Sustainability Discourses

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Sustainability Discourses
Talking about Australian Grazing
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Abstract: In this paper research on the use of discourses of sustainability by rural people (n=85) is examined from a poststructuralist perspective derived from Foucault. This is part of ongoing research on sustainable grazing adoption in the Central Tablelands region of New South Wales in southern Australia, and follows a national six-year research, trial and demonstration program called Sustainable Grazing Systems. This paper compares self-defined definitions (discourses) of sustainability derived from the survey with eight discourses of sustainability derived from the political literature on sustainability. The paper is used to signal some issues about the working of cultural discourses and some future directions for research.

Keywords: Foucault, Discourse, Australia, Sustainability

Introduction: Regional Background and Issues

The Central Tablelands region of New South Wales is a high rainfall area with longstanding grazing practices based on sheep (meat and wool) and cattle (meat) with some mixed farming (wheat and other crops) on plains country featuring mostly woodland ecologies with little remnant vegetation. Soils tend to be acid with growing problems manifesting in erosion, some acidification and salination and species loss, especially native perennial grasses. Weed management problems, especially from imported species, are a vexing long-term issue. Farm economic viability tends to decline with higher inputs and input costs and declining market returns, problems which tend to be universal today. Economic sustainability is as questionable in this context as environmental sustainability.

The class constitution of the Central Tablelands is such that the upper class of capitalist farming is small, if influential, and most farms are multigenerational family businesses, amounting to self-employed petty-bourgeois, with a small and shrinking rural working class with shearsers, shed-hands, farm labourer etc. Much work is sub-contracted to petty-bourgeois contracting (harvesting, hay-making, shearing and crutching, fencing etc.) with many owner-farmers constituting a reserve army of labour by undertaking such rural work for other farmers for off-farm income (Lawrence and Vanclay 1992).

Social issues include off-farm work associated with farm income, landholding size, flock and herd size, succession (inheritance), superannuation and generational change. Two other social issues are worth mentioning. One is the longstanding if unacknowledged gender issue, where women tend to be overlooked as farmers, who may once have concentrated on book-keeping as an extension of traditional gender activities like domestic work and childcare, but are now increasingly involved in hands-on stock and fieldwork, training and financial and other management planning. The other issue is the long-term fragmentation of rural land, partly for succession pressures but also because of a trend toward ‘lifestyle’ or hobby-farming, which often has the effect of injecting considerable and focussed capital into small land developments. Many such hobby-farmers are retirees from city occupations and urban life-style and are part of a large group in Australia moving to the coast (sea-changers) or to the inland (tree-changers), the latter almost certainly influenced by robust rural myths based on our colonial rural past. Such retirees can finance their life change ambitions from the sale of city properties which have exploded in recent decades.

Sustainable Grazing

The theory and practices of sustainable grazing have been around in Australia for some time but in 1996 several industry groups collaborated to form a national program called Sustainable Grazing Systems (SGS - Price 2002). For present purposes sustainable grazing may be defined as a set of grazing practices that aimed at achieving profitable and environmentally sustainable outcomes through pasture management and time-based stock movements (Meat & Livestock Australia, 2002). While no one approach was advocated, in simple terms, stock are amalgamated into one group and rotated for short periods in
relatively small paddocks or fields. The net effect for pasture is that it is rested much longer (up to 90 days) than it is grazed (from half to three or four days). This has potential environmental sustainability implications for groundcover, run-off and erosion, and pasture species control, including intensive grazing for undesirable species, and light grazing at appropriate times for targeted species building. The effect on stock is that high quality fresh pasture is constantly available. Smaller fields means higher fencing and water provision costs, but higher pasture yields and stocking rates compensate for this (Meat & Livestock Australia, 2002).

The national SGS program established demonstration trials at several national sites and a number of on-farm trial sites. A newsletter publicised issues and findings and many farm-walks and information evenings conducted, managed and run by producer-advisory groups, with a part-time paid facilitator. A final ‘harvest’ year was used to gather the information gained and publish research findings (Price 2002). A successor program is currently being planned with grain farming to extend the research and farming practices to cropping production.

**Discourse Theory and Analysis**

Foucault’s theory of discourse has significant implications for social research methodology (Foucault 1973, 1977). Ontologically, the social world is culturally constructed through clusters of discourses about aspects of social life, without which we are unable to speak of think or feel about those aspects. Part of Foucault’s work was a series of historical investigations which identified the rise of discourses available to speak, think and feel about issues as diverse as homosexuality; madness, and prison philosophy (Foucault 1988, 1990). Discourses reflect and construct knowledge about such social issues through academic disciplines, social institutions, and the texts that they produce through their policies, regulations and legal frameworks (Weedon 1987). Discourses are the mechanisms by which specific elements of culture are transmitted, imposed, resisted and transformed. Discourses in this light may be seen as the mechanisms which connect ‘big’ cultural forms (Culture) with the minutiae of ‘little’ culture (culture) in terms of persona and intimate identity. Power is an intrinsic part of the process since who we are is governed by social meanings and interactively negotiated and performed (Danaher et al 2000).

An important contribution of the foucauldian perspective is the importance accorded agency. A number of theorists have identified the significance of this dimension including Hall (1996), Butler (1990, 2002), Scott (2002), and McNay (2002). This work is a corrective to a widely held view that Foucault offered a largely determinist account of the role of language through discourse (Barker 2000). That is to say, one reading of Foucault’s work has seen him as emphasising the way in which discourses shape our ability to speak in an unduly determinist way (eg Lupton 1999:15). Instead agency is conceived as the space wherein we act through subject positions implicit in discourses, and through the creation of a subjectification process which produces a socially-based sense of who we are, and how we should act. To be clear, this perspective is emphatically an external, negotiated and performed process of identification, at complete odds to the commonsense assumptions of an interior, fixed and unitary self, implicit in most modern western views of identity (see Potter and Wetherell 1987). The practices of subjectivity are alternatively the taking up or resistance to, or negotiating with subject positions implicit in specific discourses, and the activation of agency and power. Integrating these aspects into empirical research holds certain challenges.

Epistemologically, we can know the world through analysis of the discourses relevant to the social aspects of interest. Discourses of sustainability - as well as issues of farming, agriculture, the environment, the allocation of resources etc. - cluster in a discursive formation around issues relevant to the local region of New South Wales, noted above. Research reported here involved asking rural people how they defined sustainability in their own words, and investigating if they recognised a range of different discursive positions about sustainability.

**Limit ed Glossary**

‘foucauldian ontology’ refers to the world/reality constructed from a perspective based on Michel Foucault’s concepts of discourse, subjectivity, subject positions and agency – referred to as a subjectification process;

‘foucauldian or poststructuralist epistemology’ refers to the construction of knowledge with the framework drawn from Foucault, ie discourse, subjectivity, subject positions and agency;

‘discourse’ refers to institutionally generated ways of thinking, speaking and writing about some aspect of social life, clustered with other discourses in a discursive formation;

‘self-defined discourse’ refers to the invocation of a socio-cultural discourse by respondents when asked to define a term like sustainability;

‘agency’ refers to the space wherein persons elect to take up, reject or negotiate the subject positions implicit in a discourse;

‘subjectivity’ refers to those aspects of the subjectification process wherein agency is enacted to take
up a subject position implicit in a discourse – called identity in modernist and realist accounts; ‘culture’ here refers to those aspects of everyday life, considered from the ontology outlined above, such as ideas, thoughts, feelings and images, as well as routines, habits and rituals, and socio-cultural practices underpinned or implicit in the discursive formations around social life like farming and grazing.

**Field-days Research**

In a first attempt to understand the relevance of a discourse approach to sustainability issues, a small research survey was designed to investigate sustainability at the 2001 Australian National Field Days, an annual exhibition of agricultural themes held in the permanent field-days site near the Central Tablelands town of Orange. This three-day showcase of farm equipment and produce, cattle, sheep and dog-trials, inventors’ competition and breed showings is accompanied by a fairground atmosphere and cheap and specialist rural consumerism, to which thousands attend. This holiday cum business event offers access to a broad range of rural and rurally interested people, from farmers and graziers, to equipment and chemicals salespeople, to children and farm advisory group representatives of many public and private institutions and consultancies. Readers should be aware that this is a limited sample size and regional-specific pilot survey with unknown application to other regions and contexts.

Respondents were chosen at random, by several interviewees, without knowledge of respondent background or status, and ranged from townspeople, farmers, graziers, hobby farmers and interstate visitors. A small number of questions were asked, both open and closed, with answers recorded immediately by the interviewer on the answer sheet. The responses from two of these questions are considered in this paper.

**Self-defined Sustainability Discourses**

The first question asked respondents to say what sustainability meant to them. This question sought to see if they recognised the term sustainability, could offer a definition without prompting, and of course, allow the researcher to analyse the content of their answer as an aspect of cultural discourses around sustainability. Of the 85 respondents who took part, 80 gave answers ranging from very brief (one or two words) to quite extensive statements amounting to an almost philosophical stance, ie only five were unable or unwilling to give a response, although continued with the rest of the survey. This 94% response rate confirmed the availability and salience of the term sustainability for this population, and encouraged the suggestion that such a discourse circulated amongst these persons, and potentially in the wider social settings and culture in which they were immersed.

These answers were read for common themes, orientation to environmental sustainability, and the words, metaphors and kind of language used. The answers fell into two main groups: an environmental response which stressed the relationship between farming and the environmental impacts of it, using some different reference points; and a productionist response which highlighted the production issues associated with farming with economic, profitability or production inputs as central.

These two main responses were sorted into the proportions in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalist</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productionist</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some examples of the environmental discourse are: ‘...doing in 100 years what we are doing now (if not better)’; ‘commitment to preserving my land’; ‘keep doing (sic) forever’; ‘it means we should be doing in 100 years what we are doing now (if not better)’; ‘to have it (land) still there for our kids and future generations’; ‘care-taking land for our children’; ‘that I will be able to go on all my life and leave it for the grandchildren and the future’. It will be noted that children here are used as a metaphor for time, the future and sustainability. Other responses invoked, as would be expected, nature and natural resources to underpin sustainability, for example; ‘the use of natural resources in a way that maintains community resources for the future’, and ‘using resources in a way that does not damage the environment or deplete natural resources’.

These are intelligent and intelligible responses that are more than random fragments of meaning. There is a coherence and focus at work here which is more than individualised responses to a relatively unexpected question from an interviewer. Put together, a strong pattern of environmental concerns around sustainability appears to represent a discourse of sustainability circulating in the culture and engendered through the research. A cluster of subject
positions of an environmentally-inclined kind are constructed through the agentic aspects of the subjectification process. For example, the first response ‘…doing in 100 years what we are doing now (if not better)’, activates that person’s agency to construct a subject position for themselves of the farmer who focuses on long-term farming and therefore environmentally sustainable or improving environmental ecosystems. By ‘performing’ this subject position, a discourse of sustainability is invoked.

Some examples of the second group who saw sustainability as a production issue are: ‘produce as much as we can now and do it into the future preferably at higher production levels’; ‘continue operation without major corrective input’; ‘using production methods that don’t result in the diminution of production over time’; ‘a constant supply of product over time’; and bluntly ‘sustain production’ and ‘prices’. Again we see the use of the time metaphor, along with survival. It could be speculated that the major corrective input of the second response cited might mean environmental correction, but that is not explicit. These seem to be answers defining economic sustainability.

Again, we see coherence and focus which suggest the economist or productionist orientation to primary production familiar to us all as an agricultural discourse circulating in the wider culture. By constructing sustainability in this productionist form, these respondents are identifying a cluster of subject positions which by their agency defines what sustainability means to them. Were there no discursive ‘core’ to the way they each have constructed sustainability, no such pattern of subject positions would be evident. Viewed from an agency perspective, the invocation of a productionist ‘mindset’ casts discourse and subjectivity into a discursive strategy performed to endow a productionist perspective on sustainability. The same line of argument could be sketched for the environmentalist answers discussed above.

In summary it is proposed that when respondents were asked to say what they thought sustainability meant they collectively reproduced two main discourses of sustainability, recognisable as viable ways of talking and thinking about sustainability. At a broader focus, we can see that by defining sustainability in their terms, respondents were activating their agency, and defining the subject positions which make sense of sustainability for them.

Research-defined Sustainability Discourses

In a following part of the same survey, respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with eight prepared statements about achieving sustainability derived from the literature of the politics of sustainability (Huckle 1996). The discourses offered and the results were as shown in Table 2.

Notes

Tags (eg democratic discourse) in brackets are terms used in the source text (Huckle 1996) to identify different political positions around sustainability. The use of these statements about sustainability was to see if they were recognisable to respondents as discourses. The agree/disagree format was used to avoid choice between them, since recognising the discourse is not the same as using or believing in a discourse. The rates of agreement or disagreement indicate ranking of the discourses in terms of how many people agreed or not with the sentiments of each discourse.

Table 2
### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>% Agreement or Disagreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A sustainability needs governments to maintain the stability of the economy without exhausting limited resources, like coal and gas? (socialist sustainable discourse)</td>
<td>84% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B sustainability is only possible through personal change and personal involvement in changing our organisations? (green reformist discourse)</td>
<td>78% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C sustainability requires that I recognise that it is my duty to protect the environment and accept my obligations to society? (green individualist discourse)</td>
<td>92% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D sustainability requires us to recognise the role of women in society and the need for them to be more involved in environmental decisions? (feminist discourse)</td>
<td>70% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E sustainability is mostly a problem created by the rich industrialised countries and poor third world countries have few choices? (postcolonial discourse)</td>
<td>47% agree 47% disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F sustainability is only possible through democratic organisations, producer groups, local action groups and cooperatives? (democratic discourse)</td>
<td>50% agree 44% disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G sustainability should be paid for by higher prices, environmental taxes and pollution licences? (neo-classical discourse)</td>
<td>28% agree 57% disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H sustainability needs to be achieved within free markets, preserving individual property rights and small government? (laissez faire liberal discourse)</td>
<td>60% agree 22% disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In rank order the results appear in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>% agreement or disagreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C green individualist discourse</td>
<td>92% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A socialist discourse</td>
<td>84% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B green reformist discourse</td>
<td>78% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D feminist discourse</td>
<td>70% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H laissez faire liberal discourse</td>
<td>60% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F democratic discourse</td>
<td>50% agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E third world discourse</td>
<td>47% agree 47% disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G neo-classical discourse</td>
<td>43% agree 57% disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Notes

Disagreement rates indicate recognition but refusal of the discourse concerned. Disagreement rates grow moving down the ranked agreement rates. A low rate of Don’t Knows was found overall.

### Comment

Not only did the respondents to this survey appear to be able to recognise these statements as relating to sustainability, but they were also clearly able to discriminate between them. What might be called the ‘green individualist discourse’ highlighting personal responsibility and obligation, was agreed with by more interviewees than other discourses, and found stronger support than a number of others in terms of those who disagreed with each statement. A high rate of disagreement was clearly indicated for some discourses. In foucauldian theory, the eight versions of sustainability are subject positions implicit in the discourses. Agency is required to be activated to agree or disagree with them.

### Comparison and Discussion

To finish the paper, this section compares the discourses found in the first question of the survey – those self-defined by respondents (Table 1) – to those discourses offered as research-defined, through the questions and answers reported immediately above (Tables 2 and 3).

The first thing to point out is that in one sense, the two questions do not address sustainability in the same way. One is of the order ‘what do you think sustainability means’, while the other is of the form ‘how is sustainability to be achieved’. Nonetheless, if we look past these differences for the moment, a viable comparison can be made.

The result reported in Table 1 was that the responses to the opportunity to define sustainability in respondents’ own terms were able to be analysed as
largely falling into two categories, here called an environmentalist discourse and a productionist one. Of the eight discourses offered for agreement or disagreement reported in Table 2, options A, B, D, E, F, G or H do not seem to be close to the 61% who appear to be defining sustainability in terms of environmental protection, or the future of children, or time-related issues. Option C does however share some characteristics with the self-defined environmentalist discourse. For example, only option C identifies the environment centrally, while other options centre on the economy, democratic forms, prices, taxes etc.

On the other hand, the productionist discourse identified relates in some ways to some of the eight discourses offered in Table 2. For example the productionist examples given above (following Table 1) included prices (also mentioned in Option G), which are also implicated in markets (Option H), with possible further implications for government regulation and intervention (Option A). These fragmentary connections are culturally embedded sustainability issues in the foucauldian sense employed here. Discursive fragments are arguably part of discourse theory and practice (see Palmer 2004).

It has been argued in this paper that a discourse approach to understanding the wider cultural issues of sustainability is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, a pattern of self-defined sustainability emerged that saw two main trends in an environmentalist response and a productionist one. Secondly, the patterns were associated or clustered around the social issue concerned – sustainability – in a discourse fashion. Thirdly, these patterns reinforce a foucauldian ontology which sees ‘reality’ as occupied, structured and constructed through these discourses around sustainability. Fourthly, a group of research-defined sustainability discourses were successfully perceived as relating to sustainability, with varying degrees of agreement and disagreement, suggesting (differential) attachment to them by respondents. Fifthly, a discriminating or discretionary comparison can be made between self-defined and research-defined discourses. Sixthly, for the same group of survey respondents, the dominant environmentalist self-defined discourse of sustainability is quite close to the most agreed-with research-defined discourse of sustainability – the green individualist discourse of sustainability.

In this context, we can return to the issue of how the questions were phrased to respondents. If many people (61%) thought sustainability was defined environmentally, most people (92%) agreed that the green individualist discourse was the way to achieve it. This may not be good news for collectivists, but in a culture dominated by many forms of individualism, it is no surprise.

Conclusions: Future Research

Several directions for future research are indicated by this paper. Employing a foucauldian methodology represents an exciting development in social and cultural research around sustainability. A foucauldian ontology suggests that viewing culture as significantly constituted through discourses allows access to the mechanism by which culture (Culture) connects with personal identity (culture), here seen as socially constructed and performed subjectification. This perspective underpins a foucauldian epistemology centred on discourse and the subject positions implicated in them. Research from such a poststructuralist perspective is oriented to identifying those moments in the subjectification process whereby identity (subjectivity) is interactively performed. This also means clarifying the subject positions constituted in the process. The number and variety of discourses (definitions) of sustainability discussed in this paper is salutary and these are probably not exhaustive. The popular difficulty of defining such terms as sustainability is well illustrated here.

Another issue raised by the research is how the insights of agency are to be maximised in poststructuralist research. Since the comforts of positivist assumptions are refused this perspective we have to consider that each time a respondent constructs (activates) a discourse they also invoke their agency, and each time a respondent selects agreement or disagreement with a proffered discourse, they also activate their agency. Different questions, different contexts, and different interactions may well produce different agentic outcomes. It might be asked if a more nuanced approach to the engagement of discourse and the activation of agency can be achieved in the subjectification process than the relatively post-hoc explication being offered here.

In this study, the attempt was made to test the utility of a discourse approach to the issue of sustainability in one region. The framework of theory employed here is productive of two countervailing insights or standpoints into the subjectification process. On the one hand discourses both constrain and enable our ability speak in certain ways, depending on the discourses and subject positions circulating in the culture relevant to the context studied – here the central tablelands region of NSW, Australia. On the other hand, discourses and subject positions allow us to ‘perform’ agency and subjectivity (identity) thereby enlivening the discourse and ourselves into the bargain, as it were. What is not clear is whether, and to what extent, the spread of sustainability awareness, the adoption of sustainability practices and the experience of grazing in environmentally sustainable ways have impacted on discourses of sustainability. If we go back to the self-defined discourses reported in Table 1 of this paper, we might
say that 39% of respondents in this region, at this
event, showed no or little impact of environmental
sustainability in their definitions, while 61% did.
What is not known is what awareness existed before,
nor how long for discourses to change, nor any long-
term studies in the tracing of discourses about sus-
tainability or any other related matter. That is a con-
siderable challenge.

References


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