

Anthropology Book Forum

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Business Culture and Rediscovery of Difference

Review by Anastasia Krutikova

Andrew Orta. 2019. *Making Global MBAs. The Culture of Business and the Business of Culture*. Oakland: University of California Press, pp. 256 ISBN: 9780520325401

Key words: business culture, capitalism, MBA, globalization, difference

It seemed a generation ago that, with the triumph of capitalism, the world had come to the "end of history,"ⁱ marked by standardization of global markets and the imminent end of local specificity. Today, however, the trend seems to be reversed - not only have local differences not disappeared from the global space of capitalism, but they have been getting more attention from international business scholars and managers. Andrew Orta aptly calls this trend the "re-enchantment of the local" (7). His book *Making Global MBAs* tells the story of this "reimagining of global space as a space of difference" (2) and paints a convincing portrait of the managerial subject who is best prepared to manage risks and opportunities in this new space. To this end, the author explores MBA programs as one of the key places that both produce and reflect the business culture in the United States. Each of the seven chapters of the book focuses on a specific aspect of MBA education, ranging from its history and ethnographic accounts of students' daily experiences to detailed descriptions of the curriculum designed to prepare students to do business abroad. Together they provide a comprehensive overview of the business culture in the United States and its basic assumptions about the world.

The first introductory chapter includes important background information about the shift in perception of foreign space and culture that has taken place in U.S. business circles and the social sciences over the past few decades. The chapter elaborates on how the idea that "managers of the 21st-century capitalism will necessarily engage a world at once rife and rich with

difference" (6) has become conventional wisdom and an expected outcome of the MBA training path. The second part of the chapter introduces the author's ten years of fieldwork in a dozen distinguished MBA programs.

Chapter 2 describes the main features of MBA programs and their meaning for students' professional future. The author highlights the challenges associated with the huge flow of information and the fast pace of educational and extracurricular activities that saturate the MBA training. He carefully examines its most salient features, including fundamental concepts of capitalism such as *market*, *risk* or *value*, language patterns and common ways of presenting data in MBA classes that reveal basic assumptions about business practice. The main argument of this chapter is that MBA training, designed as a ritual of professional socialization, offers students much more than technical knowledge in several core disciplines, but also a set of experiences and claims about the world through which students come to embody "a theoretical representation of contemporary capitalism" (29).

The historical overview in Chapter 3 reviews origins of business education and its struggle for legitimacy in academic circles in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by its exponential growth after World War II and the redefinition of the manager as an "engineer of social relations" and a "new American cultural type" (76). The chapter concludes with a section on the evolution of the international component of MBA programs, which recalls the process of rediscovery of global space among business scholars throughout the twentieth century. Introducing the milestones and key personalities that have shaped this field, the author demystifies business education. The chapter could, however, benefit from a more elaborate description of the links between the evolution of MBA programs and the broader historical context.

Chapter 4 looks into the MBA conception of culture. It provides a subtle comparison between anthropological and business framings of cultural difference, highlighting the similarities and connections between them. This chapter brilliantly illustrates how anthropological concepts can be borrowed and creatively accommodated by other disciplines. Examining the ideas of major business theorists on cultural differences, Geert Hofstede and Pankaj Ghemawat - both mandatory references in the MBA international business classes - the author underscores the specificity and implications of a business understanding of culture in terms of distance and resources, risk and opportunity.

The following chapters contain ethnographic descriptions of two signature components of MBA international business curriculum. The author first examines short-term study abroad trips, which take the form of "carefully staged international experiences" (129). He turns next to the case study teaching method, describing it as a "quasi-ethnographic simulation of the world and [...] manager's engagement with its uncertainties" (24). These examples immerse the reader further into the MBA education routine. Along with this, by giving voice to teachers and students, the author demonstrates how business assumptions about culture and global space shape their learning experiences and professional future.

The closing chapter offers author's reflections on MBA training in light of two trends that have recently marked global capitalism and that coincided with his fieldwork: the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008-9 on MBA curriculum and the resurgence of populist governments and antiglobalist movements around the world. The concluding remark describes these trends as consistent with the general trend of the rescaling of global space and rediscovery of difference, emphasized throughout the book.

In the subtitle of his book, Andrew Orta promises to introduce the reader to "the culture of business and the business of culture," and he indeed keeps this promise. Through generous descriptions of the environment, rituals and experiences that MBA students encounter during their training, the author paints a fascinating cultural portrait of future middle and senior managers as key players in global business. Furthermore, the reader finds an insightful analysis of how these managers learn to conceptualize and cope with cultural differences in the 21st century. This is one of the few studies that explore both content and production of knowledge about culture and demystify managers whose practices and understanding of culture, difference, risk and opportunity shape the lives of many people around the world. The book will be a valuable reference to anthropologists interested in education and business culture.

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ⁱ The expression refers to Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.