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Is National Culture Still Relevant to Management in a Global Context?
The Case of Switzerland

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ABSTRACT   For over 20 years researchers have urged international managers to take culture into account. Focussing on culture raises the problem of using relevant units of analysis. This article advocates that national cultures should be considered even in the global economic context. First, analysis on the national scale makes sense when it is grounded in a political approach to culture. Second, the relevance of the national level is illustrated by the case of Switzerland. If at first sight, Switzerland is a country with multiple internal cultures and borders, a closer analysis shows that the Swiss people share a common political culture based upon attachment to local communities and institutions, to government through consensus and to conflict solving by resorting to arbitration and pragmatism. In the Swiss case, the article shows that management practices are embedded in national political cultures. Validity of the national political culture approach beyond the Swiss case is examined and implications for managers working in cross-cultural environments are discussed.

KEY WORDS • national cultures • cross-cultural management • Switzerland • myths • political culture

Most research in cross-cultural management uses country-level analyses to study cultures, however as borders and boundaries get blurred with globalization, the relevance of culture at the national level can be questioned. Soderberg (2002) argues that national culture is outdated for dealing with the cultural complexity that transnational companies are facing. Appaduraï (1996) challenges the territorial roots of culture and focuses on global culture flows stemming from the circulation of persons and of mass-mediated images and messages. Lenartowicz and Roth (2001), on the contrary, insist on the increasing cultural diversity of many nations and suggest examining regional cultures. Sackmann and

Philipps (2004) advocate a multiple culture perspective including national, organizational, regional and professional cultures. Obviously, we can study culture at different levels, just as we can adjust the focus of a camera to account for a large landscape or a small detail. Cultural analysis may result in a more or less fine-grained picture, every succeeding focus bringing additional information. The challenge is to define at each level a consistent approach to culture, which may account for what is shared and what is not. This article addresses this challenge at the national level and demonstrates why and when this level is still relevant for managers faced with global business.

The dominant approach to national culture draws on Hofstede's work (1980) and defines it mainly as a set of values and norms, which guide behaviours. Osland and Bird (2000) showed the limits of this definition by shedding light on the 'cultural paradox', pointing out that culture, as a set of values and norms, does not account for the diversity of behaviours within a given cultural group and that generalizations are not reliable since many exceptions are observed. They conclude that a large part of people's behaviour cannot be explained by dominant values or shared perceptions and call for a different definition of culture.

The purpose of this article is to propose an alternative approach to national culture, namely political culture, which accounts for what very different people, in their behaviour and opinions, still share in a given country. This national political culture, which relies on frames of meaning, deeply impacts the dynamics of organizations and should be considered by managers on international assignments as well as those wishing to transfer management practices from one country to another. In the first section of the article the national political culture is defined. Such a culture constitutes a sense-making pattern used by employees to evaluate the legitimacy of management practices. The second section

illustrates the relevance of the national political culture through the case of Switzerland, a country in which I had the opportunity to conduct an ethnographic research for over two months. The Swiss example is particularly demonstrative because at first sight, Switzerland is characterized much more by multiple regional cultures than by cultural unity. The Swiss people themselves underline the diversity of the country and a common culture cannot be expected. When moving away from the traditional views of national culture as shared values and looking at political culture, the cultural unity of diversified countries may appear. The third section shows the relationship between the Swiss political culture and management practices in this country. Finally, the last section moves beyond the Swiss example and looks at the implications of persistent national political cultures for managers in a global world.

National Political Cultures

In this section, I will introduce the concept of national political culture. I borrow from symbolic anthropology the general conceptualization of culture as frames of meaning rather than values. Then, drawing on the work of d'Iribarne et al. (1998), I will focus on particular frames of meaning, which are shared at the national scale, such as ideas about the appropriate way of living together, which make up a political culture. This subset of culture appears to be the most relevant for management. How this approach relates to and differs from other approaches such as institutional theory is also discussed.

In line with Turner (1967), Geertz (1973) and, more generally, symbolic anthropology, culture can be defined as a context of meanings. Indeed this domain of anthropology deals with the following questions: what do institutions or behaviours that may be observed in a given society mean? What can we say about a society through analysing the

logic underlying its speech? For Geertz, culture refers to the meaning of human action. It is a set of references and concepts with which its members give meaning to their experiences. Smircich (1983) was among the first to adopt this symbolic perspective in the field of organization theory. In her approach, culture serves as a sense-making device to interpret daily experience. Behaviour, objects, situations, and even an easily translatable word, are interpreted differently and refer to various social representations in different cultural contexts of meaning (Jankowicz, 1994). This does not mean that within a culture, all the people give exactly the same meaning to a given social situation nor that they act similarly, it rather means that they share some templates and references to make sense of their experience and action, but may use them differently. This explains the cultural paradox raised by Osland and Bird (2000); people socialized in a given society have inherited shared meaning frames but still have room to manoeuvre in mobilizing them.

The symbolic approach could be applied to any cultural level. At the national level, the most significant shared templates for management activities are about the appropriate way to organize social life. Each society is faced with irreducible tensions, such as the need to conciliate individual freedom and social integration, and it develops its own way of managing them. Specific references and practices are mobilized to deal with the contradictions. For instance, in the United States, the notion of contract is widely used for social regulation: it creates some cohesion in social action through defining mutual obligations and at the same time maintains individual freedom because partners willingly enter into contracts and negotiate their content. The contractual regulation enables people to face both the necessity of integrating the contributions of individuals and the fear of each individual not being in control of his or her own destiny. Generally speaking, the references and criteria used to appraise

the legitimacy of the forms of government make up a political culture (d'Iribarne and d'Iribarne, 1999). Companies, like micro human societies, are necessarily affected by these cultural representations of acceptable ways of organizing and regulating social life; they directly entail appropriate ways to exert authority and possible forms of autonomy in work organization (Hickson and Pugh, 1995; Barsoux and Schneider, 2003).

When drawing upon such a definition of culture, the national scale appears to be a relevant unit of analysis because political cultures can be closely related to nation-states. Firstly, the particular forms of social organizations that are dominant in a state could not be maintained if they were not embedded in shared conceptions of appropriate ways of living together (d'Iribarne et al., 1998). Institutions must reflect the widespread understanding of social organizations for fear of being dismantled. For instance, the creation of new states in emerging countries has shown that to import democratic institutions is not enough to ensure the functioning of democracy. Any political system appears to be grounded in a system of references, that is, the specific culture of a given society. And secondly, because these very same national institutions – such as the educational system or the laws – contribute to enforce the conceptions of legitimate ways of living together. They play a part in the socialization process of citizens by conveying cultural representations. This does not mean that individuals are only passive receivers of a culture, which is fully constituted outside themselves. Rather, in a never-ending process, they appropriate the explicit and implicit conceptions embodied by the institutions that surround them.

Among these institutions are the myths that recount how the nation-state was founded; how institutions and laws have been created. Even if they may significantly depart from historical facts, they convey strong symbolic images of what makes up the uniqueness of a country (Eliade, 1963). They

put a special emphasis on the most dreaded danger and the safe issues. Their recurrent pattern entails the interpretation of social events with regards to the opposition between this danger and safety. The exemplary acts of mythical heroes remind the citizens of what is legitimate behaviour in society (Dundes, 1984). Mythical stories sum up a great deal of more or less similar situations and pervasively prescribe the right way to act. The diffusion of these myths allows the community members to share references about appropriate forms of social regulation, in other words, a political culture, and contributes to forge a national cohesiveness.

The political culture approach, presented in this article, differs from the widespread definition of national culture based on values and also from the majority of definitions focused on meanings. Indeed, the latter generally consider culture as shared meanings rather than shared *frames* of meaning, allowing individuals from a cultural group to develop a personal interpretation of a given social situation while referring to basic shared references. For instance, two individuals may strongly argue on whether a given action respects their contract or not, while they share what the concept of contract means.

Institutional theory provides a framework, including a category designed to account for the specific context, which is quite close to the conceptualization of national political culture. Kostova and Roth (2002), drawing on Markus and Zajonc (1985) and Scott (1995), introduce the cognitive component of the institutional context and define it as the cognitive categories 'that influence the way a particular phenomenon is categorized and interpreted' (p. 217). They mention as examples social knowledge and schemata, but do not detail what they mean, nor do they open the black box of 'cognitive categories'. The proposed definition of national political cultures refines the nature of shared references that shape sense-making processes. Furthermore, institutional theory places the

three pillars of the institutional context – regulatory, cognitive and normative institutions – at the same level (Scott, 1995), while I advocate that regulatory and normative institutions are embedded in the frames of meaning. In other words, political culture influences the specific forms that national institutions may take. In summary, the political culture is a set of references that a society has developed and promoted through myths to deal with the tensions it faces and to dismiss the fundamental threats it fears most (d'Iribarne, 2008). As such, it influences sense-making processes at every level of social life, be it political institutions or organizations.

The degree of cultural integration varies from one society to another. If the references underlying appropriate ways of organizing social life are widely shared in a strongly integrated nation-state, it is not necessarily the case in some new nations or less integrated states. However, even nation states that proclaim their diversity may have a national political culture. People, more sensitive to their salient differences, may ignore the cultural references they implicitly share, as in the case of Switzerland. This country was selected for research on cross-cultural teams and I spent over two months observing the management of a multinational team composed of Swiss employees and international assignees. Unexpectedly, I discovered that beyond the diversity of this small country, stressed again and again by the protagonists, a common national political culture still exists and impacts, among others, the conception of quality of Swiss managers.

Is There a 'Swiss Culture'?

In the following section, the diversity of the country is first stressed, suggesting the lack of a strong national culture. However, when turning to myths, Switzerland appears to have a series of vivid stories about the founding of the nation, all well known in Swiss communities. I shall briefly run through these famous

myths and capture the national political culture that they convey.

A Heterogeneous Country

When thinking of Switzerland, diversity and contrasts first come to mind and suggest that one can brush aside the national level and study smaller homogenous units of culture such as the *canton*. Switzerland is divided by various internal borders. The most obvious ones are linguistic borders between French, German and Italian speaking Switzerland. The Swiss people may speak German (74%), French (20%), Italian (4.5%) or Romansh (about 30,000 people) as a mother tongue, all of which have been declared a national language. Furthermore, several local German dialects are spoken. The dialect allows the German speaking population to know where the speaker comes from (Zurich, Bern, etc.). These dialects are far from being endangered languages. Their vitality might partly be explained by the role they play in distinguishing the German Swiss from Germans and foreigners who speak 'good German' (*Hoch deutsch*).

Switzerland is also split between several religions. The geographic distribution of Catholics and Protestants is very complex; Catholic communities are encountered within Protestant territories and vice versa. However, the majority of Catholics is concentrated in French-speaking cantons and the majority of Protestants lives in German-speaking cantons.

The linguistic and religious divisions that split the country are linked to psychological borders. Almost half of the Swiss never go to work in other parts of the country and when they do, they often use the words 'expatriations' or even 'immigrations' to talk about such transfers (Dunant, 1991). The Swiss also like to mention the *'rosti' border* referring to the German Swiss recipe for cooking potatoes.

The administrative division of the country goes much further than the linguistic one: 26 cantons enjoy real state prerogatives.

Indeed, each of them has its own constitution, government, and parliament, makes decision about tax, health, and education policies, dispenses justice, etc. Within each canton, the districts themselves have great powers and, for instance, can decide whether to grant Swiss nationality to foreigners living in their territory or not. Borders separating cantons and districts are not simple administrative divisions; people have a sense of belonging to the canton and identify themselves with it.

Several authors assert that the Swiss diversity derives from geography (Bergier, 1984; De Reynold, 1991). First, because Switzerland is located in the centre of Europe and belongs both to the Germanic world and the Latin world as well as to the Mediterranean and Atlantic Europe. Second, because Switzerland is made up of separated regions; two-thirds of the country is mountainous and difficult communications have encouraged each valley to remain inward looking and to make up a small political community.

This review of Swiss diversity suggests that if we consider culture as customs or as a specific identity, there is nothing like Swiss culture. However, beyond such diversity, shared conceptions of legitimate forms of social organization, that is, a uniform political culture, does exist.

A Shared Political Culture

Part of the Swiss population has its roots in Germany, another part in France and another in Italy. However, what the Swiss have in common is to be at the periphery of their source civilization. They are too far away from their centres of origin to be absorbed by them. These 'peripheral' people are more interested in their autonomy than with a more distant country to which they may be linguistically, religiously or culturally referenced. The Swiss nation progressively constituted itself through the aggregation of small communities attached to local life.

The Myths of Switzerland

The very existence of a nation implies some kind of unity. As happened in other European countries, the image of a unified nation was spread, in the 19th century, to the Swiss population through the diffusion of legendary stories and myths about the foundation of the country. These symbolic stories, still living in the minds of the Swiss people, form part of the perception of a common story and the creation of collective memories. They also reinforce the political culture by underlining the legitimate basis for power and exemplary behaviours, which allow the community to survive. In the following section, the main founding myths are reviewed and the fundamental elements of political culture that they convey are detailed.

According to the popular version of the history of Switzerland, the story starts with the pact signed in 1291. The Swiss confederation would have resulted from the alliance between the 'primitive' cantons, that is Uri, Schwyz and Unterwald. Through this treaty, the 'conspirators' formed a league to defend themselves from the Habsburgs. They promised to help one another and to go to independent arbitration whenever a conflict arose between them. Then, the 'wisest' members of the Confederation were expected to play the mediator's role and solve the conflict in the most effective way, and the other members were to enforce this judgement if ever it came into question (Dunant, 1991, p. 108). Subsequently, Switzerland developed through the addition of new communities to this original core, all motivated by the desire to protect themselves from their powerful neighbours (German Empire, France, etc.).

In fact, the myth does not match history in several respects. Firstly, Switzerland is a new country born out of the 1848 constitution and, until the 19th century, the very existence of the secret pact signed in 1291 was simply ignored. Secondly, the legend is about alliances, which would have willingly been concluded, but the nation was built rather through military conquests, external confrontations but also internal conflicts. For instance, in 1847, the army put down a separatist league formed of several cantons among which were the founding cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwald. Furthermore, the 1848 constitution was designed to prevent other attempts at separation and turned the juxtaposition of free cities and principalities into a confederation of equal cantons. However, as far as political culture is concerned, historical facts are much less important than the myth, which conveys the relationships between cantons as a network of defensive alliances against common enemies. In other words, the cantons combined their forces to remain different and ensure the respect of their peculiarities. Their solidarity was motivated by their autonomy but did not aim at building a superpower. The myth supports the idea that the union enables the protection of the identity of each member. The goal is to remain oneself.

Another well-known founding myth is the story of William Tell. Briefly, Tell was a brave archer who rebelled against the Austrian authorities who occupied the country (at that time, the 'primitive' cantons). Wanting to make his country free, Tell refused to bow to a hat on a perch in the centre of the village which represented the Habsburgs. His sentence was to pierce an apple put on his son's head with one arrow. He easily succeeded but kept another arrow to kill the oppressive bailiff. This was the starting point for the rebellion of the whole people. William Tell embodies the dispenser of justice who freed his country from despotism. He symbolises an ancient national identity based upon insubordination to any foreign authority.

The last myth refers to what is called '*Sonderfall Schweiz*', which means that Switzerland would have a peculiar fate. 'All people have, of course, their own history and each national history has its specificities. The idea that the Swiss history is an exception

to the rule applying to the other European nations supposes a second-degree exception' (Reszler, 1986, p. 67). Dunant (1991) adds that the Swiss are convinced they are different and firmly desire to stay different. The case of Switzerland would be peculiar compared with other modern states because it was constituted to maintain local particularisms rather than to create a powerful unified nation. For De Reynold (1991), the objective of the Confederation is to provide each member with the safety and the forces needed to prevent absorption by external powers and to ensure self development within its own natural frame.

The myth of the peculiar destiny of Switzerland does not only mean that the nation was established against mainstream development but also that the country would enjoy a favoured situation. And this special position would not be accidental but rather earned and deserved.

The review of the myths that tell the story of the founding of the Swiss nation shows the recurrence of the great peril that has to be fought against. The fundamental threat is to be forced submit to the will of an overwhelming power, which may be external but could also be internal to the community. Every person should be allowed a voice and to debate collective decisions ruling the community's life. To protect oneself from this peril imposes maintaining the balance of power and keeping decision makers close to the people affected by the decision. This view encourages protagonists to reach consensus and avoid conflicts from which a third party may benefit.

Some Fundamental Elements of the Swiss Culture

Myths about the country's founding illustrate several fundamental elements of the Swiss political culture. The proposed analysis focuses on:

(1) the human dimension of the community one belongs to,
(2) the tension between the respect of differences and pressure towards equality,
(3) consultation and arbitration procedures,
(4) pragmatism.

The leitmotiv of Swiss myths puts the emphasis on a strong will to maintain small communities, independent from any powerful neighbour eager to absorb them. It also implies their attachment to the human size of the community to which they belong and the importance of proximity in social relationships. The cantons all have their specificities, but the Swiss people share a feeling of belonging to the canton. Citizenship is experienced at this scale. De Rougemont (1989) says that the most effective federating power in Swiss history has been the 'passion to govern oneself'. Swiss federalism relies on independent states that existed before the central power; they created this central power themselves and only granted it limited domains of sovereignty. Because of common interests, the association of cantons does not threaten the primacy of local authorities over the federal ones. The federation serves the cantons and not the reverse. Indeed, the cantons are loosely coupled. In the past, they have helped one another whenever required but have not assimilated one another. Now, the federal level is called up only when the local levels have failed in dealing appropriately with a problem. The Swiss political culture includes mistrust towards centralization or hegemony.

Within the leagues, each unit craves retaining its peculiarities. However, the very existence of the league could not permit that one member become too powerful because it would undermine the basic goal of the league by crushing the others. Paradoxically, the means used to maintain the differences create pressure towards equality. This tension between the rejection of hegemony and the

preservation of peculiarities is part and parcel of the Swiss culture.

The search for equality implies the duty for each individual to behave like the others, which generates mistrust and intolerance towards unusual men and women. Indeed, the organization of political life fosters individual responsibilities but not the emergence of exceptional characters. For Reszler (1986, p. 28), any great person who breaks out of the traditional frame would necessarily stand above the law and create new references, which would inevitably lead to a clash with a tremendous coalition of resisting forces. If soft persuasion does not convince such a person to fall back into line, more dramatic measures may eliminate this prominent personality who holds uncalled for political ambitions. The safety of the community requires that the people behave in conformity with the norms and that all offenders be severely punished. To some extent, the quest for egalitarianism implies strict discipline.

However, egalitarianism does not mean that there is no hierarchy. The process of social integration subtly mixes equality and hierarchy. Firstly, each canton has its aristocrats, but the privileges granted by fortune and birth are restricted to private life and do not play a role in public life. Secondly, the objective stratification of classes is softened by systematic endeavours to reduce its symbolic meaning. Proximity within the community does not alleviate the gaps between the material conditions of people but it reduces the distance that separates them. The relationships between individuals are not based upon their personal status but on interpersonal acknowledgement. Practically, people intermix in local associations or militias that are susceptible to reversing the hierarchy. The multiplication of different hierarchies softens the rigidity of a strongly hierarchical social structure. For de Rougemont (1989), social status and material comfort do not automatically depend on each other, as is the case in many other countries.

The quest for equality legitimates collegial power or the authority of a *primus inter pares*, that necessarily goes through consultation processes before making any decision, as the presidents of the numerous councils ruling Swiss political life actually do. Egalitarianism leads to consensus, endeavours to conciliate views, and search for concord. The myths suggest that it is more effective to make concessions than to start a quarrel from which some external power could benefit. But highly valued harmony does not mean that all opinions converge; opinions precisely diverge because of the coexistence of differences even as the protagonists try hard to conciliate their interests. To succeed, they have to make compromises and to avoid conflicts. When they alone cannot reach an agreement, they resort to external arbitration. Lempen (1985) asserts that the arbitration model is the major contribution of the myth of the alliance settled between the primitive cantons. The arbitration is necessary because in an egalitarian context, conflicts cannot be solved with one part imposing its solution to the other; it implies coming to terms with differences.

Practically, the conciliation of differences can be reached by dint of pragmatism, which constitutes one of the pillars of the Swiss political culture. The search for consensus excludes radicalism both in thoughts or actions (Reszler, 1986). The very constitution of the Federation, aiming at matching union and autonomy, which are essentially contradictory principles, requires pragmatism. Pragmatism means mistrust towards abstract principles and systemic approaches which tend to make positions irreconcilable. The search for compromise implies the abandon of systematic, clear solutions that comply with logic but are untrue to the complex reality, upsetting minorities, and destroying diversities (De Rougemont, 1989). The myths teach that the economy is a better guide than utopia. The step-by-step walk toward consensus depends on practical difficulties encountered in the field, on the interests of the protago-

nists and on the implementation of proven solutions. As far as the process is concerned, the refusal of ideological and radical positions induces discussions without passion and debate. Moderation prevails over the quest for absolute or partisan intransigence and slowness is conceived as the way to avoid brutal, head-on conflicts.

At this point, it is clear that even if Swiss people have a strong feeling of belonging to their district and their canton, they are also attached to the confederation. Switzerland is a community of different people who have a sense of their unity. Any analysis at the local level puts the emphasis on diversity but national cohesion is grounded in a strongly shared political culture. Swiss people all have in common a conception of social life as rooted in local institutions, sustained, wherever required, by federal institutions, which exist to ensure equality between the members. They share the same ideal of government through consensus, dealing with conflicts by resorting to arbitration and guided by pragmatism. These strong references have been developed as effective ways to overcome the fundamental threat of the imposition of external or unrestrained internal powers.

How National Political Cultures Impact Management

In the following section, I show how the Swiss political culture impacts organizational life. Two examples are developed at different levels. The first relates how national political culture and institutions regulate the professional world and details some specificities of Swiss industrial relations. The second analyses the impact of the political culture on management practices as I observed them in a Swiss company. To be more precise, it focuses on quality management – one of the main preoccupations of the teams under study – and demonstrates that these management processes, far from being universal and 'footloose' (Ohmae, 1990), can be understood

within the framework of the Swiss political culture.

The Swiss 'Peace at Work'

The history of social relations in Switzerland reveals a long experience of social dialogue. As early as 1912, some branch agreements forbid the use of classic tools of struggle (workers' strikes, employers' lock outs). In July 1937, employers and the metal industries' union signed an agreement through which they engaged to solve all their eventual conflicts through conciliation or, as a last resort, through the arbitration of a court. Both declared they were ready to find solutions based upon the convergence of their interests. This agreement, known in Switzerland as the 'peace at work', has been a model for similar agreements in other industries.

This compulsory peace, which settled in advance whatever the reasons for future conflicts might be, matches the Swiss political culture described above. It results from the belief that conflicts create prejudice to all and that to look for pragmatic compromises is worth more than to search for the unilateral satisfaction of interests, which generally aggravates conflicts. The convergence of interests is postulated. Indeed, de Rougemont (1989) asserts that the Swiss workers have a conception of life very close to that of their employers. Antagonisms between the classes are not as ideological as elsewhere in Europe. The common denominator of classes could be characterized by a general tendency to prefer immediate effectiveness to partisan claims, practical solutions to logical systems and complex compromises to costly unilateral triumphs.

The clauses of the 'peace at work' also stem from the arbitration procedure set up in the 1291 pact between the founding cantons. Arbitration solves the conflict and the neutrality of the arbiter ensures that both parties are equally treated.

The 'peace at work' is not only an anecdote in the history of social relations. The low

occurrence of work conflicts is Switzerland shows that the spirit of peace at work is actually implemented. Between 1955 and 1985, the average number of working days lost was 2.1 per thousand workers per year, while it was 19.7 in Austria and 77.5 in Japan, two countries famous for their social consensus (Dunant, 1991). There have even been whole years without any strike in Switzerland. The quest for consensus, which constitutes one of the pillars of the Swiss political culture, has here one of its concrete expressions.

The analysis of the relationship between the structure and the dynamics of institutions ruling social relations can be illustrated through other examples. For instance, I could show how the preference for local government compared to federal institutions – in others words subsidiarity – inspires the organizational design of the Swiss trade unions. But the point is not to go through all the institutions peculiar to the Swiss working world but to show how they relate to the national culture.

Quality Management

The dynamics of companies is underlain, as those of national institutions, by contexts of meaning and, particularly, the political culture of their members. Management consists of making men and women work together on a collective project; it is a political activity. People cannot work together successfully if they do not share some basic conceptions of justice, human dignity, equality, liberty, and social order (d'Iribarne, 2000). To demonstrate this link between management processes and political cultures, I examine quality management in an engineering company in Switzerland. Participant observation in this company, which lasted for more than two months, allowed me to unveil the conceptions of quality held by personnel, mainly composed of engineers and technicians.

The company works in the electrical engineering industry and designs, manufactures, supplies and services systems for the power generation sector. At the time of the research, the teams were designing a power plant to make a tender for an Asian customer. This work includes choosing appropriate components (i.e. electrical products, control systems) and optimizing the whole plant design. Discussions among employees to make choices about the turnkey project reveal their conceptions of quality. In the Swiss employees' speech, quality first relies on technical aspects of the products; it is associated with high standard supplies and up-market components. Performance of the state-of-the-art materials is evaluated through its reliability. Quality refers to the consideration granted not only to the core solution but to every detail, whether it be the precision of the final product – the painting of the plant for example – or the respect of rules in the working process itself (clear organization of the working place, clean presentation of working documents about the project, etc.).

This conception of technical quality aligns with a particular conception of working relationships. Indeed, to fashion the product in the finest details ideally results from the careful coordination of a number of specialists (electrical engineers, civil engineers, project managers, marketing managers) precisely in charge of these details. Each of them contributes to the common work through a good performance in her or his sphere of competence. Thus, the quality of the product is intricately related to the fine-tuned dialogue between all the actors. For instance, the choices made by electrical engineers about the components and their integration constrain civil engineering of the plant. The necessary integration should not lead to centralized decision making. The elaborated division of responsibilities gives everybody a large autonomy within her or his domain in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity. The local art of quality is an art of small movements ruling larger ones. Decisions have to be made at a level as close as possible to the execution level, and when it is not the case, regrets are expressed: 'we have lost our autonomy,

our power of decision . . . we cannot work in an independent way. I do not mean that the decisions made are necessarily bad, but they are not made here' said a public relations manager. This quotation demonstrates that the decision-maker is as much important as the content of the decision. Each person involved expects to be consulted and this is how a foreign managing director experiences it: 'Things go very slowly because everyone at all levels has something to say. One cannot decide alone, there are plenty of actors. We continually hear: "we were not consulted!"'

Of course, to reach a consensus, or to make local decisions match, is not an automatic process and that is why many endeavours to make pragmatic arrangements are deployed. The duty to strive for common benefits beyond the immediate divergence of interests is mentioned by a German-speaking Swiss in these terms: 'there is no situation in which collaboration is not possible. Each person tries hard to help'. When no interpersonal agreement can be reached, the procedure implemented consists in asking for arbitration by one's superiors, who consider their intercession to be a last resort. 'To surmount the difficulties, I make the decision. What else do you want me to do?' asks a department head. But even when he is called upon, he hesitates in taking advantage of his managerial prerogatives and consults others: 'The department heads discuss the decision together'.

Peaceful relationships that the employees are looking for do not exclusively concern collaboration within the company. They are also expected in relationships with customers. In this sense, the reliable material makes a good quality product because it protects from customers' claims and avoids disruption of business relations. This point is illustrated by the following quotation from another head of department: 'We have some very good products . . . the lack of disputes with customers proves it. We have never had any court trial'.

This example shows how the conceptions of quality shared by Swiss personnel in this company are not merely technical, but are also inspired by political notions of legitimate ways to work together. The quality management process relies on some basic elements of the Swiss political culture such as subsidiarity, the conciliation of particular interests, the arbitration process and the quest for social harmony. Such findings confirm and extend the findings of Yavas and Rezayat's study (2003) indicating that cultural variables should be considered to explain differences in managerial perceptions of quality by providing a detailed analysis of one national political culture and the related conceptions of quality.

The Implications of National Political Cultures for Managers Beyond the Case of Switzerland

In this last section, I first point to the exemplary nature of the Swiss case and discuss the possible generalization of the unity of a national political culture in heterogeneous states. Second, implications for managers working in cross–cultural contexts are drawn.

Switzerland is representative of nation-states that have a diversified population including several minorities and a long history of internal stability, which has enabled them to build shared institutions. The point is not to deny the differences that people themselves hold to but to underline the fact that if culture is not defined as shared identities, values, practices and meanings but as shared references on the right way to organize social life, unexpected cultural unity emerges. People socialized in a given society use these cultural references differently though they are all impregnated with them. Obvious variations concerning habits or behaviours tend to conceal invisible shared frames of meaning such as the Swiss reference to subsidiarity. Shared views of appropriate social regulations derive from the fundamental fear that each society strives to avert.

> When accumulating investigations on the way, in a given society, actors give meaning to social life, and specifically those working within an organization give meaning to what they experience, an element of unity appears. What we find in an underlying worry, the fear of a specific peril and the search for salvation ways making an escape possible from this very peril. (d'Iribarne, 2007, p. 4)

This unity also appears in heterogeneous countries as long as their institutions have been stable enough to diffuse a collective imaginary. Therefore the case of Switzerland is not unique. Diverse countries, some much bigger than Switzerland, such as China, India or the United States, where there are large minorities, also share a political culture. As mentioned before, in the United States, the political culture is rooted in the fear of losing control of one's destiny. The contractual regulations, since the first founding social contract signed by the Pilgrims Fathers on the Mayflower, appears as a way to ensure that individuals are not obliged to obey rules they have not signed (D'iribrane, 2008). In China, the common culture stems from the fear of chaos and disorder, the search for the best way forward and tends to foster a strong central authority that imposes social order (Jullien, 1995). In India, the entire social life is influenced by the fear of impurity. All social classifications, including the famous castes, are marked by the fundamental opposition between purity and impurity (Kakar and Kakar, 2007). In each of these countries, such a common culture is not incompatible with a variety of opinions and practices in the society in general and in companies in particular. Furthermore, practices change more or less rapidly, for instance many Indian political leaders fight against the caste system and will hopefully overcome it, however, d'Iribarne (2007, p. 4) suggests that 'this fear, and the means of assuaging it, provides a shared and remarkably stable framework for sense-making over time'. Thus, a national political culture should be expected in every nation-state with a long-standing internal stability

and time-honoured institutions. Reciprocally, new states with recent borders and institutions, like the new European countries in the Balkans, may not have this unity.

National political cultures are of interest to managers in several respects. Two cross-cultural situations in organizations especially call for cultural understanding: international assignees who have to manage local employees and managers in charge of cross-cultural transfer of management practices. In both cases, managers have to find out about behaviours or to design tools that not only respect legal constraints but also fit the cultural context. For instance, in the teams studied in Switzerland, quality management became problematic when French engineers advocated an approach which insisted more on the global consistency of the products than on the meticulous contribution of individuals. The global overview induced a hierarchy of problems to be addressed and the sacrifice of some details, which were not consistent with the subsidiarity principle deeply-rooted in the Swiss culture. However, in accordance with the definition of political culture, it does not mean that managers should strictly conform to local ways of doing things. Rather, culture allows uncommon behaviours and innovation in practices, as long as they do not collide with the fundamental references and revive the most feared threat. When culture is not defined as shared practices but as a frame of meaning, changes in social practices including management are not incompatible with the stability of culture. A given frame of meaning does not impose deterministically ways of action as is demonstrated by successful international transfers of management practices. However, to become acceptable, new practices should be reassuring considering the basic fear of the society. In the Swiss case, it means that quality management should not rely on a centralized approach but rather coordinate the involvement of every stakeholder. Management practices that might evoke the imposition of an external

power on the local working community are bound to be rejected. Drawing on the Swiss example, it becomes clear that international managers must be aware of the national political culture, defined as the most feared threat and the references people have developed to avert it. Knowing this does not make up a practical guide of appropriate behaviour in a given country that managers in search of efficient recipes usually strive for. Developing knowledge of national political cultures is more difficult than applying lists of do's and dont's, but more powerful. It provides a key element for interpreting social practices and meanings and, unlike directive guides, leaves room for innovation. New practices may be implemented with great success whenever they contribute to avoiding the implicit peril at the heart of the political culture.

Conclusion

Research on cultures and management has been criticized for not being able to adequately account for individual differences or organizational choices. It tends to provide generalizations that are too deterministic and stereotypes that do not shed light on many specific situations. Furthermore, globalization would sweep away most of the former local particularities, especially in multinational corporations, which are at the forefront of the internationalization process. However, observers of the global picture and those who make cross-country comparisons are bound to see resistance in the standardization process. For instance, some cross-cultural transfers of management practices turn into 'ceremonial adoption' rather than effective implementation (Kostova and Roth, 2002). The point is to identify the phenomenon that resists globalization. The tenets of institutional theory have advocated the pressure of local institutions for 'isomorphism'. This article moves forward by opening the black box of cultural constraints that shape management practices. It proposes an alter-

native approach to culture – the concept of national political culture – which reveals how each country develops references as ways of struggling against the shared threat most feared by community members. Being aware of this fundamental fear and the associated references of collaborators can help all managers working in cross-cultural environments. It does not provide strict guidelines for actions but bestows on them a key knowledge to appraise the legitimacy of the management practices they are trying to implement.

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Résumé

La culture nationale est-elle toujours pertinente pour le management dans un contexte mondial? Le cas de la Suisse (Sylvie Chevrier)

Voici plus de vingt ans que les chercheurs disent aux dirigeants internationaux de prendre la culture en compte. Ce centrage sur la culture soulève le problème de l'utilisation d'unités d'analyse pertinentes. Cet article prétend qu'il est nécessaire de tenir compte des cultures nationales, même dans le contexte économique mondial. Tout d'abord, l'analyse de l'échelle nationale a un sens lorsqu'elle s'appuie sur une approche politique de la culture. En un second lieu, la pertinence de la dimension nationale est illustrée avec le cas de la Suisse. Si la Suisse semble tout d'abord un pays aux multiples cultures et frontières internes, une analyse plus fine montre que les Suisses partagent une culture politique commune fondée sur l'attachement aux institutions et communautés locales, à un système de gouvernement consensuel, et à la résolution des conflits par arbitrage et pragmatisme. Dans le cas de la Suisse, l'article montre que les pratiques managerielles sont ancrées dans les cultures politiques nationales. La validité de l'approche de la culture politique nationale pour des cas autres que celui de la Suisse est étudiée et les implications pour les managers travaillant dans des environnements transculturels sont examinées.

摘要

民族文化仍然与全球化情境中的管理相关吗？以瑞士为例

Sylvie Chevrier

二十多年来，学者们一直敦促国际管理者要考虑文化的因素。关注文化就产生了使用相关分析单位的问题。本文主张，即便是在全球化经济情境中，也要考虑国别文化。首先，当在国家范围内的分析是以一种政治方式探讨文化时，那这种分析就是有意义的；其次，国家层次的相关性通过瑞士的例子加以阐述。乍一看，瑞士是一个有着多重内部文化和国界的国家，但更进一步的分析表明，瑞士人民是分享着一种共同的政治文化，这种文化是基于对当地社区和机构的拥护、对通过共识来进行治理的拥护、对通过仲裁和实用主义来解决冲突的拥护。通过对瑞士这个案例的分析，本文提出，管理实践是嵌入民族政治文化中的。本文还检验了除瑞士以外的民族政治文化方式的有效性，并且讨论了对于在跨文化环境中工作的管理者的启示。