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Book Review : Social and Environmental Accounting

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Book Review : Social and Environmental Accounting

Abstract
This edited 4 volume set comprises a selection of published papers in the field of social and environmental accounting, and is the latest series of books to emerge from the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research (CSEAR) at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. The editors are: Rob Gray, Professor of Social and Environment Accounting and Director of CSEAR; Jan Bebbington, Professor of Accounting and Sustainable Development and Director of the St Andrews Sustainability Institute; and Sue Gray, Research Fellow and Administrator of CSEAR. The books trace 40 years of development of social and environmental accounting (SEA) through the reproduction of 80 key articles across the four volumes. The publication coincides with concerns and reporting challenges driven largely by the increase in size and influence of the corporate entity and global capitalism (Gray, Bebbington & Gray 2010). The editors intertwine two strands of thought: the need for corporations to expand the scope of responsibility and accountability relationships; and the consideration of sustainability in the face of environmental uncertainty.

Keywords
Social and environmental accounting; SEA; Book reviews

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Book Review

Gray, R, Bebbington, J & Gray, S (eds.) 2010 *Social and Environmental Accounting* Sage, London.

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This edited 4 volume set comprises a selection of published papers in the field of social and environmental accounting, and is the latest series of books to emerge from the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research (CSEAR) at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. The editors are: Rob Gray, Professor of Social and Environment Accounting and Director of CSEAR; Jan Bebbington, Professor of Accounting and Sustainable Development and Director of the St Andrews Sustainability Institute; and Sue Gray, Research Fellow and Administrator of CSEAR. The books trace 40 years of development of social and environmental accounting (SEA) through the reproduction of 80 key articles across the four volumes. The publication coincides with concerns and reporting challenges driven largely by the increase in size and influence of the corporate entity and global capitalism (Gray, Bebbington & Gray 2010). The editors intertwine two strands of thought: the need for corporations to expand the scope of responsibility and accountability relationships; and the consideration of sustainability in the face of environmental uncertainty.

This series begins by introducing an eclectic definition of SEA as "the universe of all accountings" that embraces a wide range of genres, methodologies, narratives, styles and authorships to facilitate communication between an organisation and some of its stakeholders (Gray, Bebbington & Gray 2010, p.xxii). The authors posit a rhetorical question to acknowledge three reasons for the existence of SEA: firstly, it has an enabling potential through an ability to influence management attitudes and behaviour; secondly, it increases organisational accountability by increasing the transparency of operations and their impact on society; and finally, it has emancipatory potential through the identification and exposure of conflicts between society, organisations and efficient markets.

Each volume presents a chronology of issues and catalogues the problematisation of SEA and accountability using four distinct themes further divided into sub-themes. The first volume, *Laying Foundations*, covers the period from the early 1970s through to 1990. These foundations represent a dynamic process with an acknowledgement that the ideas and debates stemming from earlier works still resonate within 21st century SEA. The volume is divided into five sub-sections. The first section problematises mainstream accounting in the 1960s and 1970s as hindering attempts to provide social accounts or accountability. Although the issues of objectivity, measurement, independence and the role of accounting as a provider of information for decision-making are all questioned, an underlying theme is still the enabling role for accountants. The next section moves into the specific area of employees and employment and how to incorporate the value of people to an organisation. The third section introduces the notion of the natural environment, referred to as the physical environment and ecology. These papers privilege the anthropocentric view of nature and present the natural environment as existing to optimise human welfare.

The fourth section presents early attempts to both theorise SEA and propose a research agenda to identify gaps in corporate social disclosures by organisations. The last paper presages the adoption of agency theory as an explanation of SEA. The problematisation of accounting and its essential role or function provides a segue to the final section. The paper *Opening up Issues* debunks the assumptions of neo-classical economics such as ahistoricity, self-interested wealth maximisation and externalities. As an alternative, it also introduces the notions of sustainability, the historical socio-political context, and public interest as a call for different directions for future research. In particular, the authors advocate broadening of scope and definition of social disclosures to exploit the plethora of corporate data that is available to researchers.

Volume II, *Developing the Field*, continues the theme of identifying the development of SEA, in particular: the methods of enquiry adopted; the theoretical explanations of SEA; and the research sites. The majority of this work is situated in the 1990s and involves corporate SEA, primarily as it is practised and researched in developed countries. The first section identifies the development of approaches to SEA based on a decision-usefulness framework (similar to that used by financial accounting). This is extended to encompass an accountability framework from a broader political economy perspective. These early attempts focus on voluntary disclosures in annual reports within a theoretical lens of legitimacy and stakeholder theory. Christi Lindblom's (1993) seminal "relevant publics" paper is featured in this section and will no doubt provide an avenue for SEA researchers and scholars to access this oft-cited paper.

With the development of the corporate stand-alone SEA reports, new fields of enquiry are considered in the second section. The notion of legitimation, using the theoretical lens of structuration and Laughlin's organisational change (Habermas), to understand management behaviour from interview data is considered to extend the insights from legitimacy theory. While the preceding sections focus on external disclosure, the third section introduces SEA from an internal reporting perspective, including ethical investment, cost allocation and environmental management systems. The final sections focus on two diverse methods of methodology and research design. They revisit the more mainstream approach of statistical research (using market indicators as a proxy for stakeholder impact), using accountability frameworks and stakeholder theory from a positivist stance. The development of the field and the use of different methodologies, research questions, methods and theoretical lenses is an important process, and this volume concludes by re-introducing qualitative studies using discourse analysis and alternate ideological frames that coincide with the move to discrete social disclosures.

Volume III, *Controversies and Conflicts*, revisits the same period as Volumes I & II, and by tracing a growing 'background' debate it presents challenges, controversies and conflicts for SEA. As a critique of the neo-classical theoretical underpinnings of SEA, these early debates bring the notions of decision-usefulness and 'truth' in accounting into question. The following section introduces subjective narratives from deep ecology and feminist perspectives that question whether accounting could ever be enabling for the environment. This section concludes with the suggestions for 'new accountings' built on different underlying assumptions. Attempts to theorise the practice of social and environmental disclosures through discourse theory provide an alternative to the more managerialist attempts by accounting researchers. This volume concludes by further extending the critique of discourse and language as an area for SEA researchers.

Volume IV, *Practices, Initiatives and Possibilities*, presents the new challenge of operationalising the notion of sustainability as a construct for SEA. With a shift in emphasis towards intergenerational equity, this volume proposes new ways of defining and reconceptualising the entity as a requirement for the future relevance of SEA. The narrow legal and economic abstractions of the entity are re-imagined to encompass stakeholders and natural assets and, by moving beyond the corporate entity, to include NGOs and the public sector as sites of investigation. Anthropocentrism and business-as-usual approaches to SEA are challenged in light of new approaches to engagement with students and education and a carbon-constrained economy. The move to sustainability has provided opportunities for SEA researchers to develop new accounts, new media and communication possibilities and new contexts.

This four volume series is relatively expensive and beyond the means of many academics, researchers and students for their personal library. However, I would suggest that institutions purchase these books for their department or university library as a resource. In particular, students doing either coursework or research in social and environmental accounting will find this an invaluable resource as a foundation for examining the prior literature in their field of inquiry.

References

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Lindblom, C 1993, "The Implication of Organisational Legitimacy for Corporate Social Performance and Disclosure", paper presented at the *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Conference, New York, April.