Organization

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What is This?

David and Goliath in the Risk Society: Making Sense of the Conflict between Shell and Greenpeace in the North Sea

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Abstract.   It is argued here that the victory of Greenpeace over Shell in the North Sea, in June 1995, exemplifies the empowerment of small organizations in the semiotic environment in which organizations in late modernity increasingly tend to operate. More specifically, it is argued that in late modern societies risk production tends to be at least as important as wealth production. In the risk society, symbolic power is of great importance, at times more important than economic power; social reflexivity, unfolding within a public discourse which favours post-materialist values, is an integral part of societal functioning; and the role of mediated communication occupies a central place. In a semiotic environment, business organizations do not only compete in the marketplace but, increasingly, in a discursive space in which winning the argument is just as important. These concepts are used to throw light on the conflict that broke out between Shell and Greenpeace in the North Sea, over the off-shore dumping of a defunct oil platform.

Lilliputian organizations cannot compel immoral rulers to apologize on their knees, as Henry II had to do; but they do subject rulers who refuse to mend their ways to damaging embarrassment in the eyes of the world . . . [In late modernity] the name of the game will be influence, not force; and, in playing on that field, the Lilliputians hold certain advantages. (Stephen Toulmin, 1990: 198, 208)
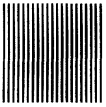
In June 1995, Shell and Greenpeace locked their horns in the North Sea, over the offshore disposal of Brent Spar, a defunct oil platform which had been decommissioned after nearly 20 years of service. The Brent Spar controversy, which originally started as a local incident involving Greenpeace, Shell UK and the British government, escalated rapidly and, mainly through intense media-generated publicity, quickly assumed wider significance, involving European governments and consumer boycotts in several Western European countries. In the end, Shell was forced to reverse its decision.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how the victory of a small organization such as Greenpeace over a large organization such as Shell was made possible. To do this, we need to reconceptualize both the environment in which organizations operate and the texture of organizational action in late modernity. Indeed, the Brent Spar controversy raises certain issues which have not been adequately tackled in organization studies. For example, it has often been suggested that organizations in late modernity are increasingly dependent on knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Drucker, 1991; Quinn, 1992) for their functioning, and the indicator of how knowledge-intensive a firm is, normally, is taken to be the share of R&D expenditure in the unit costs of its products. However, it has rarely been asked, if at all, what happens when organizations do not just compete in a market of *knowledge-intensive products* but put forward competing *knowledge claims* in the public arena, as is the case with environmental disputes.

Similarly, while institutional analyses of organizational environments have been particularly illuminating in underscoring the significance of the institutionalized values and beliefs which underlie the social context in which firms operate (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995), they have tended to leave out the very *texture* of organizational environments. Rarely, for example, has it been pointed out that, in late modernity, the organizational environment increasingly consists of *signs*, namely mediated images, symbols and knowledge claims. A company like Shell, for example, does not deal only in resources (economic and institutional) but also in risks: its productive activities generate environmental hazards, the impact of which comes under focus and debate. Moreover, in a semiotic environment, organizational action tends to be reflexively shaped: organizations act in the knowledge that they are under public scrutiny.

The thesis put forward here argues that in late modern society risk production increasingly becomes at least as important as wealth production. In such a society, symbolic power assumes great significance which, in certain circumstances, may turn out to be even more significant than economic power; social reflexivity is an increasingly integral part of societal functioning; and the role of mediated communication occupies a central place. In a de-materialized environment, the traditional competitive advantage afforded by superior size and resources does not have the same value as before: power differentials in terms of economic capital

may not be always translatable in victorious strategies. In a society in which risk production is so central as to feature prominently in social debate, business organizations do not compete only in the marketplace but, increasingly, in a discursive space in which winning the argument is just as important. These claims will be illustrated with reference to the Brent Spar controversy.

My analysis in this paper draws heavily on Giddens' (1990, 1991, 1994) and Beck's (1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997) recent work, as well as on the work of sociologists such as Lash and Urry (1994), Freidland and Boden (1994), and Thompson (1995) who, broadly, share Giddens' and Beck's neomodernist perspective. The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a conceptual framework concerning organizations and their environments in late modernity is set out. This is followed by a discussion of the events that took place in the Brent Spar controversy. And, finally, the conflict between Shell and Greenpeace is analysed in terms of the concepts set out in the proposed conceptual framework.

Organizing in Late Modernity: A Conceptual Framework

Action at a Distance

The Abstraction of Time and Space. Identifying the distinguishing features of modernity has always been a major sociological concern. From Durkheim and Simmel to Giddens and Beck, an important recognition stands out in sociological analyses: modernization is thought to be a process of disembedding—of emptying out of social systems. To appreciate this perhaps it is best if one starts the other way around: in traditional societies, to be is to be embedded in a concrete spatio-temporal context, defined by the presence of others; human interaction is limited by conditions of co-presence. Time and space are intimately linked through place: 'when' is connected with 'where' or with natural or religious occurrences. The emptying out (abstraction) of time took a decisive boost with the invention of the mechanical clock and, later, with the standardization of calendars (Kallinikos, 1996: Ch. 1). It is now possible for time to be treated as a uniform, quantifiable, abstract category. The process of the emptying out of time has reached an extreme point today with the creation of a 'global present' (Adam, 1996: 86–9; Friedland and Boden, 1994: 15): economic activities are carried out around the globe, around the clock (Cairncross, 1997; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991).

The lifting out of time from local contexts of interaction has enabled the emptying of place and, thus, made possible action at a distance (Cooper, 1992; Kallinikos, 1996: 34–42). Whereas, in traditional societies, place is identical with space, in modernity, this is no longer the case. It is not difficult to see why. In premodern societies, social interaction occurs in physical settings which are situated geographically—space *is* place. When, however, social interaction no longer presupposes a single, geo-

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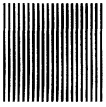
graphically situated setting, as is the case in a telephone conversation or in communication through the Internet, then space becomes separated from place. Since we can now interact without being physically co-present, our interaction occurs in abstract space, not in a locally situated place.

What is the significance of the abstraction of time and space? Abstract time and abstract space can be separated and recombined at will. Organizations, being the carriers of modernity par excellence, both exemplify and contribute to the disembedding of social systems: social relations are lifted out from their local contexts of interaction and are recombined across indefinite spans of time–space (Giddens, 1990: 21; 1991: 18; 1994: 4). It is the ability for the systematic coordination of 'absent' others and, therefore, for action at a distance, that is the most enduring feature of modern organizations. The dialectic of presence and absence becomes the central principle of modern organization—human interaction is no longer limited by the context of co-presence.

The phenomenon whereby abstract time and abstract space are recombined so as to connect presence and absence is called by Giddens (1990: 14) 'time–space distanciation' (see also Friedland and Boden, 1994: 15; Thompson, 1995: 32). Through the latter, social systems can extend their activities beyond the here and now. One is not hard pressed for examples in the late modern world. From the systematic use of automatic teller machines, through tele-banking, to electronic commerce, we are witnessing the gradual substitution of cyber-economy for conventional economic exchange (Cairncross, 1997; Lash and Urry, 1994). Late modernity makes the possibilities latent in modern institutions a fully-fledged reality.

Disembedding Mechanisms.   Giddens (1990: 21–9; 1991: 18) distinguishes two types of disembedding mechanisms: 'symbolic tokens' and 'expert systems', both of which make the recombination of abstract time and abstract space possible. *Symbolic tokens* are standardized media of exchange, such as, for example, money, which are interchangeable across different contexts. A monetary economy is a prime example of time–space distanciation: economic transactions between individuals who never physically meet each other are rendered possible. *Expert systems* are impersonal systems of knowledge and expertise whose validity is independent of those drawing on them. In modern societies, such systems are ubiquitous and are exemplified by the work of scientists, engineers, physicians, accountants, lawyers, therapists or, more generally, what Reich (1991: 177–80) calls 'symbolic analysts' (see also Drucker, 1991).

In what way are expert systems disembedding mechanisms? 'An expert system', says Giddens (1990: 28), 'disembeds in the same way as symbolic tokens, by providing "guarantees" of expectations across distanciated time–space. This "stretching" of social systems is achieved via the impersonal nature of tests applied to evaluate technical knowledge and by public critique (upon which the production of technical knowledge *is*

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based), used to control its form.' Drawing on expert systems implies an attitude of *trust* in the expectations provided by them: a belief that such systems do work as they are supposed to. Trust in expert systems is related to absence in time and space as well as to ignorance. I have no idea how my computer functions but I do rely upon those who have made it, who are physically absent from me, to guarantee that it does function as it is meant to.

The Economy of Signs (Especially Risks)

In late modernity, it is not only time and space that have been emptied out; the objects produced and exchanged are being increasingly emptied out of material content. As Lash and Urry (1994: 15) remark, 'what is increasingly being produced are not material objects, but signs' (see also Stehr, 1994: 121–59). The semiotization of late modern economies has not only to do with their gradual transformation into service economies (Makridakis, 1995; Stehr, 1994), or with the growing 'technization' of work (Barley, 1996), but also with 'the increasing component of sign value or *image* in material objects' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 15). For Lash and Urry, this process is manifested in the growing importance of design and of R&D for the value of goods, to the effect that the labour process has lost the centrality it once had in the value-added chain.

A particular kind of sign that is systematically produced in late modern societies is *risks*. The sign value of risks is not, of course aesthetic (as is the case with several goods and services) but informational (Lash and Urry, 1994: 15). Why are risks thought to be signs? Because, as will be shown below, modern risks become perceptible largely through evidence supplied by scientific models. Thus, a distinguishing feature of modern risks (as opposed to traditional ones) is that they exist only insofar as they can be pointed out in scientific theorizing and experimentation (Gephart, 1996: 212–16).

Risks-as-signs are far from being marginal or mere side-effects in late modern societies. For some analysts, like Beck (1992: 19), risks now define so heavily the nature of late modernity that he attributes 'the logic of risk distribution' to late modernity, in contrast to 'the logic of wealth distribution' which characterized industrial society (Shrivastava, 1995: 119–21). In the industrial society, the logic of wealth production dominated the logic of risk production, according to Beck. Partly because risks then were less hazardous and less global than today, as well as because it was easier for risks to be rationalized and to be seen as mere externalities, or unintended consequences to be corrected through the further development of technology, they were not taken seriously; productivism ruled. In late modernity, the relationship is reversed: the systematic production and the potentially catastrophic effects of several contemporary risks mean that the latter are no longer thought to be mere externalities, but a pivotal question around which politics and social debate are increasingly organized (Beck et al. 1994: vii; Shrivastava, 1995: 119–21). It is the cen-

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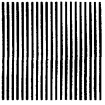
trality of risk production in late modern societies that Beck (1992) wants to capture by calling them 'risk societies'.

Are risks in late modernity really different from risks in other epochs? Are risks not part and parcel of the human condition? While it is certainly true that human beings have always been exposed to hazards and dangers of all kinds, there are also some crucial discontinuities between premodern and modern risks which need to be analysed.

First, in premodern times, risks were personal, not *global* as they are today. The risks associated with, for example, Columbus' trip to America were exclusively borne by Columbus and his crew. The effects of acid rain today or the consequences of global warming are borne by all, even by those who contributed very little to the genesis of acid rain or global warming (Jamieson, 1992).

Second, contemporary risks stem not so much from nature per se (although extreme phenomena such as floods and earthquakes keep reminding us of the human vulnerability to nature's whims) but from human artifacts. As Giddens (1990: 60, 124–34) and Beck (1992: 22–3) point out, the great risks facing late modernity are no longer natural but *manufactured*: they are the results of human intervention in nature and society (Jamieson, 1996; Freudenburg, 1996). In Giddens' (1994: 4) words:

> Life has always been a risky business. The intrusion of manufactured uncertainty into our lives doesn't mean that our existence, on an individual or collective level, is more risky than it used to be. Rather, the sources, and the scope, of risk have altered. Manufactured risk is the result of human intervention into the conditions of social life and into nature . . . The advance of manufactured uncertainty is the outcome of the long-term maturation of modern institutions.

Third, risks in the past were usually directly perceptible, whereas now, by and large, they are not. The terrible pollution of the Thames in the early 19th century was there for all to see and smell; the contamination, however, induced by radioactivity and toxic substances is not. As Beck (1992: 21) comments, 'hazards in those days assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses, while the risks of civilization today typically *escape perception* and are localized in the sphere of *physical and chemical formulas* (e.g. toxins in foodstuffs or the nuclear threat)'. The knowledge dependence of modern risks is extremely important for it means that such risks can be identified only through the causal interpretations of expert-systems specialists. Since contemporary risks become perceptible through the sensory organs of science, their nature as well as their effects are primarily *mediated* through interpretation and argument (Gephart, 1984, 1988). Thus, modern risks 'can be changed, magnified, or minimized within knowledge, and to that extent they are particularly *open to social definition and construction*' (Beck, 1992: 23).

Several studies have shown that how risks are defined, measured and assessed depends on the values, interests, priorities and epistemologies of those who have been charged with the task of risk assessment (*Wynne*,

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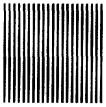
1992, 1996), in the context of broader organizational factors such as established cultures, power games and professional practices (Clarke, 1993; Clarke and Short, 1993; Kasperson and Kasperson, 1996; Perrow, 1984; Turner, 1976; Vaughan, 1996). Even apparently simple and technical matters, such as how to measure human fatalities, have been shown to be complex and judgemental (Kunreuther and Slovic, 1996: 119–20).

Fourth, the very notion of risk implies *normative criteria*, defining what is acceptable; a set of values in terms of which a particular activity is considered risky. Rappaport (1996: 69) put it nicely noting that 'risk assessment cannot be value free because values define what is at risk, and what is at risk may be values themselves'. In the same vein, Beck (1992: 28) asks: 'Behind all the objectifications, sooner or later the question of *acceptance* arises and with it anew the old question: *how do we wish to live*? What is the human quality of mankind, the natural quality of nature which is to be preserved?' It is questions of this kind that lead Beck to think that, although risk assessment crucially depends on scientific knowledge, nevertheless, insofar as risks presuppose values, the scientific monopoly on rationality cannot be sustained (Hellstrom and Jacob, 1996; Jamieson, 1992; Martin, 1996; Welsh, 1996). The interweaving of scientific and social rationalities is for several researchers a welcome return of ethics inside one of the bastions of modernity—business organizations.

And, fifth, there is something *unreal* in modern risks. Although damages to the environment are all around us, there is a sense in which the most harmful risks are not-yet-events: counterfactuals which cannot be subjected to empirical testing; possibilities which, should they ever happen, would have extremely harmful consequences (Beck, 1992: 33–4; Giddens, 1990: 134). Thus, several modern risks exist as apocalyptic scenarios which must forever remain fictional, anticipations which ought to remain only in the sphere of possibility.

The strongly counterfactual nature of modern risks draws the future into the present: human action is motivated not so much by the desire to effect positive changes as by the urgency to prevent certain events from ever happening (Giddens, 1994: 219–23). As Beck (1992: 34) remarks:

> . . . the center of risk consciousness lies not in the present, but *in the future*. In the risk society, the past loses the power to determine the present. Its place is taken by the future, thus, something non-existent, invented, fictive as the 'cause' of current experience and action. We become active today in order to prevent, alleviate or take precautions against the problems and crises of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow—or not to do so.

Thus, scientific arguments concerning large-scale risks often cannot be brought to a close, since conducting the necessary experiments or waiting to collect the requisite data may be self-destructive. Disputes, therefore, over the environmental impact of certain policies, say the dumping of radioactive waste, tend to be open-ended and difficult to settle conclusively. Ironically, instead of scientific knowledge creating more certainty,
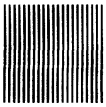
as it was once triumphantly presumed, it generates ever more uncertainty (Giddens, 1990: 36–45; 1994: 3–4).

If Beck's and Giddens' thesis about the centrality of risks in late modern societies is accepted, it follows that organizations, which have been hitherto thought of only in terms of wealth production, need to be reconceptualized. Thus, for example, a business organization like Shell should no longer be seen as being engaged only in the production of wealth but also in the production of signs, especially risks. The fact that the latter is an unintended activity does not diminish its importance in the least. A non-governmental organization (NGO) like Greenpeace is primarily engaged in the production and diffusion of symbolic forms pertaining to the environment (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989). In the risk society, the contest for the definition of symbolic forms assumes greater importance.

Symbolic Power. Drawing on Thompson's (1995: 12–18) typology of power, business organizations can be seen in terms of both economic power and symbolic power. As Thompson (1995: 14) observes, economic power stems from human productive activity involving the use of certain material resources and their transformation into goods to be sold in a market. Economic power is essentially the capacity to transform resources into products efficiently and effectively, and sell them in a market.

Symbolic power 'stems from the activity of producing, transmitting and receiving meaningful symbolic forms' (Thompson, 1995: 16). The resources upon which actors draw when they engage in symbolic activity are the following. First, the technical means of transmission of symbolic forms. The role of media here becomes crucial. Second, the cultural capital, that is the skills and knowledge forms employed in the process of symbolic exchange (Bourdieu, 1991: 230). And, third, the symbolic capital, that is the accumulated prestige and recognition (legitimacy) that have been afforded to an actor (Bourdieu, 1991: 72–6, 230). Symbolic power is, as Thompson (1995: 17) remarks, 'the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms' (see also Bourdieu, 1991: 163–70).

From the above, it follows that business organizations are simultaneously engaged in two 'fields of interaction' (Bourdieu, 1991: 230–1): in the economic field and in the symbolic field. And if it is accepted that, in late modernity, the production of risks (as well as signs, more generally) becomes as important as the production of wealth, it seems that competition between organizations should not be thought of in economic terms alone but, increasingly, in symbolic terms. Indeed, as institutionalists have cogently shown, a firm may seriously disadvantage itself if its symbolic capital is wasted—legitimacy matters (Elsbach, 1994; Grolin, 1997; Suchman, 1995). In the increasingly reflexive risk society, the quest for legitimacy (i.e. the quest for the accumulation of symbolic capital)

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becomes extremely important and, as a result, it is possible for economically strong organizations to become symbolically weak, with potentially serious performance implications. This is what Toulmin (1990: 208) means when he points out that, in late modernity, 'the name of the game will be *influence*, not *force*; and, in playing on that field, the Lilliputians hold certain advantages'. The more the contest between organizations is carried out in the symbolic field of interaction, the less important conventional business advantages, such as size, market share and financial resources, are, and the more important symbolic capital is.

Mediated Communication

It was earlier mentioned that a key feature of late modernity is the uncoupling of time and space it effects and, thus, the distanciation of time and space it entails. In this way, action at a distance is made possible. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the case of telecommunication. Through the latter, the uncoupling of time and space has led to what Thompson (1995: 32) calls 'despatialized simultaneity'—the experience of events occurring simultaneously at distant locales. Whereas, in the past, simultaneity presupposed locality (that is, 'the same time' presupposed 'the same place'), with the uncoupling of time and space, this is no longer necessary. As Thompson (1995: 32) remarks, 'in contrast to the concreteness of the here and now, there emerged a sense of "now" which was no longer bound to a particular locale. Simultaneity was extended in space and became ultimately global in scope.'

Telecommunication extends the traditional mode of interaction which was confined to contexts of co-presence, to include new forms of *mediated interaction*, such as a telephone conversation, and *mediated quasi-interaction*, such as the transmission of symbolic forms through the TV (Thompson, 1995: 82–118). The distinguishing feature of both types of non-physical interaction is that they enable the extended availability of symbolic forms in space–time. There is no need to examine in detail here each type of interaction; it would rather be useful, for the purpose of the present paper, if our attention was focused on mediated quasi-interaction, especially television, since the latter has become the most influential medium of communication in late modernity.

Television involves the separation of the context of production from the contexts of reception. There is a multiplicity of contexts of reception, since symbolic forms are produced for an indefinite range of recipients. Television is monological in character: there is a one-way flow of messages from the producer to the recipients. The separation of the context of production from the contexts of reception, and the monological character of television mean that, 'televisual quasi-interaction . . . is severed from the reflexive monitoring of others' responses which is a routine and constant feature of face-to-face interaction' (Thompson, 1995: 96). This is significant for it gives rise to *mediated indeterminacy*, since the recipients can interpret what they see in their own ways, and their responsive

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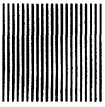
actions can evolve in ways which cannot be predicted or controlled (Thompson, 1995: 29, 109).

Thompson, (1995: 100–18) distinguishes two types of action at a distance: 'acting for distant others' and 'responsive action in distant contexts'. Acting for distant others is a form of action when the producer addresses recipients who are not physically present in the context of production (e.g. the news broadcast). A particular kind of acting for distant others is the media events which are normally exceptional occasions, planned in advance and broadcast live. Examples range from a presidential oath through the Olympic Games to Greenpeace happenings. Such events are 'reflexively shaped by the orientation towards an absent audience' (Thompson, 195: 108–9)—participants know that their actions have wider significance and are managed accordingly.

Responsive action in distant contexts is a form of action by the recipients in response to broadcast distant events. Although recipients cannot respond directly to producers, they do respond indirectly, namely as a contribution to other interactions of which recipients are part (e.g. comments between viewers on what they watch on the TV). Thompson (1995: 110) calls this process 'discursive elaboration', whereby media messages 'are elaborated, refined, criticized, praised and commented on by recipients who take the messages received as the subject matter of discussions with one another and with others' (see Figure 1). Notice that discursive elaboration need not be limited to primary recipients, that is, to individuals who have watched a particular programme, but may include others, secondary recipients, who assimilate parts of the media message through face-to-face interactions with the primary recipients (Thompson, 1995: 110).

Figure 1.   Action at a Distance in Mediated Communication: Televisual Quasi-interaction
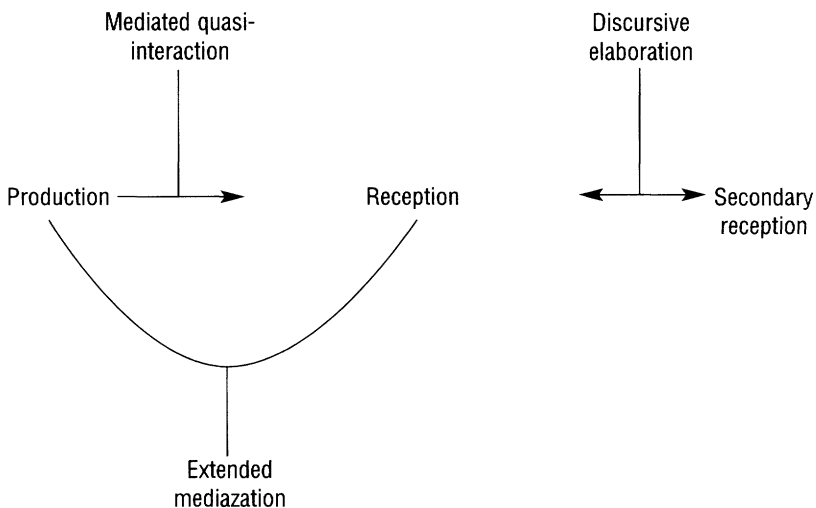

Source Thompson (1995: 111).

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It is also important to point out that in late modern societies, along with the process of discursive elaboration, there is the process of 'extended mediazation' (Thompson, 1995: 110): most of the media messages individuals receive refer to other media messages and are incorporated into new media messages, in an ongoing process of communication and debate. A dispute, for example, over an environmental issue normally involves references to scientific reports which are summarized by the communication media; media reports become then an object of discussion for commentators, whose comments are further commented upon by other commentators, and so on. It is the crucial role of media in the processes of discursive elaboration and extended mediazation that has led certain researchers to argue for the centrality of mass media in the social amplification and attenuation of risks in late modern societies (Kasperson and Kasperson, 1996).

The reception and discursive elaboration of media messages may lead recipients to undertake responsive action to events relayed via the television, a phenomenon which Thompson (1995: 112) calls 'concerted forms of responsive action'. The extent to which such action is explicitly coordinated may vary. When it is coordinated within the contexts of reception, it becomes an articulated form of collective action, seeking to influence a remote course of events. It is mainly in this sense that the media in late modernity do not only report what is going on, but also actively shape what is going on—they help create events which would not exist otherwise. The opposition to the Vietnam War, the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, and the management of the Gulf War are clear examples of the reflexivity induced by television in late modernity: actors undertake forms of action watching that the whole world is watching them (Friedland and Boden, 1994: 19; Thompson, 1995: 114-18).

Social Reflexivity

Knowledge and information are not only central to the constitution of late modern societies, they are also deeply implicated in the endemic change and instability that characterize modernity. Indeed, for analysts like Giddens (1990: 36–43, 1991: 14–21, 1994: 78–97), Beck (1992), Beck et al. (1994) and Lash and Urry (1994), a distinguishing feature of late modernity is its thoroughgoing reflexivity. 'The reflexivity of modern social life', notes Giddens (1990: 38), 'consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character'.

Of course, as Giddens (1990: 36–7) is quick to point out, reflexivity is, in a sense, an intrinsic feature of human action. The reflexive monitoring of action is a necessary and ongoing process implicated in every act of human behaviour: human beings keep in touch with what they do and incorporate the results of their actions to modify their behaviour. However, it is only in late modernity that the loop between thought and action extends so widely as to cover all aspects of individual behaviour

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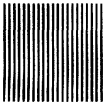
and institutional action. Examples abound: from the decision to get married, through the choice of what food to eat, to the social policies of nation states, actors' behaviour is reflexively organized in the light of available pertinent information and knowledge. The reflexive organization of social practices is particularly evident in the risk society, since risk estimates and, thus, the necessary policies, are chronically revisable in the light of new information about risks and, crucially, the change of normative horizons and the emergence of new sets of values. The risk society cannot help but be an intensely reflexive and, therefore, politicized society (Beck, 1994; Friedman, 1996).

Giddens is so impressed with the reflexivity of modernity that he takes reflexivity to be the distinguishing feature of modern organization. As he remarks, 'what distinguishes modern organisations is not so much their size, or their bureaucratic character, as the concentrated reflexive monitoring they both permit and entail' (Giddens, 1991: 16). Organizational reflexivity is not confined to traditional business concerns, such as how to increase productivity, competitiveness, and so on, but permeates many other aspects of organizational life, hitherto unavailable to public debate. As *The Economist*, (24 June 1995: 15) notes in its leader, in the aftermath of Shell's decision to abandon the offshore dumping of the Brent Spar, 'the universe of behaviour to which standards of correctness are being applied is growing. The hiring, firing, pay and promotion policies of a firm were once its own business. Nowadays there is a trend . . . to treat such policies as a legitimate area of public scrutiny.' In other words, in late modernity, organizations are under increasing pressure to explain their policies to the rest of society and, thus, to revise more and more aspects of their activities in the light of both new information and values (Friedman, 1996; Pilisuk et al., 1996). Debate, accountability, and reflexivity—in a word: politics—are key features of a social order in which tradition has lost its taken-for-granted status.

Lash and Urry (1994: 60–110) take the theme of modern reflexivity further by arguing for the 'reflexive accumulation' encountered in late modern economies. Knowledge and information, they argue, are not only sought as a way of tackling complex problems but, insofar as contemporary economies are increasingly dematerialized, they also constitute, in large part, the products in a reflexive economy. It is not only reflexive production that is taking place in such an economy but also reflexive consumption. What is actually going on, note Lash and Urry (1994: 61) is a wider process of 'detraditionalization', whereby individuals are increasingly freed from traditional social structures, such as the family, corporations and social classes, and make up their own choices and decisions (see also Beck, 1992, 1994, 1996; Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1994; Beck et al., 1994; Heelas et al., 1996). A similar thesis is echoed in Beck's (1992: 10, 14) argument concerning the reflexive modernization involved in risk societies: having interrogated the principles of feudal society, modernization now interrogates its own principles.
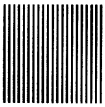
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The dematerialization of economic activities needs to be seen in conjunction with detraditionalization, and the emergence of post-materialist values in late modern societies (Beck, 1992; Inglehart, 1987; Stehr, 1994: 242–3). The successful tackling of relative material scarcity, the globalization of communication and the dramatic proliferation of risks have given rise to a post-materialist outlook in which environmental concerns occupy a central place. For certain researchers, environmentalism has become the new ideology in public discourse (Eder, 1996; Jamison, 1995). As Eder (1996: 204–5) argues, 'the masterframe constituting this new ideology is "ecology", and "ecological discourse" is becoming the common ground on which collective actors meet in today's public discourse and public place'. Moreover, the 20th century has seen a noticeable emergence of a global civil society through, mainly, the huge increase, both in terms of numbers as well as influence, of international NGOs (INGOs) (Matthews, 1997: 52–4). In their study of INGOs between 1875–1973, Boli and Thomas (1997) have shown not only the increase in the number of INGOs (for example, by 1947, over 90 INGOs per year were being founded), but also their contribution towards building a set of world-cultural principles centred on universalism, individualism, progress and world citizenship.

To sum, up, the setting within which organizations in late modernity operate is marked by four interconnected features (see Figure 2). The first feature is action at a distance (distanciation). Late modernity, through the abstraction of time and space and their subsequent recombination, makes possible the stretching of social activities beyond contexts of co-presence. Social systems are, thus, disembedded, and a crucial disembedding mechanism is expert systems.

Figure 2.   The Texture of Organizing in Late Modernity
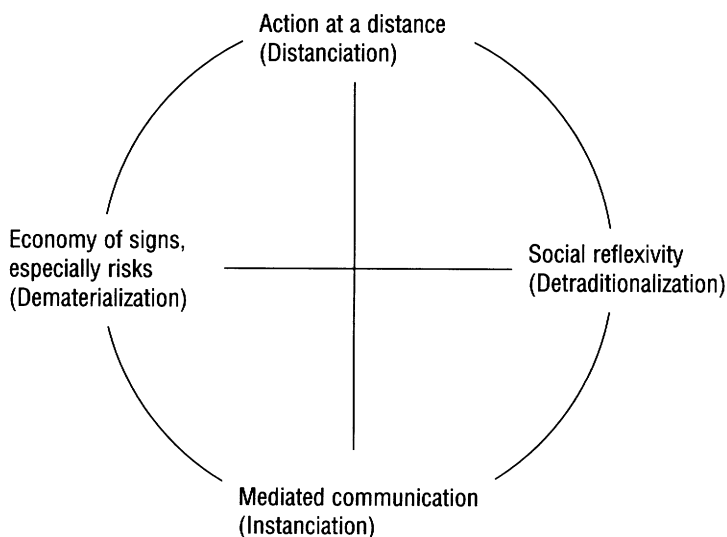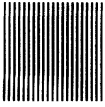
The second feature is instantly mediated communication (instanciation). Action at a distance is significantly enhanced through the uncoupling of time and space effected by the media. In particular, mediated quasi-interaction through the television extends the availability of symbolic forms across space and time. It thus facilitates acting for distant others, mainly through staging media events to be relayed to an indefinite range of recipients. Moreover, televisual interaction creates mediated indeterminacy insofar as the separation of the context of production from the contexts of reception enables recipients to put their own interpretations to, and discursively elaborate on, what they see, and undertake concerted forms of responsive action.

The third feature is the production of risks, in the broader context of the dematerialization of economic activities, whereby the economy of wealth is increasingly transformed into an economy of signs. Modern risks tend to be global; they are produced by the human intervention into nature rather than caused by nature itself; they are perceptible largely through scientific theorizing and, thus, are socially constructed as well as open-ended in terms of their acknowledged consequences; they presuppose normative criteria of acceptance; and they are unreal and counterfactual. In the economy of signs, the superiority of economic power over symbolic power tends to diminish: organizations do not compete only for economic resources but, also, for legitimacy and public approval.

Finally, the fourth feature of late modern organizational environments is social reflexivity (detraditionalization). Organizational practices are endemically unstable insofar as they tend to be revised in the light of both new information about those very practices and the emergence of new values. Traditional structures tend to lose their taken-for-granted status, resulting in the reflexive organization of individual and organizational projects. Environmental values possess a central place in the emerging set of post-materialist values and, as the action of several INGOs demonstrates, are a key concern of a gradually growing global civil society.

Below I will first describe the controversy between Shell and Greenpeace over the offshore disposal of the Brent Spar, which I will later analyse in the light of the concepts set out in this section.

The Brent Spar Controversy[1]

The Brent Spar oil-storage buoy had been in operation since 1976. Owned by Shell Expro (a subsidiary of Shell UK, which is a member of the Royal Dutch/Shell group, the largest oil company in the world), Brent Spar was designed to hold 300,000 barrels of oil. In September 1991, it was decommissioned and, following the recommendation of a three-year scientific study sponsored by Shell, and a subsequent permission by the UK government, it was decided that the buoy be disposed in the north Atlantic, in 2300 metres of water. The UK government had given Shell the licence for deep-sea disposal as the 'best practicable environmental option'

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(known as the BPEO study). The BPEO study was based on reports by consultants employed by Shell and its recommendation for deep-sea disposal was suggested 'on the grounds of reduced technical risk; the reduced safety risk to the workforce; the insignificant environmental impact; and the total cost' (Shell UK, 1994: 9). It was estimated that the cost of off-shore disposal would be £11.8 million against £46 million, the cost of on-shore disposal.

Given the cost difference between the two options, the fact that disposal costs would be tax deductible in the UK and that 50 other platforms were waiting to be similarly disposed in the near future, the off-shore disposal appeared a more attractive, financially speaking, option to the UK government, as evidenced in public statements by the then Energy Minister Tim Eggar (Grolin, 1997: 8). However, Shell's decision was severely criticized by, among others, the Scottish Association for Marine Science for containing important errors. This criticism, along with a leaked report by a government scientist in which he supported the case against shallow-water disposal, were taken up by Greenpeace in its campaign to prevent the sinking of the Brent Spar.

Brent Spar is a big cylindrical structure weighing 14,500 tonnes, made up of 7700 tonnes of steel and 6800 tonnes of haematite ballast embedded in concrete. The platform is 140 metres high, of which 30 metres are above water, and 20 metres in maximum diameter. According to Shell, the buoy contains a few dozen tonnes of toxic metals, several dozen tonnes of oily sludge and some mildly radioactive salts which have built up on its pipework and tank linings.

The bone of contention was the likely impact of the sinking of the Spar on the marine environment and, indirectly, through the food chain, on human life. The prevailing scientific view (reflected in the BPEO study) was that the environmental impact would be negligible and, at any rate, sinking the buoy in the Atlantic would indeed be the 'best *practicable* environmental option'. What would have been the likely effect of deep-sea disposal? *The Economist* (24 June 1995: 110–11) summarized the mainstream scientific view as follows:

> . . . [in the deep ocean] animal life is sparse, and only loosely connected to the main food chain. True, the buoy would have crushed some deep-sea inhabitants when it hit the bottom; the cloud of sediment raised by the impact would have smothered others. Yet having been stripped of most of its contents (including lightbulbs) by Shell, the Brent Spar contains only small quantities of pollutants: a residue of oil; perhaps 100 tonnes of sludge; some heavy metals; and some radioactive salts.
>
> In the still depths the pollutants might well have leaked out only slowly, perhaps too slowly to kill many more animals. The level of radioactivity would have been 'equivalent to what you're exposed to in any city with granite buildings', says Alasdair McIntyre of Aberdeen University . . . .

By contrast, Greenpeace, the most vociferous as well as active critic of off-shore disposal, took a sceptical view. Quoting from some scientific publi-

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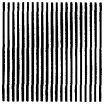
cations, its main argument was that not enough was known about the ocean to be able to predict with some measure of certainty the impact of the Spar's disposal. In her reply to Anthony Rice, a senior biologist at the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences, who had written in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (hereafter *THES*, 11 August 1995) arguing for the deep-sea disposal, Sue Mayer, the Director of Science at Greenpeace, remarked:

> No one, Mr Rice or Greenpeace, knows exactly what would happen if the Spar was dumped. Other scientists at the Scottish Association for Marine Science, for example, are much less sanguine about the dangers than Mr Rice. They have expressed 'broad agreement' with the arguments Greenpeace used to justify its action, and pointed to a series of deficiencies in Shell's scientific documents. They have pointed out that Rice's assumption that the deep seas will not be used for commercial fisheries is already incorrect in practice and that there are links in the food chain between deep water and shallow water organisms. They have also pointed to inadequacies in our knowledge of 'benthic storms' and how any dumped material will be dispersed.

Greenpeace was not only concerned about the Brent Spar per se, but also about the likely off-shore disposal of 440 platforms in the North Sea, several of which were due for decommissioning in the near future. Brent Spar was, for Greenpeace, a crucial test. Writing a few months after Shell's climbdown, Sue Mayer observed:

> The whole of the oil industry was watching and waiting. The Brent Spar was going to set a precedent for how other oil installations and possibly other waste could be disposed of. The real debate was about whether companies like Shell would have to take responsibility for their waste . . . To look at the impact of the Brent Spar in isolation makes no sense, scientific or otherwise. (*THES*, 25 August 1995)

In February 1995, the UK government granted Shell the permit to dispose of the Brent Spar in the north Atlantic. True to its tradition for spectacular happenings, Greenpeace decided in April 1995 to oppose actively the off-shore disposal of Brent Spar by occupying it. Greenpeace activists from the UK, Germany and The Netherlands began planning the occupation, which took place on 30 April. It was the start of an escalating, Europe-wide campaign which attracted considerable media attention. On 23 May, police and security men stormed Brent Spar and Shell regained control of it. A hide-and-seek game followed. On 7 June, five Greenpeace activists briefly reboarded the platform after it had been rigged with explosives for deep-sea sinking. Three days later, on 10 June, activists chained themselves to the platform's sea anchors in a last attempt to obstruct Spar's removal, but were thrown into the sea. As the platform was being towed from the North Sea to the Atlantic dumping site, followed somewhat spectacularly by Greenpeace ships and helicopters, Greenpeace managed, on 16 June, to land two activists on the platform. Three days later, two more activists were dropped on board.

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The timing of these events was ideal for Greenpeace's campaign: the occupation of the Brent Spar coincided with the fourth North Sea Conference, 8–9 June, attended by the environment ministers of North Sea countries. In that conference, not only was Brent Spar on the agenda, but the majority of participant countries adopted a recommendation against the off-shore disposal of Brent Spar and other decommissioned platforms. Prior to that, on 18 May, the European Parliament had adopted a similar resolution.

Meanwhile, the extensive media coverage had begun drawing attention to the controversy in other European countries. In Germany, a 10-day boycott of Shell's 1700 petrol stations was organized, cutting sales by up to 50 per cent; two petrol stations were fire-bombed and at another shots were fired. Consumer boycott spread in other countries such as Denmark and The Netherlands. Moreover, in addition to individual consumers, companies and public authorities entered the fray by either cancelling their contracts with Shell or threatening to do so (Grolin, 1997: 4–5). As the case attracted more publicity, governments and church groups joined the debate, taking Greenpeace's side. Chancellor Kohl told Prime Minister Major that stopping the dumping was 'not the looniness of a few Greens but a Europe-wide trend for the protection of our seas' (*THES*, 11 August 1995). Likewise, Anna Lindh, the Swedish Minister of the Environment, commented: 'The sea must not be used as a rubbish dump' (*THES*, 11 August 1995).

In the face of such strong opposition, Royal Dutch/Shell announced, on 20 June, after a meeting between the company's four top executives and the CEOs of the Shell subsidiaries in the EU countries whose governments had criticized Shell, that plans for the disposal of the Brent Spar in the north Atlantic would be called off. Dr Chris Fay, Chairman of Shell UK, announcing on 20 June the parent company's decision to climb down, acknowledged that strong public reactions throughout Northern Europe against the dumping had created an 'untenable position' (*Independent*, 21 June 1995) for European subsidiaries of Shell. Similarly, Peter Duncan, CEO of Shell Germany, said that the Group's decision reflected the fact that 'the planned deep-sea disposal could not be forced through against the resistance of the population, and especially the customers' (*Independent*, 22 June 1995).

Shell was puzzled at the ferocity of public reaction to its policy, given that what the company had done was, in the words of Peter Duncan, 'fully in accord with the British and in particular the international conventions' (*Independent*, 22 June 1995). As Dr Fay said: '[this is] the first example where governments have openly protested against an option which has been carried out in a lawful and proper manner' (*Independent*, 21 June 1995). The conflict was thought by Shell to be, in the words of John Wybrew, Shell UK's director of public affairs, 'an unusual clash between the head and the heart—a conflict in which scientific reason and careful judgement were set against the power of emotion, fear and even myth' (quoted in Grolin, 1997: 11).

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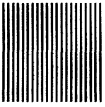
Greenpeace's victory over Shell was widely depicted in the UK and German press as a modern-day victory of David over Goliath. In an extensive article entitled 'David's Great Victory over Goliath', the *Independent* (21 June 1995) underscored the unevenness between the two organizations: 'On the face of it', it wrote, 'it seemed a massively uneven contest. The Royal Dutch/Shell Group had global sales of £84.3bn last year. It employs 106,000 people in more than 100 countries. Greenpeace had a global income of $131m last year, some 0.001 percent of Shell's. It employs about 1,000 people, and has offices in 30 countries.'

Following Shell's climb-down, the same newspaper praised Greenpeace in its leading article and drew attention to the fact that 'neither governments nor big business are strong enough to withstand a new phenomenon: an alliance of direct action with public opinion' (*Independent*, 21 June 1995). Even *The Economist*, not particularly sympathetic to Greenpeace's campaign, pointed out that, 'after Shell's climb-down' (the title of its leader), 'companies that choose to defy their consumers' political demands are placing their businesses in jeopardy . . . Tomorrow's successful company . . . will have to present itself more as if it were a person—as an intelligent actor, of upright character, that brings explicit moral judgments to bear in its dealings with its own employees and with the wider world' (*The Economist*, 24 June 1995: 15–16).

But it was not only praise and admiration that Greenpeace attracted from the Brent Spar affair. Its campaign over deep-sea disposal was thought by some to have been 'emotional' (*The Economist*, 24 June 1995: 110), 'a defeat for rational decision-making' (*The Economist*, 24 June 1995: 110), 'kneejerk populism' (*The Economist*, 24 June 1995: 16), 'irresponsible' (Anthony Rice writing in *THES*, 11 August 1995) and 'a pyrrhic victory' (Roger Hayes, director-general of the British Nuclear Industry Forum, writing in *THES*, 23 June 1995). Even the *Independent*, which throughout the Brent Spar conflict took a sympathetic stance towards Greenpeace, acknowledged in its leading article that Shell was right in wanting to dispose of the Brent Spar in deep sea (*Independent*, 21 June 1995). Eventually, after Shell's policy reversal, it was Greenpeace's turn to modify its stance, although it did not change its mind over the matter. A few months after the events of June 1995, Greenpeace admitted that its estimate that the Brent Spar contained 5000 tonnes of toxic sludge was based on flawed samplings (Grolin, 1997: 11).

Discussion

The Brent Spar controversy displays in an exemplary manner the contours of the postmodern setting[2] within which inter-organizational conflict now takes place. In this particular case, Shell was not competing with Greenpeace in the marketplace, but in the global *agora*. It was not, in other words, a competition as to who will sell more, but a contest as to

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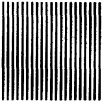
who will be more convincing. Influence was more important than competitiveness.

The object of dispute was a particular company decision with environmental implications, which might become policy for handling other similar matters in the future. The risks of a policy of dumping defunct oil platforms in the deep sea were not directly perceptible. It was the knowledge of expert systems which was drawn upon by both supporters and critics of off-shore dumping. The risks were largely artifacts of the particular assumptions and arguments of the scientific models used. Different assumptions made by the conflicting parties led to different probabilistic risk assessments. The conflict was, right from the beginning, mediated through interpretation and argument. However, whatever the conclusions drawn by each party, the uncertainty surrounding the dumping of Brent Spar was far from being dispelled. To the following questions, the answers were not very clear. What exactly will be the effects on marine life? How certain is it that the sea pollution effected by the dumping will not pass into the food chain? At the end of the day, how will the ocean behave? Even more, what will be the effect of the off-shore dumping of 50 other defunct oil platforms likely to be decommissioned in the near future?

Of course, it may be argued that risk assessments cannot but be probabilistic, and that one will never be able to be absolutely certain about the environmental impact of any policy pursued. While this is true, the built-in contestability of environmental impact assessments (EIA) also needs to be acknowledged. The modelling of an environmental problem, the assumptions upon which such modelling is based, and even the statistical measures used, are all judgemental (Freudenburg, 1996: 49; Kunreuther and Slovic, 1996: 119). The reason is that, as Freudenburg (1996: 48–9) argues, in an environmental controversy, the following three questions need to be answered. First, 'how safe is the solution adopted?' (a question about facts). Second, 'is it safe enough?' (a question about values). And, third, 'are we overlooking something?' (a question of blindspots).

Whereas conflicting claims exchanged between scientists over the sinking of Brent Spar aimed at settling the first question, there was a noticeable absence of social mechanisms for deliberating on the other two questions. In fact, one can safely assume that the strength of public reaction to Shell sprang not so much from the fact that consumers-cum-citizens had an informed view on the technicalities of the case, as from consumers' desire to uphold the *value*, best expressed by the Swedish Minister of the Environment, that 'the sea must not be used as a rubbish dump' (*THES*, 11 August 1995). John Vidal echoed a similar sentiment in the *Guardian* (22 June 1995) when he wrote: 'How can you tell 90 million Germans religiously to sort their rubbish and not expect them to cry foul when they see a global company fly-tipping its rubbish into the sea?' (see also Grolin, 1997: 9).

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Shell and the UK government, by defining the terms of the debate in narrowly techno-scientific terms, did not raise the question: 'are we over-looking something here?'. The question about blindspots—acknowledg-ing and debating the limitations of one's viewing position—is a particularly interesting one, for it can be answered only in a reflexive manner by drawing into the debate those organizations whose raison d'etre leads them to take environmental positions radically different from one's own. Shell had not realized before the dispute broke out what it did realize after it reversed its decision: the significance of extensive consul-tations with interested parties. Admittedly, prior to submitting its pro-posal for deep-sea disposal to the UK government in October 1994, Shell consulted those explicitly required by the British Petroleum Act of 1987, namely Scottish fishery organizations and British Telecom, but it made no effort to elicit the views of organizations such as the Scottish Association for Marine Science and Greenpeace which had expressed grave concerns about Shell's plans. It was only after the events of June 1995 that Shell initiated 'The Brent Spar Dialogue Process' and, in its attempt to review its disposal options, it made it one of its prime concerns to 'ensure that the proposed BPEO carries the wide support of stakeholders in general' (Shell UK, quoted in Grolin, 1997: 14).

As argued earlier, the centrality of risks in late modern societies turns the latter from economies of material production to economies of signs. Shell is not only in the oil business; it is also involved in the systematic production of risks associated with its productive activities. When the production of risks comes to dominate wealth production, as it did with the decision to dispose of the Brent Spar in the sea, the field in which an organization like Shell operates is no longer conventionally economic, but symbolic.

In a symbolic field, scientific rationality does not reign supreme: given the inherently value-laden character of modern risks, several other interested parties may be drawn into the debate. It is in this sense that 'the invasion of ecology into the economy opens it to politics' (Beck, 1997: 59), and fundamental questions about substantive rationality—about what constitutes 'the good life'—gain a fresh impetus (Wallerstein, 1997: 14). The systematic production of risk brings home the point that corpor-ate decisions are not as value-free or apolitical as was once thought but, rather, society, being seriously affected by such decisions, ought to have a say in what is being decided. Hence the perennial questions, long sup-pressed in the business world, come to the fore more pressingly than ever. How should we live? How should we relate to one another (born and unborn) and to nature? (Jamieson, 1992; Wallerstein, 1997). Consequently, politics, understood in its original meaning, namely as the handling of uncertainty through collective deliberation (Castoriadis, 1991: 104; Giddens, 1994: 15–16, 104–33), becomes an intrinsic feature of the reflexive, risk society (Beck, 1992, 1994, 1996).

In a symbolic field of interaction, symbolic capital is, by definition,
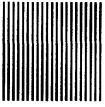
extremely important. Like several others INGOs, Greenpeace, in contrast with Shell, has had plenty of it (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989; Eder, 1996; Toulmin, 1990: 197). In its 20-odd years of operation, Greenpeace has been defending consistently and often victoriously the cause of the environment against 'greedy' corporations and governments. A few spectacular feats, such as sailing into the atomic fallout zone off Murouroa and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*, have helped it consolidate its reputation (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989: 107). Its 'no companies, no governments' funding policy has further increased its image as an independent (and therefore morally authoritative) defender of Mother Earth. The spread of its influence is indexed by the significant increase of its membership, to include in 1994 around three million people, in 30 countries. Considering also the centrality of environmental values in late modern public discourse, it is not surprising why Greenpeace's campaign was able to convince so many people in Northern Europe, a region traditionally more sensitive than others to environmental issues.

In contrast, Shell, being an oil company, was tainted with the image of greed and exploitation which has tended to accompany oil multinationals (Sampson, 1975). Although it is credited with being a far-sighted organization (*The Economist*, 24 June 1995; Ketola, 1993), it has not been easy for Shell to forsake the environmental stigma that has historically been attached to 'the Seven Sisters'. Several well publicized cases of oil leakage in the sea, including the particularly nasty damage caused by *Exxon Valdez*, and the stigma associated with certain technologies and products such as hazardous waste (Gregory et al., 1995; Kasperson and Kasperson, 1996: 99–100), have made oil companies not particularly trusted when it comes to their environmental credentials; hence, their symbolic capital tends to be low.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, the issue of trust assumes great significance in late modernity. Drawing on expert systems implies an attitude of trust in the knowledge claims incorporated in them; such trust is related to both ignorance and absence in time and space. The disembedded knowledge of expert systems, especially knowledge as technical and remote from daily life as that associated with modern risks, cannot be drawn upon unless it is also expected to be credible. It is perhaps considerations like these that prompted Freudenburg (1996: 53) to argue that 'we [scientists] are in effect trustees for something more important than money. We are trustees for the credibility of science and technology.' Likewise, any business organization is a trustee for something more important than wealth: it is a trustee for the credibility of its industry and even of business as a whole. When it comes to risks, trust is even more important for the stakes are especially high (Leiss, 1996: 89–90; Slovic, 1993). The not-so-brilliant environmental record of the oil industry, in combination with the stigma associated with its products and its waste, has tended to compromise the credibility of its environmental messages. This is not only a matter of good communication practices. It has been found that, even

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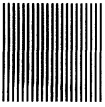
when risk communication is good, its effectiveness may be limited because of lack of trust by the public in the message source (Slovic and MacGregor, quoted in Leiss, 1996: 89).

It is interesting, however, that the issue of trust hardly ever came up in the Brent Spar debate. Influential printed media in Britain praised Shell's technical analyses and condemned Greenpeace's 'irresponsibility', without ever considering how credibility and trust could have been better elicited by Shell. The uncertainty surrounding the sinking of Brent Spar was seen as a 'management problem'—a technical problem to be fixed via more information and better scientific argument (Jamieson, 1992: 142–6). However, as Jamieson (1996: 37–9; Herrick and Jamieson, 1995) convincingly argues, uncertainty is not a merely technical matter but a socially constructed phenomenon (Stallings, 1995): uncertainty arises when the parties involved in a debate or transaction no longer take its context for granted. For every interaction to be carried out in a reasonably certain manner, it presupposes a background knowledge which is tacitly accepted by the interactants. It is only when such background knowledge is contested (no longer trusted) that uncertainty increases. Reducing uncertainty, therefore, in an environmental dispute is not a narrowly scientific matter, but a broadly social issue (Hellstrom and Jacob, 1996). As Jamieson (1996: 43) concludes, 'many of our problems about risk are deeply cultural and cannot be overcome simply by the application of more and better science'.

What, however, turned the Brent Spar controversy into something of a real-life drama, witnessed by millions of people around the world, was its extensive media coverage. Whereas Shell was quietly planning the disposal of the defunct oil platform in close cooperation with the UK government, Greenpeace's intervention turned what hitherto was Shell's private matter into a public matter, through making it a public spectacle. Through its successive occupations of the Brent Spar, its real-life theatre whereby Greenpeace helicopters and ships were pursuing the Brent Spar on its final journey to the dump site in the north Atlantic, and its successful efforts to make the dumping of Brent Spar an issue for Northern European governments and consumers alike, Greenpeace ensured that it remained in the news all over Europe.

In other words, taking advantage of the media coverage, Greenpeace was staging media events for the distant public—it was action at a distance par excellence. Through its actions, the public was kept in touch with what 'was going on'; the TV cameras were the public's 'eyes' in the North Sea. Notice, however, the inverted commas: that what 'was going on' was reflexively being shaped by Greenpeace. The latter's media events were staged with the knowledge that the entire world had its eyes on them—Greenpeace was watching that it was being watched, and acted accordingly. The confrontation in the North Sea did not follow its own 'independent' course, but developed the way it did as a result of the fact that it was under the public gaze. In that sense, one might argue, echoing

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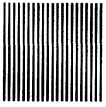
Baudrillard's (1991) provocative argument about the Gulf War, that the whole conflict was a staged event in which the stage was not so much in the North Sea as on the television screen (Woolley, 1992: 197). The representation of events overtook the events; images of conflict became the conflict (Virilio, 1989: 1)

However, all Greenpeace's efforts might have been wasted had its action-at-a-distance not been reciprocated by the public's own action-at-a-distance. This is what Thompson (1995: 109) calls 'responsive action in distant contexts', which was discussed earlier. Mediated quasi-interaction effected through the television gives rise to discursive elaboration: it enables recipients to talk about and comment upon media messages, and draw into the debate even people who did not themselves watch the messages broadcast. This is an important feature of televisual quasi-interaction for it highlights the reception of symbolic forms as an essentially hermeneutic act: '[it] involves the contextualized and creative process of interpretation in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of the messages they receive' (Thompson, 1995: 8). As mentioned earlier, one such resource in late modernity is the ideology of environmentalism (Eder, 1996); another is the symbolic capital organizations have—high in Greenpeace's case, low in the case of Shell. Discursive elaboration, in turn, may lead recipients to undertake concerted forms of responsive action.

Indeed, this is what happened in the Brent Spar controversy. The North Sea events relayed via (as well as shaped by) the television were widely interpreted as yet another instance of a greedy oil multinational behaving as though the world was its oyster. A leading article in the *Independent* (21 June 1995, the day after Shell reversed its decision) captured the public mood: 'Popular opinion has ruled that, whatever destruction may be wrought elsewhere, the oceans cannot simply be regarded as waste disposal sinks.' The concerted responsive action took the form of consumer boycott against Shell's petrol stations in Germany and elsewhere in northern Europe. Shell started feeling the pinch through a steep reduction in sales. More important, its image was being severely tainted. In Germany, the boycott was supported by the majority of the population; gradually, not only politicians from all the main political parties, but even the Church, supported the boycott (*Independent*, 22 June 1995). The momentum of the public reaction reached its peak when the governments of Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark made clear their support for Greenpeace's stance.

Thus, by providing individuals with images of reflexively shaped events taking place in distant locales, the media create a public space, in which the actions and reactions of a multitude of actors, albeit located in different places, are linked together in time, constituting concerted forms of responsive action. Such action transcends the boundaries of nation states and, as the dramatic events of 1989 have shown, may constitute a formidable force for change. In a reflexive social order, in which insti-

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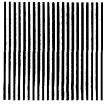
tutional accountability is highly valued, and in an economy increasingly dominated by signs (especially risks), whose interpretation is bound to be open-ended and contested, instant mediated communication makes possible action at a distance, with large-scale as well as unpredictable consequences.

Of course, nobody could have foreseen the unfolding of the controversy in the North Sea—disputes of that kind are inevitably shaped by unforeseeable contingencies. Since the risk society is rich in arguments and direct political action (what Beck calls 'subpolitics'—politics from below), a widening of the debate to include multiple rationalities and the politicization of the issues at hand is to be expected. However, the process of reception, appropriation and discursive elaboration of symbolic forms is bound to be indeterminate. As Stehr (1994: 236), Beck et al. (1994), and Giddens (1991, 1994) have noted, uncertainty, fragility and unpredictability are inherent features of knowledge-based societies in a way in which they never were for industrial societies. In such a context, influence, symbolic power and political mobilization assume great importance.

Conclusions

My purpose in this paper has been to explain what made the victory of Greenpeace over Shell in the North Sea, June 1995, possible. I have not dealt here with how Shell's decision to sink Brent Spar in the deep sea came about, nor did I seek to explore the implications of the conflict for corporate management. I have rather taken the conflict between these two organizations as exemplifying a broader theme, namely the advantage enjoyed by certain small organizations in late modernity. Although one cannot, of course, predict the outcome of similar conflicts in the future, our understanding of power differences and the way they are brought to bear upon a course of events needs revising, to take into account the conditions of late modernity. I have argued here that organizations increasingly operate in a new environment whose main features are the following four (see Figure 2).

First, accentuating the modern trend towards the abstraction and subsequent recombination of time and space, late modernity amplifies the uniquely modern capacity for action at a distance to an unprecedented degree. Moreover, absence in time and space as well as ignorance highlight the importance of trust in the activities of social systems.

Second, this tendency is further enhanced via the mass media, especially television. Mediated communication extends the availability of symbolic forms across time and place, thus creating a public space in which actors situated in distant locales are linked. Televisual quasi-interaction, in particular, makes possible acting for distant others (through creating media events), and facilitates concerted responsive action by distant recipients.

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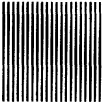
Third, economies in late modernity are increasingly economies of signs, especially risks. Modern risks are perceived through scientific theorizing and are mediated through argument. In an economy of signs, interpretation is clearly important and, therefore, the quest for symbolic power (legitimacy) is extremely significant.

And, fourth, risks presuppose normative criteria for their assessment, thus drawing multiple social rationalities and actors into the debate, and making possible the politicization of seemingly technical issues. The economy of signs is an intensely reflexive economy in which tradition loses its taken-for-granted status, while actors' behaviour is continuously revised in the light of new information and the emergence of new values. Such a value in late modernity is environmentalism, aggressively championed by, among others, certain INGOs.

Within a semiotic environment, it is possible for an INGO David to be victorious over a multinational Goliath. When risks are the focus of inter-organizational conflict (as is often the case in the risk society), the symbolic capital held by the actors involved is important. This is particularly so at a time when environmentalism is part of the public discourse in late modern societies. Tainted with the largely negative image of being a greedy oil multinational, Shell's symbolic capital was low. Perceived as a small but morally authoritative defender of the environment, Greenpeace's symbolic capital was high.

Moreover, given that risk assessment is an inherently ambiguous and subjective process, mediated through argument, the debate over risk consequences tends to be open-ended and inclusive (scientific arguments by themselves are of limited effectiveness). Acceptance of risks by the public implies the acceptance of certain values, thus turning the question of risks into a wider social-cum-political issue; as a result, the public may be drawn into the debate. The perceptibility of modern risks through, mainly, the claims of expert-systems specialists, implies that public trust needs to be won by those advancing such claims. In this case, there was a notable lack of sensitivity by Shell and the UK government concerning the establishment of mechanisms for eliciting trust for the proposed solution. Shell insisted on a narrow technical definition of the problem, while those opposing its decision were implicitly pointing at the values underlying it. Sticking to its technical definition, Shell made sense of the conflict in terms of 'reason' against 'emotion', and 'head' versus the 'heart', failing to see the conflict as the clash of two rationalities, i.e. the instrumental, techno-scientific rationality espoused by Shell versus the morally based common-sense rationality espoused by the public (Grolin, 1997: 11).

Modern risks are deeply political issues insofar as they transcend a merely technical perspective to include values and ethics. By virtue of being political issues, modern risks are a source of concern and a subject of debate for the informed public (Beck, 1994). The extended availability of symbolic forms made possible by the mass media, especially tele-

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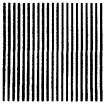
vision, is capable of drawing large portions of the public into an environmental dispute, circumventing the traditional institutions of representative democracy; direct political intervention by individuals and the civil society at large, as well as the political use of consumer power are not only possible but occasionally decisive. Formal political institutions tend to lose their quasi-exclusive right to define what is 'in the public interest' and, instead, the latter may be defined by 'a global nexus of responsibility' (Beck, 1997: 64), including NGOs, citizens' groups and individual consumers.

Greenpeace turned out to be a crucial node in such a nexus, challenging the decision made by the old 'progress coalition' (i.e. corporations and governments). Greenpeace successfully assumed the role of being the public's eyes, mind and heart in the North Sea, and staged spectacular media events to that effect. At the same time, the public reciprocated: the discursive elaboration of televisual images relayed from the North Sea made possible a concerted public response, which took the form of a consumer boycott and political pressure on North European governments to condemn Shell's dumping policy. A global action network proved stronger than a state–corporate alliance.

To conclude, late modernity gives rise to a semiotic business environment in which traditionally defined concepts of size and power do not always apply. On the TV screen, Shell does not necessarily appear more powerful than Greenpeace; on the contrary, it may well appear less persuasive and, therefore, less influential. In the risk societies of late modernity, the marketplace coexists side by side with a global political *agora*: a reflexive public space of debate, conflict and deliberation in which symbolic capital and persuasive arguments count as much as market share, and sometimes even more. In such a type of society, winning the argument can be at least as important as securing a competitive advantage; influence can be more important than force; and moral authority can be more significant than financial strength. Notice, however, the caveat: late modernity does not entail the developments just mentioned, but makes them *possible*. I hope that my analysis of the victory of Greenpeace over Shell in the North Sea has demonstrated the plausibility of my thesis.

Notes

1 The following sources have been drawn upon for the writing of this case study: the *Independent*: 21 June 1995, 22 June 1995, 23 June 1995, 4 July 1995, 11 July 1995, 29 August 1995; *The Economist*: 24 June 1995 (pp. 15–16, 79–80, 110–11), 19 August 1995 (pp. 65–6), 20 July 1996 (pp. 17–18, 63–4); *The Times*

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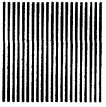
Higher Education Supplement: 11 August 1995, 25 August 1995, 31 May 1996; *Shell UK*: http://www.shellexpro.brentspar.c

2   The terms 'late modernity' and 'postmodernity', as well as 'late modern' and 'postmodern' are used interchangeably here (see Giddens, 1990: 43–54, 163–73; Lash and Urry, 1994).

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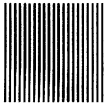
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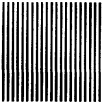
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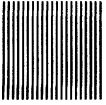
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