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**Managing Cultural Difference and Struggle in the context of
the Multinational Corporate Workplace:
Solution or Symptom?**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show the critical relevance of post-structuralist political theory to cross-cultural management studies. By emphasizing the key role that questions of identity, difference, and struggle play in the multinational corporate context, we argue for a shift in our understandings away from essentialist conceptions of culture to an explicitly critical and political understanding of the way culture and cultural difference is invoked. Of crucial importance in understanding the nature of the shift of perspective we advocate is the affirmation of a negative ontology for which the radical contingency of social relations is axiomatic.

Key Words

Culture, cultural difference, multinational corporate workplace, cross-cultural management, critical management studies, post-structuralist political theory, signifier, ideology, ethics

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[C]ulture is important, and if we had [cross-cultural] training then we could understand each other... [Without training we have] no team spirit... [and no] common code of communication... [and] we will not achieve our target deadline[s]...

Line Manager in a multinational corporation (from Angouri 2007)

[T]he management of cultural differences [can be] subordinated to management of the cross-cultural processes of knowledge-sharing, networking and learning as collaborative activities

(Holden 2002: 294)

Critical research [aims] to reclaim conflicting experiences through describing the practices and routines by which alternatives are disregarded or rendered invisible. The understanding of the processes by which value conflicts become suppressed and certain forms of reasoning and interests become privileged requires an investigation into the politics of meaning, language and personal identity

(Deetz 2003: 27)

Introduction

The first two quotations in our epigraph capture a convergence of views frequently found in the workplace and academia alike, namely, that cultural miscommunication and conflict is a problem, and that properly managed cross-cultural encounters, whether through training or otherwise, will help better realize multinational corporate goals.

In this paper we problematize this widely-held picture. We bring together literatures in cross-cultural management studies, poststructuralist political theory and conversational analysis of cross-cultural encounters to develop a critical perspective on culture in the multinational corporate workplace, including cultural difference and cultural conflict. We suggest that the cross-cultural management studies literature sometimes tends to adopt uncritically the ideals and objectives of the corporate managers themselves, using them to frame the analysis of the nature and significance of cultural difference and conflict in multinational corporations. It becomes difficult, therefore, to recognize when those ideals and objectives are actually put into question in the workplace, and whether questions about cultural difference and conflict might be displaced and distorted expressions of more fundamental divisions and struggles.

By contrast, we wish to foreground the political dimension of corporate workplace practice. This is because value conflicts are often foundational, demanding to be confronted in a more direct, politically-sensitive manner. By emphasizing that corporate ideals and objectives are often contested and, in any case, contestable, we situate our contribution in the field of critical management studies and intercultural (corporate) discourse (see, for example, Alvesson and Willmott 1992, 2003; Grey and Willmott 2005; Fleming and Spicer 2007; Jermier, Knights, and Nord 1994; Meeuwis and Sarangi 1994: 310; Holliday, 1999, 2007; Meyerhoff & Niedzielski 1994: 317; van Meurs and Spencer-Oatey 2007: 105).

More specifically, we situate our intervention in relation to a growing body of literature that engages with a poststructuralist perspective on organizational studies and critical management studies, particularly those approaches which take their bearing from the political theory of Laclau & Mouffe (1985). This literature makes poststructuralist interventions in relation to a wide range of themes, such as labour process theory (Willmott 1997; Knights and Willmott 1990; O'Doherty and Willmott 2001a, 2001b), the structure/agency relation and critical realism (Willmott 2005; Contu and Willmott 2005), organizational learning (Contu, Grey and Ortenblad 2003; Contu and Willmott 2003), power (Clegg 1989: Ch. 7), and resistance and struggle (Contu 2002; Fleming and Spicer 2007; Spicer and Bohm 2007). Central to these interventions is the emphasis placed on the dynamic and political constitution of workplace relations.

The concept of the political has a precise meaning in the work of Laclau (1990) and Laclau & Mouffe (1985). The political dimension of organizational practices is thus theorized in a way that diverges from the usual way in which the concept of the political appears in organization studies literature. Insofar as it is possible to generalize, organizational studies literature tends to treat politics as function of the way that power is distributed in the organization (see, for example, Clegg, Courpasson, Phillips 2006: Ch. 11), and power is understood as a function of identifiable sovereign authority, capacities, resources, interests, or structures (Knights and Willmott 1989; Lukes 1974). From the point of view of poststructuralist theory, however, the political dimension is understood not so much in relation to any one of a number of possible positive features (whether in terms of authority, capacities, resources, norms, interests, or structures) but more in relation to a negative ontology, where to subscribe to a negative ontology means simply to affirm the absence of positive ontological foundations (or, to put it differently, to affirm the radical contingency of social relations). Such a perspective expands the scope and relevance of critical analysis because it emphasizes the situated and precarious character of norms, interests and structures themselves. From a poststructuralist point of view, then, the political dimension of social relations is connected to the contestability of norms governing a practice.

We thus build upon the theoretical insights furnished by the above poststructuralist interventions into organizational and management studies by applying them to a new empirical domain (cross-cultural management) and by deepening and extending these insights. We show how conceiving cultural difference as a 'signifier' against the background of a negative ontology allows us to emphasize the political and ideological significance of invoking 'culture' to manage difference and conflict. This

gives our approach a decidedly critical – not only constructivist – flavour. The turn to the notion of a signifier also suggests a way in which our analysis can be generalized beyond the cross-cultural management context to management contexts and practices in which other key terms, such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘performance’, serve to domesticate difference and conflict. The suggestion here is that such terms should be treated as lacking an essential meaning, so as to reveal how their invocation in various management discourses often serves to push the political dimension of organizational relations to the background (or, alternatively, to bring it to the foreground).

We start by offering a brief portrait of the modern corporate workplace and discuss some of the features of the dominant approaches to cultural difference today in order to contextualize the appeal we make to our particular approach to questions of identity, difference, and conflict. We then draw on a range of case studies in the literature to illustrate our approach. These cases, of course, are embedded in theoretical frameworks and purposes different from our own. Our aim, however, is to *reinterpret* the case material in line with our own ontological and conceptual schema, suggesting how our own approach to cultural difference and conflict yields a distinctive understanding of the role that culture plays in the context of the corporate workplace.

The Ideals Shaping the Character of the Corporate Workplace

According to Earley and Gibson (2002:15) the two most significant changes which have occurred in the workplace over the last few decades are, first, the scope and intensity with which the market has been internationalized and, second, the restructuring of companies. As far as the former is concerned, open borders, harmonization of business regulations, pan-European strategic management, and the single currency have accelerated European economic integration (see for instance Mercado, et al., 2001: ix, 476ff), all of which has led to greater mobility of many businesses and people within the borders of Europe and beyond.

These changes have led to companies’ structures moving towards dynamic, multilevel and flexible models, organized around teams. Flexibility is felt to be particularly important in this globalised business world since parts of a company may be ‘formed, disbanded and reformed to respond rapidly to changing business needs’ comprising members from different countries, different company locations and different teams (Earley and Gibson 2002: 19). Technology has made possible communication between these teams, which are often dispersed around the globe.

It is within this context that the role of culture and cultural difference acquires its value and significance.¹ Efficiency and competitiveness emerge as the dominant ideals structuring relations among staff in the modern corporate workplace. When tasks need to be done and problems solved in a multi-cultural corporate workplace, especially by people working in teams, issues of communication and transmission become central. A breakdown in cross-cultural knowledge transmission is seen as a threat to a corporation’s competitiveness and thus viability. It is clear then why cultural differences – in fact all sorts of differences – can thwart team efforts to get a job done. Indeed, much literature on culture expresses the view that problems or clashes are only to be expected when distinct cultures come into contact with each

other. It is a view which has become highly influential in international management practice as a result of earlier work (see Sackmann, 1997), including the influential work by Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1994), Adler (1991), and Trompenaars (1993) to a lesser extent (Holden, 2002: 104; Soderberg and Holden 2002). The title of Hofstede's 1980 publication — *Culture's Consequences* – makes clear the ominous portent he associates with cultural difference. Similarly, Holden (2002) draws on Sackmann (1997) to argue that over the last 40 years the management literature has conveyed the message that cultural differences can create '*havoc*' (Holden, 2002: 105; see also Soderberg and Holden 2002: 104-6). In fact, the widespread belief that cultural differences can cause problems and hinder business success has spurred the growth of 'How to' books outlining what the authors perceive as successful ways for doing business in different national contexts (eg., Reed & Gray, 1997; Hinkelman & Genzberger, 1994).

Recently, however, it has been argued that cultural diversity can have the opposite effect and that the result of bringing cultures into contact with one another has been seen as actually enhancing creativity and effectiveness (Early & Gibson, 2001). Accordingly, it is no longer exceptional for business to positively engage this diversity, regarding it as a resource that can contribute to innovations, efficiency and thus competitiveness (Yanow 2003; Holden 2002; Mercado, et al., 2001; Winston, et al., 2001 Carnevale, 1999). It is analogous to the thought that cultural difference can enhance rather than serve as an obstacle to engaged citizenship, social justice and representativeness.

Nevertheless, whether cultural difference is seen as an obstacle that can be overcome or as something which can be profitably exploited, it remains the case that cultural difference is still viewed as at least a *potential problem* or *challenge*, largely because of the long shadow cast by the ideals of efficiency and competitive advantage. Perhaps it is the tremendously powerful grip exercised by these ideals that explains the somewhat disproportionate responses to cultural difference. Consider the earlier claim that cultural difference can create *havoc*. Or consider any number of descriptors and metaphors used in trying to capture the threat that cultural diversity is seen to pose: quagmires, clashes, earthquakes, terminal disease, world fatigue and depression, and so on (Holden 2002: 3-4; Soderberg and Holden 2002: 104-6). In this context, the very idea of cultural difference is enough to trigger images of devastation and disaster. What these images reveal is how highly invested the terms 'culture' and 'cultural diversity' can become, and why such enormous effort is expended trying to promote cross-cultural communication and synergy.

In this latter respect it is interesting to consider the role a relatively young branch of management studies has accorded itself. This branch of management studies – known as Knowledge Management – is primarily concerned with 'gathering, managing and sharing employees' knowledge capital throughout the organisation' (Bhojaraju, 2005: 37; Holden 2002). In addition, Knowledge Management acknowledges the potential of cultural difference and so proposes *solutions* for the *management* of multiple cultures within an organisation.

Problematizing Dominant Approaches to Cultural Difference

Of course, as already noted, corporations have themselves actually moved on from seeing cultural difference simply as an obstacle to seeing it also as a potentially valuable resource which can be pressed in the service of corporate goals (Holden 2002). This has led some to shift their focus from *conflict* management to *knowledge* management, wherein cultural diversity becomes the object of knowledge sharing and innovation. Here ‘the management of cultural differences is subordinated to management of the cross-cultural processes of knowledge-sharing, networking and learning as collaborative activities’ (Holden 2002: 294). It is a view expressed in a range of management fields, including human resource management.

This shift in evaluative perspective, can of course be seen to result from a conceptual shift from an essentialist to a constructivist understanding of cultural difference. Nevertheless, the full implications of such a shift are not often drawn out beyond academia. As has been pointed out elsewhere, ‘few authors utilize a constructivist analysis of strategy to draw implications concerning broader structures of dominance and inequity. Quite the contrary, the perspective is routinely used to generate suggestions for how managers can *improve* the strategy process by actively changing corporate cultures and frames’ (Levy, Alvesson and Willmott 2003, drawing on Whittington 1993; emphasis added).

Asking how we should *deal* with cultural difference and conflict in the context of the multinational corporate workplace tends to lead to a particular solution, namely, the *management* of cultural difference either through conflict avoidance, conflict management or via various forms of cross-cultural facilitation processes. But when we look closely at certain case studies, an interesting picture emerges. The various attempts at management reveal resistances and failures which are difficult to explain simply by reference to ‘inadequate management skills’. In other words many failures are difficult to construe as failures to adequately *manage* cultural difference. Instead, this evidence suggests that there are often deeper conflicts or struggles at stake having to do with organizational power configurations, and that it may be a better explanation of various failures and resistances that the ideals and goals of the corporation themselves are being put into question (whether implicitly or explicitly). In this view, supposedly neutral values, such as order, efficiency and effectiveness ‘aid the reproduction of advantages already vested in an organizational form. Concepts of organizational effectiveness tend to hide possible discussion of *whose* goals should be sought and how much each goal should count’ (Deetz 2003: 26; emphasis added).

Questions of power and control are thus foregrounded. Earlier we referred to the role of technology in facilitating changes in the nature and scope of communication and teamwork. But new technology has also been used as a means of increasing control over the workforce, and peer-based forms of control have also been added to the corporate repertoire of control processes. As is apparent in many critical management studies, especially those that adopt a Foucauldian approach to power and resistance, corporations can be highly disciplining and controlling, even if ostensibly non-hierarchical. Here, attention is focused on how external forms of control are internalized by the workforce which, in turn, becomes *self*-disciplining (Deetz 2003; Knights and Willmott 1989; Willmott 1993). And, in order to resist temptations to conceptualize power and control in totalizing terms (whether exercised hierarchically

or horizontally, externally or internally) many scholars emphasize how resistance and power are inextricably linked and constructed in the discursive practices of the workplace itself (Collinson 1994: 165; Austrin 1994; Knights and McCabe 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

This suggests we affirm an explicitly political conception of conflict and, by implication, cultural difference.² Thus, many argue that organizational life, corporate life inclusive, should be understood explicitly as a site of political struggle (Deetz 2003: 26; Fleming and Spicer 2007). We thus want to suggest that this is equally applicable to cases of cross-cultural corporate management. As Willmott puts it in a slightly different context, 'corporate culturalism contrives to eliminate the conditions – pluralism and the associated conflict of values – for facilitating the social process of emotional and intellectual struggle for self-determination' (Willmott 1993: 540).

This leads us to pose the following question: Why the frequent insistence in cross-cultural management literature that cultural difference is a (potential) problem or challenge? Perhaps it is certain logics or lines of force shaped by corporate ideals that make this possible. If so, problematizing these ideals would allow us to pose different sorts of questions, and discern rather than presuppose the sorts of value conflicts at stake when cross-cultural management is invoked as a solution. Perhaps it is the unquestioned goals of corporations that is responsible for the efforts expended in understanding cultural difference in a particular way. Consensus on corporate goals, in other words, serves to reinforce certain power relations: 'implicit values and hierarchies become reified and suppress potential discussions and conflicts' (Deetz 2003: 37). This leads to a restricted understanding of the *value* of cultural difference, namely, as a *resource* that can be instrumentalized for purposes of achieving greater control and competitive advantage.

From the point of view of the corporation this is not a problem of course. The question is whether academic analyses should also adopt this point of view, and thus not probe too deeply into the role, goals and ideals of corporations, or whether they should adopt a more critical vantage point. For example, can one not begin to think about the possibility of pluralizing these goals through more democratic means (which of course does not require these to be identical to political forms of democracy). This may entail a shift in the very concept of work itself – eg., trying to reconnect work to play, experiment, and more democratic and plural forms of decision-making (Best and Connolly 1982: 137).

Once one abandons an essentialist understanding of culture and cultural difference, its content becomes as varied as the practices within which it is invoked. The insight of constructivism resides in how the content of culture is a product of the contextualized exchanges of interactants. In fact, it is increasingly commonplace now to view culture and cultural difference as discursively constructed and thus a product of the actors' interactions in the multinational corporate workplace context³. Here, the view is that it is impossible to disentangle in *a priori* fashion the constituent elements of culture in interaction (for example, the national, gender, organizational or other features (see Sarangi 1994, Roberts, *et al.*, 2005)). But a *political* understanding of culture and cross-cultural management supplements this insight. It suggests we pay careful attention to the power dynamics underlying *how and why* certain identities and differences are constructed as 'cultural' identities and differences. This highlights the

significance of questions of political identity and difference which a poststructuralist political theory foregrounds, and whose basic contours we will briefly now sketch out.

Identity, Difference & Negativity in Post-structuralist Political Theory

The dissemination of poststructuralist ideas in the late 1960s and early 1970s (often associated with the proper names of Foucault and Derrida) brought a sustained onslaught on philosophically-potent binary oppositions. Politically, many such oppositions came to be regarded as responsible for the insidious propagation of power hierarchies, and the oppositions reason/unreason, gender/sex and culture/nature were not unexpected casualties.

An obvious way to highlight how differences are symbolically conditioned and thus culturally malleable is simply to *define* discourse as unfixed, to recast identity and meaning as *fluid*. This approach takes it as axiomatic that there is no such thing as a necessary essence. Instead of dispersing apparent fluctuations in identity by searching for an underlying essence, this approach disperses an apparent air of necessity into a tissue of differences held together precariously. The idea of a floating signifier seeks to capture this fluid and precarious dimension of identity and meaning. In invoking the notion of 'signifier' we refer here to developments stemming from Saussure's elaboration of language as a system of differences, specifically the extension of linguistic categories' scope to traditionally non-linguistic elements (by thinkers such as Hjelmslev, Barthes and Levi-Strauss). So long as elements were indispensable in the generation of meaning, and this on account of their being different from other elements, language could be generalized beyond utterances. Now *any* element (whether sound-, sight-, touch-, taste-, or scent-based) can be considered discursive, so long as it enters into relations with other such elements. The term signifier thus renders the specificity of an element's material base irrelevant. A smile, for instance, insofar as it is *meaningful*, can function as a signifier.

The move from a structuralist understanding of society to a post-structuralist political theory involves affirming a negative social ontology, by which is meant simply an affirmation of the foundational contingency of social relations and the anti-essentialism this implies (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990, 1994, 1996, 2005; Howarth 2000; Glynos 2003; Howarth, Norval, Stavrakakis 2000). Elsewhere, it has been pointed out how this yields four dimensions: 'The *social* dimension captures those situations in which the radical contingency of social relations has not been registered in the mode of public contestation, whereas the *political* dimension refers to those situations in which subjects responding to dislocatory events re-activate the contingent foundations of a practice by publicly contesting and defending the norms of that practice. On the other hand, the *ideological* and *ethical* dimensions of social reality capture the way subjects are either complicit in concealing the radical contingency of social relations (the ideological), or are attentive to its constitutive character (the ethical)' (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 14). Far from leading to a kind of relativism, therefore, a negative ontology premised on the radical contingency of social relations furnishes an alternative critical vantage point by de-essentializing dominant analytical and normative approaches to cross-cultural management.

The problem with the way sociological categories like gender, class, race, and ethnicity are sometimes used is the assumption that their content is ahistorical or can

be discerned without having to pass through the subjects' self-interpretations (see, for example, Yanow 2003), as well as the assumption that society may be understood as an objective and coherent ensemble. Against this, the perspective we hold affirms the *constitutive* and *primordial* character of negativity' (Laclau 1988: 13). The challenge from this perspective, then, is to explain when and why the political dimension of social relations is foregrounded or remains in the background: how are particular differences transformed into antagonistic sites (or not); and moreover, what sort of discursive resources are invoked? Are differences articulated as a function of gender, class, ethnicity, culture, etc.? And if so why?

What is interesting is how and why in some situations 'culture' appears to be a crucial part of such narratives of conflictual struggle or synergy. To what extent is it invoked in a way which seeks to provoke or, on the contrary, to prevent the contestation of dominant organizational norms? Is culture invoked primarily as an instrument of competitive advantage or as a cause of economic decline? To what extent are invocations of the term 'culture' accompanied by powerful utopian visions (or threats to these visions)? And how do they contribute to excluding or marginalizing demands and conflicts that could be expressed in non-cultural terms? Under what conditions do we find cultural identities and differences deployed so as to contest dominant organizational norms, transforming them into antagonistic sites?⁴ In other words, how does the invocation of 'culture' or 'cultural difference', conceived as a signifier, serve to foreground or background one or another of the dimensions listed earlier? Mapping the logics of such dynamic interactions is the task of the sort of critical approach to cross-cultural management that we have in mind.

In sum, post-structuralist political analysis affirms the anti-essentialist impulse, which finds problematic the process of constructing substantive sociological categories such as class, ethnicity, gender, and so forth, and then employing these abstract notions as key elements of a social science explanation, without adapting these concepts to suit the particular situations under investigation. In contrast to this, an approach that focuses on the political dimension of organizational practice might treat culture or cultural difference as a floating signifier, suggesting that how this is fixed can only be determined through an analysis of the practices under scrutiny. A woman or man with a young child, for example, partakes of a family discourse which may create tensions with the discourse dominant in the corporate workplace. What are the conditions under which this difference or tension is construed as a difference in *cultures*? Are the tensions felt at the intersection of family life and corporate life suppressed? If so, how? Are these tensions seen to be a result of a personal defect of the employee? Or do these tensions find another expression? If so, how? Do such expressions open up the possibility of interrogating corporate practices and goals? We will now turn to a number of studies in order to illustrate how our critical approach to cultural difference and conflict in multinational corporations foregrounds these sorts of questions.

Toward A Critical Approach to Cultural Difference in the Corporate Context

In one case study, an extensive questionnaire revealed that a significant percentage of the post holders and line managers in three European multinational companies cited 'lack of cultural knowledge' as a reason for communication problems (Angouri 2007). These white collar workers clearly perceived cultural difference – conceived primarily

in *nationalist* terms – as a potential obstacle to the smooth flow of communication in their workplace and thus the efficient discharge of their objectives. Interestingly, when the interviewees were asked to comment on their questionnaire answers, a very different picture emerged. While a nationalist conception of culture appeared important at an *abstract level*, things appeared to be a lot more complicated in the concrete context of their everyday workplace practices.

After explicitly subscribing to a nationalist understanding of cultural difference, one respondent went on to attribute the cause of cultural conflict and miscommunication to a ‘wrong attitude’, something that appropriate forms of training could resolve perhaps (Angouri 2007: 212). Adamant at the outset that culture plays an important role in accounting for potential problems in working relations, another interviewee became less certain of its significance and content as the interview continued, shifting between concerns related to ethnicity, internal power struggles, and rapid and successive substitutions of people in and out of different organizational roles and responsibilities.⁵ Yet another respondent who had attributed (abstract) significance to (national) culture in the questionnaire became less clear as to its precise content, shifting between concerns of ethnicity, gender, and professional attitudes (Angouri 2007: 406).

Angouri’s findings are corroborated by other scholars’ work. For example, Louhiala-Salminen et al.’s (2005: 408) research in communicative activity after a merger between a Swedish and Finnish company shows how their informants could not easily ‘distinguish between the effects of national, corporate, or organisational cultures on communication’, even though – at a more abstract level – they tend to construct ‘a national framework to explain different behaviours’ (ibid). David Collinson considers yet another instance in which the distinction between corporate and national cultures becomes blurred (Collinson 2003: 542). He cites the example of Indian workers employed by multinational corporations to answer telephone enquiries from callers in the US and UK. In many cases, it is corporate policy to have these call centre workers have their accents adjusted through suitable training, and to make sure that they read all the newspapers and magazines that are local to the callers themselves. Here, a significant part of corporate culture becomes as malleable as the national and local cultures of its customer base.

Clearly, culture is a complex concept and attitudes and workplace practices associated with culture vary from context to context. The question for us is how best to capture the dynamics of the manifestations of culture within a given workplace. The above variation in the significance and content attributed to culture signals how culture and cultural difference is best regarded as a floating signifier that, depending on the context, may serve to pin down and articulate a nascent grievance or problem in the functioning of the corporation. It is a view which resonates with Brian Street’s view that ‘the very term “culture” itself... changes its meanings and serves different often competing purposes at different times. Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition’ (Street 1993: 25).

We characterize ‘culture’ as a *floating* signifier here because its meaning and significance emerges only in and through the process of articulation, namely, the way it is partially fixed by connecting it to available discursive resources and the problems animating a particular context. By characterizing it as floating signifier – ie., a

signifier whose overdetermined meaning shifts on account of its floating from one to another perspective and context – we aim to avoid reifying its content and significance. As Sarangi puts it, if ‘we define, prior to analysis, an intercultural context in terms of “cultural” attributes of the participants, then it is very likely that any miscommunication which takes place in the discourse is identified and subsequently explained on the basis of “cultural differences”’ (Sarangi 1994: 414) What becomes important instead is to be able to discern the nuances of specific cultural manifestations, namely, how culture is often overdetermined by a range of concerns linked to power struggles:

The notion of ‘culture’ is very much a contested one in many modern societies, as both dominant and dominated groups often resort to the culture card in managing their power-maintaining and power-acquiring purposes. So, in analysing encounters between the dominant and dominated groups in a multicultural society, we need to subscribe to a dynamic view of ‘culture’.

(Sarangi 1994: 416; see also 424)

Based on the analyses of job interviews of young Asian migrants conducted by British interviewers, Sarangi shows how in instances of miscommunication one should resist the temptation to quickly attribute the cause of such miscommunication to ethnic or national backgrounds. Simple linguistic difficulties can of course play an important role in this accounting for communication breakdowns, but so too do differences in institutional and other power-related positionings. Sarangi shows this by highlighting the multifaceted nature of participants’ identity, and the importance of how each of these faces overdetermine the other in complex ways that preclude an *a priori* or straightforward attribution of communication difficulties to ‘culture’. As he puts it: ‘[W]hy should an instance of miscommunication, when it involves participants from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, be treated as resulting from culture-specific behaviour whereas the same instance of mismatch, when it involves participants from the same ‘culture’, become labelled as a challenge?’ (Sarangi 1994: 418).

This latter observation points to a significant problem with the ideal of self-transparency that usually underpins many approaches to conflict and struggle, namely, that it assumes that we *can* fully know ourselves or our own culture. This leads to an emphasis on *communication* (rather than open-ended exploration and discovery). Instead a post-structuralist political theory suggests that antagonism and struggle are foundational. It problematizes blanket generalizations that claim, for example, that because distant cultures have fewer understandings in common, the chances of ‘core’ problems increase.

Once ‘culture’ has been de-linked from an *a priori* content and is approached as a floating signifier, the question of how and why different cultural features serve to mobilize management and resistance in given contexts becomes central. Collinson explores this specifically in relation to shopfloor workers in a heavy vehicle manufacturing corporation, who react against a corporate culture campaign emphasizing teamwork and communication. Labelling these initiatives – instigated by new American owners – as ‘yankee bullshit’ and ‘propaganda’, these workers distanced themselves from management by developing a strong counter-culture built around working-class masculinity, which furnished them with a strong sense of

identity and dignity (Collinson 1994: 167-8). Nevertheless, Collinson shows how ambiguities and ambivalences in this counter-culture did not allow an effective resistance to be mounted. Distinguishing between studies which over-emphasize the dominant power of corporations and those which over-romanticize the radical potential of resistance, Collinson calls for studies which are more attentive to 'shifting ambiguities, ambivalences, confusions, partial knowledges, inconsistencies, multiple motives and paradoxical effects that comprise the subjective reality of organizational power relations' (Collinson 1994: 182). We think that treating culture as a floating signifier builds this nuance and sensitivity to context into the analytical framework itself.

Julia O'Connell Davidson's rich study of worker-management relations in a privatized utility also explores the culture of work with a view to how and why changes to it are resisted or succeed (O'Connell Davidson 1994). Ostensibly to improve customer service, these changes involved the introduction of a new computing system which would facilitate clerical work, as well as functionally flexible teamworking that would allow a more integrated response to customer queries and requests. In this study, O'Connell Davidson noted how these changes were resisted initially because the promised easing of clerical workload did not materialize. This was largely due to hardware and software technical glitches, but also because the process of simplifying and compartmentalizing skills was very difficult to carry out in practice: '[n]on-routine work could not easily be separated out and handled by specialist clerks' (O'Connell Davidson 1994: 82). What is interesting from our point of view, however, is how this resistance hardened because the new computer system was increasingly perceived as a means to simplify tasks (thus enabling less skilled people to carry them out), as a means to reduce clerical discretion, and as a means for management to exert greater control over its workers. As time went on it became clear that what was at stake in this attempt to change the culture of working practices was something deeper than a conflict over the best means to achieve a common objective. Rather, it was the objective or ideal itself that was in dispute. Accordingly, O'Connell Davidson does not place the blame of a problematic planning and halting implementation with managerial ineptitude which could be remedied through better knowledge transfer processes (between present workers, management, and future workers). Nor does she think blame lies with the complexity of the situation and the unintended consequences this gives rise to. Rather, she argues that questions of resistance and conflict are here best seen as 'mediated by wider political, institutional and economic factors' (O'Connell Davidson 1994: 96).

In our reading of the case the attempt to change the culture of work reflected an attempt to effect a deeper shift which demanded a more politically-inflected response, namely from a service ideal to a profit ideal. More specifically, because the clerks at the privatized utility 'saw the organization as fulfilling a socially useful function, the strengthened emphasis on profit at the expense of service was also deeply resented and contributed to the intensity of opposition to management's plans' (O'Connell Davidson 1994: 95). As it turns out, the actual responses to this shift in work culture by the clerks were varied, ranging from official responses (via union representation) to unofficial responses (via various acts of sabotage), but none succeeded in seriously putting into question the norms of the newly imposed practices. While the workers' appeal to the socially useful objectives of the privatized utility allowed them through their actions to contest the intensification of profit norms in the new practices, the

political dimension was not foregrounded sufficiently to allow alternative configurations of ideals and norms to be entertained.

The above illustrations suggest that our approach shares strong affinities with approaches that foreground the concept of struggle in thinking about the logics by which the norms of organizational governance are sustained or challenged. In fact recent contributions to this area of study reinforce the importance of developing an analytical framework which makes workplace struggle visible, especially in those cases in which strategies and techniques are called on to manage and minimize it (Fleming & Spicer 2007; Jack et al. 2008). Such strategies and techniques include cultivating 'cultures of fun' and encouraging workers to import and deploy their 'outside' experiences in the organization, whether as a function of recreation, relaxation, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, etc. Non-work cultures thus can become a valuable resource for a firm's work and productivity, but the significance of this for organizational struggle only becomes clear when situated in relation to the wider social, political, and cultural context (Fleming & Spicer 2007: 188-91).

Whether culture is a term used by the actors themselves or is a term used by the analyst, our suggestion has been that it is best seen as a signifier, whose meaning varies according to context, and whose political and ethical significance varies as a function of the way its meaning is mediated by subjects in relation to the dominant norms of the organization's governance structure. Treating 'culture' as floating signifier in organizational practices means treating it as a window into which subjects feel it possible to project their meanings, aspirations and fantasies. The invocation of 'culture' provides an opportunity for managers and workers to project their ideals and express their views in the form of a narrative in which they can play an important role, and in which a wide range of dimensions can acquire significance, whether gender, class, nationality, party politics, sexuality, and so on. Discerning the logics by which these projections are constructed and take hold opens up a space in which to critically assess their political, ideological, and ethical significance. How and why culture is articulated in one way rather than another way becomes important not because it conforms or deviates from a pre-given mould, but rather because it sheds light on the dynamics of organizational identity and struggle, thus foregrounding the social, political, ideological, and ethical dimensions of social relations.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show the critical relevance of post-structuralist political theory to cross-cultural management studies. By emphasizing the key role that questions of identity, difference, and struggle play in the multinational corporate context, we argued for a shift in our understandings away from essentialist conceptions of culture to an explicitly political conception of the role that culture and cultural difference can play.

Post-structuralist political theory takes the contingency of social relations to be axiomatic. What is of interest to us is how culture, construed as a signifier, becomes a site of context-specific signifying tensions and, more specifically, how and why it features as a key term in understanding the suppression or construction of grievances and resistance. In adopting a political conception of culture, then, we point to the need

to study those situations in which subjects re-activate the contingent foundations of an organizational practice by publicly contesting or defending the norms of that practice. This is what it means for us to ask how and why the political dimension of social relations emerges or remains suppressed. We have focused primarily upon the corporate context of course, but what our approach opens up is the possibility of a comparative inquiry, examining how these sorts of questions may receive different inflections, depending on whether the workplace context is corporate or not.⁶ Our analysis, however, also suggests a way in which the notion of ‘floating signifier’, along with its political and ideological significance, can be generalized beyond the cross-cultural management context to management contexts and practices in which other key terms, such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘performance’, serve to stoke or domesticate difference and conflict. Such terms should be treated as lacking an essential meaning, so as to reveal how their invocation in various management discourses often serves – via various social, political, and fantasmatic logics (Glynos and Howarth 2007) – to push the political dimension of organizational relations to the background or bring it to the foreground.

Our approach can thus be said to marry an ethico-political dimension to the explanatory dimension of analysis. For it is precisely because there are no foundational guarantees beyond the interpretations and political identifications themselves that such analysis ‘has to be envisaged as an ‘ethico-political’ enterprise...., one that [among other things] does not deny the constitutive role of conflict and antagonism and the fact that division is irreducible’ (Mouffe 1993: 151).⁷ In linking this ethico-political enterprise to Laclau and Mouffe’s project of radical democracy, perhaps we can draw a parallel between approaches within democratic theory and approaches within management studies – a homology that may be worth investigating in greater detail elsewhere. The idea, here, is that the shift in democratic theory from aggregative to deliberative to radical approaches parallels the move in management theory from essentialist to constructionist to critical approaches – specifically those critical approaches which affirm a negative ontology.⁸ The move from essentialism to constructionism involves the insight that conflict and diversity are best approached not by means of imparting already-existing knowledge, but via *processes* of knowledge-production and subject interaction. From this point of view we argue for a move beyond the latter position in the same way that radical democracy moves beyond deliberative forms of democracy. Our critical approach to the management of cultural differences thus parallels the approach of the radical democratic critique of aggregative and deliberative forms of democracy.

What is at stake regarding cultural difference is not so much the acquisition of a set of skills and knowledges. Of course, the acquisition of adequate linguistic skills, knowledge of diverse cultures, and so on, are all necessary. Important too are the various knowledge-facilitation processes. What is critical, however, is an appreciation of the power relations within which these skills and facilitation processes are operationalized, as well as the cultivation of a suitable ethos premised on a negative ontology. We have linked these insights to the ethical and political dimensions that are implied in Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of a radical democratic ethos. This entails a kind of opening up to the other that assumes a willingness to assume a risk to one’s very identity and being, as well as a willingness to intervene and respond *through* the other in a way which is not subservient to a pre-given goal or ideal.⁹

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Notes

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¹ For an overview of different ways of conceptualizing culture, from a historical and analytical point of view, see Sarangi 1995 and Atkinson 2004.

² For a useful summary of other frameworks for thinking about conflict, see van Meurs and Spencer-Oatey 2007.

³ See, for example, Liddicoat et al. 2003; Weisinger & Trauth 2002; Giddens 1984; Poncini 2002, 2004; Pauleen et al. 2004, McSweeney 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Xing 2000; Groeschle & Doherty 2000; Pauleen & Wu 2004; Pauleen & Murphy 2005; Smith 1999; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Louhiala-Salminen 2002; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005; Shea 1994; Frost et al. 1991; Clegg et al. 2005; Schein 1990; Lakomski 2001; Heath and Bryant 2000; Smirchich 1983; Holden 2002; Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952; Diaz-Guererro 2002; Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2007; Holmes & Stubbe 2003.

⁴ From this point of view of course, cross-cultural management can come to be seen as part of an ideological problem rather than part of a technical solution to cultural difference. In a slightly different context, Levy, Alvesson and Willmott speculate that the appeal of this sort of strategic management as a field of instruction lies 'in its ideological appeal to students and employees who are encouraged to adopt a top management perspective and engage in grandiose fantasies about sitting down with corporate elites to discuss strategy and direct the resources of major companies.... [and s]imilar

motives may guide academics interested in researching and teaching in the field...’ (Levy, Alvesson and Willmott 2003: 98).

⁵ F- (...) I have worked in X (refers to countries) and I think I get on well with uhhh you know people ((laughter)). But but this time the work is even more difficult than the first time I had to work with Z (refers to companies involved in the project) because initially the personnel uhh I mean from the partner company is uhhh people working for all the different departments of the company, so we had people working for the X department, others working for the X department or others working for their X department. The first problem we encountered due to this mix of different responsibilities and and ethnicities was the difference in mentality between the coworkers

(...) How to put it (...) the company has one common policy right ? but the people always have different ways of of applying it if you see what I mean ((laughter)). Different subsidiaries have different traditions and they come together here for the project and different subsidiaries have also different parts under their responsibilities and though there is one common policy it takes time to come to mutual understanding. Does it make sense I dunno well my point is that culture is important and if we had training then we could understand each other because we don’t know each other, no team spirit, no time to build a common identity and when all these subsidiaries are involved well it’s a recipe really isn’t it? It’s its energy and time consuming to interact and also find and use a common code of communication and and it is important you know because uhhh we will *not* achieve our target deadline and then whose fault is it? Certainly not my people’s ((his team)) (Extract from an interview with a line manager in a multinational corporation (Angouri 2007))

⁶ Nevertheless, though cultural differences and antagonisms should be seen as constructed under context-specific conditions, this is not necessarily to imply that all is reducible to context or to the contextualized self-interpretations of the subjects involved. We believe it still makes sense to talk about different *logics* of construction and contestation, which transcend the specificity of context, though the nature of this transcendence requires careful consideration (see Glynos & Howarth 2007).

⁷ Mouffe's claim that antagonism is constitutive must be juxtaposed with her claim that ‘the task is to think how to create the conditions under which those aggressive forces can be defused and diverted...’ (Mouffe 1993: 153) Elsewhere, she suggests that ‘the aim of democratic politics is to transform an “antagonism” into an “agonism”’ (Mouffe 1997: 26).

⁸ This qualification is necessary because not all critical management studies approaches affirm a negative ontology as their premise, whether these approaches are inspired by one or another strand of critical theory or Foucauldianism.

⁹ This raises a very important question which may generate a way of making more theoretically differentiated our anti-essentialist ontology. If this radical ethos exists as a possibility, what accounts for the apparently strong resistance to it? What accounts for the obvious reluctance to fully acknowledge as an experience the primacy of antagonism and political identification? What accounts for the difficulty with which the radical contingency involved in the political process is made visible and experienced as such, thereby creating the conditions of a radically democratic ethos? Though this question has been addressed before (Glynos 2003), it has not been examined systematically in the multinational corporate context yet.