

Working Across Cultures

By: John Hooker

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Being book review editor has some little pleasures that come along with the work. One such pleasure has been "Working Across Cultures" by John Hooker. My eyes immediately caught the title of chapter six: "Germany and Denmark". How dare he lump these two countries together?

The chapter starts "While waiting in the Hamburg Altona station to board a German train to Denmark, I studied the passengers on the platform ... about half were Danish and half German, and it was clear who was who." This immediately sounded familiar as the train from Hamburg to Denmark is, literally speaking, connecting me as resident in Denmark with my parents' home in Germany. Well, rather than lumping similar countries together, the author spotted subtle but important differences, and makes his observations pointedly and amusingly. While I may disagree that travellers' clothes are that different, he is definitely spot on many other subtle details. As my colleague and fellow Danish resident with German passport likes to put it: "Each time I cross the border to Denmark, I convert from "Herr Professor Dr Ritter" to "Thomas".

Beyond the anecdotes, the chapter provides a very knowledgeable introduction to European cultures going beyond the visible behaviours to the underlying cultural traits and history. The author has apparently spent considerable time in both Denmark and Germany, and provides real live insights. From this he derives very useful practical advice for anyone coming to do business. Naturally there are minor lapses as societies changes, and on other issues my interpretation would be different. But in an overall very knowledgeable chapter it would be picky to list the errors. However, I would have liked to see some more systematic comparisons, which might have pointed out that in many less talked about aspects, the two countries are very similar: from emphasis on punctuality, engineering culture to the separation of business and private spheres and welfare state.

But, let's start at the beginning – as readers grounded in monochromic cultures presumably would prefer. John Hooker has set himself the ambitious task to "prepare Western professionals for otherness of other cultures" (p. 2). With a solid grounding in cultural anthropology, he aims to provide an intellectual grounding as well as practical advice for managers confronted with cross-cultural management tasks. He largely succeeds. Moreover, his comprehensive treatment of the topic also provides a highly readable overview of the key literature, and thus a starting point for thinking about future directions for research.

The book reflects the author's rich personal experience in a variety of quite different countries, which enables him to connect theoretical lines of reasoning with personal examples and in-depth discussion of selected countries. This interconnectivity of the theoretical and the practical issues are the main strength of the book. The author apparently uses the book in his own executive or MBA teaching, but it is not written in textbook style. Rather, the book is accessible to broad

audience, though for a long-distance flight it is a bit too heavy (intellectually as well as weight).

While most authors prefer to separate the theoretical and empirical parts of their study, Hooker chose to introduce some theoretical ideas, and then discuss some countries applying the concepts introduced, before continuing with another bloc of more theoretical material. In this case, this structure works well, because interest in new issues is stimulated by the cases of very diverse (sets of) countries: Mexico, “Germany and Denmark”, China, India, “The West”, “Turkey and Islam”, Zimbabwe.

Hooker starts from the premise that culture is a complex phenomenon that can be approached from many complementary angles, but that probably can never be fully understood. Thus, he provides many insights, but not a unifying framework that would allow managers to analyse their cross-cultural management concerns. The issues in the first bloc of conceptual chapters are key dimensions of “space, time and context”, “culture and prosperity” and “what is culture?”. This bloc outlines Hooker’s understanding of culture, and why it is important for economic performance and cross-cultural interactions.

The second bloc of theoretical chapters introduces key concepts developed in the literature in “classification of cultures” and “culture and stress”. Hooker argues that crucial distinctions between cultures arise from the different mechanisms used to handle stress, that is how humans manage to their lives in view of the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the environment. This theme is explored in the country chapters to pinpoint unique cultural characteristics of the country concerned.

The book concludes with chapters on “cross-cultural ethics” and on “the United States and Multiculturalism”. Having recently struggled with how to teach specific issues of cross-cultural ethics in an international management class, such as corruption, sweatshop labour and the environmental “race to the bottom”, in the classroom, I found the ethics chapter rather philosophical and of little practical value.

A major strength of this book is that, based on his diverse international experience, the author succeeds to a high degree in overcoming the natural bias of most humans to see the world from the perspective of their own culture. Thus, his discussion is multifaceted, and offers interesting broad perspectives as well as detailed insights.

I can recommend the book to both scholars of cross-cultural management and managers facing cross-cultural management challenges. The book is informative as well as readable and amusing. We had a good laugh – sorry to spoil your stereotypes.

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