

CHAPTER 4

The Business of Business

“In Western industrial societies each person is enjoined to fit a “rational” homogeneous, yet somehow individualistic (actually egotistic) stereotype, and the total effect is what both Bateson and Marcuse have described: senseless, crazy, a vast alienation rather than a vast ecology. It is in the streamlining of life, whether in a Kansas wheatfield or in this year’s graduation class at the University of Peking, which has, in its destruction of diversity, so impoverished human life” (Berman, 1981: 264)

As I said at the start of the previous chapter, I am intending to set out here some ideas which constitute the macro-context of the professional territory in which I work. In addressing the business-perspective-on-the world I will be entering a discursive territory which is immensely well-established in Western culture, and fast becoming so worldwide. Its assumptions, symbols and practices are a well-established ‘regime of truth’. Nevertheless, I am giving myself permission here to express criticisms which (for reasons to be explored in later chapters) I seldom verbalise in practice. It may be that the lines of thinking I am pursuing seem at times to digress away from a business focus, but there are many strands at play here, and many connections I am seeking to make. I will move through a critique of globalisation, rationality and economics, and their underlying assumptions about human separation from the world, to consider the implications of the growth imperative underlying business. From there I will explore the way the ‘environment’ is treated by conventional economics, and alternative perspectives offered by ‘new economics’, ecofeminists and deep ecologists.

I come from a post-war generation, and have been born in a rich country. I am one of the few humans in history to have reached adulthood without enduring hunger, war or both. I have never suffered violence, and I have been well educated. I have lived with an expectation of realising most of what I want from my life. I am an immensely fortunate person. I am also part of a generation who

are just beginning to grapple with the idea of the moral, and practical responsibility for ensuring that more people in future generations may be able to live with equivalent fortune.

I live at a time when the story we tell ourselves about the world we live in is in the process of change – a period of competing understandings. It is a cliché to say that this is a period of rapid change, but my experience is that the world in which my children are maturing is different in many significant ways from that I grew up in, and my experiences, understandings and expectations, in their turn, are very different from those of my mother, born in 1921.

One of the defining symbols of the current era is that of business. Business organisations dominate popular consciousness, and a business-ethic pervades public life, in the non-profit and governmental sectors as well as the for profit sector. As an educator of business managers, I am engaged in the production and transmission of business discourse. It is a language I have learned in the course of my working life. And in so far as I repeat the narrative of business without making connections to the power relations that construct it, I am engaged in telling what Ewick and Silbey (1995) call “hegemonic tales” which contribute to common-sense understanding by ‘regulating silence and colonizing consciousness’ (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). So one of my purposes in this chapter is to rehearse some “subversive stories” –that might disrupt that silence by connecting the everyday to its historical, political and cultural context. As Hearn says: “one of the mechanisms of hegemony is the reduction of socially constructed and socially divided into the neutral and normal” (200: 618). So what are the stories I could tell of relevance to business?

Business as ‘Global Actor’

To the majority of us living in the Northern Hemisphere, the expectation of ever-increasing prosperity seems a reality. We seem to be wealthier, in terms of disposable income, and healthier than our parents and grandparents were: we do not experience any shortage of commodities we want or need, and on the contrary, our commercial systems are constantly enticing us to develop wants we

did not know we had. We have consumer choice, and the freedom to exercise that choice in pursuing a range of different lifestyles. We increasingly define ourselves, create our identities, through consumption of goods and services (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2000). Economic development has enabled at least some human beings to loosen their dependency on the vagaries of natural weather systems and accidents of birth in determining their life-chances (Hertsgaard, 1999).

So successful has modern business become that it is increasingly seen as the major “engine of development”, the means through which poor countries, as well as poor people, have the possibility of becoming richer (Jay, 2000). The idea that public money, held either by governments or by multi-lateral agencies such as the World Bank, can use aid alone to bring countries out of poverty - part of the post-war intention – is now largely discredited. Official Development Aid (ODA) from the OECD¹ countries in 1995 amounted to just 0.27% of their GNP², the lowest proportion since relevant statistics were first collected in 1950 (Scholte, 2000:245). Instead, development hopes are being pinned to “foreign direct investment” (FDI), capital inflows from private sources, which are on the increase, but are mainly concentrated within the world’s richest countries (UNDP³, 1999).

The language of business, finance and money is the medium through which much of our discussion of the future of the world takes place. As the size, turnover and resources of multinational corporations begin to dwarf those of all but the largest nation states, senior executives of major corporations take their place alongside politicians and heads of state as world leaders. The annual meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos in Switzerland, for example, describes itself as “a unique global institution capable of gathering world leaders in business, government and civil society to address the major challenges confronting humanity”. It acts “in the spirit of entrepreneurship in the global public interest to further economic growth and social progress” (WEF website, 2001). Of the largest 100 economies in the world today, 50 are corporations (UNDP, 1999)

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: has 29 member countries, usually considered the richest countries in the world, which together produce two-thirds of the world’s goods and services

² Gross National Product: a sum of the value of all the economic activity within a country

³ United Nations Development Programme Report

– and so the balance of power, suggesting which institutions can control what, is shifting, and a new political territory is emerging, bringing into question issues of democracy and accountability (Korten, 1995).

But the story of business through the twentieth century has not just been one of increasing size and power - we are also witnessing a process called “globalisation”. The scale, impact and meaning of this phenomenon is highly contested (Scholte, 2000): globalisation is generally taken to include expansion in communications, markets, production and finance which are now operating not just internationally, between countries, but supra-nationally, independently of geographical borders (Henderson, 1996). While world output has grown six times since 1950, world trade has grown eleven times (Ekins, 2001) - representing a massive growth in the flow of goods and services around the world. This has affected almost everyone in the world, from the globe-trotting business élite, to the unskilled workers of Northern countries whose jobs have been lost to new technology and cheap labour in other countries, to the urban poor of the South working in factories to serve export markets and indigenous people whose habitats are threatened. In many industries labour markets now operate on a global scale. The geographical flexibility of business organisations, held together not by physical proximity but by increasingly complex networks of both trading relationships and virtual connections, means that they can literally span the globe, placing research and development where the education and infrastructure are most favourable, production where the right sort of labour can be found at the lowest prices, and sales wherever the markets for the product offer the best economic returns. We are now joined to each other round the globe by trading and technological ties which are clearly visible and accessible. Global business is breathtaking in its technological achievement. Goodwin (1998) suggests that only in the last 50 years has modern science really begun to achieve what it was created for – to fashion the world according to human purpose. This has come about through a mutually-reinforcing connection between technology, governments and business to pursue scientific projects, demonstrating tremendous instrumental ability. China, for instance, is undergoing industrial revolution much as the UK did in the nineteenth century, but using modern technology, which enables, literally, mountains to be moved in the name of progress (Hertsgaard 2000).

Globalisation is a process which has both winners and losers. The inequality of global wealth distribution is increasing (UNDP 1999), as our wealth-creation systems favour those who have capital and resources to invest in the first place. Korten (1995) notes that there has been a five-fold increase in global output since 1950, but that during the same period the number of people living in absolute poverty has doubled. Scholte, comments:

“contemporary globalisation has tended to perpetuate and sometimes also to accentuate the inequities that result from arbitrary hierarchies of life chances among people. Classes, countries, sexes, races, urban/rural districts and generations have had structurally unequal opportunities to shape the course of globalisation, to share in its benefits, and to avoid its pains.” (2000: 259).

As we enter the twenty-first century, overcoming poverty remains an awesome task. Hertsgaard (1999) describes graphically the lifestyle of the Dinka people in southern Sudan, destined through a combination of geography and civil war to struggle through every day in the expectation that there may not be enough food to keep alive until the next. He reminds us that every day around eleven thousand children in the world die of starvation and that “nearly one out of every six human beings on the planet lives a life like the Dinka’s – often famished, perhaps ill, a whisper of bad luck away from death” (1999:46). He comments:

“For the well-to-do to ignore the poor is as commonplace as it is callous. But, morality aside, it seems to me a grave intellectual error to assume that the fate of the world’s poor can be kept separate from the human species’ larger ecological prospects.” (1999:47)

Alongside this technological and commercial development runs the globalisation of ideas and understanding. Scholte describes it as a shift in our understanding of ‘social space’ to a ‘supra-territorial’ level, “a distinct kind of space-time compression” (2000:48) in which it is possible to conceptualise the globe as a single, interconnected social space which joins you, reader, and me with the Dinka. This is a relatively recent thought: the photograph of the world as a fragile blue globe

shimmering in empty space, so commonplace on book jackets and product labels now, is only as old as the satellites which enabled such pictures to be produced, a mere 40 years or so. The experience of aeroplane travel to the other side of the world is no longer confined to a tiny rich élite: mass tourism means that many inhabitants of richer countries understand at first hand the finite space of the planet, and many of those who do not can access such images through television and film. The notion of connection, rather than separation, begins to surface as part of cultural consciousness (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2000). Giddens comments:

“Globalisation really refers to a new agenda for our lives - an agenda in which distant happenings directly affect local life, and in which what we do as individuals can have global consequences....we should remember, it is about relationships between the small and the large, in which each influences the other” (1995)

Rationality and Economics

But alongside this there is another business story, about separation. In his discussion of the development of ideas through Modernity, Toulmin (1990) suggests that what is usually taken to be the modern period, starting in the seventeenth century, has been characterised by an “intellectual scaffolding” which is so deeply entrenched that it could better be described as a set of ‘pre-suppositions’ or axioms rather than tested ideas. Central to this scaffolding is the idea of rationality as a key characteristic of humankind operating independently of the messy causality of the material world. Human actions were seen to be voluntary, creative and based on clear reasons, whilst physical phenomena were conceptualised as passive, inert and subject to Laws of Nature, which were discoverable by the human mind (1990:109) (see also Chapter One). Only since the middle of the twentieth century, he suggests, has this scaffolding started to be dismantled – and one of the factors in this shift has been a growing recognition, both by scientists (particularly in life-sciences) and non-scientists, that interconnection between nature and people, between the mental and the material, offers a better descriptor of the world. Modernity offered, he says, “an oversimplification that, in retrospect, was unrealistic” - and this beguiling simplicity was one of the reasons why it has lasted so long. Gherardi, describes this as a culture of ‘oppositionism’ and comments:

“the oppositional universe draws its strength from its weaknesses. Since it is only able to abstract what is simple, and therefore simplifies what it abstracts, it creates distinctions by going to extremes and hence extremizes everything that it distinguishes” (1995: 94)

Toulmin suggests Modernity can be seen as a “cosmopolis” – a *political* as well as an intellectual phenomenon. He suggests we are now entering a period of either late (more humanist) Modernity, or of post-modernity.

Scholte sees rationality as still a key concept. This, together with the logic of the accumulation of surplus value which underpins capitalism, is the major structural factor leading to globalisation (together with what he calls ‘actor initiatives’ of technological innovation and building a conducive regulatory framework) (2000:89). Like Toulmin, he points to the historical location of rationalism. He describes four main distinguishing features of this knowledge configuration: secularism – it defines reality entirely in terms of the physical world, without reference to transcendent forces; anthropocentrism – it understands reality primarily in terms of human interests; scientism – it holds that the world can be understood through single incontrovertible truths discovered through rigorous application of research methods; and instrumentalism – it assigns greatest value to insights that solve problems. “Rationalism” he says “encourages a belief that people can gain comprehensive knowledge when they access and understand the territorial world as a whole” (2000:95). At one level, then, globalisation can be seen as part of this anthropocentric push to control the world and extract from it that which humans require. At the same time, ironically, this has been part of the process through which the nature of that goal has begun to be challenged.

In the business environment, rationality is primarily expressed through economics, the ‘human science’ which both legitimates and produces business activities. This is part of modernity’s ‘intellectual scaffolding’ described by Toulmin. It purports to offer a set of laws to which all societies are subject at all times, and which we misunderstand at our peril – or at least, at the peril of those whose poverty will worsen as a result, or whose wealth will be diminished if mistakes are made. Daly and Cobb (1990) suggest that economics suffers from what Alfred North Whitehead

called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, in which the abstractions that have taken place in order to build theory are somehow forgotten, so that the abstract is thought to be applicable to the concrete situation.

“It argues that since abstract exchange flows in a circle, so do the physical commodities constituting real GNP. Or, since money in the bank can grow forever at compound interest, so can real wealth, so can welfare” (Daly, 1996: 38)

The building of universal, abstract theories is one of the features of Modernity highlighted by Toulmin, as not only based on a belief in the stable and unchanging nature of the world being described, but also in order to help create that stability, order and hierarchy. This regime of truth has been so well established that it seemed to be a simple depiction of how the world is. Like Foucault, Toulmin points to the double function of truth-rules, which produce the state of affairs they appear to explain.

Adam Smith is often cited as the founder of modern economics, and one of his key assertions was that individuals pursuing their own self-interest were at the same time promoting the collective interest and welfare. He wrote the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, at a time when trade predominantly took place within national borders and the British economy was dominated by agriculture and operated within a framework regulated by the state. Smith set his writings on economics within a moral framework; his belief in the “invisible hand” was a reference to nature, not markets, as is usually assumed, and was a reference to “natural desires” for security, personal gain, ease, independence and freedom (Lubasz, 1995). He clearly expressed the view that commercial exchange happened most efficiently when buyers and sellers had equal power and information, and if no harm was inflicted on innocent bystanders.

The social embeddedness of Smith’s views on economics have been discarded, and his framework abstracted and extended to build a series of economics “laws”. Despite a dismantling of some of the

modernist assumptions in some branches of science, classical economics, in which capital was assumed to be confined within nation-states, has entered the twenty-first century as ‘neo-classical’ economics, based on non-physical parameters (Daly, 1996) with its rationalist assumptions intact. The fact that homo economicus represents a description of no living person, male or female, is deemed irrelevant, since the purpose of theory is to derive informative generalisations, which in turn might be used to generate measurements and means of prediction and control. The consequences of some of these generalisations, operating within the power of globalised business, are very severe.

Feminist thinkers have pointed to the gender implications of the assumptions of economics (Ferber and Nelson 1993, Nelson, 1996; Staveren, 1999). Nelson comments:

“the conception of human nature underlying neo-classical economics is of an individual human as radically separate from other humans and from nature; the emphasis is on separation, distance, demarcation, autonomy, independence of self” (1996:30)

Economics, she argues, is a system of thought that deals with concepts of individual activity, choices and competition, all of which are associated with masculinity in Western culture. At the macro level, economics is concerned with markets and with governments – and yet almost all activities with which women are centrally concerned for most of their time - the raising of children, the maintenance of families, tending personal relationships, food production, housework – exist outside these formal economic institutions. Like other aspects of modernist thinking, economics establishes a ‘logic of hierarchical dualism’ such that if an argument is not ‘hard’ and ‘logical’ it must be sloppy and irrational.

This is taken further by Shearer and Arrington (1993), who point to the fact that, like the discourse of philosophy itself, economics is predicated on:

“rationality, order, clarity, logic, form, unity, culture and closure over and against chaos, ambiguity, nature, openness, dispossession, preservation, content, the unknown and the

concealed, negated attributes that philosophy has always found usefully described with the metaphor of ‘woman’”(1993: 258)

Drawing parallels between a feminist deconstructive critique of masculinist constructions of female sexuality, based on ideas of male sexuality as the norm against which women are found deficient, they point to the normalising and standardising effect of economics, reducing all human activities to actions based on motives of self-gain. In the place of a mutltiplicity of motives and desires, economic thinking validates only appropriative ones. Accounting, as a specialised practice within the economic field, perpetuates a system of values which:

“assigns no values to nature until it is tamed, harnessed, commodified and (through income calculus) literally negated. Nature has no values in economics or accounting until accounting “makes it her slave” (John Locke). That is a condition of accounting, and its rationality that is so deeply ingrained in our language and our practice that it seems to hardly demand reflection” (1993: 260)

Waring (1988) describes the process by which male economists, concerned with post-war reconstruction in Britain and America, devised a system of national accounts which completely missed out what most women in the world do. By following Adam Smith’s categorisation of labour as either “productive” or “un-productive” (the former being the labour of a manufacturer, the latter being the work of a servant who “adds to the value of nothing”), work that counted in national accounts was taken to be that which is done in the formal workplace. Services later were added to this list, and some attempts have been made to “impute” a value on those forms of work which do not pass through the market but which could do so. Nevertheless, all childbearing and rearing, housework, growing of crops for family consumption, tending of family livestock, collecting water, caring for relatives, helping with agricultural work on family farms - cooking, sewing, mending, nursing - are deemed unproductive and are missing from the national accounts.

Just as Fletcher (1998) identifies a dynamic within workplaces which renders that which women do invisible (see Chapter 3), Waring has identified a similar process operating at the widest possible scale. She writes:

“When international reports and writers refer to women as statistically or economically invisible, it is the United Nations System of National Accounts that has made it so...when you are seeking out the most vicious tools of colonisation, those that can obliterate a culture and a nation, a tribe or a people’s values system, then rank the UNSNA among those tools”(1988: 38)

The discourse of economics, then, is founded on a modernist male-centred view of the world, one in which that which is valued, has importance in terms of “productivity”, is very largely the things that men, historically, have tended to do - in the public sphere of life. The things that women have tended to do, within households, as carers, as creators and re-creators of families, as builders of communities, as conservers of resources, have been largely missing from economic thinking. People doing this kind of work are “economically inactive”, even though in many parts of the world families depend for their daily food on the crops the women produce and the animals they tend. As Waring points out, if you are not counted, and not valued, you tend not to figure in policy making. You are invisible to the formal, “official” eye.

Economics and the Environment

Economics is a system which counts only that which is exchanged as a commodity: it has had no measurement for natural resources, no equivalent of a “capital account” on a world scale to account for depletion. Trees are value-less, according to economic thinking, until they are felled and sold as timber – by which time, of course, they are dead and no longer to carry out their function within the ecosystem. What Fletcher (1998) calls an ethic of growth-through-individuation can conceptualise no collective value in preserving or maintaining the resources of the earth: it accords using apparently “free” resources as a morally neutral act, in which the economic incentives suggest to the rational individual that he should fell as many trees as he can, in order to maximise his wealth. If

depletion of 'natural capital' (Hawken et. al. 1999) is taken into account, the wealth currently enjoyed by those of us who live in the rich parts of the world would seem much less desirable, achieved as it is at the cost of substantially reducing the planetary base we (now and in the future) need to survive.

There are now many voices, from feminist writers, ecologists and economists, who are connecting the ways in which human activities are driven by economic imperatives with substantial environmental damage resulting. The annual 'State of the World' report from the World Watch Institute in New York makes sobering reading (Brown et. al. 2000). Hawken (1993) reports that all natural systems are in decline, and even sceptics are now coming to accept that climate change is a taking place as a result of human actions. The UN-affiliated Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported in January 2001 that the rate of climate change this century is expected to be greater than that for the past 10,000 years⁴. Von Weizsäcker called the twentieth century the Century of Economics, during which this ideational framework was so embedded that "it never occurs to us that other centuries were shaped by entirely different realities or perceptions of reality" (1994: 6). This, he suggests, is a situation that cannot last far into the twenty-first century, which he dubs the 'Century of the Environment' because:

"the cruel reality of ecological devastation will confront us in our every day lives and will inevitably shape our civilisation if present trends of destruction continue for just another decade or two" (1994:7)

Some environmental economists are trying to develop measures which take some of the issues into the economic system, whilst leaving the assumptions of the discipline largely intact (Cairncross, 1991). Others go much further. Part of the difficulty lies in the macro economic system's reliance on the mechanism of growth, placing increasing strain on limited environmental resources and the 'carrying capacity' of the Earth – "the uppermost limit of the number of species an ecosystem or habitat can sustain, given the supply and availability of nutrients" (Hawken, 1993: 24). Robertson describes the logic of the system as "consumption-must-grow because production-must-grow

⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change press release, Jan 22, 2000

because money-must-grow and jobs-must-be-provided” (1998: 23). Ayers quotes the economist Kenneth Boulding: “anyone who thinks that exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist” (1998:101)

At the level of the individual company, the growth imperative is also at work: capital investment from shareholders requires a return, which means that profit must be generated through constantly reducing costs, increasing turnover and entering new markets. Current activities are financed through processes which require larger scale future activities to generate sufficient surplus to reward lenders (Scholte, 2000). This, then, is a system with no regulator, no theoretical or practical recognition of limits. Von Weizsäcker is not the only person to point out that it is not physically/environmentally possible for all the inhabitants of the planet to consume resources and create waste at the rate of the world’s richest 10 percent: in effect, the rich can only live comfortable lifestyles because most of the world’s people are far poorer than we are. Yet there is no recognition of this in mainstream economics or politics, or in the rhetoric of ‘economic development’ for all.

Those working in the field of ‘new economics’ argue that pricing mechanisms and markets are very good at steering human behaviour in certain directions, but that the economic system needs to be adjusted to take account of the perverse incentives it currently creates and the costs it leaves uncounted. In effect they are seeking ways to represent the interests of both people and ‘the planet’ within an economic system. As Hawken comments “Markets are superb at setting prices, but incapable of recognising costs” (1993:75). Daly and Cobb (1990) set out a number of conditions which markets need to work well, but which markets themselves cannot provide: fair competition; moral capital, such as trust, co-operation and integrity; public goods, like education, research, security; full-cost pricing, rather than incentives for producers to externalise all possible costs; just distribution of rewards – not enabling owners of capital to prosper at the expense of those who rely on their labour to survive; and ecological sustainability, without which the foundation on which economic activities rest is undermined. Korten sees the provision of these conditions as being a role for both governments and civil society, and suggests that the ensuing democratic pluralism offers the best chance for human creativity to rise to the challenge of solving human problems (1995).

Robertson also advocates a change to the ‘rules of the game’ within which economics is enacted, to achieve a new economics “as if people and the Earth matter”. The new economics would be based on:

- A systematic empowerment of people, as opposed to making and keeping them dependent as consumers and wage-slaves
- Systematic conservation of resources and the environment
- Evolution from a ‘wealth of nations’ model of economic life to a ‘one world’ model based on decentralisation
- Restoration of political and ethical choice to a central place in economic life and thought, based on respect for qualitative values, not just quantitative ones, and
- Respect for feminine values, not just masculine ones (1998: 15)

Robertson does not, in fact, elaborate on what ‘feminine values’ means here. But I get a sense from these writers, several of whom mention a connection between women and ‘environmental issues’, of the ‘other’, something unordered and chaotic, lurking at the edges of this talk of new economic systems. Ortner, in her 1974 article entitled “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”, drew the connection between the control of Nature by rational culture and the control of women by men. New Economics remains a largely rationalist discourse, where the assumed ability of human minds to control and order the world is strong. Robertson talks about “a market economy operating freely within a well-designed framework of government, law and money” (1998:16) and von Weisäcker says “in order for environmental protection to re-gain the minds of the public, it should be re-designed in a way that helps economic recovery” (1994:12). Both mainstream environmentalists and ‘new economists’ keep a foot securely in the modernist camp, seeking rationalist solutions to systemic problems (or so their written discourse suggests, but since they write in order to persuade and convince, what alternative do they have?). Eco-feminists, however, express a very different orientation.

Eco-feminism: a story of participation

Feminism offers two main interconnected responses to the environmental challenge: the first, as articulated by Ortner above, is to link the techno-industrial culture's treatment of Nature with the way the masculine and the feminine are represented and valued by that culture. Both are relationships of domination and denial. The second suggests that there is a particular connection between women and Nature, particularly through women's role in reproduction. I will consider each of these in turn.

Ecology is concerned with the interrelationships between all the different life-forms on the planet: unusually for a scientific discipline, it seeks to integrate rather than differentiate through highlighting interconnectedness and mutual dependency of biological systems. (oikos, Greek for house/home, logos, meaning discourse). Deep ecology, a term first used by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, takes this further by asking "deep"/non-scientific questions about Nature, society and the relationship between inhabitants of the planet, seeking wisdom rather than fact. It distinguishes itself from 'shallow' or reform ecology by seeking to overturn an anthropocentric perspective on Nature, and offers an eight-point 'platform' of principles from which to work, the first of which states:

"The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes". (Sessions, 1995)

This, then, is a major step away from modernism, and a re-ordering of the human place as no more than equal participant in the more-than-human world. From a slightly different perspective as a 'Social Ecologist', Bookchin (1991) explicates the links between domination and hierarchy in human society and the way humans treat nonhuman nature. Unlike the deep ecologists, his attention is with the political project entailed in overcoming hierarchy, in order that Nature be appropriately valued. He is explicit in the connections he draws with female imagery, using the concept of

unconditional 'motherlove' to describe sort of participant relationship with Nature of pre-modern societies, and suggesting that oppression and hierarchy which have developed through male-oriented society have broken that relationship, suppressing women as a key step:

“woman haunts this male ‘civilisation’ with a power that is more than archaic or atavistic. Every male-oriented society must persistently exorcise her ancient powers...the subjugation of her nature ...forms the archetypal act of domination that ultimately gives rise to man’s imagery of a subjugated nature” (1991:121, in Reason, 1994)

Ecofeminists take this idea as central to their thinking, emphasising the exercise of gendered power in the treatment of Nature by culture. They identify it not so much as a problem of anthropocentrism, but of *androcentrism*:

“Social ecology challenges the dualistic belief that nature and culture are separate and opposed. Ecofeminism finds misogyny at the root of that opposition” (King, 1989)

Closely echoing the feminist critique of economics, ecofeminists (Plant 1989, King 1989, Merchant 1995, Macy 1991, Spretnak 1997) argue that Western techno-industrial culture is deeply imbued with the values of domination and hierarchy. Dualistic binary thinking is normal, with woman, and nature, at the denied and disparaged end of the pairing. Such thinking also acts to reduce diversity and multiplicity through simplification and abstraction. Rich (quoted by King) has called it a “culture and politics of abstraction”, characterised by increasing commodification, and uniformity. Ecofeminists seek to express the voice of denied other, whether as woman or as Nature, accepting “the life-struggles of all of nature as our own” (King, 1989: 18). Macy (1991) calls this a “third movement” – a post-Modern step, a return to a world of participation and connection in recognition that the “distancing eye” of the Scientific Revolution has brought humanity great gains and understanding, but also at considerable cost. She evokes the image of “world as lover, world as self”, suggesting that the re-connection of person (male and female) to world is an integral part of acting with love towards the environment. She says that the self-consciousness of modernism - “the lonely and heroic journey of the ego” (1991:13) - is coming to an end, and being replaced by a new consciousness that “we are our world knowing itself”. (Eco-feminists are not alone in expressing

such ideas. Reason (1994) similarly talks about a resurgence of a participatory world view after the “unconscious participation” of the Modern period, as does Berman (1981), Tarnas (1991), Capra (1982, 1996) and others)

Merchant (1995) identifies four main strands of ecofeminism - liberal, cultural, social and socialist. The liberal approach (echoing the reformist orientation of the liberal frame of feminist thinking on organisations, discussed in Chapter 3) stresses the need for more women to become more involved in ecological science, conservation, and the environmental movement, with better educational opportunities to enable them to do this⁵. “Cultural ecofeminism” has clear links to the standpoint (“Value Difference”) perspective on organisational analysis, and has probably been the strongest voice within the movement. This position proclaims a special connection between women and the environment:

“Women give life. We have the capacity to give life and light. We can take our brooms and sweep the earth. Like witches, we can clean up the atmosphere with our brooms. We can seal up the hole in the ozone layer. The environment is life and women must struggle for life with our feet on the ground and our eyes toward the heavens. We must do the impossible.”
(Letelier, in Merchant, 1995: 23)

Women have, across cultures, been seen as closer to Nature than men, because of their menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. ‘Natural’ cycles, and an awareness of the body, are a constant part of the life-experience of women in a way they are not for men. Women as child-carers and home-makers tend to have a close relationship with their immediate environment - they notice in

⁵ I notice that, despite their long and significant contribution to the grassroots environmental movement, women are conspicuously absent at the head of environmental NGOs, as leading spokespeople of ‘experts’ on environmental issues, or as prominent academics writing on environmental issues. In March 2000 I co-facilitated a meeting for leaders of fifteen of the UK’s major environmental and development NGOs to work on a ‘post-Seattle strategy’, and only one woman was in this grouping

very concrete ways when something goes wrong.⁶ Also, in most countries of the South it is women who are responsible for maintaining domestic crops and animals, and are farmers: they are impacted very directly by environmental degradation (Shiva, 2000). Merchant comments:

“Household products, industrial pollutants, plastics, packaging and wastes invade the homes of First World women threatening the reproduction of daily life, while direct access to food, fuel and clean water for many Third World women is imperilled by cash cropping on traditional homelands and by pesticides used in agribusiness” (1995: 7)⁷

This is a perspective on environmental degradation that is grounded in the lived experience of individuals, rather than in abstractions. The secularisation and isolation of the human from the natural world which has been part of Modernity has impacted women in a different way from men, driving a wedge between the connections that are made through daily life and the ‘intellectual scaffolding’ available to articulate and make sense of that experience. Max Weber talked about the bureaucratic advance of modernism as leading to a progressive “disenchantment” of the world; cultural ecofeminism calls for re-enchantment, re-valuing the idea of the Great Mother Earth, with celebration and ritual, including a celebration of the nature in women’s bodies. Spretnak evoked this in the form of a myth about Gaia:

“From the eternal Void, Gaia danced forth and rolled Herself into a spinning ball, She moulded mountains along Her spine, valleys in the hollows of Her flesh. A rhythm of hills and stretching plains followed Her contours, From Her warm moisture She bore a flow of gentle rain that fed Her surface and brought life”(Spretnak, 1978, quoted in Merchant 1995: 3)

⁶ The futurist and environmentalist Hazel Henderson began her campaigning work when, as a mother of a young child in New York, she became aware of the traffic pollution in the city air which affected her child’s breathing.

⁷ “Women who live within three kilometres of landfill sites have a 33% higher risk of having babies with birth defects than those living further away, says a study in the Lancet” Guardian, 7th August 1998

The image of the Mother Goddess found (perhaps ironic) scientific connection when in 1979 the scientist James Lovelock published *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth*. His hypothesis is that:

“The entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts” (1979: 9)

Social ecofeminism tends to emphasise the domination of human by human, pointing to the increasing marketisation and commodification of life, including aspects of Nature and reproduction, echoing Bookchin’s work, cited above.

Merchant suggests that socialist ecofeminism is the least clearly defined of the strands. It builds on social ecofeminism, but seeks to highlight the subordination of reproduction by production under industrial capitalism. In particular, it points to the fact that true respect for and harmony with Nature is logically precluded by the basic tenets of capitalism, because capitalist economics assumes growth and competition, in which nature and waste are uncounted in the calculation. The system, therefore, has no intelligence of the damage it does, and no information which might lead thoughtful people to choose to do otherwise. Such considerations lie outside its truth-rules. Shiva (1998, 2000) speaks from this position:

“There are in India today two paradigms of forestry - one is life-enhancing, the other life-destroying. The life-enhancing paradigm emerges from the forest and the feminine principle; the life-destroying one from the factory and the market...Since the maximising of profits is consequent upon the destruction of conditions of renewability, the two paradigms are cognitively and ecologically incommensurable.” (Shiva, 1988:76)

Philosopher Karen Warren says:

“An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature, and attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. ...It builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses...An ecofeminist perspective is thereby structurally pluralistic, inclusivist, and contextualist, emphasising through concrete example the crucial role context play in understanding sexist and naturist practice” (1988: 151)

An eco-feminist critique, then, offers an alternative way of being in the world, which at the same time displaces the certainty of the dominant paradigm. This may be one of many alternative commentaries on the destruction to the environment brought about by Modern living, but the feminist aspect keeps the notion of gendering, and of women, in all their diversity, as central rather than as marginalised and silenced.

An Interlude: So what about Business Education?

I carry the critiques above, the alternative stories they offer, as I move within the territory of business education. And so I begin to unpack the lived contradiction with which I started this inquiry, because exactly the same rationalist, individualist intellectual scaffolding underpins this educational practice. Let me unpack a little further, before moving into some accounts of my practice.

Business schools are places where business practice is legitimised, formulated and theorised. They neither determine nor fully reflect how business is carried out, but they offer a language through which business activities are discussed and perpetuated, and a body of people whose time is devoted to describing, analysing and legitimising business from an academic perspective. Within the professional community of business education, it is possible to see an acting out of the modernist dilemma over the science base of knowledge, with business academics tending towards grounding business theory in social science, particularly economics, in order to establish its (and their) academic credibility, whilst practitioners and management consultants, certainly over the last two decades, have increasingly drawn attention to the non-rational, unpredictable and intuitive aspects of business practice (Peters and Waterman, 1983, Vaill, 1986). Debates that take place within the business school fraternity – still heavily male-dominated, the female business school dean being a rarity, women contributors to academic business journals still a small minority - is an interesting indicator of the legitimising discourses for business. They set the terms of the discussion, and because they are increasingly populist in approach and dissemination, these discussions, perhaps more than those between any other academic group, enter the realms of public discourse. There is a conflation between the interests of business and “national” interest more generally, and the language of business pervades modern public discourse.

As western business organisations grew in complexity from the early decades of the century, so the idea developed that learning how to run them required something more akin to a professional education rather than an apprenticeship, learning on the job. Drawing on the well-established

concepts of “scientific management” (Taylor, 1974), much academic business education has its roots in the 1960s movement, which began in the USA, to become more rigorous and intellectual in learning how to conduct business:

“It was thought that a manager’s decisions would be better if he (sic) understood, say, the economists’ definitions and theory of self interest...The capital asset pricing model, developed by the University of Chicago and no child’s toy to understand, has had a profound and lasting effect on the financial markets” (O’Reilly: 1994)

Business education operates within the neoclassical economic paradigm. It has attempted to build from this formal framework a set of practices which can be used to run businesses successfully. So modern business education came to be named “business administration”, a process of running the ‘business machine’ in an orderly way. The core disciplines of business education have broadened from economics to embrace financial management, accounting, marketing, human resource management, organisational behaviour and business strategy. In effect, running businesses was treated as an applied science, a question of formal theoretical knowledge combined with technique, taking as its foundation a body of theory predicated on the existence of the rational individual seeking to maximise his or her gain through transactions in markets.

The curriculum and approach have been widely criticised. The first set of criticisms from the mid 1980s on, were on the grounds that the sort of analytical rationalists being produced by the business schools were no substitute for managers - that they could not, in fact, run businesses despite their education. Peters and Waterman, writing in 1983, identified one of the problems with industrial competitiveness in the United States as being “paralysis by analysis”, an inability to see the wood for the trees. They identified the need for more spirit, more leadership, more attention to organisational culture in order to build successful businesses. Their argument was that managing organisations of any sort is more of an art than a science, and that conceptual models which failed to account for the humanity in collections of humans could not be successful. Other voices joined the debate about shifting management paradigms. Mintzberg wrote scathingly about the education of managers:

“I have seen (business school) professors of finance continue to search for the respect of economists by teaching increasingly irrelevant mathematical models. I have watched many of the behavioural scientists who have infiltrated business schools strut around like high priests seeking to ensure a degree of scientific rigour in research sufficient to detach researchers from the very organisations they are supposed to understand” (1989)

At the same time as people were being reintroduced into management thinking, globalisation was beginning to make itself felt, as international business grew to the supra-national level. As new organisational forms, and new tasks, emerge through this process, the formal ‘administrative’ approach, predicated on concepts of relative stability in the business environment, finds itself under challenge. Ideas of what it takes to exercise managerial control in these new circumstances - when different parts of a company may be in different continents, and may not share the same language and culture as the parent company, and supply chains may be global and indecipherable - are shifting.

The first response by business educators was a liberal one - to find a way of adding other nationalities in to the existing models. The notion of the international manager as someone who is fluent in several languages, comfortable working in uncertain environments, and sensitive enough to the contexts of other cultures to be able to “do business” fitted with the more humanistic approach to management developed from the mid 1980s. Good managers were increasingly seen to be people with excellent interpersonal skills, and personal flexibility and this needed to be reflected in what business schools taught. Fortune magazine commented (with tongue in cheek) in 1994:

“Every Business-school dean knows what to confidently promise: The ideal executive of the future - and every one of his (sic) school’s graduates - will be a leader not a mere manager. Global in outlook. Facile with information systems and technology. Able to capitalise on diversity. A visionary. A master of teamwork and a coach. And able to walk on water.”

One management educator commented:

“A qualitative shift is taking place in the ways companies compete, managers manage, and business is conducted...In the new economy, the manager’s job is to create an environment that allows knowledge workers to learn - from their own experience, from each other, and from customers, suppliers and business partners...the authenticity, integrity, and identity of the individual turn out to be the most critical managerial assets” (Webber, 1993)

A new discourse has begun to evolve, which delineates this ‘new economy’. It is characterised by flexible, ‘de-layered’ business organisations which operate in global markets and handle uncertainty by managing a lot of their work through out-sourcing – moving operations which would previously have been done in-house to outside contractors operating on relatively short-term contracts. Furthermore, this is being dubbed a “knowledge economy”. The 1988 World Bank development report commented:

“The balance between knowledge and resources has shifted so far towards the former that knowledge has become perhaps the most important factor determining the standard of living...Today’s most technologically advanced economies are truly knowledge based”

So-called ‘knowledge workers’, individuals with technical know-how and new ideas, are becoming the prized resource in this economic system, and are increasingly subject to a labour market, which recruits around the world (although, of course, they are both produced by and predominantly needed in rich countries with high levels of education). Business in the new economy is seen as a process in which highly personable people with leadership capabilities are taking their companies to undreamed of places, working in joint ventures with overseas partners to produce ever more diversified products ever more cheaply to meet ever expanding market needs⁸. The envisaged result is increased

⁸ I was once sitting in a hotel bar in Slovenia with a group of students from the MBA in International Business programme. I was talking to Liu and Sally, both from Taiwan. We were discussing the opening of the newest McDonalds in Ljubljana. Liu remembered when the first one came to Taipei. “When I first went there and ate the food, I thought it was disgusting”, she said, “its nothing like Chinese food, the taste was

prosperity for everyone involved, and increasing world-wide political stability, as relationships of trade and mutual involvement in enterprise overcome previous hostilities between nation-states. Peter Drucker suggests that managers cope with this new scenario by “preparing to abandon everything they know” in the face of “society’s new pluralism”, in order to achieve both “economic performance and political and social cohesion”(1992).

The skills needed by the new business executive might be seen as “feminised”, a moving away from the command-and-control model of management towards a valuing of all the sorts of attributes women traditionally have demonstrated in management (Helgesen, 1990). The Industrial Society comments:

“The most profound change of all is the one that has attracted the least attention. The real impact of the new economy is not on corporate structures, communication methods or the wage structures, but on the relationship between companies and employees” (2000)

In the new economy, (desirable) employees have choice about who they work for, don’t seek a ‘job for life’, are constantly looking for new skills, and have strong bargaining-power with their employers. Hiring a knowledge-worker is one thing: persuading them to pass on their knowledge is another. It requires, it is suggested, careful management, persuasion rather than coercion, and end to the deep assumptions of Taylor’s Scientific Management (1947) in which the worker is an adjunct of the organisational machine (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2000).

A 1999 survey of 100 chief executives on the future of business leadership by Anderson Consulting found the main desired attributes in future leaders were abilities to: create a shared vision in the company, live the company values, build team work and partnerships, think globally, appreciate

horrible. But I kept at it - everyone went there, it was very popular - and gradually I persuaded myself I liked burgers, by eating a little bit more each time. And eventually I got so that I really did like them!”)

cultural diversity and develop and empower staff. The survey report comments: “there is little doubt that the networked, outsourced, allied company is the pattern of the future” (Anderson Consulting, 1999). The “business case” for employing more women in managerial positions is thought to be emerging. The management consultant Tom Peters wrote in 1990:

“As we rush into the 90s, there is little disagreement about what business must become: less hierarchical, more flexible, and team oriented, faster and more fluid. In my opinion, one group of people has an enormous advantage in realising this new vision: women”.

Relational work, then, is being framed as key to profit generation. The feminist writers Calás and Smircich (1993) see this as an appropriation of ‘women’s difference’ discourse by male management theorists, which carries no suggestion of there being any concomitant re-valuing of women’s role in business organisations. Although the workplace might be more ‘feminised’, it is not necessarily more *female* at senior, decision-making levels or in the sorts of outcomes it produces.

This new environment, however, is being described as one in which employees gain independence and managers release control, in order for both to reap the potential rewards of the global marketplace. Managing has become not so much administering, as *leading* – so that ‘leadership studies’ is a recent addition to many business school curricula. The changes are also reflected in business school teaching in strategy, marketing, financial management: all increasingly address how to ‘penetrate new markets’ and in particular, how to assess ‘business risk’ (i.e. minimise the threat to profit accumulation) when operating in unfamiliar and unstable environments (i.e. in ‘developing countries’).

There are, however, many questions which stand outside ‘what can be asked’ (Jacques, 1998) within this discourse – including those relating to the stories above– about poverty, income distribution and environmental degradation, human purposes, and – in the end – the ethics of the system, in both environmental and human terms. Ferguson comments that administrative discourse subjects “very

intimate aspects of human relationships, emotion and identity to the reign of commerce and technique” (1984: 52). It is guilty, she suggests, of what Foucault calls “radical deafness” – a structured inability to hear outside its rationalist boundaries. This includes speculative thinking, “the rigorous self-scrutiny that underlies the task of political philosophy”, and all connections with a social criticism/social change agenda (1984: 76).

The debate about the ‘new economy’ (and old economy) and the competences and capacities it requires are set within an inaccessible meta-framing, in which the rationalist, purposive, anthropocentric, non-participative economic goal of business activity is beyond question. Despite the talk of ‘new paradigms’, this is a within-paradigm adaptation. Business education, within this administrative framework, asks predominantly ‘*how*’ questions, not ‘*what*’ questions; the first are technical, the second evaluative, normative. Answering ‘*how*’ questions presupposes that questions of ‘*what to do*’ have been answered. It cannot “know” the sort of information which might make a difference to its operation, because its epistemology outlaws such knowledge. The sort of ‘knowing’ expressed in ecofeminism, deep ecology and other voices founded on participative world views sit outside the ‘truth’ accessible to modern, rationalist business.

The processes of globalisation seem to offer both the ultimate and inevitable culmination of the modernist project as it is expressed through economic activity (as Scholte argues), and at the same time a searching challenge to the whole purpose and conduct of business. We are witnessing the global version of what Kanter (1989) has described as the “corporate Olympics” - finding out how to do more with less, continue to squeeze growing profit out of increasingly saturated markets using increasingly inaccessible natural and human resources. The point in this link at which saving is made is where labour is cheaper, or where raw materials can be obtained for lower prices than locally. Competitive advantage, the magic ingredient that enables firms to make more profit than their rivals, to gain and keep market share, is won by good timing in this race - being the first to find a commercial outlet for a new raw material, being the first to sell an existing product in a new country. Such a process means that the core labour force in the expensive First World gradually becomes valuable only for its knowledge, that which cannot be found more cheaply elsewhere. The

“knowledge society” presupposes the exportation of other types of work to other parts of the world. The division of labour into “hand” and “brain” work (Braverman, 1974), which typified the industrial revolution in the North, is becoming a division across the hemispheres of the globe in the service of a unified business system.

The effects of this on those who are not part of the “knowledge society”, or who are part of it but do not have the valued sorts of knowledge, are very severe - and create scenarios which are hard to identify as part of a rising quality of life. Relationships of economic dependency are created, in service to the embracing market, as the capacity of local communities to sustain their own means to subsist are undermined (Shiva, 2000). People give up ways of life that have supported them for generations, in order to sell their labour for money; they become both employees and consumers. And with the market moves market values, market assumptions, market assessments of worth, market pressures. The Avon cosmetics representative now knock on the doors of the favelas in Sao Paulo, the entrepreneurs of Bangkok discover a market niche in child prostitutes for visiting businessmen, and the Chinese government discover the ultimate low cost labour force by getting goods for Western markets made by prisoners in forced labour camps. As people in the North discuss the post-industrial age, the imperatives of modernism play themselves out in the South, to meet Northern fragmented and diversified market demands. We maintain food mountains in the North in order to keep the cost of goods high enough, whilst millions in the South experience famine. We develop new strains of genetically modified grains which carry the promise of increased crop yield, with unknown environmental impacts, but enable private corporations to recoup the cost of developing such seeds by patenting and hence owning seed varieties which have previously been freely available to Southern farmers (Shiva, 2000).

With nothing but instrumental ground to stand on, business discourse, and the education that perpetuates it, has no way of commenting on these issues other than in terms of risk to capital. The only kind of evaluative or moral comment in business schools is found within a (low status) sub-discipline called ‘business ethics’, which invites individuals, as individuals, to consider their response to some ‘moral dilemmas’ they could encounter in the course of their career. This is

private/personal work, provided most commonly as an optional ‘elective’ after the compulsory part of the curriculum has been completed, and usually framed as a question of individual choice. It is seen as having nothing whatsoever to do with the other business disciplines. *The enormous ideological work done by the business paradigm, as it rationalises, calculates and standardises everything it comes into contact with, is voiceless.*

This is a world I have been moving within: this is the discourse with which I have been surrounded. I have felt silenced by it, holding my feminist attention inside myself. It has constantly posed me challenges – which I will go on to explore more in the next chapter.

It remains the case that I do not know how to behave - what to do -when I find myself on a business-trip eating “continental breakfast” in a hotel in Pakistan, where 60% of women in the country remain unable to read or write, and in China, where an estimated 40% of girl children currently do not survive infancy, because of the one-child policy. I know that I am participating in a power-system which denies the connections between these micro and macro phenomena, and seeing relationship between these manifestations of economic development and continuing, systemic, gender inequity leaves me hesitant, struggling with my powerlessness.

What Next? Thoughts on Agency and Change

In the preceding two chapters I have sought to set out the conceptual and values framework within which I am moving - the critiques I carry in my head. The next question, of course, is *so what?* - what does this suggest I should be doing, for real, in practice? I will raise here some questions and thoughts, which I will build on later in my inquiry.

I notice, in these two chapters, a two-way movement: out, towards macro issues, at the global level, addressing what Ekins has called the ‘global problematique’ (1992), and at the same time inwards, towards my personal identification with a set of feminist perspectives, focusing down on the micro level of the individual’s participation in systems of power. I also notice the very abstracted voice I have used in the discussion of globalisation above, suggestive of my own difficulty in engaging in this territory without getting sucked in to its discourse. I have raised questions about modernist and postmodernist approaches to feminism, and elaborated some critique from them, which in turn suggests quite different thoughts about change processes.

As discussed in Chapter 3, one of Foucault’s insights was to point to the importance of what he calls the “micro-physics” of power, the everyday and mundane ways in which structures of power are maintained and reproduced. In thinking about gender as a system of power, I believe such minutiae are particularly important - it is in the details of practice that power and resistance are played out in my current cultural context, where much of the overt signs of gender-power-conflict are no longer visible. This is the territory of ‘latent’ gendering, where even naming the process involves digging in that which seems unproblematic. What I have tried to do in the foregoing chapters is to indicate some connections, which to me suggest that the details of practice, of everyday behaviour, although in themselves almost insignificant, are part of a values system which has huge, ultimate significance for “planetary survival”. These aspects of gendered power are, for me, inseparable. The ‘micro-physics’ enacts and sustains the overarching system. Political interventions can, do and should take place at many different levels in a system. But if politics is carried out at the macro level without affecting the micro-interactions between people and between people and their planet, the sorts of change that may occur will not be significant enough. This, I believe, is the importance in the

feminist idea of the personal as political: in the terrain we conventionally attribute as personal, private - governed by emotion, character, psychology - power-systems are played out.

I have also raised the tentative thought that there is some curious interplay going on here between postmodern positions of multiplicity and uncertainty, and the grounding of feminism as a social movement in a modernist framing. I notice, in my own language as I write, that whenever I approach the purposes of feminism I easily drop into the language of certainty and conviction; I do not hold this (without effort) with the lightness demanded of the postmodern place. At the theoretical level, staying in the postmodern is one thing: Gherardi (1995), Calás and Smircich (1996), Ferguson (1984), Fletcher (1998), Nicholson (1990), Kemp and Squires (1997) and many other theorists I have not mentioned along the way, locate themselves as feminists drawing on postmodern theory. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this theoretical 'turn' has had the effect of taking some of the simplicity of action out of contemporary feminism. But my interest, although strongly grounded in ideas, is not just in thinking, but also in questions of action. I am working with ideas of lived knowledge (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), and have started this inquiry process by questioning what I am doing. As Rowan suggests in his 'dialectical research cycle' (1981, see Introduction), thinking is not enough, caught, as it is, in the contradiction between having not enough information and too much information. Active engagement is needed as a way forward. Or as Lather (1991) says, acting in the face of uncertainty is required.

And so I am beginning to work with the paradoxical idea of 'postmodern change agency', in order to play some part in transforming manifestations of modernity. This is in some senses a nonsensical idea: the 'agent of change' is an idea evoking individualist purposive, instrumental action – a creature of the Modern. The language of 'change strategies', which suffuses organisational literature on change, suggests that such things can be intentionally brought about and controlled – that ideas can be operationalised. But postmodern feminism must also address issues of bringing about change (or it would not be feminism), and so work with more paradoxical, multiple and less agentic (Marshall, 1995) approaches to change. And since the postmodern conceptualises social structure, expressed through discursive practices, as processual and diffused with points of resistance, it is not without change possibility.

Ferguson (1984) and Fletcher (1998) offer some thoughts on this, both concerned with discourse. As noted in Chapter 3, Ferguson suggests that the act of changing the way things are thought about is also to change the world, since ideas are constitutive of that which they depict. Likewise, Fletcher suggests that disrupting discourses, through deconstruction, is a way of bringing about change. At one level, then, the stories we tell of our world are very important (hence my struggle to tell this story...). But this does not feel a very strong basis from which to guide my practice. What else could I draw on?

Although much has been written on the critiques by various sorts of feminisms of organisations and management, relatively little attention has been given to what feminist practice as a manager inside a conventional workplace might consist of - even though, as important places in which the process of gendering takes place, managers are key agents in how this is done. The micro-physics of gender in organisations often comes down to what managers do to, and with, those who work for them. Ferguson (1984) is not alone in suggesting that the values of feminism and those of hierarchical organisation are in such opposition that they cannot co-exist, and feminists should leave and set up alternative organisational forms. Calás and Smircich have highlighted the dangers of allowing feminist values to be co-opted by business imperatives, but have also suggested that “thinking feminine” through drawing on critical, rather than liberal, feminist theories may be a way to put alternative images and models of the world into the business domain: the frugal housewife, gossiping women in the global village, the hysterical woman who “releases her emotions to cry and scream in moral indignation at the crimes against humanity that are constantly committed in the name of economic rationality” (1993:79).

One set of suggestions which might be followed by those who carry out management work as feminists comes from Martin (1993). She states her belief that this is an important area for feminist attention since

“managers are active gendering agents. Because of their authority and control over resources, the gendering that managers do is particularly consequential. Armed with a feminist vision,

they can initiate change. In practice, feminist managers can refuse “to gender” in ways that harm women or minority men and that privilege majority men” (1993: 281)

She proposes eight practices of feminist management:

1. Asking the “woman question” - actively putting women as women (and hence by implication men as men) in the picture, to highlight gendering processes that are implicit
2. Using feminist practical reasoning - developing pragmatic responses to concrete, contextualised situations, rather than assuming choices are static and oppositions immutable
3. Consciousness raising - developing collaborative and interactive processes which enable people to make use of their personal experience, acknowledging the multiple realities brought by people to their work
4. Promoting community and co-operation - meaning not an absence of difference, but a conscious de-emphasising of winning and losing, status differences and invidious comparisons. “Emphasis on hierarchy encourages a focus on power as control over people...whereas an emphasis on community encourages a focus on power as a means to produce and get work done”
5. Promoting democracy and participation - highlighting people’s involvement in the making of rules by which they are governed, their rights to dissent without punishment, and their freedom of speech, action and choice. “Feminist managers exercise authority carefully and they share rather than hoard information, resources and opportunities”
6. Promoting subordinate empowerment: power as obligation - an inversion of the usual hierarchy-down focus, instead actively trying to use power to affirm, encourage and enable other to grow
7. Promoting nurturance and caring - an acknowledgement of the appropriate humanity of workplace relationships, and the multiple demands and expectations that people have on each others “affections, energy and time”
8. Striving for transformational outcomes: Martin suggests three areas in which feminist management might bring about transformation: through enhancing women’s and minority

men's status in and treatment by organisations, either by affecting individuals or groups; by improving the way management is practised, so that is less oppressive and damaging, to men as well as women; and by challenging the prevailing ideas of what the purposes of corporations are. She expresses the belief that "use of new feminist practices will raise new questions and offer new ways of thinking, seeing, resolving problems and relating to others" (1993: 291)

A subtext of her principles, which is not deeply buried, is that this is a better, more humane and more effective way of managing than that of the male-centric model, and will bring about change in the desired direction. Martin is offering more of a prescription than an inquiry (but is that what I am looking for?), carrying something of a modernist think-plan-act framing. It does, though, point to some key areas in which feminist practice might differ from conventional management practice. As the next chapters will explore, I have certainly been carrying and trying to enact some of these imperatives.

But one of the many messages of postmodern thinking is that such acts may carry the seeds of their own undoing – that their intentionality, paradoxically, will lead to them not creating what they intend. Gherardi's work is relevant here. She notes the rejection of ambiguity and 'oppositionism' within modernity which "induces us to deny of the Other what we affirm for the One" (1995: 91), constantly creating right/wrong dichotomies. Yet this practice sits inside an ever-present and ineradicable *uncertainty* within the symbolic (and gendered) universe of modern organisations. Uncertainty is part of that which modernity denies, whilst having strategies to contain it that must be continuously carried out. "Gender relations" she says, "can be viewed as cultural performances, learnt and enacted on appropriate occasions" (1995: 125). She sees work as enacting a symbolic order in which "male is male, and the female is second-sexed", so that females in the workplace, whilst clearly not excluded, require both men and women to carry out ceremonial and remedial 'work' to repair the symbolic order. One feature of this, she suggests, is women's less assertive style, which amounts to them asking for permission, justifying and apologising for trespassing on the male symbolic territory.

The 'relational resources' which are deployed in such situations include hypocrisy, irony, trust and embarrassment (1995: 192). It is possible, she says, to put aside moral rejection of hypocrisy and "look instead with amusement at how hypocrisy is a resource for changing gender relations" (1995: 143). For example, actions taken irrespective of values, or under a façade and insincere declaration of values, may allow experimentation that would not otherwise happen. Putting ambivalent intentions into action may lead to the discovery of new purposes, or alter the original ones:

"Faced with a strong ethical imperative for coherence between values and actions, the ambiguity of courses of action creates room for experimentation. There is no doubt that equal opportunity initiatives attempt to instrumentalise the female presence for the purposes of legitimisation. But it is also true that they have enabled many women to instrumentalise organisations in order to create spaces for other women and to combat the devaluation of the female"

and

"Behaving in a female manner and professing the values of femaleness makes it easier to manage the dual presence (female in the male symbolic space), leaving room to choose how and when to resort to open opposition rather than to covert resistance" (1995: 145)

These are about strategies of protection as well as disruption. Indirect actions, says Gherardi, are a form of resistance to social control.

She goes on to discuss irony "as a metacommunicative resource, as an instrument of resistance, as a postmodern attitude", which enables "exposing contradictions without claiming to resolve them" (1995: 145). Irony is available as a pragmatic resource which:

"insinuates doubt. It suggests the world can be described in different terms, but it does not propose these other terms as alternative, 'better', 'more correct', or 'truer'" (1995: 145)

An ironist is someone who is aware of choices between what Rorty (1989) calls 'final vocabularies', ultimate or root explanations of the world. Common sense involves believing one's own final

vocabulary explains all others – that, in effect, you know best. An ironist sees all final vocabularies as contingent, fragile, historically situated and supported by linguistic games (see also Mumby and Puttnam, 1992). Rorty describes an ironist in this way:

- “(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered
- (2) She realises that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor resolve these doubts
- (3) Insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself” (1989: 73)

This, says Gherardi, is someone who has lost her innocence, and is also self-ironic, casting doubt on her own final vocabulary. “Perhaps the political nature of irony is not as evident as a political programme, but it undermines the foundations of all power based on the monopoly of absolute truth” (1995: 146)

This is a very different approach from the usual feminist struggle to express authenticity, close correspondence between values and actions – and reflects the constructivist, processual view of organisations, where little is fixed. Gherardi’s approach has some echoes of suggestions from hooks, when she talks about deliberately using marginality as a place for self protection and resistance, rather than seeking to enter into and change the mainstream. Marginality, she says, “offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds” (1991: 149) whilst still being in contact with the centre. She locates this as a site of resistance rather than (just) pain, a place for “radical openness”. An ironic position, then, could be an active and potentially creative place to be, rather than one of theoretical detachment – even though, from this perspective, the ‘political project’ of feminism takes on a different hue.

If I broaden out the notion of vocabulary from words to discourse/practice, this becomes a role I can identify with. I work at one of the places that create and reproduce the ‘final vocabulary’ of business management, and continue to do so whilst holding substantial doubt about it (as explored in these chapters). Rorty expresses well the sharpness of the situation when he says that “argument phrased in (the) present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor resolve these doubts”. I cannot use the discourse of rationalist business to resolve my doubts, yet I can use no other vocabulary and still make sense in this context. The point, of course, of persisting with the discourse is to remain in the field of play – and perhaps, as Gherardi suggests, playfulness is the only way of making space here. Whether or not I have managed to do irony (or want to), and if so what the effect of doing so might be, is something I shall explore further in the accounts that follow.

Before moving on, I will mention one other author who seems to have something to say of relevance here, although his perspective is not centred on gender issues. Torbert (1991) offers some interesting thoughts on what it might take to work with the sort of tasks/change processes, particularly as a manager, that are essentially undoable using existing discourse/practice. He suggests that what might be needed in such circumstances are what he calls “liberating structures” – defining tasks that require normal ways of doing things to be addressed and dismantled if the task is to be accomplished. Features of a liberating structure include:

- deliberate use of irony
- definition of tasks that are incomprehensible without reference to accompanying processes and purposes
- pre-meditated and pre-communicated structural evolution over time
- constant attention to experiential feedback on participants’ different ways of constructing realities
- use of all available forms of power involving a ‘psycho-social jujitsu’ in which power is used openly to create increasingly collaborative conditions

This concept is tied into his formulation of different sorts of power – unilateral, diplomatic and logistical, and a form of power that integrates and at the same time transcends these, which he calls ‘transforming power’:

“Transforming power is not enacted in a deductively logical fashion. It does not deduce specific action from general principles. Instead, transforming power is enacted ana-logically. It seeks analogies between a general theory and an independent apprehension of the present situation, felt from the inside as a participant in it” (1991: 58)

Not everyone, he suggest, can work at the sort of paradoxical level required by transforming power. He sets this claim within a theory of adult development which identifies seven successive stages, the last of which are Expert, Achiever, Strategist, Magician and Ironist (1991, Fisher, Rooke and Torbert 2000). The Expert is interested in problem solving, efficiency rather than effectiveness, finding causes, ensuring the smooth functioning of the enterprise; the Achiever is results-oriented, appreciates complexity, likes to initiate, seeks mutuality not hierarchy, feels guilt if not meeting his/her own standards. The Strategist no longer takes the existing overall structure of social systems for granted, is able to see critical gaps, move into unoccupied niches and motivate others, resolve disputes. The Magician and Ironist act outside any single framing, actively exercising multiple attentions and awareness of pattern, circulation, interruption, and dissolution of ego-identity (Torbert 1991, Fisher, Rooke and Torbert, 2000). Torbert suggest that although the great majority of managers are Technicians and Achievers, the most significant forms of leadership are exercised by Strategists and particularly, but rarely, by Ironist/Magicians, who operate outside normal behavioural or personal conventions. He writes:

“the transformation from the Strategist stage (to the Magician stage) is from being in the right frame of mind to having a reframing mind....A reframing mind continually overcomes itself, divesting itself of its own presuppositions” (1991: 62)

From the perspective I am taking in this inquiry, Torbert’s work does not have the gender-political ‘edge’ of Gherardi’s, but I find his development of ideas on what I might call ‘irony as practice’ useful and - as he intends, no doubt – provocative. The distinction he makes between the Strategist, struggling to connect things up, even at a complex level, and the Magician who has let go of that imperative, is helpful – as I will explore in subsequent chapters. I do, however, have reservations about the hierarchy of developmental stages he proposes, which at times in his work seems to take on an overly-concrete usage, where – ironically – ‘later stages’ are definitely better places to be than

'earlier stages'. I have also seen the categories used by others to type-cast and judge work colleagues. But I recognise that this is not necessarily Torbert's intention, and may be an example of 'oppositionism' as Gherardi calls it, which "mistakes form for substance, and takes constitutive of things what is in fact an epistemological procedure for setting them in order" (1995: 94).