THIS ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN WITH THE intent of naming some of the aspects of the corporate citizenship debate that are routinely missing. I will argue that scholarship in this area is at an early stage of development and is, as yet, practical rather than theoretical. I suggest that corporate citizenship is concerned with bringing about change and, if those working within it intend to be effective in this regard, a greater level of ‘reflexivity’ is required: an awareness of their own social practice and an ability to see themselves both as challenging social patterns and, at the same time, as part of them.

What follows is a number of thoughts, covering a range of topics in no great detail. This is written to provoke and raise debate. I beg forgiveness, therefore, for touching on substantial bodies of thought without full explanation and refer those who want to know more to the references at the end of this piece.

Corporate citizenship seems to be an idea of the time. The last five years have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of initiatives, standards, practice and language relating to this still ill-defined idea, stretching not only across Europe and North America, but increasingly in the third world. Some contested concept of the ‘citizenship’ responsibilities of corporations, as they emerge as a powerful social force, is becoming part of the language of wealth-creation, globalisation and, increasingly, of development. Within the territory of ‘corporate citizenship’ it is possible to distinguish a wide range of positions and activities: a critique of the free-market legitimisation of some aspects of globalisation; a normative argument about the conduct of multinational corporations; a call for new governance measures, both at the supra-national level and at the local voluntaristic level; an argument as to the relevance of ethical conduct and reputation in the growing importance of non-tangible business value; a burgeoning ethical investment community; a call for triple-bottom-line accounting, auditing and reporting; an emergent practice in such auditing and reporting, as well as in stakeholder consultation; new forms of partnerships between businesses and NGOs, and between businesses and multilateral agencies; and many more.

It is my experience that people working in this arena—as social auditors, consultants, campaigners, standard-setters, corporate managers with responsibility for reputation assurance or community investment, trainers, academics—may hold widely divergent views as to what they are doing, the ends they are hoping to achieve and the means they are using. But a broad underlying belief, often not articulated, can
be imputed from these developments: that there is some change under way in how business is to be conducted; that long-accepted models of business functioning inflict a substantial burden on both people and planet; and that this is a situation that must in some way be addressed. Despite its many different positionings and presentations, this is a set of initiatives and emergent practices that are concerned with social change. The exact nature of the desired change is seldom addressed—perhaps because the different players in the field would be unlikely to agree on them—but corporate citizenship is not, in essence, about business-as-usual.

For many of us, the big challenges we face in our world at this time in history remind us why we are engaged in this area of work; my language for these closely interlinked issues is relatively simple: poverty, justice and sustainability. Zadek (2000) calls these the ‘third-generation challenges’, citing progressive questions underlying corporate citizenship over the last decade:

- Can corporations be responsible in ways that enhance their business?
- Are more responsible companies likely to prosper in the future? And now,
- Are leadership-based voluntary approaches to responsibility enough in addressing the growing levels of poverty, exclusion, and environmental degradation?

In effect, corporate citizenship takes the activity we call ‘business’ out of the supposedly value-neutral discourse of business administration, and instead begins to ask questions of the purpose of business. In grasping the third strand of the triple bottom line, ‘the social’, business enterprise begins to grapple with itself as social practice, as an activity constructed by humans in the pursuit of human goals, subject to a now-global economic system that is also constructed by humans. In taking this step, business begins to move, even within its own terms, beyond the relatively—and deliberately—bounded assumptions of economics and more explicitly into the territory of social theory.

Yet, in this newly emergent territory, thinking or theorising seems limited. Something of the anti-theoretical bias of business practice characterises the whole area; much of the discussion is couched in pragmatic language assumed to be business-friendly. But if this is a movement concerned with social change, why is more attention not paid to other social change traditions? Why are underlying assumptions concerning change processes not interrogated more? Why is there not more methodological innovation and experimentation? Why not more discussion about theory–practice links, about what is being learned and in what way, about what is being resisted and in what way?

There are many possible sources of theory that could offer worthwhile insights, models and experience to those working in the corporate citizenship field. In this paper, I would like to touch on one of these, which has been, as far as I can see, ignored: theories of gender. Further, I will argue that unless those engaged in ‘corporate citizenship’ can pay more attention to the dynamics of socially constructed power and the ways in which their own interventions may bring about alternatives, the potential of the new practices of corporate citizenship to bring about social change will be very limited. This is a task in which, I believe, some strands of feminist thinking may be of help.

Learning from feminism(s)

Feminist thinking, which encompasses a range of different theoretical orientations, linked by a shared concern to address and overcome inequity and injustice based on gender, offers a set of trenchant critiques of modern society. These encompass not just a critique of the unjust outcomes of current social arrangements, but also the epistemology through which we (women as well as men) seek to justify them. Although the
spur for feminism has been protest and action, it has given rise to an extensive body of political, social and philosophical critique, which attempts to link the social subordination of women to the conceptual framework through which that subordination is held in place; to take the struggle for ‘women’s liberation’ into the realm of ideas.

In the three decades since the second wave of feminism began, feminists of many different persuasions have become increasingly concerned not just with action, but also with issues of knowledge creation, ownership and representation. Kemp and Squires describe this as a movement from asking ‘what is to be done?’ to ‘how can I claim to know things?’ and ‘who is the “I” that makes such a claim?’ (1997: 8). Feminist thinkers ask how knowledge is defined and who maintains the power to make such definitions. Feminists have increasingly taken their task as not simply the process of adding the marginalised contribution of women into an existing social order, but also attempting to take apart the intellectual tools of that order, in order to derive alternative understandings of where change may be located—and resisted.

Feminist critiques range far beyond those issues traditionally seen as ‘women’s issues’ such as reproductive rights, domestic violence and pay disparities, partly because much feminist thinking is at pains to uncouple the notions of ‘gender’ and ‘women’, and instead to consider gendering processes, which are enacted by both men and women in the course of everyday life. In his review of the development of Western thinking, Tarnas suggests:

considered as a whole, the feminist perspective and impulse has brought forth perhaps the most vigorous, subtle and radically critical analysis of conventional intellectual and cultural assumptions in all of contemporary scholarship . . . so fundamental that their significance is only beginning to be realised by the contemporary mind (1991: 408).

One of the significant, difficult and contested insights of feminist thinking is to link Western civilisation—currently being ‘globalised’ as the dominant way of living and thinking—with a particular expression of masculinity, and in turn to connect this to modernity itself. Like fish unable to see the water around them, these ideas are deeply imbued in our understanding of how the world is, to such an extent that we can scarcely recognise them as social construction. The connection between modernity and masculinity has been articulated not just by women thinkers but also by men who are concerned with the role of ways of thinking in creating change (see, for instance, Berman 1981; Capra 1982, 1996; Tarnas 1991). Again, to quote Tarnas:

The masculinity of the Western mind has been pervasive and fundamental in both men and women, affecting every aspect of Western thought, determining its most basic conception of the human being and the human role in the world (Tarnas 1991).

From this perspective, change strategies informed by feminism have moved towards activities concerned with the ownership of knowledge, empowerment processes and the building of new discourses. Other bodies of theory, concerned with ecological thinking and development, for instance, make similar connections.

Before elaborating on the connections between this and corporate citizenship, I offer a very brief summary of four stages in this movement, for purposes of illustration. In order to make the point, these are greatly simplified models, which in the complexity of real life tend to merge from one to the other, with later stages building on the earlier. Here I am drawing on the work of a team of researchers, of whom I was one, working on feminist approaches to organisational change.¹

¹ See Ely and Meyerson 2000; Meyerson and Kolb 2000; and Coleman and Rippin 2000. See also Calás and Smircich 1996 for a full review of the many different perspectives on thinking about organisations offered by feminisms.

link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/g_coleman.html
Stage one: ‘Equip the woman’, or liberal individualism

This approach takes as its starting point the assumption that differences between men and women are a result of sex-role socialisation, which leaves women ill-equipped to compete in the world of work or to assume leadership positions. It focuses on offering training, education and support to women to enable them to move into more senior organisational positions; in effect, to minimise the differences between them and the male colleagues with whom they may be competing. Those who manage to achieve positions of responsibility are then able to act as role models for others, shifting the expectations of those who follow. The major criticism of the approach is that it individualises the problem and requires women to do all the work to overcome their perceived ‘disadvantage’.

Stage two: ‘Create equal opportunities’, or liberal structuralism

Developing from the first stage, this approach addresses the structural or environmental factors that militate against women ‘competing on a level playing field’ in organisations. Gender inequalities are the result of biased recruitment, selection and promotion techniques; the additional responsibilities women face in fulfilling childcare commitments outside work; and gender segregation of workplaces and occupations (Kanter 1977). Ways to overcome these lie both in legislation to outlaw sex discrimination and unequal pay for equal work, and in developing workplace policies to supplement the law, for instance on sexual harassment, flexi-working and parental leave, together with training to help people to understand the issues and change their behaviour accordingly.

These first two approaches encompass most of the work done in organisations in Western countries over the last 30 years, when women’s relative under-performance in work life was first seriously recognised as some kind of problem. The solutions they encompass have made significant differences to the ability of women to take and retain paid work, and no doubt have made some contribution to the much higher participation rate of women in labour markets in recent decades. But they have done relatively little to change the systems of power that make them necessary in the first place.

To some extent a relative failure of the liberal approach might be a failure of implementation: the legislation that exists in many places is inadequately enforced. But the deeper question, of course, concerns the expectation that deeply rooted systems of inequality can be legislated away. It was at this point that feminist thinking became more trenchant.

Stage three: ‘Value difference’, or women’s standpoint

One response was to question the goal of the liberal approach: that of adding-women-in to an existing legislative and organisational framework, and minimising the differences between men and women. Surely, it was asked, the purpose of feminism is not to reproduce the inequities and hierarchies created by a male-dominated civilisation, but to create something different and better? One of the strongest themes of feminism has always been that of consciousness-raising, offering individuals an alternative conceptual and values framework through which to name their experience, so that they might reclaim that which is socially denigrated as a source of pride and strength. This form of feminism has parallels with other liberatory movements and standpoint epistemologies, bringing together the politicising of personal experience with an increasing political activism (Freire 1972). Many non-white and non-Western women pointed out that they had no desire to achieve positions of power in the institutions that were oppressing them; this was an aspiration for a white liberal elite, mistakenly generalised to people who saw their interests quite differently (hooks 1991). Standpoint feminism spoke of alternative knowledge and alter-
native ways of living, working, valuing things and emphasising the value of diversity rather than sameness.

Stage four: Resisting dominant discourse, or ‘post-equity’

More recently, attention has turned towards post-structuralist thinking, which emphasises the ongoing social construction of gender relations and other forms of power. Foucault’s work on what he called the ‘underside’ or ‘micro-physics’ of power has been influential, particularly the connection he draws between power and knowledge. One of the ways in which human beings govern themselves, he suggests, is through the establishment of ‘regimes of truth’, held together, but not necessarily easily, by a ‘normalising gaze’, deeply held assumptions as to what is usual, acceptable or normal (Foucault 1977). Fletcher (1998) sets out three key features of post-structuralist thought that are particularly relevant in developing approaches to change:

- It draws attention to ‘the process of knowledge production, and conceptualises it as an exercise of power where only some voices are heard and only some experience is counted as knowledge’. Post-structuralist perspectives challenge the notion of a transcendent universalising truth, and assert that the very set of rules used to determine if something is true or false is ideologically determined.

- It ‘emphasises the role language plays in mediating the relationship between power and knowledge’. Social reality and its patterns of dominance are constructed through established understandings of what can and cannot be said while still seeming sensible or credible; she calls these ‘truth rules’.

- It reminds us that the exercise of power is never absolute but rather should be seen as ‘contingent, provisional, achieved not given’ (Clegg 1989: 151). Power regimes can be disrupted and resisted (Foucault 1980; McNay 1992).

From this perspective, bringing about change at the micro level in organisations and at the macro level in societies involves engaging in processes of critique, experimentation and especially narrative-generation: building the possibilities for new stories, explanations and connections with experience, which challenge dominant and taken-for-granted realities. New ways of operating or seeing the world are grown from engagement and sense-making processes, rather than handed down in policy. In particular, enabling muted and marginalised individuals and groups to make connections between their experience at the personal level and the constructed social, historical, political and material structures within which they are located can lead to the creation of ‘subversive stories’ (Ewick and Silbey 1995) with transformational potential. (See also Gaventa and Cornwall 2000.) There are many action-researchers and activists working with these sorts of approaches in many parts of the world, some utilising feminist orientations and some not, attempting to grow both new practice and new understandings using participative and collaborative methodologies (see, for instance, Reason and Bradbury 2000 for examples).

Clearly this is a very different approach to change from those in which the first attempts to achieve gender equity were framed. It involves considering what, in practice, it means to work within ideas of second- rather than first-order change (Watzlawick et al. 1974)—that is, a ‘change of state’ rather than a ‘change within state’—and at the same time recognising that to do so is to engage with expressions of power and resistance which are in a constant state of being made and re-made through social interaction. For many feminists, thinking through the implications of these ideas for the role of the ‘change agent’ has been very complicated, because they rob the agent of much of the possibility of straightforward action.

Post-structuralism, then, directs attention towards the power of language to create and maintain a certain sort of ‘reality’. It suggests that we should look with particular
attention at that which is apparently self-evident and normal, and consider how it has been constructed that way and what or who may have been suppressed or excluded in the process. Hearn reminds us that ‘one of the mechanisms of hegemony is the reduction of the socially constructed and socially divided into the neutral and normal’ (2000: 618).

And so to corporate citizenship

Much of the activity within the corporate citizenship field could be located within the second approach outlined above: trying to create legislative and policy responses that will address inequity and exclusion, and so make the business playing field not only level but ‘transparent’. There is little overt discussion of power issues, of conflicting interests or ‘win–lose’ rather than ‘win–win’ strategies. As advocates and activists have sought to entice a sometimes-reluctant business community into changing its behaviour, the territory is painted in business-friendly discourse as one concerned with ‘drivers’, ‘tools’ and incentives for innovation, and therefore as simpler, perhaps less threatening, than it might be.

The corporate citizenship debate is framed as practical/strategic or possibly ethical, but not political. In this respect there are clear echoes of the meaning given to the equal opportunities initiatives that fell within the liberal structuralist approach I have described. There seems to be an assumption that the struggle to get policy or codes or rules of engagement agreed is what matters, rather than directing equal attention to how—if at all—it makes any difference to what is done in practice. To step beyond this procedural, legal-rational discourse is to leave the ‘business’ terrain and enter forbidden and frightening territory, in which humans struggle to make sense of the world. Hard-pressed managers will be forgiven for feeling that this is not where they would choose to go. But the point I am trying to make is that this is where ‘corporate citizenship’ potentially leads: to an awareness of the constructs through which our social arrangements are maintained, including arrangements for which inhabitants of the planet live in peace and plenty and which fear daily for their life and livelihood. Just as feminists have had to struggle with what it means to practise activism in the face of bewildering conceptual complexity, so those seeking second-order change within the field of corporate citizenship could and should follow.

There can be little doubt that corporate citizenship is engaged in the creation of new language and discourse; there is a growing vocabulary and practice associated with this subject and several emergent areas of professional expertise. So, this is an area in which, right now, possibilities of difference exist. Viewed as a political rather than a procedural process, issues of inclusion and exclusion, of scrutiny of the power to define and contribute to the debate become critical if this is to be an opportunity for the realisation of some new reality, a process of co-creation of something other than business-as-usual.

Gender patterns as a signal?

I have said nothing in this article so far about gender per se; I have been more concerned here to point to the potential lessons to be drawn from some of the social-change theorising of gender rather than to criticise specifically the corporate citizenship community for its lack of awareness of gender. But I would like to make some final remarks about ‘voice’—in particular the largely missing voice of women in the corporate citizenship debate—and draw attention from there to the other, even more marginalised, voices. Perhaps this is an indicator of the way in which this potential critique of business is mimicking the business community with which it is engaged. Nevertheless, it is noticeable how predominantly male-gendered the movers and shapers in corporate citizenship are.

An interesting precedent is offered by the environmental movement. Eco-feminism
has a long and honourable tradition (King 1989; Plant 1989; Macy 1991; Shiva and Mies 1995; Spretnak 1997), and Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*, is widely credited as pivotal in bringing environmental issues to mainstream attention. Women continue to be active in grass-roots environmental movements worldwide, and to be disproportionately affected by environmental degradation worldwide, since in most parts of the world they are the primary growers of family crops (UNDP 1999). Yet there are relatively few women ‘authorities’ speaking about the environment, few major environmental (or any other) NGOs led by women, few senior academics who are women, few major consultants. This suggests that at some level the environmental ‘movement’ continues to reproduce conventional gendered—and from that we might surmise other—power relations, continues to hear some voices as more authoritative, effective and learned than others. Some major environmental writers are fully aware of the contribution of women to radical environmental thinking (see, for instance, Welford 1997), but their comments in this direction have not made significant impact. Conventional modernist thinking separates ideas from people; what matters is the thought itself, not the gender, race or any other personal attributes of the thinker. But post-structural thinking draws attention to this as another ‘regime of truth’, which unobtrusively determines what can be said and taken seriously and by whom.

A similar pattern seems to be asserting itself within organisations, commentators and authorities on social issues in business. Scholte, in his recent book on globalisation, notes this, but is at a loss as to how to respond:

> the protagonists in globalization debates are disproportionately urban white middlet class, Judaeo-Christian English-speaking men resident in the North (especially the USA and the UK). Perforce I can do little in my own writing (short of remaining silent) to counter the last of these shortcomings (2000: 40).

Why is this situation not seen as clearly problematic for those engaged in this work? An absence of diversity in authority and leadership should ring warning bells, as an indicator of the ease with which work associated with ‘corporate citizenship’ could reproduce the social relations it might be seeking to change.

**Conclusion**

I started this article by stating my own reasons for working in this area: a belief in the need for us to connect ‘business’ with issues of poverty, justice and sustainability. I, like—I suspect—many readers of this journal, am a seeker after change, someone who believes in the human capacity to create the conditions in which we live, within the biosphere of which we are a part.

I have tried, in this article, to connect the loose collection of activities associated with ‘corporate citizenship’ to some issues that are usually outside what is discussed, seen perhaps as too theoretical or too academic. I have done so in the belief that work on corporate citizenship—if it is to mean anything, to achieve anything worthwhile—needs to become more theoretical and more complicated, and could draw far more from existing bodies of social theory, including those concerned with gender and with post-structuralism. The management theorist, Kurt Lewin, said ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’. Getting more thoughtful is a way to act better, with more effect, within a complex and hard reality.

Corporate citizenship, I take it, is emphatically not about business-as-usual: it is part of a move to question the rules by which we humans have collectively chosen to run our world. It involves a debate, an inquiry if you like, into what business responsibility is in circumstances where we increasingly get a sense of the interconnected social and natural systems within which we all live. We have learned much in recent decades about our own ignorance: new science suggests that we are not passive observers of the objective world, able

link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/g_coleman.html
to look at it from a disinterested height, but participants in it. However sophisticated our understanding, it is not sophisticated enough to account fully for the complexity of the environment with which we are interacting and, hence, ‘mistakes’ are made—both ecological (ozone depletion, global warming, BSE) and social/economic (people starve daily while we have the technical resources to feed everyone; HIV/AIDS is now estimated to have infected more than 30 million adults and children [UNAIDS/PWBLF 1997]). Businesses are powerful, nimble, person-made creations carrying our partial human understanding masked as value-free certainty; with the potential both to inflict great costs and to make a substantial restorative contribution in the world. So what could and should they be doing?

The challenge raised by ideas of corporate citizenship is, of course, still in its infancy, and both the arguments for increased ‘corporate responsibility’ and the resistance to them will become more developed as time passes. I have suggested here that these arguments should increasingly and explicitly include questions of power, diversity, discourse creation, contested knowledge, legitimacy and subversion. I am appealing for a greater degree of theoretical sophistication, of reflexivity, on the part of those engaged in this work. This involves developing the capacity to comment on what is going on around us and at the same time recognising ourselves as subject to the very systems and structures we are commenting on and seeking to change.

In particular, this might consist of strategies to disrupt and challenge our own comfort, such as:

- Asking ourselves constant, critical questions as to what our actions are achieving
- Noticing whenever the things we are doing seem ‘normal’ and asking ourselves what is not being addressed
- Noticing whenever all the voices in a debate/consultation are of the same gender/race/class/life experience and asking ourselves how that has happened
- Acknowledging that all understandings, all solutions, are temporary: a good enough story for now, unlikely to stand the test of time
- Experimenting with explanations that both simplify and complicate what we are working on
- Taking seriously the acts of discourse-generation in which we are involved
- Pushing at the boundaries of what can, and cannot, be discussed in any situation

Maybe, in this way, we can help the push for greater corporate citizenship to realise its potential as a movement for positive social change.

References


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