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# Can Post Modernism Contribute to Saving the World?

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## **Abstract**

As human beings, our future sustainability could be under threat if we continue to 'trash the planet'. Sustainable development, suggested as a way of addressing the environmental, economic and social problems ahead, has fundamental implications for the governance of modern society. In a complex system, such as the Earth, linear analysis and rational planning are no longer considered appropriate, and new ways of understanding change are needed. Post modernism offers an alternative approach and a different way of perceiving the world and its problems. It is however, criticised as almost useless because its plurality of competing dialogues is said to undermine the basis for meaningful change. Revisionary post modernism may provide a way forward. This paper examines a theoretical approach to exploring discourses around sustainable development in non environmental, voluntary organisations using revisionary post modernism, based on a belief that in complex systems small changes can bring about major change and that voluntary organisations, working at a local level, can bring about change in their communities. It highlights how a post modern approach could contribute to securing a more sustainable future, by helping us understand the importance of local narratives in co-creating the future.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, revisionary post modernism, complex systems, change, voluntary sector

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# Can Post Modernism Contribute to Saving the World?

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## Introduction

There is increasing recognition that socio-cultural wellbeing, economic wellbeing and environmental wellbeing cannot be achieved independently of each other (Capra 1997, Porritt 2005). Climate change in particular, poses serious threats to economic development (Stern 2006), and Mckibben (2007) suggests that as economic growth bumps against physical limits it may be impossible to continue to expand the economy. Furthermore it is generally the poor, already disadvantaged in terms of wealth distribution, who are likely to suffer disproportionately from the environmental problems. (Hawken 1993)

Sustainable development has been suggested as a way forward. (Porritt 2005) It is about redefining how we live in the world, a process rather than an outcome, and requires changes in behaviour across all sectors of society: government, business and individuals. Rationalism and linear analysis are no longer considered adequate to deal with the challenges presented by sustainable development, because they ignore the complexity of the situation, leading to the belief that there are simplistic solutions. (Voss et al. 2006, Smyth 2006) Post modernism, defined as a rejection of the meta-narrative of modernity and rationalism (Hassard 1993), offers an alternative approach more appropriate to the complex, multidimensional dynamic world we inhabit. Unlike rationalism, which shuts down alternative voices, post modernism opens up possibilities, and provides a different way of theorising, structuring and organising that could generate new understandings and offer emancipatory potential by acknowledging the importance of disparate localised narratives in the co-creation of reality. (Cilliers 1998, Hearn and Parkin 1993).

Post modernism has been criticised because it offers a plurality of competing representational dialogues that undermine the basis of meaningful change, (Burrell 1993:82) but Sterling (2003) suggests revisionary post modernism overcomes this problem. Revisionary post modernism is a third order, ecological worldview that recognises our fundamental embeddedness in wider natural systems, and unlike deconstructive post modernism, it acknowledges the concept of the 'whole', as an interdependent pattern of agents interacting with each other and with their environment. The 'whole' is not an objective reality but a co-constructed temporary accommodation. In this respect revisionary post modernism resembles complex systems theory, in which a system is defined as a multiplicity of interacting, locally determined discourses. (Cilliers 1998) All agents in the system co- create the system. Agents can be human and non human and relationships between agents determine the nature of reality. This redefines the relationship between humans and the natural environment and recognises reality as a dynamic co-construction, constantly open to revision.

This paper examines how revisionary post modernism can contribute to the understanding of a complex problem like sustainable development by exploring discourses in the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector was chosen because this sector works with those most likely to be adversely affected by unsustainable development. Furthermore, the UK government believes that the voluntary sector has the potential to bring about the changes needed to create a more sustainable society. '*Voluntary and other non-profit organisations can mobilise millions of people in the fight against climate change to help create and safeguard a better future,*' (Cabinet Office 2007). EAC (2007b) identified urban, non environmental voluntary organisations as the least likely to engage in this agenda. The methodology involved engaging in participatory conversations with a variety of stakeholders (13 stakeholders in 10 organisations, including: managers, workers, volunteers, trustees and service users) to understand their perspectives around the need for behaviour changes to support sustainable development. These were conversations rather than interviews, because a conversation suggests a

two way process, where the researcher acts as part of the process of knowledge creation, rather than as an independent observer.

The aim of the research was about generating a different type of knowledge, an understanding of the relationships between the agents, human and non human, in the system in an attempt to explore how relationships in a dynamic system influence the system.

Firstly, the complex problem that is sustainable development is outlined, followed by a discussion around the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, including the theory that the Earth is a complex adaptive system, in which human beings are a part. Revisionary post modernism as a way of researching a complex system is discussed in the context of sustainable development, before briefly considering the role of the voluntary sector in bringing about change. The conclusion discusses how in a complex system like the Earth, revisionary post modernism could offer alternative understandings that may contribute to the creation of a more sustainable world.

### **Sustainable Development - a complex problem**

Sustainable development, first outlined in 1987 as a concept for social modernisation on a global scale, focuses on the triple bottom line of social equity, environmental quality and economic prosperity. (Porritt 2005, Brundtland 1987) There are many definitions, which include phrases such as vision, value change, moral development, or social re organisation (Gladwin et al 1995), and the many interpretations (Lozano 2008) and the abundance of related terms, such as, environmental, green, eco friendly, climate change and global warming, have confused the concept, diffused the challenges and allowed particular interest groups to evade responsibility. (Gladwin et al 1995, Voss et al 2006:3). The scale of the problem also means it can be seen as *'too big an issue to deal with'*, (EAC 2007b:ii) and the complexity renders the possibility of a simplistic, universal solution unlikely.

Jacobs (1991) suggests that although sustainable development is a contestable concept and the exact meaning can never be agreed, it does not mean that it has no value. It presents an opportunity to introduce new ideas into debates around how we wish to live and the quality of nature we wish to preserve, as a fundamental aspect of sustainable development centres on the relationship between humans and nature. (Voss et al. 2006, Borland 2009) The anthropocentric world view, which sees nature as a resource for humans to exploit, has led to the problems of unsustainable development, (Giradot et al 2001, Borland 2009) and according to Sterling (2003) we need a new way of looking at the world, a cultural shift or third order change, which acknowledges that humans are just one species amongst many and can not stand outside nature. The natural environment is part of the system on which we depend, (Gladwin et al 1995:896, Voss et al 2006) and this realisation presents fundamental implications for the governance of modern society, moving away from traditional, linear, reductionist approaches.

Sustainable development can be seen as a guide for human behaviour, as opposed to a formula for management practices, and rather than a quest for a desired end state it is about the capacity of society to learn about the conditions of its future existence. (Blewitt 2010) Focussing on the process of change rather than the end goal, it provides opportunities for groups to reshape the urban environment and make it more equitable for disadvantaged groups. (Kiel and Desfor 2003) Sustainable development is meaningful because it brings difference into a common dialogue, and mutual agreement as the basis of collective action.

The problem therefore, is not confusion around the concept of sustainable development, rather it is the current discourses around linear analysis, problem solving and the need for certainty that need to be re examined as we face choices about the future. We will have to learn to live with diversity, ambiguity and lack of control, where the only certainty is that all decisions will be made on the basis of uncertain knowledge in an ever changing dynamic world.

## The Earth as a Complex Adaptive System

*'The sheer scope of global activities combined with the interconnectedness and the diversity of the world's population and societies create an inter connected highly complex system where what is done in one part of planet Earth affects what happens in other parts.'* (Waddock 2007:546)

Sterling (2003) and Blewitt (2010) talk about a mismatch between the systemic world we inhabit and the fragmented way we think about it and believe we need to encourage a more holistic view of our relationship with the Earth. *'The unhealthiness of our world today is in direct proportion to our inability to see it as a whole'*. (Senge 1990:68) Moving away from seeing nature as a passive resource to be deployed, we must recognise it as a dynamic partner in our existence, an equal participant in our networks. Latour (2004) seeks to explain social order through the networks of connections between agents: humans, technology and objects (Couldry 2004) and for Latour, objects can only be defined in relation to other objects. They become what they are and what they mean through social and ecological relations, thus both nature and science are seen as human constructs and open to interpretation. Replacing the split between nature and society with a dynamic community, incorporating humans and non humans, challenges the dominant Western rational view based on the separation of mind and matter, domination and control (Blewitt 2010). Other cultures have long recognised our interdependence, the importance of living in harmony with nature, (Peate 2005) and their responsibility, not only for themselves but for the world around them. We are in a co-evolutionary relationship where each affects the other, and the natural world channels human interpretations of both culture and nature as much as human interpretation of culture and nature are channelled by socio historic pressures. (Argyros 1991)

Lovelock reflected this idea of interdependency in his Gaia theory (Lovelock 2000), suggesting that the Earth is a self regulating, complex, dynamic web of interactions, of which humans are a part. In such a system each part affects the other parts and each depends on the whole. A system cannot be understood by analysing its parts, (Hatch 1997) and subsystem interdependence produces features and characteristics that are unique to the system as a whole. Borland (2009) suggests that the current problems have arisen because business models work from a linear framework and once we understand that we are in a relationship with the natural environment our way of interacting with it will change. Action to protect the natural systems on Earth will be understood as also being about ensuring human sustainability.

Decisions are a product of the social contexts within which an individual is located (Blakie 2000) and an understanding of the wider context that influences people's behaviour towards the environment is therefore an important step forward. In a complex system we are all co-creators of the future and solutions will *'depend on the development of shared understandings of the problem and an ability to reframe system dynamics so that short term individual interest and long term sustainability and development become more balanced and integrated.'* (Morgan 2006:271) An iterative, participatory approach, that acknowledges the different views and opinions of people with different values, will help us to understand the world differently and accept that in a dynamic environment, solutions can only be local and specific to that time.

## Revisionary Post Modernism

Post modernism is a basic ontological and epistemological attitude towards our perception of reality that presents a philosophical break with positivism. It refutes generalisable meta-narratives and does not attempt to impose a rationalist logic on events. (Johnson and Duberley 2000). Whereas modernism relies on notions of expertise, truth, and objectivity, and attempts to predict the future based on linear analysis, post modernism recognises plurality of perspective, relativity and a multiplicity of truths none of which has more validity than any other. Objective truth is replaced by narratives based on particular perspectives and this allows us to deconstruct frameworks, understand reality in a different way, and challenge the validity of taken-for-granted ideas or meta-narratives that depend on the exclusion of other narratives for their legitimacy. The underlying principle behind post

modernism is that knowledge is socially constructed and reality is changing and indeterminate, thus rendering prediction difficult or impossible.

Revisionary post modernism, like traditional post modernism, recognises the transience of our lives in a continuously changing environment.

*'An uncertain future is a key reality of the human condition and forecasting the whole as opposed to the parts of civilisational development is far beyond our abilities.'* (Smil 1993:32)

Unlike deconstructive post modernism however, revisionary post modernism, acknowledges the whole, as an interrelated pattern of interacting agents in a system, rather than a collection of disparate narratives, and relativity, often seen as a weakness of post modernism, becomes a strength, because ambiguities and dissonances create tension that releases associations and new ideas. (Berg 1989)

Revisionary post modernism counteracts the dissociative alienation that has been a feature of Western culture for centuries, and acknowledges the fundamental embeddedness of human beings in their natural environment. (Sterling 2003) It provides a way of understanding the interaction between natural systems and human activity and its co-evolutionary ontology, suggests that our every act is involved in creating the world. By recognising the contribution of multiple perspectives to the whole and by eroding the boundaries between things, i.e. the known from the observed, it removes the distinction between reality and its representation. Reality as an independently existing reference point is erased and language is no longer seen as representing reality but as creating it. To understand our world therefore, we have to explore the different narratives that create it.

Revisionary post modernism has similarities with complexity. Complexity also recognises a multiplicity of locally determined discourses and challenges the notion of predictability. (Cilliers 2006) In a complex system, the behaviour of a system is characterised by multiple local discourses interrelating in an open network, and information from the environment has a direct, non determinate influence on the system, causing changes in the system but not determining the nature of these changes. Local agents, in relationship with each other, can plan their own actions but they cannot plan the actions of others rendering predictability impossible. Small changes can have large effects (Cilliers 2006, McMillan 2004) but the change is not totally random. Trends or directions can be discerned and this process is referred to as emergence (Stacey 2007). Development and evolution are not the result of consensus, but of acted and expressed differences. (Berg 1989) Consensus can only be a local phenomenon limited in time and space, a temporary accommodation because a system needs dynamism to function and if consensus is the goal, the system would freeze. A healthy system is always in flux. Prigogine (1997:71) suggests the adaptability of self organising systems to the prevailing environment makes them extraordinarily flexible and robust.

Post modernism is often criticised for its inability to make value judgements, but from a revisionary post modern perspective, society is an emergent property of social systems, and the relevance of activities is determined by the effectiveness of their entry into the network. (Berg 1989) The distinction between right and wrong, true and false is blurred and the evaluation of reality becomes a matter of choice or acceptance. Credibility is more important than truth and propositions are judged according to their usefulness or the support they gain (Cilliers 1998). A revisionary post modern research approach to a complex system will allow dissenting and different voices to contribute to the future without privileging them. The relevance of the differing discourses will be dynamically determined through competition and cooperation in terms of the history and the changing needs and goals of the system.

In a complex system where instability and constant change make prediction difficult or impossible, instead of trying to control change, we must acknowledge it as a constant feature of our lives (Stacey 2007) and McMillan (2004) suggests complexity has major implications for how we manage change. Development is a result of the interactions in the system and for a system to operate effectively it

needs a multiplicity of interactions. (Stacey 2007) A revisionary post modern approach to researching sustainable development will examine a variety of differing discourses to explore how change can emerge as a result of the interactions.

### Revisionary Post Modernism: application to Sustainable Development

Luhman (1985) outlines features of modern society that resemble a complex system:

- Large numbers of elements (human and non human), interacting dynamically
- Many connections in many different capacities
- Non linear interactions in which the same piece of information has different effects on different individuals
- Short range interactions determined locally with no meta-level control of information

Within this system, sustainable development can be seen as a complex problem that will require an approach to problem solving that differs from the traditional linear, rational approach. Complex problems arise *'from environments characterised by turbulence and uncertainty.'* They are *'value-laden, open-ended, multidimensional, ambiguous and unstable.'* Klein (2004:4) and *'they resist being tamed, bounded or managed by classical problem solving approaches.'*

All agents in the system are responsible for co-creating the future through interactive networks and no single agent is any more important than any other. If sustainable development requires us to address questions about the kind of world we want to live in, we have to think about how we understand the world and our role in creating the future. If we view the Earth as a commodity to be bought and sold our responses will be different than if we recognise the Earth as an interactive system in which we are an intrinsic part. In terms of sustainability our long range future will be dependent on us all understanding that a system that destroys its environment destroys itself and that we have a role to play in sustaining the environment.

From a complexity perspective it is the actions of the multiple, independent actors at local level that create the changes in the system. Creativity and innovation emerge, not from the intention of individual agents, but from interactions. (McMillan 2004) This suggests a need for dialogue or rather many dialogues, exploring our relationship with each other and with the natural environment and post modern research is about exploring narratives. (Johnson and Duberley 2000) Empirical research from a post modern perspective is about gaining an understanding of a situation at a particular point in time, recognising that there are many possible interpretations. It challenges the content and form of dominant models of knowledge to produce new forms of knowledge and gives voice to those not represented in the dominant discourses. (McAuley et al 2007:250.) We have all contributed to the creation of the current way of life and to find a way forward the voices of voluntary sector stakeholders at a local level, are as important as those of governments. My research attempted to put into practice a revisionary post modern approach, working with a group of stakeholders from non environmental, voluntary organisations in an urban environment, to explore their understanding of sustainable development. It aimed to develop inclusive narratives around sustainable development that could contribute to local action and encourage emergence by exploring different understandings of our relationship with nature and with each other in a dynamic interplay.

### The Voluntary Sector and Sustainable Development

Although most organisations are quite small, Hale (2008) feels the third sector holds the key to mobilising public concern around sustainability. The capacity of the sector as an agent of change is widely recognised (Tandon and Mohanty 2002, Schwabenland 2006) and it can bring people together, explore differences and *'create opportunities for conversations about the world: how it is; how it could be; how it should be.'* (Etherington (2008:3) The sector can bring new issues and different perspectives into public policy debates, provoke public debate, give voice to the disenfranchised and its proximity to citizens and communities makes it more trusted than business or government. (Buchs et al 2011) The government acknowledges the sector's ability to influence

sustainability. (HM Government 2007) '*The thousands of organisations that make up the third sector are powerful forces for change in our society – and it's a force we need on our side in the fight against climate change. We know that climate change will hit the world's poorest and most vulnerable people first, both here and abroad.*'

Although the UK has one of the more active and visible movements on climate change, and through organisations such as Greenpeace, FOE, WWF, the voluntary sector has been at the forefront of awareness raising, campaigning and providing information, there is a dearth of research evidence about organisational change in the sector specifically in relation to sustainability (EAC 2007a). Many non environmental voluntary organisations don't understand the need for change or see it as relevant to their organisation, and there appears to be a relatively poor understanding of sustainability at a local level, even though the ethos of care, linked to social justice, suggests sustainable development is an area the sector should be considering because of its impact on the poor. (Baring Foundation 2007) A further complication is that the term sustainability in the voluntary sector is commonly taken to mean organisational or financial sustainability and related to the need to secure funds. (Big Lottery 2006)

Therefore, although there is a belief that voluntary organisations are important agents of change, unless the actors at local level, voluntary organisations and their stakeholders, understand that they are part of the problem and part of the solution, it is unlikely that change will happen. My research used a participatory approach with a small group of stakeholders from non environmental voluntary organisations in an urban environment to explore their understanding of sustainable development. In an attempt to develop inclusive narratives around sustainable development that could stimulate local action, the aim was not to provide definitive outcomes or solutions, but to generate a different type of knowledge, an understanding of the relationships between the agents, human and non human, in the system to explore how relationships in a dynamic system could influence the system.

This approach could help individuals in organisations recognise their role in the creation of society and to recognise the natural environment as a legitimate stakeholder, rather than an externality outside of their responsibility. (Banerjee 2008) This new understanding may contribute to a wider acceptance by organisations of the need to consider sustainable development in their operations and help them explore different ways of working at a local level that encourages emergence of new ideas.

### **Methodology**

The research took place in a major UK city whose strategy was to make the city '*an attractive and sustainable low carbon city*' based on a vision of environmental excellence. A city location was chosen because research identified that urban, non environmental sector organisations were the least likely to change.

Conversations were arranged with a variety of stakeholders: managers, employees, trustees, volunteers and service users, a total of 13 people in 10 organisations. The approach attempted to invoke co-participation, where the interviewer was a co-creator of the knowledge. This reflects a complex system in which all agents interact to co-create the knowledge and the researcher cannot stand outside this process as a rational objective observer. A conversational approach was chosen over interviews because ordinary conversations with no clearly defined objectives can lead to the formation and transformation of ideas and concepts as one theme triggers another in an apparently random way. (Kuhn and Woog 2005) However, there were weaknesses in my approach. It was an unequal, unbalanced relationship and the artificiality of the situation and the power dynamics may have meant that the participants did not see it as a conversation and merely attempted to answer the questions as per an interview (Gubrium and Holstein 2003). In an attempt to overcome this I made an effort to be open about my views and opinions and encouraged participants to discuss their own interests and ideas in the hope that new insights and understanding would emerge spontaneously as a result of the interaction. As a social researcher it was not my aim to design specific emergences

but to support and enable conditions that may inspire movement in certain directions. The aim of the conversations was to develop a qualitative, contextual relationship that would help participants understand their own role in world and their relationship with the natural environment through exploring the concept of sustainable development.

As well as recognising my role in co-creating the knowledge generated from the interactions, I have to recognise my role in interpreting the data collected. Just like reading is a creative process, where the reader brings their own understandings to the process, interpreting the words of others operates in the same way. Post modern researchers should be humble about their findings, and recognise their role in the construction of these findings through a process of reflexivity. (McAuley et al 2007) This is especially important in the co-creative process of revisionary post modernism.

### Findings

All conversations resulted in an 'emergence', an unplanned outcome. For example, one manager remembered that he had intended to do a travel audit but had not done so. Another, who at the beginning of the conversation intimated that sustainable development was not an issue for his organisation to consider because they were too small to make any difference, realised in the course of the conversation that *'if you look at the Third Sector collectively it's big. If you look at it individually it's small - that's probably the dilemma.'* He began to understand the bigger picture and at the end of the conversation he said he would discuss sustainable development at the next board meeting, adding, *'It's (sustainable development) probably one of the most important issues of our time.'* Although these can not be documented as examples of changes in behaviour they highlight how, just by having a conversation, agents can understand a situation differently. According to McMillan (2004:74) this reflection can encourage new mental models of the world which, in a complex system, can contribute to change. *'Transformation is achieved by a continuous process whereby changes in individuals and groups that arise from individual and group learning experiences change the culture and behaviours.'* A weakness of my research was that I did not build in opportunities to revisit the organisations to see what changes, if any, had occurred since my initial visit.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored how a revisionary post modern approach could provide a new way of exploring sustainable development. Voluntary organisations were chosen as the subject because of the belief that the voluntary sector has the potential to act as a catalyst of change, and as a values-based sector, would be supportive of changes that may benefit their service users.

Sustainable development is a complex, political, social and economic concept that requires negotiation around vision and value change, and changes in the way we organise our lives that will not be realised unless we better understand the need for the changes. Sterling suggests that complex issues in the modern world, especially those around the natural environment, can only be understood and effectively addressed by holistic, flexible, integrative approaches which help us understand things systemically. (Sterling 2003, Capra 1997) Western civilisation is not the result of any kind of calculated long term planning. Individuals do not form an intention to change civilisation and then gradually realise this intention through rational purposive measures. Society is created by the interplay of intention and actions of many people to produce a pattern of development in a particular direction. (Elias 2000) This co-evolution, a core aspect of complexity, suggests that human beings, through interaction, both make and are made by the environment and are thus actors in their own evolutionary history, and in a complex system local agents acting in their own interest can bring about large scale change. The key elements in the system are relationships as new ways of working emerge through a process of discussion and negotiation where people and organisations come together to create understanding.

I tried to highlight how a post modernism approach could facilitate research in a complex system. Ontologically, both post modernism and complexity regard matter and consciousness not as separate but as complementary aspects of life, engaged in a continual process of reconstruction and from this

perspective, research that helps us better understand the dynamic complexity in which we co-exist may offer the potential for appropriate change. Any vision for the future about how we want to live will be the outcome of a collective discourse. (McMillan 2004) Human dynamics bring about real change and it is through interactions with others that new ideas and new ways of seeing the world emerge as we move away from linear thinking. Berg (1989) suggests that post modernism allows us to remove the human agent as the rationalising power and helps us learn to live with interdependence. Post modern research may, therefore, set us free, not to do as we like, but to restore to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility whilst simultaneously depriving us of the comfort of the universal guidance that modernism promised.

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