Discourse: Globe 2004 as a Case Study

The Globe 2004 Conference in Vancouver provided a unique opportunity to experience

first hand the ways in which CSER is being discussed by a cross-section of key players in CSER. This international conference was part of the Globe™ Series organized by the Globe Foundation of Canada, “a private, non-profit group dedicated to accelerating the business of the environment” (Globe 2004, 2004b). The Globe Conference began in 1990 and has since grown in prestige and in size to close to 10,000 participants from around the world. I attended the conference in full, including three plenaries on the themes of the conference (corporate sustainability, energy and climate change, and sustainable cities), six sessions on strategies, innovation, tools and case studies of corporate sustainability, two networking breakfasts, and a women’s networking lunch. I also investigated the products and technologies promoted at the trade fair. The President and CEO of the Globe Foundation of Canada John Wiebe described the impetus behind the conference in his letter of welcome to Globe 2004 Conference participants:

Over the past decade, GLOBE events have provided an ideal platform for government decision makers, business executives, technology specialists, communicators and leaders in environmental innovation to discuss emerging management and technology... This year’s GLOBE Conference comes at not only a challenging time on the road to environmental sustainability, but also an exciting one as innovators and business leaders capitalize on progressive solutions to today’s global environmental challenges. (Wiebe, 2004, 2)

The Globe 2004 conference included three days of plenaries, sessions, and networking social events with speakers, delegates and participants from corporations, non-governmental organizations, business organizations, academia, governments, financial institutions, and development agencies, across transnational, national and municipal levels. Top sponsors of the event included the Government of Canada (“diamond supporter”), the newspaper The Globe and

Mail, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), and Alcan (“platinum sponsors”), Suncor Energy, Export Development Canada, EcoSmart Concrete and BC Hydro (“gold sponsors”), and a host of other corporations, organizations and institutions. Each Globe Conference generates over 400 million dollars in business, and as the Trade Fair Exhibitor Package candidly states: “... Your target markets are delivered to you... Form partnerships and strategic alliances, or attract investment capital... Gain recognition as a provider of progressive solutions...” (Globe 2004b).

The Globe 2004 Trade Fair and Conference on Business and the Environment was an event designed to promote dialogue around CSER across various sectors in capitalist society. I set out to compare my analysis of the discourse of CSER as evidenced in publicly available documents of corporate and social-environmental groups, with the interactive panels, discussions and dialogues at the conference. Several of my observations about the dynamics of CSER were confirmed. There was a great diversity of approaches present at the conference, ranging from a “risk management” perspective to a concern with “embedding sustainability” in theory and practice. Corporate executives from national and transnational companies, representatives from various levels of government, lawyers, and representatives from financial institutions alike stressed common reasons for adopting CSER, and defined CSER using similar criteria, metaphors and strategic approaches. The impact of crises such as Enron, WorldCom and anti-globalization protests were mentioned by a number of speakers as key driving factors behind CSER. CSER as an “early warning system”, a means of keeping ahead of the international regulatory curve, and as risk or issue management, were also among the top reasons for adopting CSER. In addition, speakers mentioned the importance of maintaining shareholder or “brand”

value, otherwise known as corporate reputation.

The merits of adopting CSER were championed both on moral grounds and on grounds of corporate competitiveness and innovation. Some referred to CSER as “enlightened self-interest”, and many referred to the implementation of CSER distinctly as a “strategy”. The representative from VanCity Bank, Lee Davis, used the phrase, “Good business is good business”, stressing the interdependency of a strong bottom line and CSER. Similarly, Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell stressed that “it doesn’t matter if you believe it [CSER] because it’s good or because it’s profitable.” The tag line for several speakers was: “Just do it!”

There were a number of common metaphors which ran through the conference discussions and plenary sessions. Most pervasive was the triple bottom line approach to sustainability, which downplayed the profit motif of corporations and argued for an equal weighting of social, environmental and economic factors. Indeed, two keywords of the conference were “capitalize” and “sustainability”, and the prevailing message was that business can, should and must capitalize on sustainability in order to remain both ethical and profitable. RBC Financial Group Senior Manager Group Sandra Odendahl stated more candidly that despite commitments to society and the environment, there is only one bottom line: profit.

Other common metaphors included the “ecological footprint”, “walking the talk”, “front of the pipe versus end of the pipe”, which refers to the stage at which environmental sustainability practices are embedded into technologies, “picking fruit from the bottom of the tree”, which refers to efficiency, and “cradle to cradle versus cradle to grave”, which refers to maintaining sustainable lifecycles of products. The CEO of Interface Inc., Ray Anderson, who

has become something of an icon of corporate sustainability since release of the 2004 Canadian documentary The Corporation, used the metaphor of “Mount Sustainability”: a difficult climb with seven faces to overcome. Similarly, speakers employed the image of a “path” or a “road” to sustainability, and sought for means to measure this seemingly unquantifiable goal, through creating “roadmaps”, “benchmarks”, “metrics” and “targets”. A common approach to CSER in the conference was the “candid” strategy, where top corporate executives and representatives of organizations would engage in “honest”, informal discussion, inviting criticism, engaging in selective self-criticism, and accounting for challenges along the “path” to sustainability. The sessions “CEO Armchair Dialogue” and “The Highs and Lows of Implementing Sustainability: A Practitioner’s Perspective” were two examples of these types of sessions.

Practical strategies of engagement and implementation of CSER were also addressed within the conference. Speakers discussed prospects for public-private partnerships, partnerships between business and non-governmental organizations, dialogues with stakeholders, networking, “clusters” of strategic partnerships or alliances across various sectors of society. The conference was designed for networking and cooperation between diverse groups, yet the participants in the conference reflected disproportionate attendance from national corporations. NGO participation was limited to a handful of representatives, and, despite the promotion of the conference as “international”, there were relatively few transnational corporations.

Nonetheless, strategies of transnational corporations’ adoption of CSER were addressed throughout the conference, and companies such as Shell and Nike were held up as luminaries in CSER. The common strategies of transnational corporations were represented in the April 1 session entitled “Sophistication of Stakeholder Relations”. Vice President of “The Natural

Step”Eric Olson of how his San Francisco-based company provides a framework for corporate adoption of CSER. McDonalds, Starbucks, Home Depot and Nike are all clients of “The Natural Step”, which offers “new approaches to stakeholder engagement” with a complex four-tier system of stakeholder engagement, including, “input”, “dialogue”, “partnership”, and ultimately, “alignment and action”.

Given the disproportionate number of national and subnational firms present at the conference and the focus on strategies, innovation, tools and case studies in the “corporate sustainability” stream of the conference, one of my observations was that CSER, while increasingly widespread at the transnational level, is still lagging at national and subnational levels, partly because of the higher public profile, legacy of corporate scandals, and greater risk involved for TNCs. Since CSER can be framed as a “hegemonic discursive strategy” employed by and for proponents of neoliberal globalization, it is fitting that the TNCs and selected high profile national corporations are deemed exemplars and visionaries, while the rest of the corporate world struggles to follow.

There were also unexpected trends in the discourse of CSER that I observed. The first relates to the reflexivity of corporate actors to respond to immediate challenges. Myrna Khan of Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR) hosted one of several tables at the Corporate Networking Breakfast on April 1, 2004, with the discussion topic: “Is CSR Just PR?” Khan told the table that just the night before, CBSR had held a meeting with its members and posed this very question to them. This was as a response to the 2004 documentary The Corporation, which, Khan informed us, alleged that CSR is nothing but PR (public relations). Speakers at the meeting included the movie producer Mark Akbar and Ray Anderson of

Interface, who spoke in the film about his “epiphany”– the moment he discovered the importance of environmental sustainability. The members were concerned with this allegation and wanted to examine its merits. CCSR resolved the issue by the formulation: “CSR- HR (human resources) = PR”. In other words, a corporation has to “embed” CSR into its operational fabric in order for it to have meaning.

Another observation relates to the “dangers” of corporate adoption of social and environmental responsibility. CSER has been adopted as a strategy by and for proponents of neoliberal globalization as a public relations move, to mitigate risk and to legitimize capitalism. A corollary to this argument is that while CSER can be advantageous to corporations, it has the dangerous potential to open the door to further public scrutiny. At the Globe 2004 April 1 session entitled “Corporate Reporting: Trends in Transparency”, speakers addressed the fine balance between reporting transparently while avoiding risk or “value destruction”. A few speakers noted the 2003 California Supreme Court ruling against Nike (Nike vs. Kasky, Inc, 1998), in which an environmental activist accused Nike of making false statements about conditions in its Asian factories in letters and press releases (CorpWatch, 2004b). This case was perceived as a major setback in CSER for the corporate world.

Along similar lines, Denise Taschereau, Social and Environmental Responsibility Manager at Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) in Vancouver, Canada, argued in the April 1 afternoon session entitled “The Highs and Lows of Implementing Sustainability: A Practitioner’s Perspective” that one of the biggest failures of MEC was its decision to have a “dialogue” with its members about MEC’s adoption of Nike products *after* having already decided to adopt the product. However, according to Ms. Taschereau, the failure was not due to the fact that MEC

decided to carry Nike shoes for, she noted, Nike has an outstanding record of corporate social and environmental responsibility. Rather, the failure was in MEC's decision to have a dialogue at all, since the result was a swell of protest, dissent and lack of understanding on the part of the members.

My experience of the discourse of CSER as played out at the Globe 2004 Conference highlighted the fact that there are serious limitations and contradictions inherent in the discourse and practice of CSER. Furthermore, the risks of uneasy partnerships and alliances between corporate and social-environmental interests are incurred by both sides. One of the major themes of the conference was the idea that CSER is not only cost effective but actually improves the bottom line. The participants at the conference neglected to inquire what happens when CSER is not cost effective.

Prospects for Counter-Hegemonic Movements

For practitioners of both the corporate and social-environmental approaches to the discourse of CSER, there is a tricky balance between compromise and cooperation to be maintained. The gap between the powerful, wealthy corporate world and the fragmented terrain of social-environmental movements is immense. Such an unequal partnership, particularly if unquestioned, seriously limits counter-hegemonic possibilities. Alliances between corporate actors and social-environmental movements, while involving some risk elements to corporations, nonetheless pose a far greater risk to society and to the environment through the cooption of the defendants of each.

Acknowledgment that the discourse of CSER operates as a hegemonic strategy to

legitimize global capitalism is the first step in forging alternative visions. The World Social Forum, set up as an alternative to the World Economic Forum, does not address “corporate social responsibility” in any of its manifestations within its public policy statements, but rather focuses on specific social and environmental issues and campaigns. Perhaps this refusal to engage in a discourse of CSER is an effective counter-hegemonic strategy, but it is only one strategy amongst many possible alternatives. As Linda Coady of the World Wildlife Fund argued at the March 31 Globe 2004 session “NGOs and Business: Cooperation or Confrontation?”, strategies of cooperation and strategies of confrontation are each necessary in advancing social and environmental change.

Gramsci advocated a “war of position” for counter-hegemonic movements, a constant maneuvering in the spheres of culture, ideology and politics. In this war of position it is difficult to ascertain what is a concession and what it a gain, or even whether the distinction can be made. Perhaps if the hegemonic discursive strategy of CSER is constantly questioned by social and environmental movements, and if the profit-first nature of CSER is exposed, then the hegemony of neoliberal globalization may be successfully countered.

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