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**In Search of the "Win-Win":
Possibilities and Limitations of Multi-Stakeholder Environmental
Partnerships**

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ABSTRACT

In the policy domains of countries throughout the industrialized West, the convergence of market liberalization ideologies, welfare states on the decline, dissatisfaction with conventional regulatory regimes, and frustration over the "gridlock" stymieing decision making processes is resulting in the increased promotion of voluntary, cooperative environmental management instruments. This paper takes as its topic the emergence of multi-stakeholder partnerships as one such instrument. These collaborative initiatives bring together representatives from the business, governmental, and non-governmental sectors for the purpose of producing consensus-based solutions to environmental problems of common concern. The paper's goal is to explore the capacity of these institutions for furthering a transformation toward sustainable development. Drawing upon ethnographic research performed with two such partnerships in the European Union and the United States, and guided by theories of practice and cultural production, the paper examines the privileging of one particular discourse--that of ecological modernization--in these settings. In considering some of the implications which stem from this, the paper argues that though these partnerships may contribute toward

sustainability via ecological modernization's promotion of "win-win" scenarios involving the co-achievement of environmental protection and economic expansion, their ultimate impact will be limited. Problems arise, in particular, from ecological modernization's complicit relationship with the dominant system of liberal capitalism and from the silencing effect that its privileged position has on alternative environmental perspectives and voices. The paper concludes that environmental partnerships such as the two considered here are ultimately tools of the status quo. Their ability to induce long term sustainable development is constrained by their reluctance to critically examine the adequacy of prevailing economic and political structures.