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EAST, WEST, BEST:
CROSS – CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND MEASURES

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CROSS – CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND MEASURES

Inaugural Address

Address given in shortened form at the occasion of accepting the appointment as Full Professor of "Cross-Cultural Management" at the Rotterdam School of Management / Faculteit Bedrijfskunde of Erasmus University Rotterdam on Friday, September 28, 2001

by

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Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,
Geacht College van Decanen,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great honour and pleasure that I accept the appointment as Full Professor of "cross-cultural management" at the Rotterdam School of Management / Faculteit Bedrijfskunde of Erasmus University Rotterdam by giving this inaugural address entitled "East, West, Best: Cross – Cultural Encounters and Measures".

Introduction

A Dutch proverb ("Oost, west, thuis best") in the title of the present address draws our attention to a common sense notion of differences between various human groups, organizations and societies. Societies, far and close, differ. Pascal has already noted that a truth on one side of the Pyrenees becomes a lie on the other. Most of us have been brought up believing that things are different north, south, east and west, but here, at home, wherever that might be, one knows what is best, or at least better. It is one of the many missions of a university in a contemporary society to question common sense knowledge, to examine the unexamined beliefs and to expose the tacit values at the bottom of our hearts and minds. A critical analysis of the proverb in question would quickly reveal that there are many "Easts", not all of them eastern, that there are many "Wests", not all of them western, and that there are many "bests", not always better than the others. Some solutions to some problems can appear better – but not always, not everywhere and not for everybody. Not all "bests" will appear better than their predecessors, alternatives, or successors upon a closer examination, especially after some time. Who should perform a critical analysis of Easts, Wests and Bests? Following the iron laws of the political economy of our divided attention such analysis is being performed daily by journalists in mass media and by individual citizens in their daily lives as students, patients, consumers, tourists, family raisers, believers or workers. Common sense becomes common sense because it is common, not necessarily because it makes sense. It is up to us, members of an academic profession, to make sense of making sense and to indicate why some of these ways are so commonly accepted as to result in the common sense beliefs, which guide humans in their behaviour and prompt their routines.

Needless to say, we are not unrestrained in our critical attempts. The structure and pace of scientific revolutions vary. Scientists and scholars can be stuck with a dictatorship of a paradigmatic proletariat and threatened with an exile of dissidents to virtual cyberias. The evolution of paradigms developed by scholarly communities for producing knowledge (with an academic trademark and a university logo proudly attached to the publications) can accelerate so quickly that all that is solid melts into thin air and a sort of an anarchy (a kind of a Feyerabendian epistemological dadaism)(1) is loosened upon the academic world. Between the Scylla of dogmatism and the Charybdis of relativism we hope to manage research, gather data, develop explanations and interpretations and provide some measure of guidance to many recipients of our services, disclosed and undisclosed.

It is one of the most fascinating experiences of our profession to watch a new domain of knowledge emerge out of a struggle to understand “Easts”, “Wests” and “Bests” – and to change the edifice of social sciences by doing so. The undersigned hopes to convince you that the emergence of cross-cultural studies is precisely such a case in point. Empirical research designed and conducted by Geert Hofstede helped define a new domain, endowing it with the theoretical concept of cultural dimensions (at the expense of social psychology)(2), while a theoretical model of advanced rationalization presented by George Ritzer linked it to the post-Weberian critical sociology (at the expense of sociology pur sang)(3). The development of critical theories of management – once a risky venture attracting historians of the Frankfurt school such as Martin Jay or students of organizational communications such as Mats Alvesson – is certainly much more advanced now than it was in 1988 when this university hosted an international conference attended by the abovementioned colleagues (and organized by the undersigned with his Dutch colleague, Frits van Engeldorp Gastelaars). Chairs in cross-cultural management in schools of business are being created either within the organizational sciences or within a new field called communications. It is not a smooth process. Organizational sciences are already fighting protracted border wars against the representatives of strategic and knowledge management studies. The latter have territorial claims against organizational scientists. Is this academic war of independence, a struggle for the recognition of a new branch of knowledge, for the creation of a new academic nation-state, for the acknowledgement of a new sub-discipline, a just and legitimate struggle?

Two cases: encounters past and present

Before answering this question let us imagine that we have designed a virtual reality game. Time: XVth century. Place: Territorial waters of eastern and western Africa. Name of the game: explore and exploit. Along the western coasts of Africa - European sailors and traders slowly make their way towards the southern tip of the dark continent. Their ships fly first Portuguese, then Spanish and later Dutch or British flags. They land, contact local rulers, establish trading posts, move forward, come back to Europe with spoils, then return and press southwards, looking for a sea route leading to Chinese silk and to Indian spices. Meanwhile, along Africa's eastern shore, the Arabs have already established their trading posts and the Chinese are sending their fleets. They also land, contact local rulers, establish trading posts, move forward, looking for new exotic gifts to the emperor – a giraffe, for instance, or a rhinoceros. Let us freeze the game around 1414 and consult the experts. Who has better chances of winning this game? Who will control the trading posts along the African coast and the sea link between a prosperous China and a conflict-torn Europe? Here is what an expert could have written if asked by the World Bank to advise them whether to invest in the European or the Chinese enterprise:

"A huge fleet left port in 1414 and sailed westward on a voyage of trade and exploration. The undertaking far surpassed anything Columbus, Isabela and Ferdinand could have envisioned. The fleet included at least sixty-two massive trading galleons, any of which could have held Columbus' s three small ships on its decks. The largest galleons were more than 400 feet long and 150 feet wide (the *Santa Maria*, Columbus's largest vessel, was about 90 by 30 feet), and each could carry about 1,500 tons (Columbus's ships combined could carry about 400 tons). More than 100 smaller vessels accompanied the galleons. All told, 30,000 people went on the voyage, compared with Columbus's crew of ninety-some. The commander's name was Zheng He, the Grand Eunuch of the three Treasures and the most acclaimed admiral of the Ming dynasty.(4)

Let us imagine that the World Bank sends this expertise to another expert for a second opinion and let us assume that the person in question is a specialist in cross-cultural management. Would his or her opinion coincide with the one of their predecessor? It might. Should the second expert make use of the analysis based on the Hofstedian dimensions of culture, with a stress on Confucian dynamism and an ability to think in terms of long-term plans – he or she might still arrive at the same conclusion. Chinese can focus on long-term stability and are not pressed so hard for a quick return on investment. Ergo, they will be much more prudent, rational and successful in the long run. Chinese can organize and manage their collective ventures much more efficiently and without internal rivalry. Ergo, they will be less wasteful and will enjoy higher profits. They are more skilled in games and gambling, which should give them an edge in risk-taking and development of financial institutions.

But an expert in question might also notice the possibility of a different interpretation. The focus on long-term stability could prevent the Chinese from exploiting the windows of opportunity on a short-term basis and undermine their competitiveness in the long term. The collective harmonization of activities could prevent them from developing individual initiative and exploring individual opportunities, leaving the Europeans free to do so. Technological and managerial superiority might prompt their inward turn and a decline of interest in foreign affairs. The expert in cross-cultural comparisons would possibly discover what a famous Dutch football player has expressed in an immortal formula that “every advantage has its disadvantage” as the underside. The same values which helped the Chinese build and sustain a large empire with advanced technology, with a productive agrobusiness feeding a huge population and with a highly skilled professional bureaucracy standardizing communications – the same values locked the empire in a prison of relative and temporary success. As long as world communications remained relatively unimportant in managing the local business of large societies, the Chinese’s values were a recipe for success. However, as soon as the frequency of cross-cultural contacts increased – the criteria of a successful competition also began to change. An emergent world-wide system started to reward bellicose individualist adventurers from Europe – at the expense of everybody else. Neither the geographical proximity of the Arabs to their eastern African trading posts nor the technological superiority of the Chinese sufficed to defeat their European rivals.

Should our expert have furnished the World Bank with this critical opinion, a position of cross-cultural studies among managerial sciences would have been safe. However, sceptics can notice that forecasts and predictions are harder with respect to the future than to the past. Should experts in cross-cultural management hope for relevance, they have to risk forecasting, let us say, the future of globalization. Forecasts about the future of globalization available on the academic markets fall into two basic categories. First, there is a mainstream literature on “one market under God”(5) and on the inevitability and progressive nature of globalizing processes.(6) Globalization, in other words, is a continuation of modernizing policies by other means. Second, there is a number of highly critical analyses of the effects of globalization by sociologists (7), representatives of political economy (8) and by political scientists (9). The above duality is reflected in annual ritual clashes of the representatives of the global establishment (IMF, WB, WTO, G-8, etc.) and their police forces with the opponents of globalization on the streets of Seattle, Washington, Prague, Quebec or Genoa. Clearly, the representatives of the world institutions do not share values and beliefs with those who want to disrupt their proceedings or at least to change the approach, to modify the agenda, to redraw the priorities. Can experts in cross-cultural management add something relevant to this debate?

They can and they do by indicating the ways in which culture matters in shaping the choices of groups and individuals with respect to the alternative aims of possible actions and the organizational means available. They can do so by simply assuming that culturally dominant “western” societies and organizations should offer a natural basis for comparison. This is the way chosen by those who compare the values and institutions of the political and economic elites in South America and Africa to the values of the US and Western European ones(10). This is the way chosen by those who conduct international research projects measuring – for instance - the national leadership styles and comparing them to one another. They can do so in a more self-critical manner. They can namely try avoiding the pro-western bias by relating comparative analysis to a critical theory of social processes, for instance to a Wallersteinian theory of world-systems or to a theory of social movements. In this latter case they can try to explain mass protests against globalization as the emergence of new social movements proposing new values and looking for new, alternative governance structures and communication patterns, prompted by new inequalities and new exclusions resulting from the globalizing developments.

They might even draw upon the imaginary case about the Euro-Chinese rivalry around Africa after 1414 and quote king Nzinga Mbemba of Congo who argued in the letter to the king of Portugal sent in 1526 that slave trade must stop:

"because it is our will that in these kingdoms of Congo there should be not any trade in slaves nor any market for slaves".(11)

They may point out that a Christian king of Portugal must have treated this letter as just another example of a parochial prejudice of ignorant natives, who failed to understand that trade was good for them. They may suggest another approach to what appears as a stumbling block on the way to successful globalization – for instance, angry demonstrators and concerned scientists. They may try to understand what Adam Smith would have called moral sentiments and contemporary economists like to call social capital (which prevents us from bowling alone) or even "trust" (which prevents us from cheating in market transactions). They may try to explain the birth of individual and group values as an emergence of a belief that some ends and some combinations of ends and means are right and natural (for instance, human rights and the means of safeguarding them, or rights of women or of the ethnic, religious, demographic or sexual minorities). They may indicate the necessity to involve the "excluded" protesters in a plethora of modern, electronically mediated "agoras". They may stress the necessity to make global elites aware of their institutional biases. They may point to the increasing price societies are paying for non-transparent and non-democratic forms of corporate governance. They may be the first to notice the cultural significance of the victory of the South African government in the struggle against global pharmaceutical corporations – a struggle for medicines slowing down the development of full blown AIDS. They may notice that a critical theory of cross-cultural competence has to be interdisciplinary and critical of global influences exerted by emergent networks of states, markets and other institutions:

"Modern world culture is more than a simple set of ideas or values diffusing and operating separately in individual sentiments in each society… The power of modern culture – like that of medieval Christendom – lies in the fact that it is a shared and binding set of rules exogeneous to any given society, and located not only in individual sentiments, but also in many world institutions."(12)

This sample quotation hints at the relevance of cross-cultural studies. However, to maintain relevance, our expert should be able to demonstrate that his or her expertise also offers a methodological advantage in the research community and a pragmatic advantage in society at large. Is this feasible? Can he or she do it? Can he or she offer an edible pudding, which can find its proof in the eating?

Measuring cultural relativity: a methodological comment

Nobel-prize winning economist Amartya Sen has once criticized a tacit assumption (resulting from the Western political, economic and cultural dominance in the contemporary world) that Western civilization has a virtual monopoly on rationalist and liberal ideas. When commenting on a routine bias involved in identifying and defining cross-cultural differences by contrasting other cultures and traditions with the modern Western ones, he wrote that:

"The West is seen, in effect, as having exclusive access to the values that lie at the foundation of rationality and reasoning, science and evidence, liberty and tolerance, and of course rights and justice"(13)

While this normative assumption and a biased approach to a comparative, cross-cultural analysis are relatively easy to detect, a methodological bias is much harder to tackle. A postmodernist critique of the grand narratives has contributed to the focus of social scientists on the methodological bias of a rational choice theory. The persistence of rational choice theory as the methodological starting point gave "homo economicus" a privileged status in academic social sciences. A model of a rational subject has been privileged compared to a "homo sociologicus" or a "homo sentiens", in spite of the fact that an explanation of either individual and group identity or of the structuring of institutional and normative framework for action requires an equal access to all three conceptualizations of the human agent, with special stress on the third one. Perceived as homo economicus, a man or woman calculates and makes choices according to the principles of instrumental rationality, perceived as homo sociologicus he or she follows social norms reflecting his or her embededness in groups and communities, and perceived as homo sentiens he or she expresses his or her identity as a person moved by “deepest concerns” and moral commitments, able to use cultural resources in his or her own way. While economists focus on homo economicus and sociologists train their sights on homo sociologicus, cross-cultural researchers are slowly replacing novelists, theologians and film-makers as students of homo sentiens. As Margaret Archer succinctly puts it:

“Weber’s Wertrationalität, far from being expelled from a disenchanted world, remains part of our lifeworld, which cannot be reduced to the bargain-hunter’s bazaar.”(14)

This is the source of the immense popularity enjoyed by the theoretical construct of the dimensions of culture created by Geert Hofstede. Hofstedian dimensions of culture owe their popularity among social scientists in general and among the representatives of the sciences of management in particular to their dual methodological nature, reminiscent of Max Weber’s own “ideal types” (although they are not ideal types themselves and they are not empirical generalizations either). On the one hand they allow us to study group behaviour in economic organizations and link it to the sociological background of group members. In other words, they allow a student of a homo sentiens to account for a homo economicus and a homo sociologicus, while using a single analytical tool – namely the concept of the dimensions of culture, which can be applied cross-culturally. On the other hand, they allow us to study the spatial distribution of clusters of behavioural recipes, scenarios or scripts, developed by human individuals trying to respond to varying economic and sociological contexts. A homo sentiens does not passively reflect a sociological background and does not simply respond to managerial stimulae – he or she uses both as resources to be recombined – creatively – in the light of values deemed worthy of preserving and defending.

This methodological duality did not make the pioneers’, for instance Geert Hofstede’s, academic life easier. His choice of a multinational business organization (IBM) and of the national level of culture have often been criticized as arbitrary methodological decisions. Critics accused him of endorsing a “national cultural determinism” and ignoring the alternatives. Why not a shop floor level subculture of a working community? Why not a professional community in a whole branch of industry? His dimensions of national cultures were described as a dogmatic product of an *a priori* belief that influential national cultures exist beyond any reasonable doubt (while some authors claim that they are little more than “imagined communities” evoked by state elites to facilitate modern state formation). His assumption that national cultures exert a causal influence upon resources chosen by individuals and groups for social action (administrative, political, economic) has often been criticized as insufficient to comprehend, for instance, the religiosity of the Spaniards or atheism of the Russians without taking the monopolistic position of the Catholic Church in Spain or the state-imposed atheism in former Soviet Union into account.

There is, however, no methodological objection against accounting for the non-cultural influences upon individual behaviour by a cross-cultural researcher. There is no methodological rule against accounting for a homo sociologicus, even if we focus on a homo sentiens, and want to keep homo economicus in the picture. There is no methodological taboo in cross-cultural studies against studying how:

“As subjects, or citizens, or partners, or employees, or whatever, we take our positions within the relations of power and within our understanding of those relations.(Kondo),(15)”(16)

Moreover, most of the researchers studying cross-cultural or cross-national differences in value priorities, have followed Hofstedian example (voting, so to speak, not so much with their feet as with their footnotes), stating, as Schwartz, for instance does, that:

“In tackling this broad question, we have taken whole cultural groups as our unit of analysis, following in the footsteps of Hofstede’s monumental work”(17)

This homage to Hofstede is even more important if we consider the fact that Schwartz studies clusters of values from the point of their motivational influence upon a single individual in a variety of institutional settings and aggregates them along a different scale than Hofstedian dimensions. Thus he divides values into ten groups – universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation and self-direction - and clusters them into compatible and incompatible sets. The compatible sets include for instance power and achievement (an individual who pursues those values is interested in social superiority and esteem) or tradition and conformity (an individual who is motivated by these values wants self-restraint and submission, often for spiritual, religious reasons). The incompatible sets would include, for instance, self-direction and stimulation versus conformity, tradition and security or universalism and benevolence versus achievement and power. Then he studies students and teachers in China, Poland, Spain, the United States, Venezuela and Zimbabwe and mentions the following conclusions as meaningful:

“Age correlated positively with giving priority to security values and negatively with giving priority to hedonism values. Education correlated positively with emphasizing self-direction values and negatively with emphasizing tradition values. Religiosity correlated positively with giving priority to conformity values and negatively with giving priority to stimulation values. Voting for parties on the economic left was associated with emphasizing benevolence values and deemphasizing power values. Voting for parties favourable to classical liberalism was associated with preferring self-direction values over conformity values."(ibid.)

The fact that even researchers representing different methodological traditions, working with different dimensions of culture, assuming different mechanisms of motivational influence of values and studying different levels of social aggregation acknowledge the role of Hofstedian dimensions should not come as a surprise. The edifice of social sciences has changed in the wake of the paradigmatic wars and the postmodernist offensive. The field of cross-cultural studies has changed both because of what Hofstede has written and because of what has been written for and against him. The concept of cultural dimensions has not been formulated within an additional paradigm in social sciences, waiting to be admitted by professional gate-keepers to social psychology, sociology or managerial sciences. It has become a theoretical construct in an academic world without a single dominant paradigm. It has become a theoretical construct in a business management world without a ruling orthodoxy.

Methodologically speaking, we live in a world in which, as George Ritzer puts it, multiculturalism, feminism and postmodernism have opened a Pandora's box with new paradigms and with a growing number of theories (each of which seems to have been built on shifting sand), and forced us to thrive on chaos in place of on a discipline deemed necessary in the pursuit of truth. This discipline used to be imposed by rigorous gate-keepers, but proved untenable. Even the staunchest defenders of the explanatory model of scientific rationality (at the expense of the scholarly interpretation) have finally paid their dues to those from the other side of the methodological barricades. Nostalgically looking back at the period of a dominant neopositivist paradigm in social sciences, E.O. Wilson pays this reluctant tribute to the postmodernists:

"We will always need postmodernists or their rebellious equivalents. For what better way to strengthen organized knowledge than continually to defend it from hostile forces? John Stuart Mill correctly noted that teacher and learner alike fall asleep at their posts when there is no enemy in the field."(18)

Measuring cultural relativity; a pragmatic comment

Representatives of cross-cultural studies do not have to limit themselves to methodological arguments alone. The relevance of their pursuits for the academic institutions can also be demonstrated on much more pragmatic grounds. First, there is a growing demand for expertise in facilitating the creation and maintenance of cross-cultural governance structures in the economic, political, military and cultural spheres. The proliferation of training and coaching programs for expats in spe testifies to the relevance of cross-cultural expertise. Second, there is a growing need to tackle the new complexity of organizations made possible by new information and engendered by communication technologies. Organizations are able to function networking and aligning many very different sub-components of complex chains, allowing for much more personal discretion and group autonomy. Controlling, guiding and co-ordinating these complex modern organizations requires cross-cultural competence in dealing with subcultural clusters of individuals. Globally distributed teamwork is slowly becoming a rule rather than an exception in designing, maintaining and changing teaching and research products.

Let us begin with the latter problem of tackling the new complexity of organizations and look at it at our academic home. Abandoning the normative idea of a single truth approximated by theoreticians of the dominant paradigm had consequences for the methodologies of rational pursuits, central to the identity of the academic communities. However, no sooner have communities of researchers reconciled themselves with the onset of methodological relativism, when a new form of pragmatic, institutional relativism has struck the very heart of the academic community – the organization of a university. The dividing line between the true professionals – academics – and the administrators of increasingly large, complex and bureaucratic universities has been blurred from the very beginning by academics temporarily abdicating their research and teaching functions and assuming some administrative duties as deans, rectors, research or training product managers, and the like. However, with the qualitative leap in complexity (many more students of various types, mixing of free and commercial programs, appearance of graduate schools of business) and with the increased pressures from the political bureaucracies of government and from lobbies of business communities, the emergence of professional managers (as deans, rectors or presidents of a university) has made the separation between substantively rational academics and formally rational bureaucrats final. One may claim that the break has not been so abrupt – professional managers are usually recruited from among the academics and thus are not blind to the substantive rationality of the profession as a whole. Moreover, they usually used to pursue a typical academic career themselves, which should have prevented them from streamlining the bureaucratic organization without any professional concessions. On the other hand, academics themselves spend at least part of their time controlling the formal rationality of their activities and are thus not complete strangers to the world of bureaucracy. However, some changes are hard to ignore. This process of professionalizing academic management has already contributed to a relative loss of professional autonomy of the academics in managing universities as incomplete formal bureaucracies. This has been witnessed by some changes in legal acts issued by governments and regulating the functioning of the institutions of higher learning. Will losses of professional autonomy become even more acute in future? Will mergers with non-university types of schools and acquisitions of new training grounds accelerate bureaucratization of all academic institutions? Will they result in what George Ritzer calls "a deprofessionalization" of the academic profession – very much after the pattern set by the medical or legal professions in the United States he had studied in the wake of his "macdonaldization" theory? Will a livable, teachable, learnable university ("leefbare universiteit") survive? Answering questions like these certainly requires cross-cultural competence and an ability to reconcile the priorities of the culture of an academic research community with the values of an efficiency-based bureaucratic culture of a modern educational enterprise. Needless to say, these values and priorities cannot be reconciled in a vacuum of the ivory tower but have to be measured against the background of values and priorities of society at large. Some ecological or feminist postulates have already assumed the form of priority lists of a global society willing to reduce waste and decrease gender inequalities. Phrases like "our university is an equal opportunity employer" or experimental initiatives like "buy nothing day" carry across most cultures and will probably carry through all in future.

Apart from this domestic necessity to accommodate organizational change within academic settings there is also another pragmatic reason to devote some attention to cross-cultural studies. Developments in information and communication technologies have made us aware of the social life of data, information and knowledge filling the air around us and enabling us to experiment with new forms of organizing and changing our collective activities. Both the champions and the critics of globalization agree that the increased frequency of international contacts, trade exchanges, political clustering, cultural networking, media overlaps and the like require guidance and coaching. In order to guide and coach we have to perform an analysis of the beliefs and values of those who are involved and impacted by changes. It is very important to also understand those parties, which are either consciously excluded from the benefits of these processes or end up forgotten and deprived of them. Their ways of coping with their situation, their manner of linking a homo sentiens with a homo sociologicus and a homo economicus, certainly merit research attention as much as does the behaviour of top managers and global leaders. They also merit support – which should be guided by cross-cultural competence in designing this support's institutional frameworks and networking them around the principal values of the relevant communities.

We do not have to search very far for opportunities to develop and test our cross-cultural competence. History has downloaded a case in point at our doorstep and it is up to us to pick up this challenge. By a case in point I mean the recent breakdown of the state socialist system, an attempt at an alternative, non-capitalist and non-democratic globalization. Signalled by the rise of the Polish “Solidarity” movement in the summer of 1980 and completed by the fall of the Berlin Wall in the fall of 1989, this breakdown of a undemocratic and centrally-planned institutional cluster gave rise to numerous strategies of survival, reform and change in central and eastern Europe, and has put our concepts of east, west and best to yet another pragmatic test.

Old “east”, old “west” and a new search for the “best”

As far as this historical event is concerned, the breakdown of the state-socialist system dominated by the former Soviet Union made us re-define both “east” and “west”. Before 1989 “east” meant countries east of the Elbe river, east of the line on which the armies of the United States and of the former Soviet Union met while defeating Nazi Germany and “west” meant countries to the west of this dividing line. The differences were lined up in a perfect symmetry. The “east” had a Warsaw pact, while the “west” had a NATO. The “east” had a communist ideology, while the “west” had a liberal one. The “east” had a Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, while the “west” had an European Economic Community. The “east” had a Soviet atomic umbrella, while the “west” had a nuclear umbrella provided by the United States. The “east” had its own Germany (GDR), while the “west” enjoyed its own (FRG). The “east” exported its system to the other continents (China, North Korea, North Vietnam, Angola, Cuba), while the “west” continued to export to its club (Japan, India, South Korea, South Vietnam, Chile). This symmetry has never been perfect (for instance, China broke with Russia and started promoting her own model of alternative globalization, India felt it was not rewarded for sustainable democracy by the United States, which focussed on the Chinese market), but it has been almost perfectly maintained by the superpowers in question. When Greece was assigned to the “west” after WWII, the pro-communist rebels were defeated with British military assistance in 1948 and Soviet Union did not intervene. In return, when the east German workers rioted against the communist party in 1953, they were defeated by Soviet tanks and the “west” kept its part of the bargain doing nothing. In spite of the popularity of the communist party in Italy, it has been successfully (if not always legally) prevented from taking over state power and trying out the Soviet system in the "west", while the Hungarians (1956), the Poles (1956,1970,1981) and the Czechs (1968) have been repeatedly reminded that they should not try the western system in the “east”.

The breakdown of the “east” in this sense came as an almost complete surprise to the majority of experts, academics, advisors, consultants and analysts working for teams, commissions, lobbies, projects, brain trusts, think tanks and other institutions. The “almost” in the above sentence refers to two independent scholars and to a cross-cultural concept of human rights. Both of the scholars in question specialized in cross-cultural comparisons, both were historians by profession and both have been predicting the fall of the Soviet Union and the accompanying decomposition of the Soviet sphere of influence, i.e. of our latest equivalent of the “east”. They did so in the mid-1970ies. I refer, of course, to the political pamphlet written by the late Soviet dissident, Andrei Amalrik – “Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?”(19) and to the study of a French historian and cultural anthropologist working in Great Britain, Emmanuel Todd – “La chute finale. Essai sur la decomposition de la sphère soviètique”(20).

Mentioning human rights I refer to the Helsinki endorsement of the universal declaration on human rights. The Committee on European Security and Cooperation dates back to the 1970ies. It had been designed by government representatives in the wake of an attempt to reduce tensions between the superpowers and to reduce conventional armies in Europe. The declaration has been worded in a truly cross-cultural manner. It has been viewed by the Soviet government as a relatively minor case of ideological window dressing, a trivial concession on the way towards a reduction of the economic burden of further arms race. However, it was subsequently used by civil societies within the Soviet sphere of influence (including Russia proper) as a powerful instrument for conducting some checks of the communist governments’ repression of civil society and for defending individual citizens against totalitarian state.

Both of the abovementioned authors had a research interest in cross-cultural issues. Amalrik had drawn the attention of Soviet censors very early in his academic career. He had angered the Soviet authorities with his studies of the Viking influences upon the early Kiev state. This clashed with the propaganda image of Ruthenians inventing an early state organization on their own. Forced into exile, Amalrik was apparently assassinated by the KGB on a highway in Spain, on his way to a Helsinki Committee meeting. Todd was interested in comparative studies of political behaviour. He tried to link types of family socialization (especially the degree of authoritarianism or of power distance) to the political behaviour of adults. Assuming that our value systems emerge in the course of an early socialization, he tried to link types of family upbringing to the extreme, often violent political behaviour in the world at large (21).

Both authors have offered predictions, which were based on an analysis of values and preferences of human individuals living within the state socialist system. Both of them assessed the predicted uses of national cultural resources (including religious ones) against the institutional attempt at total control of civil society by the state. Both have put forward the hypothesis that an economy based on enterprises destroying value instead of creating it cannot sustain a strong state and an effective system of repression. They claimed that the Soviet empire would dissolve into nation-states, since when individuals within it acquire a free choice (which they are bound to do as the system deteriorates) – they will identify with their national culture rather than with the artificial and unattractive ideal of a "homo sovieticus". What made both authors different from the majority of social scientists formulating hypotheses on the Soviet – dominated "east"? It was the fact, that they did not consider a slow, gradual decline ("the ottomanization" of the Soviet Union and its satellites) as much more probable than a rapid desintegration. They both had the courage to state that the end of the Soviet empire, the decomposition of its structures, was imminent and inevitable. Their hypotheses have been verified within two decades of their formulation. While the present-day Russian economy is not yet as transparent as the market ones, it has become much more accessible to researchers. Looking at the aftermath of the half-hearted market reforms and at the Russian repetition of the Soviet dilemma, the economists thus state bluntly in 2001:

"The Russian economy remains a hyperindustrialized system composed of enterprises that would not be viable in the market economy, supported by transfers from the energy and raw materials sectors."(22)

The difference made by both authors' focus on cross-cultural values is that they did not assume, as most of their contemporaries did, that a strong and repressive state would simply transfer energy and raw materials without any constraints in order to maintain the system, i.e. itself. They have thus prognosed a systemic collapse on the basis of a hypothesis involving homo sentiens rather than homo economicus or homo sociologicus and have focussed on the role of national culture as a crucial resource for individual and group action.

The future of "east", "west" and "best"

The role of cross cultural studies in making the world safe for many "easts", "wests" and "bests" does not end there. Let us therefore ask what future research in the cross-cultural area could add to our competence in dealing with some or all of them. First, research on national cultures – a continuation of the Hofstedian project – could bring us closer towards an understanding of the influence of "imagined communities"(23) on actual societies and states. What do we need to predict the behaviour of the former members of the Yugoslav federation or of present-day Russia and her Community of Independent States? What do we need to decide whether the European Union should accept Turkey as a member state? Which policy should European Union employ with respect to immigrants, mostly from one of many "easts" or one of many "souths"? What should we do with a female employee of a Dutch court of law, or with a female student of a Belgian school who wants to cover her head in Muslim fashion? One can see that cross-cultural studies, with a special focus on national identity are staging a modest comeback in the political sciences, and are at the heart of our explanations of the "easts":

"The emotional, albeit irrational, sense of nation and national identity plays a vital role in forming a society's perception of its environment and is an extremely important, if not driving, force behind the parameters of what a polity considers its national interests at home and abroad".(24)

Second, the breakdown of the Soviet-dominated, politically and militarily defined "east" has also made it clear that there are many "wests". Kennichi Ohmae has started splitting the west into the triad of the United States with a Southern American economic hinterland, the European Union with central and eastern Europe as an expansion area and the middle east with northern Africa as an economic hinterland and Japan with a string of south-east Asian countries as its economic hinterland. Please note that Japan, formerly classified as Far East, has been relabelled as one of the three key versions of the "west". Many Latin American politicians and economists hesitate between a European model of the market economy – parliamentary democracy mix and the US variant of the same, with the Dutch "polder model" as a showcase of the difference. Europeans themselves are also increasingly contesting the present shape of the European Union as too slow in coordinating national governments. The project of a new type of a continental federation suggested by the present German minister of foreign affairs, Joshka Fischer, possibly signals a new phase of this political, cultural and economic process. Some politicians point out that an eastward expansion of the EU might be a historical opportunity to modernize, upgrade, change and develop this institutional shell – in tune with the values shaping the preferences of the Europeans. Thus, not only is the "west" a chance for the former "close east", the admission of the countries of a former "close east" becomes a chance for the redefinition and modernization of the "west" according to changing preferences.

But what are those preferences? How can we come to know and implement them at all levels of social processes? Do our organizations reflect them? For instance, are we, academics, happy with the present form of the university? Do our politicians express them adequately when formulating party programs, creating new political parties or announcing referenda? Are these values compatible, reconcilable, is their implementation manageable? How can we increase our competence in dealing with conflicts of values? Again, a cross-cultural analysis appears to offer important clues as to the multiple "wests", both real and imagined.

Finally, our ideas on the "best" also evolve. Values, norms and preferences make us believe that a certain action, a certain way of life, a certain cultural identity and a certain institutional form are “best” for us and for some or all others. However, there are many “bests” at present as well. My colleague, Richard Whitley, compared the national recipes for the successful development of new technologies in a space of university researchers, corporate producers, government legislators and financial networks. He came up with national clusters of German, Japanese, British and US-American models of the “best” clustering of resarchers, producers, legislators, and of marketing and financial organizations. Resources are similar, institutions comparable, technologies the same – what makes them different, however, are cross-culturally perceivable preferences, choices, routines, and visions of the “best” solution to the problem of managing technological progress. A Silicon Valley model changes on its way to southern Bavaria, Tokyo or Cambridge (not to mention Thailand, Brazil or Kenya) and a cross-cultural comparison offers us insights into the underlying cultural processes of crucial policy choices and organizational design preferences.

Are we getting closer to recognize this volatile and mutable nature of “bestness”? Are we getting closer to a European definition of a flexible cultural identity based on multiple inclusions? Can representatives of the cross-cultural research community offer a clue as o the “best” way of dealing with the variety of cultural backgrounds of individuals and societies? They obviously try, suggesting that the future belongs to someone who is:

“a person capable of mediating between national traditions, communities of fate and alternative forms of life. Citizenship in a democratic polity of the future, it is argued, is likely to involve a growing mediating role: a role which encompasses dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others with the aim of expanding the horizons of one’s own framework of meaning, and increasing the scope of mutual understanding.”(25)

They try, but do they succeed? Can their focus on homo sentiens yield better results than the previously tried focus on homo economicus or homo sociologicus? Can cross-cultural studies equip cross-cultural managers in business, politics and culture with better toolboxes for negotiating the best “best” for our future?

Ladies and gentlemen, let me suspend the answer to the last question and express my thanks: first, to Joanna, my wife, and our children, Magdalena and Jacek. Their support, sense of humour, patience and genuine warmth, have been, and still are, crucial to me.

Second, I would like to pay homage to the pioneer of the cross-cultural study of organizations. Together with Johan Huizinga, Geert Hofstede represents for me the Dutch face of social sciences. I feel honoured by your presence today, dear Geert. I am also grateful to my American colleague, George Ritzer, who studies the macdonaldization of society to re-enchant the disenchanted world. Thank you for joining us. I would also like to thank Immanuel Wallerstein (who unfortunately could not come) for teaching me how to put cross-cultural comparisons in a historical and systemic perspective. Needless to say, I am also grateful to many other researchers from Dutch, Polish, German, Danish, Austrian, Swedish, French, British, Italian, Spanish and American universities and research centers, of whom I would particularly like to mention Martin Jay from Berkeley in the USA and Mats Alvesson from Lund in Sweden, thanking them for setting me on critical theoretical tracks at the 1988 conference, and for coming.

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