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Hybridisation of business norms as intercultural dialogue: The case of two post-Soviet countries

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Abstract

This article provides an in-depth exploration of the nature of the cultural shift in business norms in two former Soviet Union republics: Estonia and Belarus. While questioning the linearity of existing models describing social–cultural change and, drawing on [Lotman's model \(1990\)](#), the paper points to a complex interplay of past and present, Western and local traditions in the transformational context of the post-Soviet countries. The analysis is based on a set of semi-structured in-depth interviews with Belarusian and Estonian entrepreneurs, who conveyed their attitudes towards transition and current management practices in the region. Exploring the issue on both a temporal (pre-Soviet and post-Soviet) and a spatial (Western/non-Western) axis the paper discusses the relationship between the 'importing' and 'exporting' of values, which take place across each of them, and concludes with what the analysis can tell us about cultural transformation more generally.

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Keywords: Intercultural; Dialogue; Entrepreneurs; Attitudes; Estonia; Belarus

Introduction

Apart from a few examples ([Burawoy and Verdery, 1999](#); [Humphrey and Mandel, 2002](#)) there is a dearth of multidisciplinary studies exploring social–cultural change in Eastern Europe. The present article addresses that gap by providing an in-depth

exploration of cultural shifts in two markedly dissimilar states: Estonia and Belarus. Although my main point of reference is the Belarusian and Estonian business spheres, I am mainly interested in what these spheres can tell us about cultural transformation more generally. I wish to question the teleological bias of existing theories of socio-cultural change and, drawing on Lotman's model of intercultural dialogue (1990), I point to a complex interplay of past and present, Western and local work-related customs and attitudes in the region. I further argue that the dynamic of intercultural dialogue is most vividly revealed in groups located close to the social-cultural periphery in any given nation. Such groups are more susceptible to change in comparison with the more resistant cultural centre (inhabited by groups with greater power). I claim that, in many post-communist societies, this role is fulfilled by the emerging stratum of entrepreneurs which is i) particularly exposed to the dialogue of ideas with Western and other cultures and ii) more likely to acquire the transformative urge to influence and mobilise other, more static components of the cultural system, though *not* necessarily in support of Western-inspired practices. The analysis is based on the attitudes which emerged in a set of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with Belarusian and Estonian entrepreneurs.

My analysis requires an interdisciplinary methodological framework, which, though it draws on business studies models, is grounded primarily in cultural theory. A brief discussion of the role attributed to cultural factors in existing accounts of the global convergence of managerial practices is nonetheless in order. For whilst notions of globalisation and homogenisation clearly explain the diminishing impact of national culture on socio-economic change, the idea of convergence with globalising forces and divergence from them is more complex. Warner asserts that 'culture-led' narratives are still viable, by outlining a framework of hard (absolute) and soft (relative) types of divergence and convergence (Warner, 2003: 6–7). Child (1981) speculates along the same lines by referring to the evidence of convergence at the organisational or macro-level (organisation, technology), but not at the personal level. Divergence on the micro-level suggests that people's organisational behaviour is determined by local, culturally derived attitudes. As a result, cultural influences on the principles which underlie all business activity are still detectable.

Furthermore, the notion of culture itself is a highly problematic concept, which has long been characterised by a lack of agreement on how it should be defined. Here we understand it as that 'social organisation of meanings' (Friedman, 1994) which is constantly reproduced by individual agents, and in which change initiated at the individual level possesses a potential for 'reconfigurations in one of several "macro levels"' (Archer, 2005: 30). In other words, the production of a constructive and concrete synthesis from existing 'contingent complementarities' is inseparable from the process of innovation. The driving force behind cultural elaboration is provided by inhibitions to the material and/or ideal interests of the agents. In a transforming society with a so-called 'unsettled culture' (Pi, 1996: 14), levels of disaffection and tensions within key groups of agents (including business elites), are particularly high.

However, the focus on agency should not preclude attention to possible contradictions at the level of the cultural system. Following Archer's (1988) warning that cultural systems cannot be treated as *coherent* and *homogenous* entities, my line of

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