

Find Articles in:

All
Business
Reference
Technology
Lifestyle
Newspaper Collection

Business Publications

Global Management. - Review - book review

Organization Studies, Nov, 2000 by Freek Vermeulen

Stewart R. Clegg, Eduardo Ibarra-Colado and Luis Bueno-Rodriquez: Global Management. Universal Theories and Local Realities

1999, London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage. 308 pages.

The issue of the universal applicability of management theory is always sure of sparking a spirited debate. Too often, however, our view of the matter, and consequently any progress in the debate, is blurred and hampered by reproaches of (American) imperialism, in terms of theories of organization, research methodologies, or even -- wandering well off-track -- publication practice. Every now and then, a valiant attempt is made to inspire research that actually explores the universality of management theory itself (e.g. Aharoni and Burton 1994; Boyacigiller and Adler 1991; Hofstede 1983), but this has, with notable exceptions (e.g. Farley and Lehmann 1994; Pennings 1993), seldom moved beyond the point of examining whether or not a certain phenomenon can be detected in two, or perhaps a few, countries. Systematic research into the question of to what extent a theory may or may not be applicable across different settings is regrettably scarce.

Hence the aim of the volume edited by Stewart Clegg, Eduardo IbarraColado, and Luis Bueno-Rodriquez, whose 'main contribution lies in exploring the dichotomy between universalism and locality' (Introduction: 8), is well-chosen. Although I hope (and expect) that it is a continuum rather than a dichotomy, the set-up of the book is logical and promising. It consists of thirteen papers divided into four parts: (1) global myths that changed the world, (2) re-making the world locally, (3) critiquing the global world of management theories, and (4) rethinking values, collaboration and global management as political practices. Although the purpose of the last part was not immediately evident to me, the first three seemed to make sense: first, studies are gathered together that take (allegedly universal) theories as a starting-point, to examine whether they are applicable across different settings (cf. Graham et al. 1994); second, studies are grouped that analyze a local situation, to indicate to what extent 'universal' theories are relevant (cf. Shenkar and Von Glinow 1994); and, subsequently, papers are collected that reflect on global management theory in a general sense (cf. Rosenzweig 1994). The catch of this book, however, is that hardly any of the contributing authors seemed to be aware of the theme of the volume at the time of writing. As a result, the collection and its theme appear rather artificial,

opportunistic, and perhaps ex-post generated. The collective contribution of the hook is therefore difficult to assess.

The first chapter on 'global myths' (Graham Sewell) is a refreshing look at the commonalities of issues such as total quality management, continuous improvement and organizational learning. Chapter 2 (Mills and Hatfield) is a critical view on the expanding use of textbooks in management education, while Chapter 3 (Dunford) attentively addresses the changing role of employment and loyalty in our modern times. Although all these are original and adept, they seem to have little to do with the tension between 'universal theories and local realities' (or with one another for that matter) and, if they do, only subterraneously. Perhaps they could be interpreted as unravelling 'global myths', but surely not with local reality as its key.

The next two chapters deal with 'local realities' by offering interesting in-depth stories on Mexico's deep-rooted struggle with poverty (Soria, Chapter 4) and the current transitional of state the Russian economy (Grancelli, Chapter 5). Both studies could, with some benevolence, be understood as questioning the applicability of capitalist models in their particular setting, although most has to be read between the lines. The results of the next two (empirical) studies, which complete the 'local' part of the volume, seem rather preliminary and enumerative, but they probably come closest to the book's main theme. Couchman and Badham show, in Chapter 6, that 'team-based cellular manufacturing' may have (partly) different manifestations in different countries, while the study by Morris, Lowe, and Wilkinson (Chapter 7) indicates that the role of a supervisor may differ in the British and Mexican subsidiaries of a Japanese firm. As such, the studies picture how characteristics of local circumstances may moderate the practice of declared global phenomena.

'Critiquing the global world of management theories' comprises another three papers. In Chapter 8, Kelemen argues that the (unambiguous) concept of total quality management, in reality, does not exist. It is a socially constructed phenomenon which, consequently, has different meanings at different hierarchical levels in a firm. Moreover, top managers use of it what they want if, and only if, they find it worth their while. As a result, there is no such thing as 'total quality management'. Subsequently, Clegg and Clarke (Chapter 9) look at organizational forms from the heyday of Taylor to the current times of Microsoft, employing an agreeable organizational learning perspective, while Montano, in Chapter 10, (empirically) examines the idea of metaphors in an organization, above all revealing that it is a complicated matter. All three papers certainly have their individual merits, but I could not discover the rationale separating them from the papers in, for instance, Part I of the book, Kelemen seems to be tea ring down a myth all right, while the parallels between Chapters 1 and 9 are evident.