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Romanian cultural background and its relevance for cross-cultural management – A Comment

Mihaela Kelemen

The paper engages with a difficult and controversial subject, that of national and organisational culture. The authors take the view that culture could explain why individuals behave in certain ways and therefore, an understanding of national and organisational culture could assist international companies which have invested or intend to invest in Romania. The authors have adopted Lucian Blaga's cultural audit system (1943, 1944, 1946) which posits that cultural form (style) gives meaning to cultural values (content). An exploration of the relationship between cultural form and content would have been useful here, particularly in order to clarify the assertion made that cultures differ not so much in their content as they do in their form. Nevertheless, the contribution of Catana and Catana should not be understated: they are, to my knowledge, among the first authors who have drawn upon Blaga's cultural framework to explore Romanian culture in relation to cross-cultural management.

Following a discussion of the various elements that make up Blaga's cultural style, the authors proceed to map out the 'stylistic matrix' of the Romanian national culture. Based on this matrix they highlight the positive cultural features of the Romanian people as well as some of the negatives. It is interesting to note that they also provide a short critique of their own taxonomy suggesting that it is a subjective construction and indeed a simplification of reality. These are two important points that could have been pursued further by the authors. Instead they return to making statements which are rather deterministic and universalistic. For example, they argue, in line with Hofstede's (1980) position, that 'one thing is certain, namely that national cultural values are stable constructs, having strong historical roots'.

While one cannot dispute that cultural values have historical roots, the view that they are fixed, immutable constructs begs further questioning. Many authors regard cultural values as dynamic: they are affected by and affect in significant ways what goes on in the rest of the society, for example, in the economic, political and social spheres (Kelemen, 1999). For example, traditional peasant values characterising Romania at the beginning of the century (Harsanyi, 1993) had to be re-defined in the light of the political, economic and social changes brought about by the communist regime. More recently, communist values have been challenged and partially displaced. Indeed, the transition to a market

economy emphasises individual responsibility, achievement and difference rather than equality and collective goals.

Going back to Blaga's framework, it becomes clearer the elements of the Romanian 'cultural style' are malleable and changing rather than fixed constructs which embody and reflect the 'essence' of the Romanian culture. The stylistic matrix developed by the authors is however useful, at least in heuristic terms, for it draws our attention to important features of Romanian culture (i.e., Romanians' perceptions of space and time, their attitudes towards values and so on). But such features are in constant flux and transformation and any attempt to fix them can only result in a picture that over-simplifies the complex socially constructed reality. Nevertheless, thinking about these features could help foreign investors to understand better the sort of 'identity work' that goes into the constitution of Romanian culture. Based on such understanding, foreign companies could become more successful in managing human resources and dealing with the overall business culture.

The paper moves on to present the 'features of Romanian managers which are deeply rooted in the stylistic matrix'. Such features are also based on prior empirical research that has been carried out by the two authors. The paper concludes with a list of seven features of Romanian managers. The authors suggest, for example, that Romanians do not appreciate money and material goods (due to historical and religious causes), and yet Romanian managers pay attention to fashionable clothes and are sensitive to visualising brands. In my view, the transition to a market economy has accentuated the importance of acquiring material goods and money. In the market economy, the act of consumption has become a powerful factor in the constitution of individual identity (one is what one consumes). This may explain why managers use their material possessions as ways of 'behavioural communication'.

The authors also make the points that 'Romanians appreciate women a lot', that 'family life is separated from business relationships' and that 'Romanians are very religious'. In what follows, I would like to deconstruct these three assertions. Firstly, women hold a marginalised position and have a limited role in the Romanian society (Hausleiner, 1993). The Romanian society is still a patriarchal one: most organisations and state institutions are run by men for men and women issues are not part of the agenda. Womanhood is typically associated with images of motherhood, emotionality and bodily functions while maleness is associated with rationality and self-restraint, values which are deemed absolutely necessary in the organisational world. The Romanian language in use is itself sexist: when talking or writing about managers for example, Romanians use the pronoun he rather than she (and the paper reviewed here is no exception, see the reference made to the fact the 'foreign *businessmen* have to understand Romanian culture'). Thus, one could argue that women's characteristics are

valued but only to the extent they can be circumscribed to male logic and assessed against a male benchmark.

The second assumption, regarding the fact that family and business lives are kept separate, needs also some unpacking. First of all, the manager is under tremendous pressure to employ his/her immediate and extended family (Kelemen and Gardiner, 1999) and in most cases he/she does so. Moreover, given that at the moment the number of family businesses is on the rise (more than 250,000 in 1997)¹, the divisions between work and family life are becoming more and more blurred at least in this economic sector. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for Romanian managers and entrepreneurs to strike deals outside the work environment, in the informal family environment. Thirdly, the view that Romanians are very religious is again debatable. Perhaps some of them are, but there is also a large proportion of population who does not believe or is agnostic. More importantly, if Orthodoxism defines the essence of being Romanian, how about those, more than 2 million, Romanians who are Catholic or Reformed?

Such questioning does not aim at reducing the value of this paper. I have very much enjoyed the intellectual challenge provided by the authors and the fact that I have engaged so seriously with their paper should be read as a sign of respect for their work. Once again, their contribution to the field of cultural studies is important and more researchers should be following their example in using 'local' theoretical frameworks to unpack 'local' social phenomena.

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¹ According to The Annual Report on The Private Sector of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in Romania, published by the Government of Romania)

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