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Agents of American hegemony in management education: Evidence from Malaysia



Rossilah Jamil

UTM International Business School (UTM-IBS), Level 10 Razak Tower, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates how and why American management education (ME) ideas proliferate. It also examines their contributions to sustaining the hegemonic status of the United States. To achieve these objectives, a study in Malaysia was conducted that involved interviews with management educators from three public university business schools as well as analysis of their websites and program prospectuses. The findings suggest that the American influence on local ME practices is substantial. Three key American agents were determined to be responsible for spreading and sustaining the observed hegemony. The author associates the phenomenon with post-war American imperialism and discusses its implications on local ME and business practice.

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1. Introduction

The hegemony of American management education (ME) is evident in many countries (Kipping et al., 2010; Neal & Finlay, 2008; Tiratsoo, 2010). In Malaysia, for instance, the American influence can be observed in the curriculum designs, the teaching materials, and the student assignments employed by its business schools (Jamil, 2011). Although records of American hegemony are well documented in the literature, they fall short in two areas. First, the main agents and their roles in the transference process have yet to be properly studied. Second, although the evidence of American ME hegemony is noted in other countries, no research study has yet been conducted in Malaysia. The focus on Malaysia is timely because the country is part of the boom in Asia, where interest in ME programs is growing (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; www.topmba.com). Furthermore, the country's unique cultural and economic backgrounds render it an interesting case that may potentially provide some scholarly contribution to the field of ME.

Against this backdrop, a study was conducted with the following objectives: to investigate the transference process of American ME ideas in Malaysia and to identify the key agents. Data from the research study were then used to discuss how the transfer may have contributed to the perpetuation of American hegemony in ME.

The article is organized as follows. A review of the relevant literature establishes the theoretical underpinnings of the issue. It is then followed by an explanation of the methodology employed to furnish data for the study. The article then presents findings that show how American ideas have permeated Malaysia and the extent of their influence on local ME practices. The article ends with a discussion on the agents responsible for the transfer followed by the conclusions.

E-mail address: rosillah@ibs.utm.my.

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2. Literature review

2.1. American hegemony in ME

American hegemony is a widely discussed topic within the realm of international relations (Khoo & Smith, 2002; Naji & Jawan, 2011). With the exception of Ancient Rome, the United States (US) has been described as the only power in history that has pursued the longest and most extensive hegemonic strategies to mould the world's economic, political and cultural relations (O'Brien, 2003). Although much of its hegemony was initially created due to its economic superiority, its declining economy has forced the country to find a new cause. After the events of September 11, 2001, America has re-intensified its ideology of *American primacy*, which 'authorizes' Washington to implement controversial foreign policies on other countries in the name of America's safety and well-being (Nesadurai, 2004). The heightened promotion of American-based ideologies, such as democracy, capitalism, secularism and human rights, has also been argued to be the only way for the country to sustain its global hegemony (Newmann, 2011). America's long-standing influence has been largely credited to its understanding of the meaning of power, resulting in its successful pursuit of carefully planned strategies since the Second World War:

"American political leaders and thinkers ... have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of debate. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to want what you do not want. If the United States represents values that others want to follow, it will cost us less to lead."(Nye, 2004 in Kachur, 2010:124)

Similar hegemonic strategies have been employed in the field of business and management. The US is undeniably the breeding ground for management theories and practice. The majority of the world's top management gurus have received their education in American business schools. In ME, the American model has become a framework for many business schools, notably in Great Britain (Tiratsoo, 2004; Wilson, 1996), Mediterranean Europe (Kipping, Usdiken, & Puig, 2004), the Nordic countries (Engwall, 2004), Russia (Walck, 1995), the Middle East (Neal & Finlay, 2008), China (Lamb & Currie, 2011) and Australia (Barry, 1996). Traditionally, the American economic standing has rendered the country as being more advanced. With such performance, the American formula for national development has easily become a model that other less developed countries should emulate. This phenomenon was observed in the development of most of Western and Southern Europe after the Second World War (Guillén, 1994). Similarly, Kipping et al. (2004) found similar evidence in France, Italy, Spain and Turkey, all of which perceived the American model in ME as the way to solve their industrial inefficiencies. In Asia, Mok (2006) concurs, stating that since the 19th century, Asians have long equated 'Americanization' with 'modernization'. Similarly, in Great Britain, the American approach to ME was once considered to be the solution to the country's failing productivity (Tiratsoo, 2004).

Despite various criticisms (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004), American ME continues to be the benchmark for many countries. One of its most recognized legacies is the MBA programme. Invented at the turn of the 20th century, the programme has now become a global phenomenon in the education and training of managers (Williams, 2002 in Mintzberg, 2004). Its functionalist curricular structure is prevalent among top MBA programmes in the UK, Europe, North America and Australasia (Scherer & Perren, 2001). The second American characteristic is the scientific orientation of MBA programmes (see Gordon & Howell, 1959) which remains omnipresent in many ME curricula today. Another American feature can be observed in the establishment of business schools within universities (see Kipping & Nioche, 1998; Kipping et al., 2004). The fourth common feature of American MBA programmes is the use of the case method, championed by the Harvard Business School (HBS), which has been extensively copied around the world despite being the object of serious criticism (Contardo & Wensley, 2004; Liang & Wang, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). Finally, the greatest American influence lies in the capitalist ideology embedded in its management theories, education and practices. The very existence of American business schools and the American management discipline supports market capitalism (Bower, Leonard, & Paine, 2011; Dunne, Harney, Parker, & Tinker, 2008). Thus, profit maximization is the focus promoted in American business teaching (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007) and research (Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003). Interestingly, American business schools tend to regard the promotion of capitalism as a '*patriotic duty*' (p. 12), and developing '*capitalist managers*' (p. 12) is viewed as a purpose shared in tandem with the country's foreign policy agenda (Khurana, Kimura, & Fourcade, 2011). Despite increasing warnings about the danger of profit orientation (Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2007; McCabe & Trevino, 1995; Starkey & Tempest, 2005; Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2011; Zimmerman, 2001), capitalism continues to be the underlying values of most ME practices around the world. The American influence spills over into other aspects, such as MBA and business school rankings (Gioia & Corley, 2002; Policano, 2005), the over-commercialization of MBA programmes (Finney, 2011; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004) and the definition of a 'world-class university' (Deem, Mok, & Lucas, 2008). Collectively, all the above evidence confirms that American ME has a significant influence on many ME institutions worldwide.

2.2. Transference process

The transference process of American ME to the world may occur as passive and active acts between the US and recipient countries (Kipping et al., 2004; Usdiken, 2004). For instance, in Europe, there has been involvement on the part of states,

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