1 Introduction

The Greys Hope to Win. RAINBOW NEEDED URGENTLY[1]

Yesterday was May 1st 2001; in the news there were numerous reports from around the world concerning a variety of marches, rallies and protests on this traditional day of action by 'the people'. The events were diverse: the traditional May Day parade of military-might in Moscow that had been transformed into a march by pensioners claiming that they had lost the security of communism in their new free market society; the anti-capitalism street carnival-type activities which aimed to slow or shut down London, Sydney and other financial and capital cities around the (developed) world and the march by trade union members in Turkey, Indonesia and elsewhere.

As I was thinking about how to introduce my thesis, two particular exchanges of views following the protests stayed in my mind. In the first exchange, one of the members of the British Chamber of Commerce, in discussion about the various anti-capitalism protests, was asked whether he thought that there was any connection between the involvement of the Women's Institute in forcing British supermarkets to remove food containing genetically modified organisms from their shelves and the coalition of fun-loving activists on the streets of London, some of whom had appeared to have resorted to acts of violence against various symbolic targets of multinational corporations. His response was to say simply that making such a link would be naïve.

In another discussion the police officer in charge of overseeing and planning the operation to contain violence from the protests in London was asked whether their techniques denied the fundamental right of people to engage in direct protest. His response was that every year in London 3000 groups who wish to conduct a protest arrange to do so in collaboration with the Metropolitan police; if the "anti-capitalists" had followed suit and worked in partnership with the police then there would not have been a need for the controlling measures that were put in place.

It seemed to me that, within these two exchanges and beyond in the activities of members of the May Day carnival, it was possible to perceive some of the challenges that we currently face in trying to change the unsustainable and unjust ways of acting, thinking and being that currently

mark out our presence on the planet.

One aspect that has defined "anti-capitalist" protest, brought into mainstream media attention by the action against the WTO in Seattle in November 1999, has been the apparent lack of central organisation in the protest activities. The police officer's suggestion that the "group work in partnership" with the authorities seemed to assume that there was both some identifiable core organising group with whom to dialogue and that some underlying logic meant that a participatory approach to protest engagement was appropriate, satisfactory and "better".

At the same time, it has been suggested that the various protests represent the 21st century equivalent of the actions of the Suffragettes in chaining themselves to railings in order to get the vote; when all other methods of persuasion fail and in the light of a felt powerlessness, people take to the streets in a mood of direct activist demonstration. However, there would seem to be at least one difference between the actions of the Suffragettes and the kind of protests cited above: whilst the aim of enfranchisement for women was an objective easily understandable in terms of the prevailing way of operating (i.e. that women were seeking an extension of voting rights), the international protests against organisations such as the WTO, the IMF and multinational corporations and processes such as economic globalisation, environmental devastation and cultural homogenisation do not seem to have a particular aim or objective towards which they are striving, other than what seem like a series of vague antitheses.

In fact, looking at the Suffragette movement in wider relief we might consider that activity towards gaining the right to vote was a tangible manifestation of wider projects seeking a change of attitudes and values, which were perhaps defined by a similar kind of ambiguousness as the current activism. In an expression similar to that in which enfranchisement has been a step along the way towards deeper changes with respect to the position of women in society, an alternative stance has emerged alongside the current protest activities that has attempted to create more tangible, objective-centred change. This alternative stance is one of collaboration or participatory engagement.

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[1] Carlos, Sub-commandant of the Zapatista's, in an open message addressed to "Civil Society".

1.1   Focus of thesis

My inquiry in this thesis, then, looks to explore attempts at participatory engagement between powerful actors, as attempts to catalyse change towards an environmentally sustainable and socially just society. Placed within the frame of an emergent participatory worldview, I conduct my inquiry through the exposition of two forms of relational practice aimed at creating change for sustainability through collaboration. The first of these is the engagement between Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and businesses in new forms of collaborative change-oriented relationships.   The second relational practice concerns the collaboration between "knower" (researcher) and "known" (participant) in inquiry.   These practices have been informed by my participatory action research with Shell (the multinational oil company) and Living Earth (an environmental education NGO) that looked at the interaction of two organisations in Nigeria and in the UK.

Living Earth and Shell have been engaged in a collaboration that is looking to alter the relationship between Shell and its host communities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Shell's operations in the Niger Delta - extraction and shipment of crude oil - have, since the mid-1990s, been under continual threat from the ongoing political, ethnic and social struggles of the indigenous groups in the region towards gaining a fairer share of the wealth that has been generated from their land for the last fifty years and the environmental struggles against the destruction of habitats and livelihoods. The collaboration with Living Earth originated in the challenges faced by Shell on two interacting fronts. The first was the threatened loss to oil production in Nigeria in the light of protests from the host community and their demands for "compensation" for the continued environmental destruction and social inequity brought about by the oil industry. The second front concerned a threat to Shell's sales and image in Northern countries, through the potential consumer protest over the rights and responsibilities of a multinational oil company to society and sustainable development.   My inquiry with Shell and Living Earth, which took place between August 1999 and May 2000 sought, broadly, to make sense of their relationship. I used a learning history methodology to engage in collaborative reflection with individuals from Shell, Living Earth, other organisations and members of the communities in the Niger Delta both here in the UK and in Nigeria.

When I was first thinking about my research, I had conceived of my work as bearing solely upon the relational practices between NGOs and businesses in the context of sustainability. Whilst I had

considered this to be at the heart of my work I also had a growing appreciation of sustainability as a process of transition that cut across personal, organisational and societal boundaries. It seemed that there was an incongruity or lack of wholeness in many forms of research that built upon the central place of ecological integrity of the planet but that failed to embody the conditions that emanate from this in practice. Much social science research, and perhaps more disturbingly, much inquiry into the environment seemed to work under the premise of a mechanistic metaphor of knowledge. Instead, I increasingly desired a way to make sense of participation and relationship that accorded more value to the kind of knowing embodied in our earth system. In looking for an ecologically grounded or organic metaphor to guide my inquiry I initially recognised the value of constructivist and participatory action research perspectives that seemed to critique the various assumptions of positivist science. The critiques included challenging the attempts to separate "knower" from "known", research and theory from practice and activism, and facts from values. Meanwhile both paradigms suggested an open-ended research design that allowed for emergence during the process of inquiry.

Since those early stages I have sought whenever possible to allow the flow of inquiry to move in directions appropriate to the continually unfolding conditions of the reality that I have been engaged in. Perhaps the most important aspect of this emergence concerns the location of an ongoing inquiry into my own practice as a researcher/practitioner seeking change towards sustainability. In the light of the inseparability between knower and known I initially sought ways that would make my research more alert to my own position as a researcher. Over time it became evident that my practice in conducting research was more intimately connected to and actually informed the pattern of the research and that I needed to be more than just alert to this. As I became more comfortable with the notion of engaging with others in order to create change through my inquiry I realised that I would need to actively inquire into and engage with my own practice.

The development of this attention to my own practice made clear that my inquiry with Shell and Living Earth displayed some themes that were common to the catalytic attempts of NGOs to create change within multinational companies; my use of an action-oriented, reflective form of engagement could be considered/framed as another form of "relational practice aimed at fostering a transition towards sustainability through the collaboration of powerful actors". In this way, I widened the scope of the thesis, beyond an exclusive focus upon NGO-business relationships, to

also include the collaborative relationships between "knower" and "known" in inquiry, in the form of participatory action research.

In line with this expansion I present two empirical tracks of relational practice. The experiences of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth have informed my understanding and exploration of the collaboration between NGOs and businesses. At the same time my relationships with Shell, Living Earth and others during the research have informed me about the nature of collaborative engagement between knower and known in inquiry. However, these two tracks do not stand separated from each other; in the process of widening the focus of my inquiry I have also realised that, when located within the context of an emergent participatory worldview, there are deep epistemological implications of both such forms of relational practice for sustainability. Accordingly I note that organisation efforts at developing relationality require more individually focused attempts at forging a renewed understanding of the relationship between "self" and "other"

1.2   Reading the thesis

I start my exploration in chapter 2, (Section I) where I flesh out the background or context in which this inquiry is framed. Sustainable development has taken on a range of different meanings both in theory and practice. One interpretation of sustainable development, known as eco-development or green developmentalism, can be considered as posturing towards first-order changes in one or two behaviours or values. In contrast to this, another understanding of sustainable development is concerned with a fundamental revisioning to our ways of being and acting and to the dominant, growth-centred worldview. This second interpretation regards the current worldview as epistemologically and ontologically incommensurate with the achievement of sustainability. Sometimes associated with deep ecology and eco-centric views of the world, this position considers second-order changes to all values, attitudes and behaviours as essential to the project of sustainability. In particular the transformation of a way of being that orients towards the earth as if there are no limits to economic growth is regarded as central to the achievement of sustainability within this interpretation.

There is a dialectical tension and inter-penetration between these two versions of sustainability. From an eco-centric point of view, whilst some of the changes made in the name of eco-

development are important, they not only look like "tinkering" at the margins but also seem to further entrench the validity of the current worldview by appearing to solve various social and environmental challenges. Additionally, first-order changes are seen as perpetuating an understanding of sustainability as a global management initiative that can be undertaken by some sufficiently authoritative, central management deploying a range of technologies to avoid ecological collapse. This is as opposed to an understanding of sustainability associated with the development of locally grounded, participatory action learning initiatives in all parts of society.

For those who believe in the need for system change, the dialectical tension between first- and second-order changes is one that is being continuously encountered in relationships with actors who have been framed as powerful members of society. Quite often the attitude towards these powerful actors has been an adversarial one, in which "systems catalysts" regard the behaviour of the powerful as co-opting the "movement" towards second-order transformation of the "system".

Whilst such a view is an important way of turning towards the reality of entrenchment and co-optation, it seems that such a view of change and power reflects a mechanistic and fragmentary view of society. I outline the possibility of taking an attitude towards power and change through an alternative, organic metaphor; through such an analogy, participation with powerful actors may be conceived in terms of the need for engaging in collaborative action learning. The organic metaphor does not clear the relationship between systems catalysts and powerful actors of paradox, challenge or breakdown, nor of the need for conflict. It does, however, offer an alternative way of orienting that allows for the important suggestion that "we do not know what a sustainable society might look like" and that the creative emergence-without-knowing is one of the essential aspects of a second-order transformation. An organic metaphor also helps us to move beyond a socially constructed, fragmenting delineation concerning different levels and spheres in an analysis of change in society. Thus, in chapter 2, I set up the direction of the thesis in terms of a participatory worldview in which an organic metaphor that allows catalysts, who are seeking a transition to sustainability, to take an attitude towards other powerful actors in a collaborative, generative and self-reflexive manner.

In the two chapters of Section II, I then move into a more focused exploration of two forms of such generative "self-other" relationships. In chapter 3, I describe the relational practices between NGOs and businesses. The relationship between these two organisational forms has historically

been characterised by either adversarial confrontation or philanthropic inertia. However, the emergence of the sustainability agenda or movement, a range of globalisations and the burgeoning importance of relationality and signification in organisations and social life have enabled the emergence of a collaborative form of engagement, in which parties from both sectors are coming together to seek solutions to problems and realities with which they are increasingly confronted. Some NGOs are developing strategies and activities more centrally concerned with system change; in the context of the effects of economic globalisation the attention of these systems catalysts has fallen upon the role played by multinational businesses in perpetuating socially unjust and environmentally unsustainable ways of being and acting.

I go on to describe how NGO-business relationships have been understood in academic literature in some more detail. Initially, I use a simple model of preconditions, processes and outcomes of collaboration in order to structure this discussion. Whilst it has been suggested that the research into such collaboration has not described the processes of engagement in sufficient depth, I suggest that this critique is valid mainly because the notion of "process" itself has been narrowly conceived in the literature. Accordingly, I open up my consideration of the process of collaboration to the wider context of sustainability; in doing so I situate NGO-business relationships and the involvement of corporations in the sustainability movement within the frame of the first-order/second-order change-dialectic as described in chapter 2. Businesses have generally sought to engage with the sustainability project in terms of first-order changes, in which eco-modernisation and market-based-environmentalism efforts remain commensurate with the underlying growth-centred paradigm of neo-liberal economics and capitalism. In contrast, an interpretation of the call from sustainability, in terms of the need for second-order changes to underlying paradigms and organising myths, has been very rare within the business-world. Having located NGO-business collaboration within this dialectic, it is possible to reconsider some of the output from the literature in terms of the wider story of transition towards sustainability.

At the end of chapter 3, I suggest that the vast majority of academic literature concerning the area of businesses, sustainability and organisations works within traditional and dominant positivist epistemology. Whilst there have been calls for action-oriented and critical research, the overall pattern has been one in which researchers have attempted to stand objectively outside of the research setting. This distancing of voice has been identified by post-structuralist and postmodern critiques of inquiry as obscuring the value-laden nature of all facts. In the context of sustainability,

I return again to the two forms of change that I have outlined to suggest that the assumption of objectivity obscures the fact that the majority of researchers in this field fall into patterns of inquiry that are aimed towards first-order change. This privileges a form of sustainability that is marked by the continued myth of global management by the powerful elite, as opposed to a process of locally-grounded participative learning by all.

In the light of the failure of researchers to adopt alternative epistemologies in their inquiries, in chapter 4 I look at the collaborative forms of engagement between knower and known in inquiry within the participatory action research tradition. Grounded within non-positivist, participatory epistemology, the family of relational practices associated with action research seem to offer a more suitable fit with the kind of demands made by allusions towards second-order transformations for sustainability. Whilst there is an important consideration towards the practical in the action research tradition, this is in no way its sole or guiding concern. Action research challenges a range of traditional dichotomies between fact and value, researcher and participant, theory and practice in such way that allows for the possibility of action in the light of a continual process of envisioning. It does this through privileging locally grounded and lived forms of knowing over abstract, expert knowledge/power. I go on to outline the important expansion of the traditional audiences of inquiry made within the action research tradition.

Having introduced these two forms of relational practice, I outline the flow of my inquiry in chapter 5 (the single chapter of Section III). This chapter seeks merely to describe the various stages of my research starting from my early footsteps on the Ph.D. programme and then onto contact with participants from Shell and Living Earth, in terms of the series of reflective interviews that I undertook here in the UK and in Nigeria. I then go on to describe how I developed grounded theory in order to produce the learning history documents that I wrote for Shell and Living Earth and then some of the activities in which I engaged in order to make sense of and communicate my experiences.

In the four chapters of Section IV, Praxis, I explore the "findings" of my inquiry, although this is not purely a description of findings as would be found in a traditional research report. In addition to providing the empirical data of my inquiry, section IV, in particular chapters 8 and 9, also seeks to engage you in the inquiry in a more decided way, through the adoption of a double-column presentation and an inquiring, reflexive attitude.

In chapters 6 and 7 I concentrate upon telling the story of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth in the UK and Nigeria. Chapter 6 is a descriptive exposition of the relationship, which explores the background to collaboration and the processes of engagement. In chapter 7 I present a learning history of the relationship between Shell and Living Earth; the chapter is presented in a double-column format that provides both more information about the relationship and seeks to engage you in some reflective practice. Chapter 8 is written in a similar presentational format and asks you for a similar attitude but in this case my research relationships form the empirical base for inquiry. At the same time as exploring the nature of my relational praxis during this research chapter 8 also adds some further details about the relationship between Shell and Living Earth, but framed quite definitively in the context of my interactions with the organisations. In chapter 9 I return to focus upon the story of the Shell-Living Earth relationship with a brief discussion and reflection about their interaction.

In the final section of the thesis, Section V, I engage in a more theoretically grounded discussion of the relational praxes explored in the thesis and reflect upon the implications of my inquiry. In chapters 10 and 11 I draw upon two theories of communication to explore and analyse collaborative efforts involving powerful actors towards system catalysis for sustainability. In chapter 10 I use Batesonian pragmatics of communication to focus the reflections; using his ideas I explore the relational practices described in section IV in terms of a network of double-binding relationships. The implication is that the difficulties experienced by organisations and individuals involved in such engagement are functions of the tangled web of communication that occurs at the relationship level as opposed to any "schizophrenic" tendencies within the individual organisations.

In chapter 11 I consider the empirical tracks using Habermas' theory of system and lifeworld and theory of communicative action. I orient towards the relational practices in the language of Habermas' critical theory and his attack against welfare-state capitalism. I note that while opportunities for system catalysis have been opened up for latter generation NGOs, their attack upon multinational capitalism is highly problematic. The is partly because the NGO sector is very much part of the project of modern welfare-state capitalism that latter generation NGOs are attacking. The result is that attempts at system catalysis by the NGO sector become paradoxical discourses and practices expressing organisational perpetuation and persistence. Thus, whilst NGO collaboration with the private sector affords considerable opportunity for change, the

relationships tend to provide developmental action and change in line with currently unsustainable patterns of growth, as opposed to transformational change for ecologically sustainable and democratic societies. These mimetic patterns suggest that this form of engagement is likely to proliferate and also lead to the delegitimation of the NGOs without appropriate reflection and sense making within the sector.

Finally, in chapter 12, I draw these two chapters, the praxis and the rest of the inquiry together and engage in some explorative reflections and conclusions about sustainability, participation and epistemology. I first bring the theories of the double-bind and system and lifeworld together using the relational experiences of business and NGOs. I then work with the changing understanding of the "self" in postmodern society to suggest that, based upon my experience of such a transition, Habermas' critical theory is unable to cope with the expanded concept of a "relational-self". This challenge is based upon a changing understanding of the connection between the self and more-than-human world and the need for elaborating our ways of knowing within a universe newly reconceived as animate, alive and multiply constructed in relationship. I suggest an expansion to our notions of democratic participation in line with this renewed understanding of our ongoing communion with the more-than-human world. The epistemological shift required suggests that, whilst organisation efforts at participation for sustainability are valuable, important work for transformation needs to be done by individuals through on-going praxis. Thus, I express a concern that alone the current discourse and practices of corporate citizenship, stakeholder engagement and NGO-business relationships - framed as forms of organisational relationality - may perpetuate a view of sustainability as an opportunity for the technological management of the planet by a global elite. This as opposed to an interpretation of sustainability as a practice that allows for a participatory play of learning by all individuals, communities and organisations.