Our starting point for this paper is a widespread perception that in the world of globalization, a single model derived from the world of business has been extended to nation states as well, eroding previous notions of state sovereignty and creating roles and structures in the running of states that are explicitly based on current business practices. To illustrate this perception we quote from an article by the Mexican journalist Carlos Fazio about a major project in Mexico, the ‘Plan Puebla-Panama’:

- ‘It will convert the south-east into a corridor of sweatshops in the service of US multinationals.
- ‘With the Plan Puebla-Panama, the isthmus of Tehuantepec, magnet for super-exploitation.
- ‘Fox fits the profile of the ‘Country Managers’; he does not reject his class position’
- (La Jornada Sunday 29 July, 2001)

Our aim is to explore some of the issues raised by this kind of claim, focused on the nation, Mexico, and the plan, the Plan Puebla-Panamá, referred to by Fazio. Our primary concern is with issues to do with discourse and discourse analysis as they apply to
institutions and organizations in the new environment created by the processes of globalization. In what senses (if any), for instance, is the discourse of the Plan affected by or an instance of a ‘discourse of multinationalism’, or of ‘management discourse’? What forms of discourse, and discourse analysis, may provide insight into the processes at work in this instance and therefore, by extension, in other similar instances?

**Understanding discourse**

We start our inquiry far from Mexico, trying to specify what are some of the characteristics of ‘management (or business) discourse’ in order to see whether or how far they are present in the discourses that surround the Plan. We are aware that ‘discourse’ is understood in importantly different ways in the literature. We will draw on two main senses. Foucault’s influential usage (1971) sees a ‘discourse’ as a regime which constrains the forms and contents of specific acts of communication, who can say what to whom, and the boundaries of what can count as ‘truth’ or ‘sense’ for that community. This usage is similar to the ideas of Kuhn on ‘paradigms’ (1968), a term that has gained wide acceptance in the world of business. We will refer to discourse in this sense as ‘discourse/paradigm’ or D/P.

But discourses can also refer to the products of a D/P, and since these also exist and have very great importance, theoretically and practically, we will use the word in that sense. The plurality of discourses and genres in this sense is important for a real-life analysis, since it is immediately evident to inspection that many kinds of text circulate even in the world of business, framed differently for different kinds of audience. No competent PR office would send out the unedited memos of the CEO to the general public. Contradiction between some forms of discourse and others is not an occasional and accidental phenomenon, but the contrary: it is systematic, functional and ubiquitous. Any analysis which fails to recognize this basic fact will be unable to distinguish between a basic difference in D/Ps, and the differences and contradictions which are part of everyday discursive life.

As an organizing concept to account for this unity in diversity, we draw on the Social Semiotics theory of ideological complexes, which are

> ‘a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interests, or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests.’ Hodge & Kress 1988:3

‘Ideology’ in this sense, including its explicit concern with issues of power and politics, is useful to complement the other two terms, since in common parlance what we term a D/P is often referred to as an ideology, and normally does indeed include a political agenda as the grounds of its rules and effects.

We also need to unpack our understanding of ‘management’ and ‘business’, which we have yoked together in the above phrase. We join them together because in the dominant paradigm of management discourse the two are almost equivalent, since management is taken to refer mainly to business organizations. However, there are many kinds of organization, and many appropriate models for running them. Those differences are what come to attention when the assumptions and practices of management of business organizations are transferred without change to other forms of organization,
such as nation states. We are concerned, then, with the dominant discourse of management found within the world of business today.

**Business discourse and the linear mind**

As a way of anchoring this discussion in concrete instances, we take *International Business – The Challenge of Global Competition*, by Donald Ball et al., a McGraw Hill text book currently being used to educate the new generation of managers. We use the 2004 edition, the 9th, of this successful and widely used book.

In this text, there are 3 related features which distinguish it from texts in other humanities and social sciences areas: tables, consisting of ranked items in a list; figures, consisting of circles, labeled and segmented, linked by lines or arrows, or boxes in similar structures; and directories, listing items under alphabetic or other headings. We will take the first, the lists, as an exemplary form, since they are frequent as well as marked.

At the beginning of the book, a table sets the scene: a consolidated list of 100 nations or multinational corporations (MNCs), ranked in order of GDP or total sales in 2000. (Ball et al 2004:14-15) In this list, the top 20 entities are all nation states. USA is of course no. 1, with more than double the amount of no. 2, Japan. Mexico comes in at no 10, with 1/17th of the US figure. Corporations begin at no. 21, with Walmart at 1/34th of the US figure. The rest of the list is a perfect power law curve, with a steep head, and a long tail, which includes 53 MNCs over-all, over half the entities in the top 100.

This list is not original to this book. It puts together two other, less controversial lists, World Bank estimates of GDP and Fortune Global 500’s list of corporations ranked by annual sales. But Ball et al are ambivalent about this list. On the one hand they use it to show how significant multinational (or ‘transnational’) corporations have become, which is one of their themes. But they are also concerned that ‘there are still critics of large global firms who cite such statistics’ (2004:13), so they point out that GDP and total sales are not strictly comparable, because GDP is concerned only with value added, whereas total sales measures a single variable. The figures, then, are inflated, and recalculated in this way only 37 of the top performers were multinationals.

Revealingly, this change affects only the details, throwing into greater relief the unchallenged assumptions behind the process, and the fact that they are indeed unchallenged. These are the expression of what we have termed the D/P.

Lists like this play a powerful role in the ‘discourse’ or ‘paradigm’ of business. At their heart is a paradigm-sustaining faith in one dimensional linear thinking: that is, the assumption (required for members of the discursive community, the paradigm) that the swirling, chaotic, multidimensional reality of the world can be better understood in the form of a list creating a rank through application of a single criteria or dimension. Note that Ball et al’s criticism of the original list was not on the grounds that such lists are misleading per se, but because the criterion was not strict and consistent across the data. With that correction, the list is able to be extended to cover 100 items, or theoretically more, with no reduction in its explanatory power.

The construction of such a list is intended to strip off from the objects being surveyed all qualities other than the single criterion by which they are being ranked: including all political, social, cultural, environmental qualities and relations. All of these could figure in other lists. What the list-method cannot cope with is the idea of interacting variables, corresponding to a non-linear reality. The method corresponds to a world in
which, in Marx’s old-fashioned terms, all relations have been reduced to the ‘cash nexus’. In the new fashioned terms of modern business, this is the famous ‘bottom line’.

The list does not simply describe, it constructs a version of reality which corresponds to the terms of its description. In this case, nations and corporations are constructed as the same kind of thing, MNCs becoming ‘Nationoids’ and nations becoming ‘Corporoids’: that is, nations understood as if they were (from this point of view) no different from MNCs, and MNCs on this scale no different from nations.

Some theorists (including Kuhn and Foucault) have given the impression that the power of paradigms or discourses to determine how ‘reality’ is constructed and managed is very great, in ‘normal’ times. We instead emphasise that such determinism was only ever partial even in the most ‘normal’ of times, (which have never ‘normally’ been entirely normal) and it is less likely in the world today. We do not now live in ‘normal’ times. The world of globalization is increasingly recognized as turbulent, chaotic and unpredictable, and in order to understand it we draw on ideas from chaos theory (see Coronado & Hodge forthcoming). In these terms, we presume that a linear discourse such as the list mentality will not be able to construct a fully linear reality, but on the contrary it will interact unpredictably with a chaotic, multi-dimensional world in a dialogic interaction which will produce various changes, inversions and contradictions.

The dialogue between corporoids and nationoids

The Consolidated List represents the world as seen from the perspective of the Business D/P, in which nations are understood purely as economic agents, and some companies are represented as close to equals to regular nations. That is not how most of the citizens of these nations see their nation, but insofar as the leaders of the country construct the world in these terms, they will see and act on their nation accordingly. Yet many basic differences will remain, too great to be ignored, interacting with the one-dimensionality of the list mentality. The leadership may view their role as that of a manager, a Chief Executive, not an owner, but with delegated power to sell or acquire assets in a common market place. The national assets become potential commodities, and potential buyers can be drawn from anywhere, either within other ‘sovereign’ nations or from nationoids, large transnational organizations. In such a trade, a nation (such as Mexico) can see itself as competing with other similar nations (corporoids) to achieve sales with MCNs, this new, more powerful kind of client.

Since they seek to be attractive to these prospective buyers, they will try to define their commodities in the appropriate terms. That is, they enter into a dialogic relation with these nationoids, internalizing the values, learning ‘the language’ (which in this case is equivalent to the discursive conditions of the exchange). The nationoids likewise internalize and learn to speak the discourse and values of a nation state, expressing concern for the national good and public benefits of their operations. This is in broad terms the process through which the values and assumptions of another can become part of the discourse of the first party: at first consciously and with full intent, but later becoming internalized to a degree that may not always be or need to be conscious.

In these terms there are features of business discourse that are likely to be known by and part of the way of thinking of Chief Executives as heads of state (for these purposes we are not assuming that a single individual in a government has this function, the President alone, but rather the Executive Level as a whole). In practice, Mexico’s President Fox is likely to have had the same training in business management as a top
executive in USA companies, since for a term he was Manager of Coca-Cola in Mexico. The two preceding Presidents, Salinas and Zedillo, studied business management in USA institutions. From the point of view of a multinational corporation, the questions expressing their specific interests are posed under the category of ‘assessing countries’ attractiveness’. Lasserre’s introductory text on *Global Strategic Management* (2003) sums up the basic questions under two headings: ‘market and industry opportunities’ and ‘country risks’. He then produces a grid with 4 cells, or quadrants, to reflect these variables. High attractiveness is high returns and low risk. Low attractiveness is low returns and high risk. The other two quadrants are high return but high risk, or low return but low risk (2003:157).

This device produces a two-dimensional space, in which the axes are continua (producing multiple precise positions) but also are divided into binaries to form quadrants. Values in the space are organized by the relationship to a single diagonal, from bottom left to top right, which gives positive value (high return, low risk) and negative value (low return, high risk). In these terms, the strategy for choice (for potential investors) is to locate a country in relation to a quadrant. The strategy for a country (corporoid), then, is to shift the perception (and perhaps the reality) of the country along the direction of the diagonal: higher return AND lower risk.

Two axis, two-valued grids are common at successive stages of this decision (and construction) process. For instance, resources include ‘human resources’, where the two qualities, cost of labour and quality of labour, are mapped on a grid for many countries, including Mexico (2003:171). Mexico is in the bottom left hand quadrant, with low costs and low skills. But in this case, this quadrant is not undesirable. On the contrary, all the countries in this quadrant are attractive as EPZs, (Export Processing Zones), where low technological skills are not an issue for global corporations who distribute the different aspects of the total process across different regions of the world. This quadrant, then, identifies to interested MNCs the regions that would qualify as EPZs. At the same time it identifies to a country within this quadrant who are its competitors, against whom it must position itself. It also gives an approximate indication of how to maximize its competitive advantage, by increasing skill levels and decreasing labour costs as far as possible.

The other crucial dimension is risk, which is categorized under different headings, usually including political and economic risk Lasserre lists a large number of sources of risk assessment, which include a different range of factors but reduce them to a single value, to complete the first diagram: opportunity balanced against risk.

At one level, this analysis is commonplace for the world of business. That is precisely the point. When the same framework comes back down the telescope, reflecting back and creating the same version of the world from a reality that is differently constituted and also previously understood in terms of a different paradigm, then the conditions are set up for a complex discursive situation, in which the form, presence and effects of the ‘business paradigm’ on political discourse are unpredictable yet important.

**Mexico doing business in the Plan Puebla-Panama**

In the rest of this presentation we will use the preceding framework to focus on a single text, *PLAN PUEBLA PANAMA Resumen y Gráficos*, the ‘Executive summary’ document released by the President’s office and circulated for discussion in 2001 (hereinafter PPP). It is thus a public document, an important one, yet in many respects insufficient as a direct reflection of ‘how the Government thought’. That will be precisely
our focus of interest; we use the text as evidence of discursive forms, not of political or economic truths or intentions.

The document is organized under 6 headings: Presentation; Vision; Mission; Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Threats, (a SWOT analysis); Objectives; Strategies. Stylistically, headings 2-4 are normally found in texts in the world of business, where they are standard forms. They are not normally found in political discourse. In this way, the form is signaling a different genre which carries along with it different expectations of a different kind of readership. Yet the first section, ‘presentation’, contains a 5 page argument about Mexico, the south of Mexico and the global world that has the form of a political speech, and is in fact close in form and content to the political platform on which Fox was elected.

But there are many ways in which this is an aberrant form of the genre it seems to represent. For instance, the ‘Vision’ statement of a corporation normally has as its agent the corporation itself, as expressed by its leaders. This ‘vision’ has no stated agent or institutional context. It is the Plan which seems to have the vision which is itself: ‘The Plan Puebla Panamá is an integrated plan of great vision and for the long term, to achieve () structural change’ (2001:7) Where the form speaks to the discourses of business, the content seems not to address this class of reader, but rather an audience concerned exclusively with key issues in Mexico and the region. The vision is concerned with the construction of a ‘macro region’, which will offer ‘substantial benefits’ to Mexico and Central America, allowing them to ‘overcome their current backwardness, improving their quality of life by means of better education, and sustained and sustainable economic growth’ (2001:7). Similarly, in the Mission statement, it is the range of social issues that are uppermost in the text: ‘The Plan proposes to contribute to sustained economic growth and the preservation of the environment and the natural resources of the region’ (2001:8)

The SWOT analysis consists of a total of 62 bullet points distributed between the 4 headings, with weaknesses the largest (23) and threats the smallest (11). This may seem over-all a fair balance between good and bad aspects in the analysis. However, if we look at this text as something that may also be read by outsiders who are potential investors, many of the ‘weaknesses’ may seem like further attractions. They refer to the vulnerability and lack of economic power of the region (the low wages, lack of local capital, economic backwardness etc.) that in practice that would place this region as a desirable EPZ.

In this way, the same list is able to make a different kind of sense to the two main audiences, a political reading in Mexico and a business audience outside Mexico. The extreme social and life problems faced by people in this region could motivate a social program designed to address precisely these problems, and that indeed is the impression given by the ‘Vision’ and ‘Mission’ statements. At the same time, the region is presented as a commodity for sale, its depressed economy and low wage economy presented as an opportunity for the benefit of others. As one instance of how this inflection is presented, the theme of education, which could be concerned with general empowerment, is presented in terms of a more skilled labour force, in effect pushing the work force in this region into a more competitive mix (still firmly in the quadrant of EPZs) of labour costs and skill levels.

The same can be seen in the 8 objectives listed under ‘strategies’. Many of these speak of progressive social and environmental policies. For instance, objective 6 states:
‘To pursue a sustainable management of natural resources and the environment’. There is a very different orientation in Objective 3, which states ‘To achieve a structural change in the dynamics of the economy of the region which will permit sustained growth’ (2001:22). Under this heading are the main features of the plan: a massive investment in transport infrastructure, massive hydro-electric schemes, introduction of new technologies, an ‘open economy’ and ‘modernization of the regulative framework of the economy, and elimination of those discriminatory measures in public policies which affect the South Southeast region.’ (2004:28).

This objective occupies 7 pages. The environmental objective occupies less than a page. As Orwell might have said, all objectives are equal, but some are more equal than others.

The political context

The ‘threats’ do not mention the greatest threat to the Plan Puebla Panama, the existence of the Zapatista movement, with its proven capacity to mobilize Mexican and global opinion against precisely this kind of neo-liberal scheme. It is not likely that any serious potential MNC investor would not have been interested in or ignorant of this threat, under the heading of ‘political risks’, since it would be included in any risk assessment document they consulted. The government certainly knew of the existence and importance of this threat. A document written by advisers to President Fox, who subsequently took significant places in the government, began with a clear analysis along these lines:

On the 1st of January, 1994, Chiapas surprised Mexico and the world. NAFTA came into force, indisputable proof of a Mexico ready to enter fully into modernity, which coincided, by no accident, with the discovery, for many, of a Mexico that was unknown, and for others, proof of the oblivion, poverty and marginalization in which a large number of citizens are immersed. With the beginning of the armed conflict in Chiapas the seriousness of the socioeconomic problem of the region became manifest’ (Dávila et al, 2000:1).

This analysis, from circles close to the President, is important background to the Plan. From it, a number of points emerge. The problem concerns a region, but it is the Zapatistas as a political problem that are central, and Chiapas itself, which is buried in the PPP amongst the other states of the region, which is the main focus of attention. There are large issues of policy, to do with NAFTA and the political and economic implications of this treaty, connecting problematically with the issue of serious indigenous poverty and marginalization.

This text, which is as much a briefing document as a scholarly article, then gives in its body an analysis of the economic consequences of NAFTA for this region. The treaty, it argues, will make economic developments in the north of the country more profitable and easier, and at the same time increase the disadvantage of this already disadvantaged south. The warning, then, couched within the careful terms of an economic analysis, is that the effect of market forces flowing from NAFTA into this region will exacerbate the scandal of indigenous poverty already in the public domain as a result of the Zapatistas. There is a need, in these terms, for a Plan which will genuinely address these issues.

A dialogic perspective

The PPP document we have suggested is formed out of an arbitrary weaving together of two kinds of discourse, designed for two distinct kinds of audience, which
have different locations, different values and interests. The task of the text is to speak to
different audiences, so that each will see enough of their own meanings in it to be
convinced. However, each class of audience will have their own means of interpreting the
text on their own behalf. They will do so in a dialogic framework, aware that some things
are not spoken to them, but to others, and that other things are spoken to them but cannot
be fully trusted.

For instance, from a MNC perspective, the material about social disadvantage and
measures to promote social justice would not appear to affect the ‘bottom line’, or figure
in the grids of their own SWOT analyses. They would focus mainly on the 7 pages of
objective 3, which contain all the business friendly measures Fox is proposing to
introduce, and filter out most of the other 29 pages. Yet this other discourse is not
irrelevant to their judgement. It shows the Mexican government behaving (or
discoursing) like a government, demonstrating the concern for public good that
government must be able to do convincingly. They will recognize the contradiction
between the social justice rhetoric and the policies promised in objective 3, but their
concern would not be the contradiction, but only whether Fox would (and could) deliver
on the policies of objective 3. Even the failure to mention or do justice to the political
threat posed by the Zapatistas may not be such a serious problem, in that they would rely
on sources other than the Mexican President to rate the level of political risk (though the
way the PPP ignores it rather than offers ways of resolving it would not add to the
documents credibility).

From this MNC perspective, the contradictions of the text would be mostly resolved
by a reading strategy in which certain elements of the text – those foregrounded by the
D/P they share with Fox (as ‘CEO’ or Country Manager of Mexico) – become its main
content. In terms of some earlier theories of discourse, formed mainly in relation to the
mass media, an idea was developed of a ‘preferred reading’ (Hall 1980), a hegemonic
viewpoint which was the default option for mass readers, carrying the primary ideological
content for them. This case is significantly different, in that the meaning of the dominant
is precisely dispreferred, available only with effort by a minority of readers.

It is interesting then that radical critics of the policy in Mexico read only this
meaning in the text, as though it is overt and emphasized. Fazio, for instance, wrote:

One treats of a renewed formula to concentrate and transfer wealth to the
domestic and to local elites. Mexico, as client state, will continue to cede strategic
sectors of the economy and offer more lucrative opportunities to US capital,
relegating Mexican businesses to the condition of mere providers of raw materials
and agricultural products, not manufactured goods.

The idea of converting the south-southeast into an emporium of ‘sweat shops’
(maquiladoras)… is not new with Fox. (La Jornada 29 July, 2001)

In the same vein is the declaration of Tapachula, produced by representatives from
organizations from Mexico and Central America:

Considering that any plan of development ought to be the result of a
democratic process, not an authoritarian process, we firmly reject the so-called Plan
Puebla Panamá (PPP) because it is a renewed project of primitive colonization of
South-Southeast Mexico and Central American countries, to further the interests of
grand capital, transnational corporations and the oligarchs (of Mexico). A plan to
deepen even more the impoverishment of the people and the destruction of our
cultures and of nature.

In schematic terms we can set the PPP text in a discursive process consisting of
multiple dialogues and multiple kinds of participant, each with their own degrees of
freedom. This is what leads to the heterogeneities and contradictions we have noticed in
the fragments of genres and arguments that constitute this text, held together by the
functional unity of the ideological complex informing the Mexican president’s position.
This tissue of contradictions is made manageable in different ways, in terms of different
reading strategies and different underlying D/Ps, for different participants. The discursive
process in effect restores a sense of unity, or unities, to what is otherwise an incoherent
text.

By a seeming paradox, the ‘radical’ reading (Fazio and the Tapachula Forum)
seems to have more in common with the international business reading, as though they
share a common D/P. The analysis is common, the evaluation of it exactly inverted
(radicals denounce precisely what international business most wants, and hopes that Fox
said, and will deliver). Yet there is no evidence that the business community would want
a direct statement of their particular interests, partly because it would be seized on by
radicals (as it has already been seized on, in this instance) and partly because the business
community want President Fox to be addressing his nation as a responsible leader, not as
a mere entrepreneur. That is, the kind of discourse that comes out of the different D/P of
social concern is something that they want also to hear, which has been incorporated into
the world view of MNCs as nationoids (responsible world citizens, political as well as
economic players alongside nation states on the world stage). President Fox will not be
able to deliver the promised commodity (large chunks of Mexico over which he has some
measure of control, and a set of other small nations, over which he has no control at all)
unless he is perceived to be the President of Mexico, not just a ‘Country Manager’.
Likewise, MNCs are so big and so public that they will run into many problems with
many constituencies unless they are able to maintain some of the forms of political
discourse. Nations may converge to some degree in the direction of corporations, but they
must also, simultaneously, be nations, just as corporations may construct themselves in
many ways as nation-like, yet they need to behave primarily as corporations.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have tried to present the complexity and indeterminacy of the
relations between ‘discourse’ in many senses, the world to which it refers and the agents
who express themselves and act discursively in it. Key agents are immersed in discourse,
using and being used by it with complex results, both for the discourses they produce and
the actions that follow. This is the medium in which we see played out ‘globalization’
understood as innumerable individual dramas involving corporations and nations
interacting with each other, co-defining and co-determining one another. The example of
Fox and the Plan Puebla-Panamá we have used for illustrative purposes is not ‘typical’,
but rather a unique instance of the ways the contradictions and differences are being
played out in practice. It is those contradictions and that process which will be found in
other instances, across the landscape of the global world.
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