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Can We Talk Ourselves into Sustainability? The Role of Discourse in the Environmental Policy Process

YVONNE RYDIN

Department of Geography and Environment
London School of Economics and Political Science
London WC2A 2AE, UK
Email: Y.Rydin@lse.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: There has been a recent expansion of work within a variety of theoretical frameworks which looks at the role of discourses in policy and politics, much of it focused on environmental issues. Within this there is a particular category of polemical material which argues for discourse management and for managing discourse between actors towards achieving a particular goal, such as sustainable development. The paper examines the different ways in which the significance of environmental discourse is recognised and its influence analysed. It critically examines the claims made for normative discourse management and highlights the need to consider carefully the institutions through which environmental policy discourse is mediated.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, discourse, environmental policy, policy agendas, collaborative planning

THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE

The 'linguistic turn' within the social sciences is now firmly established. As Edelman succinctly outlines: 'The "linguistic turn" in philosophy, social psychology, and literary theory has called attention to language games that construct alternative realities, grammars that transform the perceptible into non-obvious meanings, and language as a form of action that generates radiating chains of connotations while undermining its own assumptions and assertions.' (1988: 103). It is widely accepted that a central aspect of the policy process is that it is communicative. As Fischer and Forester claim 'policy-making is a constant discursive struggle' (1993: 1-2). To analyse policy is, therefore, to analyse communication and argument, language and discourse. But how do analysts build on this insight? What exactly are the consequences of accepting that policy terminology comprises linguistic constructs? In the case of environmental policy, what are the critical and normative implications of recognising that sustainable development is socially and discursively constructed?

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Clearly such a recognition implies some attention to the detail of the language of environmental policy. In the case of sustainable development debates, such attention rapidly comes up against the *variety* of ways in which the twin terms sustainability and sustainable development (so often used interchangeably) are constructed. These appear to be deeply, perhaps inherently ambiguous terms, and many different actors make use of that ambiguity to present their own specific versions of the terms and to rest normative claims and policy demands on those versions. Many different definitions of sustainability and sustainable development, therefore, co-exist and vie with each other. Is this problematic? Attitudes to such ambiguity vary.

One deep green position is to argue, as Richardson does, that:

> Sustainable development is a political fudge: a convenient form of words … which is sufficiently vague to allow conflicting parties, factions and interests to adhere to it without losing credibility. It is an expression of political correctness which seeks to bridge the unbridgeable divide between the anthropocentric and biocentric approach to politics. (1997: 43)

He goes further: 'for the concept to have any real meaning … it needs to be radically redefined along purely ecological lines. If that is not possible it should be totally abandoned' (ibid). This position places adherents at one point within the sustainable development debates, a point they are strongly committed to and consider to be correct. It does not provide a view of the environmental policy process as a discursive process; rather by attacking ambiguity, they are denying the role of ambiguity as a rhetorical device. There is right and wrong, not different shades of ambiguity. Such a view is quite optimistic on the possibilities for shaping debates, since language is seen as passive; there need be no difficulty in shaping language to a specific, justificatory end, in this case persuading others of the right definition. Actors may use communication transparently to promote their interests and values, and they are not constrained in so doing by the overall discursive patterns. Ambiguity is a linguistic veil which can be lifted to reveal the truth.

Other contributors to the sustainable development debates, however, see some value in this very ambiguity. Baker et al. base their analysis of environmental policy on the premise that sustainable development needs to be understood as a social and political construct and that it 'is contestable *by its very nature*' (1997: 1, their stress). They argue that the lack of clarity over its definition 'is not without its advantages' precisely because it allows those with different, even conflicting interests to 'reach some common ground upon which concrete policies can be developed' (p. 5); (policies which presumably are then technocratically developed, rather than being undermined by any inherent ambiguity). The difficulty here is that apparently relativist acceptance of the ambiguous character of the sustainable development concept is combined with a normative commitment to a specific vision of sustainable development. Thus

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Baker et al. go on to claim that the 'promotion of sustainable development forms part of a conscious process of achieving social change' (p. 6) and that sustainable development 'therefore requires the construction of a new moral and ethical view of nature which takes account of the interests and values of all living things' (p. 10). They propose a heuristic model of a Ladder of Sustainable Development (p. 9) but the very terminology of the ladder implies a normative ordering of the options, from the *treadmill* approach at the *bottom* of the ladder, through *weak* and then *strong* sustainable development, to the *ideal model* on the *top* rung. Proponents of this approach find themselves arguing for ambiguity, for a policy fudge because they believe it will favour their own interests and promote the sustainable development cause. An open-ended recognition of the variety of ways that sustainable development can be constructed sits uneasily with this desire to promote one particular construction.

It is possible though to adopt a view of environmental policy discourse which starts from the existence of a myriad number of different ideas, topics and storylines in the environmental debates, with multiple conflicts and synergies, multiple ambiguities. There are attempts to mould this into *one* environmental debate but it threatens always to fall apart into these many parts. These tensions towards disintegration and unity have been captured in the metaphor of the environet (Myerson and Rydin 1996a). The environet provides opportunities to define different visions of sustainability and different arguments for sustainability, visions and arguments which then engage, reinforce and compete with each other. The different arguments within sustainable development debates have been numbered in the tens, even hundreds. But the desire to order this variety produces typologies (many competing typologies) which manage to contain this variety into three or four categories, as with O'Riordan's categories of environmentalism (1981, 1992). Similarly in urban sustainability debates, we can currently discern (at least) three different visions of the sustainable city:

(i)   The Ameliorated City in which a coalition for green growth can be built between environmental and economic interests;

(ii) The Limited City in which the environmental imperative sets limits to economic activity including urban activity; and

(iii) The Restructured City in which economic restructuring, democratic politics, social equity and environmental security are combined (see Rydin 1997).

The underlying reasons for this variety are twofold. First, there is the inherent richness of language, which allows for so many possible ways of expressing a position, so many subtle refinements. Second, there is the existence of inevitable conflicts, both value- and interest-based, associated with sustainable development as a policy direction. These overarching concepts represent an attempt to forge new compromises between these conflicts. Figure 1 sets out the potential

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Conflict / Synergy	Environmental	Political	Social
Economic	Dynamics of capitalist/ market economies degrade env-ironment / Ecological modernisation	Democratic projects such as LETs, etc. are margin-alised / Restructured markets encourage economic democracy	Current dynamics generate inequality / Restructuring for the equitable economy
Social	Environmental concern as a luxury good / Poverty causes degradation	Politics follows resources and incentives / Community empowerment	
Political	Top-down environmental policy / Benefits of local knowledge/action		

FIGURE 1. Dimensions of sustainability

conflicts that can exist, organised along the economic, political, social and environmental dimensions of the sustainability concept. The conflicts are identified in the top, right-hand half of each box in the matrix. But the figure also draws attention to the synergies between these different dimensions of the economic, political and social that some have argued for; these are found in the bottom, left-hand half. Different accounts of sustainable development stress different elements within this matrix.

It is overly simplifying to suggest either that there is a fundamental conflict, say between economic and environmental goals, that the sustainable development concept is trying to avoid, or that the concept manages to effect a synergy between all dimensions. Rather there are different viewpoints which find different pathways through these potential conflicts and synergies, many of which can only be concretely assessed as conflicts or not in specific, practical settings. The purpose of Figure 1 is to identify the variety of different elements that can be combined to provide a distinctive viewpoint on sustainable development. It provides the raw material from which a particular recipe for sustainable development can be devised. This is not to say that all the resulting recipes will be equally pleasing to the palate (that is, any particular palate) but they all have a place in the cookery competition that currently constitutes sustainable development debates.

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Ambiguity arises, not just from the number of different positions within sustainable development debates, but from the way in which some positions have been constructed so that boundaries are unclear and overlap is substantial. The ambiguities of the debates can cloak the persistence of the conflicts, encouraging a 'pre-emptive consensus'; that is, one which pre-empts the examination of potential conflicts (Myerson and Rydin 1996b). This may represent a lost opportunity in moving the debates forward.

This approach does not, therefore, deny the value of putting forward distinctive, normative positions; indeed, the dynamics of the environet are provided by the necessity of expressing interests and viewpoints in this way. But it does separate out the commitment to a particular normative position from the recognition of the linguistic character of environmental debates. This is an advantage over both the hard-line position and the 'benefits of ambiguity' position outlined above. The weakness of such an approach is that, stated in these terms alone, it merely outlines the possibilities offered by environmental language. It says little about the constraints placed on these possibilities by structures of interests and, therefore, it offers little in the way of normative suggestions for policy practice. The next sections of the paper go on to consider issues of interests, power and environmental discourse, and then to demonstrate the need for a closer attention to the institutions through which such discourse is mediated if such normative suggestions are to be developed.

THE UNSEEN POWER OF DISCOURSE

A key reference point for the question of how language use relates to the exercise of power is Foucault's work. Foucault explicitly examined the power of discourse, the hypothesis that 'in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality' (1984: 109). In Foucault's view, just as discourse is prevalent throughout society, so power is a diffused phenomenon, in one sense oppressing us all, though not equally. This analysis was, of course, developed through immense studies of the history of sexuality, madness and the disciplinary basis of the academy. In these, the controlling influence of prohibitions on forbidden speech, of the defining line of madness and of the Enlightenment project of the 'will to truth' are all explored. Particular emphasis has been put on the role of the state, at least in recent centuries, as a disciplinary state, enforcing compliance through discursive means. The metaphor of the Panoptican – the ideal model of a prison where a centrally located warder can observe prisoners, without prisoners in separate wings seeing each other – is used to encapsulate this.

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This suggests an analysis of how environmental perspectives can be excluded from the legitimate discourse by labelling them extreme and even mad, 'on the lunatic fringe'. The association of green ideas with lifestyles that are outside the norm thereby robs such ideas of much power. These associations can also be used to distinguish legitimate environmental ideas from illegitimate ones and legitimate groups from illegitimate ones: the presentation of Greenpeace's direct action form of political lobbying, as with the occupation of the Brent Spar oil rig in the North Sea, is a case in point; the actions and lifestyle of New Age anti-roads campaigners, where squatting on proposed routes, tunnelling and 'travelling' combined, is another. So concepts such as sustainability are only allowed into the Panoptican if they have been safely disciplined; the very fact of the incorporation of such environmental ideas into the mainstream policy process is evidence of their compliance with dominant ways of thinking rather than any radical sea-change in policy direction. The central problem this kind of analysis throws up is: how then is any change to be achieved? Is such a dystopian scenario inevitable? Weeks points to a more optimistic tone in one of Foucault's final commentaries, which stressed innovation and invention in relation to 'the good', but this was never spelt out in detail (Weeks 1993: 191).

Hajer has drawn on Foucault's ideas, and moved on from them to present an analysis of environmental politics which looks at the way that storylines run through political debate, focusing particularly on acid rain politics (1995). These storylines are promulgated through a variety of discursive means and are significant because of the way in which they mesh together different actors involved in a particular policy process. These connections are not found in physical proximity or interpersonal communication – attendance at meetings, correspondence, debate within formal arenas – but through common adoption of the assumptions, concepts and lines of analysis of the storylines. Such discourse coalitions will include members of political coalitions but also those who never meet or are even aware of each other. Yet the widespread adoption of a storyline can add credence to the claims of specific groups and render those of other groups less credible. It also means that certain interests do not need continually to push for their position since the prevailing storyline implies that some of their claims have already been accepted. And this very longevity and independent existence of storylines means that historic coalitions will continue to influence policy development in the present.

From this perspective, promoting a new storyline will be a difficult task, involving dismantling previous storylines and confronting the interests who were able to achieve prominence for their claims and viewpoint. Hajer's analysis emphasises the difficulties of achieving change in pursuit of goals which challenge dominant economic and political interests. Thus the conclusion is drawn that concepts such as sustainable development and ecological moderni-

sation only achieve a place on the policy agenda if they do not challenge these interests fundamentally. 'We are all Greens now' (1995: 14) but nothing has really changed.

A less structuralist approach to the interaction of power and language, is provided by the range of work which draws on focus groups to investigate the ways in which 'lay' and 'expert' groups actively construct meanings around environmental issues and the relative influence of these meanings – and, by implication, these groups – within the policy process. Following a social constructionist line, this work argues that the ways in which we define issues, understand problems and delimit possible solutions are all active processes that actors engage in, contingent upon the social situation in which they are located (Harrison and Burgess 1994). This actor-centred approach emphasises the interplay of these different understandings within the policy process, the differential 'voice' given to different actors, the implications of labelling certain understandings as 'lay' or 'expert' and the difficulties of constructing a consensus out of the different voices (a point returned to later).

Closely related work on the sociology of scientific knowledge (Irwin 1995; Wynne 1996), including many environmental issues, has also stressed the relationship between lay and expert understandings; this argues that lay perceptions are determined in part by the prevailing constitution of expert knowledge but also by the extent of trust or scepticism conferred on expertise. It becomes difficult to achieve policy goals when a substantive gap in viewpoints exists between expert and lay constituencies and trust is absent, in part due to the previous exercise of power by the expert groups. Policy recommendations arising from such work usually involve greater acknowledgement of the meaningful knowledge held by lay groups and improved two-way (not one-way) communication between groups to achieve goals. Such a message also comes from the risk communication literature (Muir and Veenendall 1996). However it is difficult to envisage how communication of itself will effectively close the gap and dispel memories of past inequities. Examples of successful risk communication strategies are often premised on a prior consensual agreement, and do not create that agreement (see a case study of successful risk communication over a waste facility in Belsten 1996).

The value of this body of work is that is draws attention, not only to the discursive nature of environmental policy, but also to the way that the outcomes of the policy process may be affected *as a result* and how this interacts with prevailing structures of interests. Where does this leave the case for altering the policy process in line with desired policy goals? Broadly put, what is the potential of arguing for sustainability? Can a normative commitment to environmental policy benefit from this more detached view of environmental policy discourse? This would involve a perspective in which recognition is given to the

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structures of language, both in terms of the rhetorical possibilities they provide and the constraints placed upon communicative practices, the ways in which language actively constructs actors and the relationships between actors. This involves placing policy 'texts' within the broader range of texts within society, as with Hajer's work (1995), but also looking at the possibility that language actively shapes the policy process itself and can be intentionally used to do so (Rydin 1998a; Mazza and Rydin 1997).

THE POTENTIAL OF PROACTIVE DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT

By discourse management is meant the overt and intended manipulation of the discussion about policy issues. This has often been regarded as underhand and unprofessional. It is the remit of special interest groups rather than the official, the policy maker or the expert observer (such as academics). It makes use of the rhetoric of politics but in a pejorative sense. However, there have been two sources of impetus for looking more favourably on positive discourse management. First, within the advocacy planning movement it has long been recognised that it may be necessary to argue for a position and put more resources into supporting that position given the prevailing distribution of resources and associated agenda, which render certain groups at a disadvantage and certain issues the victims of non-decision making (Forester 1989). Also positive manipulation of communication between actors can be seen as a way of aiding dispute resolution, and this is in effect a professional specialism in its own right (Glasbergen 1995). All these examples usually apply to specific cases of conflict.

The second impetus recognises the need for discourse management on a broader scale, in terms of altering the whole political agenda. This view has become more widely accepted because of the way in which the project of Reaganism/Thatcherism was pursued. This New Right onslaught was deliberately conducted as an ideological project, an attempt to change hearts and minds, values and norms and not just the policies of government. When those within British local government started questioning whether local authorities should be the lead agency on a particular urban policy initiatives, the Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine famously announced 'We've won!'; the victory was not over the imposition of a policy proposal but over the change of attitude of the local authority representatives. Therefore the attempt to build a challenge to New Right ideas during the 1980s and 1990s has also explicitly followed an ideological route. The marxist sociologist Stuart Hall argued: 'one thing we can learn from Thatcherism is that, in this day and age in our kind of society, politics is either conducted ideologically, or not at all' (1988: 274). And the path to the General Election victory of New Labour in the

UK in 1997 was built on a careful management of the messages going out through the media and detailed research into how politics is perceived and talked about (Jones 1997); the Labour Party has and continues to make considerable use of focus group methodology to test out policy proposals and, more importantly, their presentation.

In this context, it can appear that whole societal systems of norms, values and ideologies are 'up for grabs'. Mulgan, an influential advisor to New Labour, has argued this (1994), partly drawing on the ideas of the American thinker Etzioni (1988, 1993). Etzioni's argument represents an attempt to build a case for collective action in the post-Reagan US context. In doing so he relies on the identification of win-win scenarios where the collective good and the individual good reinforce each other, but he also seeks to tackle those situations where they conflict. Here he points to the importance of norms and values, of how we perceive a situation and the degree of moral force involved in discussion of the issue. His project is, therefore, one of cultural change, to spread the notion of moral responsibility more widely, and he believes that a moral dialogue at the societal level can result in new shared understandings and commitments; government action should then follow this new understanding. From Etzioni's viewpoint, it is, therefore, possible to talk ourselves into a new moral commitment to sustainability and that this should indeed precede government legislative action for sustainability; without the former, the latter is doomed to fail.

While starting from a Habermasian perspective, which Etzioni rejects, Healey's collaborative planning theory (1997) develops similar ideas about how a consensus for a particular strategy can be built; her focus is largely on the regional and local scale. She sees collaborative planning as a way of 'shaping places' and this includes the potential for shaping places in a more sustainable way. The planning task is to bring together stakeholders in a variety of arenas and to manage the discourse so as to identify commonalities and overcome conflicts and barriers to action (see also Innes 1994). While recognising the economic and other constraints that influence the goals that actors pursue and the role they play in the policy process, collaborative planning is based on an appreciation that language makes a difference; the way in which communication occurs affects outcomes. In particular, the language used can create barriers between actors, as in the case of gender-blind or colour-blind language. Attention to the detail of communication can ensure that specific groups are not 'talked out' of planning debate; thus discourse management can bring environmental concerns into the policy debate. But it can also ensure that other important stakeholders, such as local businesses, are not driven away. It is a matter of considering whether the concerns, concepts and ways of thinking of specific groups are reflected in planning deliberations and making sure that all views are fully included in the discussions to enable collaboration rather than 'talking past each other' (Rydin and Greig 1995). Language can help forge alliances by building or borrowing a

shared means of communication – most recently, planners using the language of business have found it easier to work with business interests or gain grants from a pro-business government (Newman 1996; Hastings 1996).

Here there is an emphasis on the constraints imposed by linguistic structures *and* on the potential for using those structures purposively, in a dialectic manner reminiscent of structuration theory; discourses are reproduced through communicative action by actors and, in using the resources of available linguistic structures, actors can reshape those structures. As a result, language can influence the policy process in a variety of ways: it can alter perceptions of interests and issues; it can define the object of policy attention; it can promote particular policy agendas; it can shape the nature of communication between actors; it can cement coalitions or differences between actors; and it can be diversionary, resulting in a form of symbolic politics. This view rejects the notion of a separate sphere of cultural practices distinct from political practices. It also rejects, or rather is suspicious of the notion of a unified policy discourse. Rather there are many discourses performing in all these different ways. They change all the time using the resources of linguistic structures. Certain patterns may be discerned at any one time but these come and go; the patterns offer the potential for new uses of language as much as they constrain the user.

Seen in this way, tackling the discourses of planning seems a clear task, if not one that can necessarily be easily achieved. It is possible, according to this viewpoint, to build a consensus for a policy approach, whether it be urban regeneration or environmental sustainability. Much Local Agenda 21 work aspires to this kind of model, pursuing a radical participatory model but with a clear goal, at least in those examples of local practice that are considered to be the most advanced (Lafferty and Eckerberg 1997). Baker et al. see the production of consensus, via more extensive participation, as an integral element of the sustainable development agenda (1996: 25) and further argue that sustainable development 'can help forge a consensus or commitment'; it is 'a powerful tool for political consensus' (p. 28). However, before this step in the argument can be made, more attention needs to be paid to the institutional arrangements for policy discourse. As Etzioni recognises, it is necessary to propose certain rules of engagement which can foster the moral dialogue he favours and to identify institutions – he chooses community religious institutions – where the dialogue can begin.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN POLICY DISCOURSE

Considering the institutional dimension of environmental policy discourse highlights three issues: the problem of participation; the problem of achieving consensus; and the role of professional policy makers.

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The problem of participation and collective action

Most accounts of consensus-building within a sustainability context refer to the benefits of extensive participation and a more open policy approach: Baker et al. claim that 'participation is now seen as an integral part of the promotion of sustainable development' (1996: 25) and Healey's collaborative planning emphasises the bringing together of *all* stakeholders to forge a consensus. But, as Giddens acknowledges (1994), not all people wish to become involved in such political action; he calls for a 'necessary silence' so that people should be permitted not to get involved.

This emphasises the discretionary nature of participation and is an important liberal point. But public choice theory goes one stage further to identify the constraints on participation arising from the incentive structures facing actors (Olson 1965). This argues that the balance of benefits to be gained from engaging in politics as against the costs of such political engagement may mean that it is not worthwhile for some individuals or groups to become politically active, even if in a cost-less world they might wish to; this is the collective action problem. The balance of costs and benefits also means that those who engage most enthusiastically and with the most resources will be those with the most to gain and the least to lose; this may not necessarily contribute towards the goal of sustainable development. Many continue to argue, like Baker et al. (1996: 25) that 'bottom-up participation has the potential to facilitate and catalyse radical social change' but they also recognise (following Lele 1991) that 'participation, seen as a institutional process, is a framework for bargaining and negotiation in which certain groups of people can become involved and, as such, may not necessarily reinforce ecological sustainability'.

Incorporating collective action problems in the analysis reinforces the need for procedural safeguards for those who choose not to be empowered, for whatever reason. But it also suggests an additional strategy, namely the design of institutions which alter the choice situation facing those potentially involved in collective action. Such a strategy has been proposed by Ostrom (1990), whose work on the management of common pool resources has highlighted how institutions can be designed to create and maintain social capital. This social capital comprises a variety of practices, attitudes and knowledge which enables co-operation to manage the resource in question; it also encompasses the active trust, identified by Giddens (1994). In the context of such institutions, the balance of costs and benefits from collaboration that individuals and groups face can be altered so that it is worthwhile engaging in joint management rather than passively being excluded by the collective action problem. Institutions which overcome this problem are various in kind but include common property regimes where property rights are (re)distributed to emphasise inter-relationships between actors, the mutual network of rights and responsibilities within a defined

group; in effect such a property regime creates and sustains a community (see below).

Ostrom's own work has particularly focused on how water systems may be overused in the absence of such community institutions and she has showed how establishing appropriate property regimes alters the package of rights and duties held by members of a community so that they consider it worthwhile to participate in resource management and, further, so that the resource is used renewably. It may be that the principle behind such cases has a wider applicability in bringing actors into the policy arena.

Legitimation and the creation of consensus

Once the scope of the participating group has been determined, the next issue is the potential for creating consensus out of conflict. Reference has already been made to the work on lay and expert representations which identifies the existence of differently constructed meanings. It may prove difficult to meld these differences into a common commitment to a policy goal. Paying attention to communication may be a necessary but certainly not sufficient condition to setting out, let alone achieving agreement on planning goals. The Habermasian position is that consensus is inherent in the communicative act, although everyday conditions prevent this being realised. However, if one drops this assumption – for which there seems to be no supporting evidence – then the issue of conflicts of interest becomes a much more pressing problem. We may have to accept that dissent is inevitable. As Mouffe baldly states 'all forms of consensus are based on acts of exclusion' (1993: 81); she further argues that we 'need to abandon the illusions of direct democracy and perfect consensus in a completely transparent society' (p. 77). There may even be situations in which dissensus is desirable and performs useful functions; Ingham (1996) provides a case study from Montana, USA in which the discourse of conflict between actors helped forge the identity of the local community, which had previously been somewhat amorphous and latent.

The problem of the treatment of conflict is one that has been preoccupying much contemporary social and political theory. This is associated with the announcement that we are living in a postmodern age. This age is characterised: economically in terms of flexible accumulation, post Fordism and/or disorganised capitalism; socially as a time of fragmentation, multiple social identities and the emergence of new social movements; and culturally as distinguished by the rise of new mass media, polyphony (literally 'many voices') and the growth and spread of information. Commentators have found themselves torn in trying to characterise postmodernity politically. On the one hand, some acclaim the benefits of many groups newly finding a voice and identify the empowerment potential of polyphony. On the other hand, many fear a collapse of solidarity for collective action into a morass of cultural relativism, in which no case can be

made for one view above another (and that includes arguments for sustainability), and in which all concepts such as 'justice' or 'truth' are seen as discourse dependent. As Squires points out, this is ironic since most of those who engage in deconstructing the narrative of modernity do so in the name of marginalised or oppressed groups (or the environment) and, after the event, become concerned 'at the extent to which questions of meaning and interpretation have superseded questions of judgement and value' (Squires 1993: 5).

The discussion around these questions has suggested that much more careful attention needs to be paid to the way in which democracy, in all its forums, deals with difference, in order to find a path between treating everyone identically in the name of universalism and facing a fragmented collection of groups and individuals, a collection which does not readily and freely agree. Furthermore, as Harvey points out, much of the postmodern fragmentation is the result of the play of power within capitalism, and a free polyphony is unlikely to challenge that (1993) and, by implication, could not challenge current patterns in the pursuit of sustainability. Institutions to shape polyphony are, therefore, needed. The search is for the possibility of 'togetherness in difference', recognising the existence of injustice and oppression (and sustainability) and ensuring that the advocacy of these values (or any others) is not inconsistent with an allowance for difference. As Squires acknowledges though, postmodernism offers little in the way of concrete guidance on how to achieve this.

It has been suggested that reinterpreting difference in terms of community may be helpful in rendering 'togetherness in difference' more real. A community is characterised by a common internal identity, which distinguishes members from others and supports claims from the community, but also by the notion of responsibilities which community members owe both to each other and the broader society; duty to the society modifies the notion of community rights. This can be used to embrace the environmental obligations of communities, both internally, globally and over time. More broadly, 'togetherness' requires relationships between communities. Linguistic differences may suggest barriers between communities. Each group may adopt its own discourse in order to enable and reinforce both internal communication and to distinguish that group from others. But that does not preclude communication with others via translation and learning and/or interactive debate. Communication may not imply consensus or 'speaking the same language', but it does imply inter-relation. So fostering community may help move from polyphony towards some agreement for social change, including shifts towards sustainability. Of course, not all communities will support such change but dialogue between communities may result in the dynamics for such change. And, as has been suggested above, fostering communities may have implications for resolving collective action problems.

A second suggestion has been more procedural, looking to new institutions of governance to help organise polyphony into policy action. These institutional

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recommendations come under the heading of 'deliberative democracy' (Jacobs 1997) and, like collaborative planning, are based in the Habermasian concepts of communicative rationality and the public sphere, although most accounts seem more ready to countenance the problem of lack of consensus.

> The purpose of deliberation is to reach agreement on what should be done by or on behalf of society as a whole. This does not require that 'unanimity' or 'consensus' be reached. In complex, pluralistic societies where interests and values conflict, this is impossible. (1997: 221)

Jacobs explicitly puts forward such institutions as a preferred means of environmental valuation and outlines the examples of citizens' juries and group contingent valuations. But these institutions have the potential to go beyond the articulation of public opinion and enter the arena of recommending (but not taking) policy decisions. While, as with any procedure, the detail needs to be worked out in practice, deliberative democracy may have significance for using polyphonic social structures to influence policy decisions. But, as Jacobs clearly recognises, this may not necessarily promote sustainability: 'So long as sustainability is *not* generally regarded as a binding constraint on public policy decisions, one must acknowledge the potential conflict between the procedural ethic of deliberative democracy and the outcome ethic of sustainability' (1997: 228). These institutions represent a challenge to environmentalists to trust the values of the public.

The role of professionals

If deliberative democracy requires faith in the public, what of the policy makers? The justification of professional involvement in the dialogue that Etzioni envisages or the collaborative planning of Healey is twofold. The professional may bring advice and expertise to the policy process, enabling other groups to engage in dialogue on more equal terms. The expertise of the professional becomes a means of empowerment. The second justification arises precisely because the collaborative process may not yield a consensus or it may yield a consensus which does not accord with the desirable policy direction as defined by other policy actors (such as central government, say). Consider the situation where an empowering dialogue within a local community has been sensitively facilitated by professionals attuned to the language of different sub-communities and offering up their specialist knowledge and expertise. What if the community decide on a path which the professional deems unsustainable? It can be argued that the professional can be the guiding light for public interest policy goals such as sustainability, talking others into the desired values and outcomes.

This raises several questions about such professionals. What of the interests of professionals as a group, which may constrain any programme for reform,

particularly where genuine empowerment for other groups is involved. Why should professionals give up their control or at least influence over decision making? The public choice approach has pointed out how state bureaucrats, which many of these professionals are, may skew public policy in pursuit of their interests, as measured by budgets and status (Dunleavy 1991). Perhaps value systems can overcome such simple self-interest. But what are the values that professionals bring to the policy process. Do they incorporate a commitment to empowerment and to sustainability? How do professionals accommodate these to other values they may hold, such as equity, redistribution, aesthetic quality or economic regeneration? And finally, there is the matter of the expertise which some professional groups may bring to the process. The expertise claims of generalists within the policy process may be suspect for their lack of grounding in ecology or other areas of environmental science. The claims of environmental specialists may be narrow and even blinkered, resulting in conflict with lay understandings. Professionals may be called on to mediate but where are their skills in this task? All these issues of sectional interests, values and claims to expertise are compounded by the formal processes of professionalisation which many policy actors go through (Evans and Rydin 1997). The institutions of professionalisation are, therefore, another arena that needs examination if discourse management for sustainable development is to be achieved.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the environmental policy process is discursive and that recognising this involves a commitment to separating normative desires for environmental policy from consideration of how language shapes that policy. Environmental policy discourse necessarily involves a variety of arguments and viewpoints, a variety which can result in ambiguity but also holds the promise of a vigorous debate on environmental policy. These arguments are related to the structures of interests and power in society, though not determined by them. Environmental policy discourses reflect (but not transparently) the societal structures of power; they also have the potential to change them. Normative discourse management – in favour of sustainability – is a possibility but it has to take the form of debate between sustainability arguments. This requires institutional support and framing. Such institutions would include arenas and procedures for decision making which recognise and allow for:

(i)   the collective action problem;

(ii) difference within society and the problems of generating consensus; and

(iii) the limited capacity of professionals.

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Suggestions include proposals for specific institutions: to overcome the collective action problem, perhaps with common property regimes; to support communities and dialogue between communities, in order to foster 'togetherness in difference' and forge some agreement from polyphony; and to encourage deliberation within the public sphere through new procedures. But there is also a requirement for formal public safeguards within the policy process on access, recognition of status within the policy process and redress in the case of 'necessary silence'. Safeguards are also needed to allow action against professionals within the policy process, given that they are, after all, another sectional interest group. The emphasis in talking ourselves into sustainability should, therefore, be on creating the institutional context within which new norms, values and ways of talking can develop. Finally, though, it is worthwhile recalling the paradox that Jacobs (1997) identifies; we may create the institutions for debating sustainability but we cannot ensure that the outcome will be a legitimated consensus for sustainability.

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