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# What You See is What You Get? Images of Central and Eastern Europe in Managerial Discourses Since 1990

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This article analyzes the images of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) circulating in the business community at the turn of the twenty-first century. It suggests that a mere stocktaking of Western perceptions of “the East” is not enough, arguing that CEE images in post–Cold War managerial discourses should be analyzed in respect to both their cultural embeddedness and their epistemological function. The article’s methodological approach combines poststructuralist discourse analysis with imagological theories to reconstruct the images of CEE. As such, the article aims at an analysis of managerial meta-discourses and the premises and assumptions that generated them.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, management journals, managerial discourses, publications

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Cold War empire, Western managers began to debate the business options opening up in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)—the former socialist countries of the Eastern “bloc” in Europe. In trying to assess the possible success of direct investment, joint ventures, and business takeovers, Western business elites reflected on the character and direction of the historic transformations underway, described CEE business practices and habits, analyzed the national cultures and characters in this region of the world, and tried to predict the future course of economic development there. These debates were tied inseparably to the questions of how to apply Western corporate leadership and governance to the transitional economies of the former Eastern bloc, what Western businesses and managers could do to engineer the economic, political, and cultural changes there, and how to define the social responsibility of corporations in this process.

While these debates were scientific insofar as they took place in the framework of international business (IB) theories, drew on empirical data, and were published in scholarly journals

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read by the community of academics, they were not exclusively generated from a scientific quest for “facts” and “knowledge.” Rather, the representation of CEE realities in these academic journals was structured, informed, and shaped by culturally embedded images and stereotypes about CEE, some of them centuries old. At the same time, the representations of CEE reality were inextricably linked to images of “the West” and preconceived notions of “Western identity.” Thus, in debating the economic chances in CEE and defining the role(s) of Western businesses in the economic transition process, Western managers were not only constructing outside views on CEE business and management, they were also, in one and the same process, describing themselves and their own managerial culture. In short, in assessing the business options in CEE, Western managers were not only constructing a CEE “other,” they were also imagining “the West” as a coherent cultural entity. In the course of this highly complex communicative process, the key theoretical and practical concepts of Western free-market capitalism, such as entrepreneurship and competition, incentive and accountability, efficiency, and quality, were taken for granted. The premises and cultural embeddedness of IB theory and practices were not problematized.

Drawing on a systematic close reading of all the relevant articles published in two leading management journals since 1990 (*Academy of Management Executive*, *Academy of Management Journal*), plus a selection of articles from the *European Management Journal*, we analyze, in the present article, the images of CEE circulating in the business community at the turn of the twenty-first century. In doing so, we investigate the following questions:

1. What images of CEE can be identified in the managerial discourses? What are their central elements? What are the recurring patterns in Western perceptions of the CEE other?
2. Which concepts and core values of IB theory and practice help generate these images, and which notions of Western business identity are written into the managerial images of CEE?
3. How do the images of CEE serve as arguments for certain business strategies pursued in CEE? How do they inform the business practices of Western companies in the former Eastern bloc?

We suggest that a descriptive reconstruction of the images of CEE articles studied, and a mere stocktaking of Western perceptions of the East, is not enough. Rather, we argue, the images should be analyzed in both their cultural embeddedness and their epistemological function for the construction of knowledge about CEE in the post–Cold War managerial world. The discursive creation of mental maps and their positioning of CEE shaped the way in which Western businesses acted in post–Cold War CEE contexts in many respects. By investigating the function of the images of CEE in the processes of managerial meaning-making from 1990 to the present, the present article aims at an analysis of managerial meta-discourses and the premises and assumptions that generated and structured them.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This article takes a cultural approach to IB theory and practice, capitalizing on recent theoretical developments inspired by the cultural turn in the humanities (Bachmann-Medick 2009; Bogards

2010; Burke 2004; Maurer 2008). The concept of a cultural turn refers to a wide variety of theories, conceptual frameworks, and approaches that are used differently in different academic disciplines for different purposes and to different effects. Yet, as different as they may be, all these cultural approaches, in one way or another, are interested in the genesis and transformation of culturally constructed systems of knowledge and processes of meaning-making that, in providing for an orientation vis-à-vis the world, structure social practices and motivate human behavior. As such, many approaches in the field of cultural studies are deeply indebted to a sociology of knowledge and the “social construction of reality” as laid down by Alfred Schütz (1979/1984) and by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966).

Not surprisingly, recent cultural approaches have put great emphasis on social communication as the generator of meaning- and knowledge systems. By *social communication*, we mean that set of communicative practices through which social groups reach an understanding about who they are and who they want to be, who belongs to them and who does not, what they hold to be “good” and “bad,” what they like and what they do not like (Depkat 2003, 2014). These debates emerge from the highly controversial and interest-driven quests of social groups to interpret the world they live in as meaningful, and this, in turn, is a condition of the possibility to act “meaningfully” in the world in the first place. Cultural approaches, therefore, conceptualize the relationship between knowledge and behavior as inherently cyclical insofar as socially constructed systems of meaning trigger and motivate certain behavior, while, at the same time, they see these systems of meaning as the result of time- and culture-specific sets of social practices that serve to either stabilize or destabilize the system of meaning enveloping them.

There are, of course, many theoretical approaches to the study of social communication, ranging from Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory to Jürgen Habermas’s hermeneutic approach, which introduced *Lebenswelt* (“lifeworld”) as a communicative paradigm (Habermas 1981; Luhman 1984, 1997). However, to analyze the communicative functions of images of CEE for the construction of knowledge about the CEE region in the managerial debates since the Cold War, this article combines critical discourse analysis, inspired by the philosophical work of Michel Foucault, with imagological theories originating in the field of literary studies.

Discourse analysis, which is widely identified with the work of the poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, is not a method per se but a set of epistemological premises and philosophical concepts that define how we analyze forms of speech (Foucault 1969, 1971; Howarth 2000; Landwehr 2009; Mills 2010; Sarasin 2003). It takes the materiality of language as the point of analytical departure, and proceeds to the institutional, political, social, and economic conditions of the possibility of making concrete statements in specific historical contexts. Understanding discourse as an institutionalized form of speech, discourse analysis is interested in the actual use of words on the textual surface, and strives to unearth the order, regularities, and rules of language usage, which, however, are defined not just grammatically but also socially, institutionally, and historically.

Discourse analysis is never interested only in one single statement; it is concerned with the relation of one statement to other statements and to the power-driven social practices that let the statements surface in the first place. Always starting with the concrete usage of words and other nonverbal signs on the surface level, discourse analysis moves on to reflect individual statements as integral parts of a larger discursive constellation as carrier of knowledge of the time. A discourse, therefore, is understood to be a time-specific configuration of interconnected

statements, verbal and nonverbal in nature, that carry strands of the socially constructed knowledge of a certain social group at a certain time.

In this context, a key issue of discourse analysis is the relationship among knowledge, truth, and social power, which it sees as inherently cyclical. On the one hand, the discourses of any given time are understood to be power-driven, which means that knowledge always has a social base, and is, therefore, not removed from the interests, perceptions, and cultural conditioning of the actors involved in a discourse. On the other hand, and this goes way beyond the Marxist *Überbau-Unterbau* concept of ideology as “false consciousness” veiling the material base of power relationships, discourses are seen not only as “mirroring” social power relationships but also as actually producing them by defining what is true and false, what is right and wrong, what is normal and deviant.

As such, a discourse, in the eyes of discourse analysts, is a social fact in and of itself, subordinating the participants in the discourse to rules and regularities defining what can be said in a certain context, and, just as important, who can say it. Discourse analysis thus does away with the notion of the autonomous communicative subject, and replaces it with two new categories, namely, the *dispositif* and the archive. While the archive is the system of rules and regulations defining the inner order of a discourse, the *dispositif* is the apparatus of institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms that connects the various actors and elements to form a discourse. Foucault defines the *dispositif* as a

thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. . . . The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault 1980, 194)

Continuously interacting, archive and *dispositif* regulate what can and cannot be said at a given time in a certain politico-social context. A discourse analysis centering on the categories of archive and *dispositif*, therefore, will not primarily be interested in the content and the subjective meaning of statements and their relationship to some outer reality, but rather it will analyze the surfacing of statements in a certain place at a given time in their regularity and power-driven historical condition of possibility.

Discourse analysis opens up a new take on the analysis of images about other countries and cultures. It suggests that they should no longer be analyzed primarily in terms of how “realistic” they are—how much they are in keeping with the “realities” in the countries and cultures they describe. While this does not mean that one should stop asking such questions altogether, discourse analysis encourages us to take the study of images further, to identify their communicative function for the social construction of reality. The present article, therefore, complements discourse analysis with imagological approaches from the field of literary criticism. Literary imagology, as pioneered by Hugo Dyserinck, Manfred S. Fischer, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, and others, has moved well beyond the descriptive reconstruction of how members of one culture perceive other countries, regions and peoples (Beller, Agazzi, and Calzoni 2006; Dukić 2012; Fischer 1981; Zacharasiewicz 2010). Rather, it systematically looks for notions of the self that are not only written into but also constructed by the very representations of other countries, regions, and peoples. Imagological approaches thus center on the premise that notions of the “self” are always dependent on the construction of “significant others” who are “significant” insofar as they serve, in one way or another, to construct and

uphold one's sense of identity. In sum, this suggests that images of other countries, regions, cultures, and peoples are hardly ever disinterested representations of reality as it actually is, but rather are culturally conditioned and interest-driven discursive constructions that serve identity purposes.

Analyzing images of CEE in the managerial discourses from 1990 to the present thus encourages self-reflection about the premises that shaped Western business perspectives on CEE in the post-Cold War world. It asks about the (cultural) condition of the possibility of corporate leadership, governance, and corporate social responsibility in CEE contexts, and it contributes to reaching greater clarity about the situation businesses and managers were and are acting in. This self-reflexive clarity, in turn, seems to be the precondition for improving the processes of corporate decision-making.

### STATE OF LITERATURE

This article contributes to the problem of management in the transitional economies of CEE, a subject that has generated a considerable number of scholarly publications. We note the special issues or symposia of prestigious journals dedicated to this topic (e.g., *International Studies of Management and Organization*, *Organization Studies*, *European Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, and *Journal of Management Studies*). In addition, numerous edited volumes, books, and book series have been issued by prominent publishers (e.g., Ashgate, Edgar Elgar, Palgrave). Last but not least, a few journals were founded that have a particular focus on CEE countries or management issues in emerging economies, such as *Journal of East-West Business* (1995), *Journal of East European Management Studies* (1996), and *Baltic Journal of Management* (2006).

It is not surprising, therefore, that several authors have reflected upon and have tried to summarize the research output in this field. In a rather early review, Banaj (1994) concluded that U.S. scholars were dominant in the field. Interestingly, this finding has remained widely undisputed and hardly explored in the following years. Alt and Lang (2004) basically confirmed it in their (particular) review on research about East Germany. Gelbuda, Meyer, and Delios (2008) mentioned that researchers with a CEE heritage were increasingly participating in international academic discourse, and thus contributing to a merger of (local) context knowledge and (Western) methodological know-how. Steger and Lang (2011) confirmed this, but at the same time highlighted the endurance of Western, particularly U.S., dominance in the field.

With respect to theoretical and paradigmatic fundamentals, Hoskisson et al. (2000) argued that institutional theory first became relevant when markets emerged. As markets matured, transaction-cost economics and, subsequently, the resource-based view of the firm gained in importance. Meyer and Peng (2005), exploring 218 articles from thirteen top journals, found that CEE research had particularly highlighted the importance of contextual influences and detected the limitations of classic organizational economics theory in a highly volatile environment to which several of its assumptions do not apply. Wright et al. (2005) also found institutional theory to be dominant, although it is usually blended with transaction-cost economics, a resource-based view, or agency theory. Soulsby and Clark (2007) argued that higher-context approaches, such as comparative institutionalism, organizational learning, and organizational change, could have made some major contributions to organization theory, and, the other way

around, were enriched by more fine-grained research in the field. Gelbuda, Meyer, and Delios (2008) also found that scholarly studies about CEE management problems increasingly employed institutional perspectives, namely institutional economics and sociology-grounded institutional theory. This was also stressed in the review by Puffer and McCarthy (2011), which explicitly claimed to use “an institutional theory perspective.”

Regarding the topics explored in CEE management research, Banaj (1994) mentioned that the penetration and settlement of foreign firms in CEE and the HRM methods used in the CEE countries seemed to be the most attractive topics (in the early years). Wright et al. (2005), who particularly focused on strategy research, found that scholars were mostly interested in firms from developed economies entering emerging economies and in domestic firms competing within emerging economies, whereas the strategies of firms from emerging economies entering other emerging economies or entering developed economies were not analyzed with the same intensity. Taking a more general view, Steger and Lang (2011) found that organizational change has been the most widely explored topic ever since 1990, followed by corporate strategy, managerial behavior, and HRM.

These reviews, indeed, need to be critically reconsidered with respect to our topic: Some authors (e.g., Puffer and McCarthy 2011) summarize the content of Russian business and management research without going any deeper into the studies they examine. Those who have taken a closer look at the studies examine only a limited number of theoretical aspects and theories, and some of their considerations in this respect are more normative than descriptive (e.g., Hoskisson et al. 2000). Methodological and methodical aspects of management research are hardly discussed, and the important role of scientific paradigms has been widely ignored. With one exception (Meyer and Peng 2005), the reviews offer neither a systematic analysis of a major sample of publications in the field nor a more detailed examination of developments through the years. Moreover, the authors of these reviews often refuse to take a critical position toward the production process of scientific knowledge. Against this backdrop, it hardly comes as a surprise that the presence and function of images, stereotypes, and culturally conditioned outside perspectives of CEE have not yet been reflected as factors of knowledge production by practitioners in the field of IB theory and practice.

Obviously, it is necessary to broaden our focus here—to look at the findings of scholars from outside the management disciplines. The study of perceptions and representations of foreign countries, nations, cultures, and regions is a classic topic of intellectual history and literary study that has generated a multitude of monographs and articles so great that we cannot document it here (for a bibliographical systematization, see Hoffmann 1986, 2008). Even if we narrow our view to the CEE countries, there are numerous studies dealing with the images of Russia, Poland, Hungary, and other CEE countries by individual authors, travelers, and intellectuals from different European and non-European countries. In addition, the images of CEE countries in foreign media and public opinion have been investigated for different countries and historical periods. However, only a few studies systematically analyze Western perceptions of the post-Communist CEE. If we just take German images of Russia at the turn of the twenty-first century, the studies by Varvara Degtjarova (2007), Stella Gavrilova (2005), Katrin Seifert (2003) and Antonina Zykova (2014) have analyzed the representation and construction of Russia in newspapers and on television. Furthermore, several collected volumes of a more general nature have been published, thematizing different aspects of the images of Russia currently circulating in Germany (Krumm, Medvedev, and Schröder 2012; Lobkowicz 2008). A similar situation can be assessed for images of other CEE countries in

Germany and other Western European countries. The classical text genres analyzed in this context, however, are travel accounts and literary texts, newspaper and magazine articles, or television broadcasts. Nobody in the field of cultural studies and literary criticism has so far looked at the images of CEE countries circulating in managerial discourses.

All of the above suggests that further research focusing on the role of perceptions and stereotypes in intercultural encounters and the problem of intercultural learning is obviously needed in order to gain more intimate knowledge about how management research on CEE countries has developed throughout the past two decades, and what this has meant for corporate leadership, governance, and corporate social responsibility.

## METHODS

Drawing on a systematic close reading of all the relevant articles published in two leading management journals since 1990 (*Academy of Management Executive*, *Academy of Management Journal*), plus a selection of articles from the *European Management Journal* (see the complete list of articles in the Appendix), this article analyzes the images of Central and Eastern Europe circulating in the business community at the turn of the twenty-first century and their specific relevance for corporate leadership, governance, and social responsibility in the CEE context. It tries to identify their central elements and recurring patterns, investigates their communicative functions in the larger identity-defining discourses of the day, and unearths the key concepts of IB theory and practice written into the scenarios about CEE and its future.

In dealing with the articles so closely read, we have (a) systematically identified the metaphors used to represent and frame the situation in CEE, (b) reconstructed the discursive interconnectedness of individual statements about CEE “realities” to distill the strands of the major narratives on CEE, and (c) traced the identified narratives to the core values and key concepts of IB theory that generated and shaped these discourses in the first place. In all, therefore, we have excavated the subtexts beneath the surface level of the scholarly articles, always asking what else Western managers were talking about when they were talking about CEE. The overall approach, therefore, is to reconstruct the communicative function of the images by way of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and discursive contextualization of individual statements.

The approach of this article is thoroughly interdisciplinary, in that it joins together two scholars from different disciplines: The first author is a trained historian and professor of American Studies, who has done a lot of work on the perception of the United States in Europe and on problems of cultural transfer. The second author holds a chair in the area of management. His research interests mainly focus on corporate governance and management issues, particularly in the transitioning countries of CEE.

## FINDINGS

Our analysis resulted in four major patterns that characterize the nature of management research about CEE throughout the past two and a half decades. In what follows, we describe the patterns in more detail and illustrate them with concrete quotations from the articles explored.

## The Self and the Other

The managerial discourses analyzed tend to construct CEE as a cultural entity, the unity of which is defined by the shared Communist past. Written into this construct of CEE as a coherent, even monolithic cultural area originating in the Communist experience is a concept of the West as a community of values forged by natural-rights individualism, liberal democracy, and free-market capitalism. As a result, the mental maps discursively drawn in managerial debates are structured by binary oppositions centering in “us-vs.-them” patterns that identify the West and CEE as two distinct cultural areas with mutually exclusive ways of life. As Ivancevich, DeFrank, and Gregory (1992) write,

a people who have lived through the icon, axe, hammer, and sickle, will have difficulty and frustration adjusting to a world of democracy, free enterprise, and risk-taking decision making. (Ivancevich, DeFrank, and Gregory 1992, 54)

The concept of CEE culture transported in these discourses is holistic. Irresponsibility, collectivism, inactivity, and stasis are represented as the dominant attitudes of the CEE way of life. The notion of CEE culture as collectivist surfaces time and again in the articles we analyzed (Bruton and Rubanik 1997, 73; May, Stewart, and Sweo 2000, 420; Mueller and Clarke 1998, 326), and the formula of collectivism serves to explain the phenomena, behavioral patterns, and business practices that Western managers encounter in CEE countries. Mueller and Clarke (1998, 322) thus speak of a “sociopolitical environment” in post-Communist Russia “that subordinates individual interests to the collective welfare.” Explicitly tracing the “collectivistic culture” in Eastern Europe to the historical experience of Socialism, they highlight that

people in the Central and Eastern European countries tended to be more socially or externally oriented, and that those in the United States and other Western countries tended to be more individually or internally oriented. (Mueller and Clarke 1998, 322)

In a larger context, the difference between CEE collectivism and Western individualism is frequently based on a conceptual framework that links traditionalism, backwardness, and irrationality to Central and Eastern Europe, while it defines the West as modern, progressive, and rational. This mental map surfaces with all the clarity desirable in Snejina Michailova’s article “Contrasts in Culture: Russian and Western Perspectives on Organizational Change,” in which she writes:

Whereas efficiency, predictability, professionalism, and modernity are seen as key forces for rationality in the West, belief in fate and destiny reflect an underlying faith in the Russian context. While a professionally oriented and modern Western society provides little room for traditions and regards them as slowing down progress, Russians tend to value them very highly. They perceive the future orientation and focus on action and achievement in the Western context as not very appropriate, and admire history and traditions instead. (Michailova 2000, 106)

Inseparably connected to the binary opposition of the us-vs.-them is a deficit discourse that reflects CEE business cultures in terms of what they lack in light of Western standards. The topical scope of these deficiency-statements is wide and varied, ranging from institutional and political circumstances to mentalities and culturally forged predispositions.

In Central and Eastern Europe, privatization is challenged by scope, the absence of efficient capital markets, and a lack of entrepreneurial and managerial skills. (Uhlenbruck and de Castro 2000, 381)

May, Stewart, and Sweo (2000, 407) stress that

Bulgarian managers underutilized certain information resources because they lacked the knowledge necessary to handle complex business documentation and management information systems.

Meanwhile Earle, Spicer, and Peter (2010, 234) argue that

one factor in the spread of wage arrears in the Russian case was likely the relative lack of labor mobility across communities, which limited the opportunities of Russian workers to escape deviant organizational practices.

Hitt et al. (2000, 463), finally, see the “the lack of financial capital and the lack of infrastructure to provide access to capital” as a “major deficit” in Poland and Romania. From these multilayered deficit discourses result the many suggestions for what needs to be done to help CEE economies. Shama (1993, 24), for example, sees the necessary development in CEE countries as leading

from little or no competition to more competition; from little or no management control over marketing-mix decisions to more control of such decisions; from little planning to more planning.

The effect of this discourse on deficits, which implicitly sets Western businesses practices as the norm and takes them for granted, is to frame the encounter between Western management and CEE business practices in terms of a “clash of cultures.” This discourse produces some very strong metaphors, suggesting that

most of the managerial values developed during the Soviet period, and their attendant attitudes and behaviors [were] antithetical to Western management practices. (May, Puffer, and McCarthy 2005, 26)

Against this backdrop, it is clear why the transfer of Western knowledge to CEE countries is sometimes described as a “battle of wills” or a “mental combat” (May, Puffer, and McCarthy 2005, 33).

“Shades of gray” are identified only rather slowly as some authors gradually become aware of the cultural and historical diversity within the supposedly monolithic sphere of Central and Eastern Europe. Thus McNulty (1992, 80) speaks of “Eastern Europe’s many cultures,” while Luthans and Riolli (1997, 71) state that

each of the former Communist countries is quite different, and the reasons for the successes and failures are varied and complex, involving historical, cultural, political and even geographical issues.

However, the voices stressing the diversity of CEE are marginal in the debates we have looked at for this article. This has something to do with the overall lack of knowledge and understanding of the situations, contexts, and processes in post–Cold War CEE. Noting the relative ignorance about Central and Eastern Europe, interestingly enough, is one of the formative factors in the managerial discourse on CEE.

The world in general and Western scholars and managers specifically know very little about Soviet management styles. (Ivancevich, DeFrank, and Gregory 1992, 43)

Shama states that “our knowledge of management behavior during this transformation is scant and anecdotal” (Shama 1993, 23). This admission of ignorance, however, is conceptually

linked to the construction of CEE as a cultural entity forged by the experience of Socialism, which not only makes CEE seem “different” but presents it as a “foreign” and even “exotic” world that Western managers are entering almost like “intruders from a different planet.”

### Certainty Versus Uncertainty

Another major discursive strand in the articles read is the complex relationship of certainty and uncertainty. Most of the authors thematize a multitude of aspects about CEE realities, which lets a ubiquitous ambiguity and insecurity about the present and the past in CEE become manifest.

Initially, and particularly in the articles from the early 1990s, the changes in CEE are perceived as tumultuous and disruptive, even as unbelievable and indescribable. People in similar situations usually tend to use metaphors to express what they have in mind but cannot express in “dry” language (Geertz 1973). This is quite evident in many articles from that time. Pearce (1991, 77) conjures up the image of an “avalanche of change” in CEE, while Shaw, Fisher, and Randolph (1991, 11) argue that “worlds have been turned upside down.” Even several years later, Luthans and Riolli (1997, 61) tried to describe what they had seen and experienced in Albania, not with abstract facts and figures, but with the help of an image reminiscent of an auto graveyard.

[Communism in Albania] has been ripped down, broken into bits and carted away. This ravaged country is recycling itself out of the rubble.

At the same time, the representation of past and present changes as disruptive and beyond control is inseparably linked to explicit certainties derived from supposedly historical necessities and economic rules (“natural laws”). Betraying an essentially deterministic approach to a historically open situation, Western managers assumed that certain developments would take place more or less automatically.

[C]ompetitive pressures compel firms to produce goods at higher quality levels. (Forker 1991, 71)

As the economic system matures it is expected that the connection between ownership and management of the firm will change manager’s attitudes toward workers and excessive staffing. (Bruton and Rubanik 1997, 73)

In a situation of widespread uncertainty and openness, this determinism provided authors and readers with orientation—a “red line,” so to speak, that guaranteed to turn an open-ended transformation into a more clearly defined transition process with a clear target or final state. It is taken for granted by almost all the authors that the “end of history” cannot be anything but free-market capitalism in a liberal democracy. This becomes obvious in the managerial treatment of those CEE countries that had supposedly already started to go exactly this way.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland have been using drastic means to move their countries from planned political and economic systems into systems of political democracy and market economy. (Shama 1993, 25)

Moreover, this strict determinism eliminated the (potential) fear of a return to socialism that existed even among experts at that time, especially after the revolt of the “old guard” in the

Soviet Union in the summer of 1991. As Ivancevich, DeFrank, and Gregory (1992, 45) put it, “there is no way for the Soviet Union to turn back. This is important.”

All in all, therefore, while the managerial discourses betray a sense of uncertainty about what was going on in CEE, they are at the same time certain that the outcome of the changes underway is free-market capitalism and liberal democracy. To reach this “final state” of history, many authors advocate substantial market reforms in a short period of time, which time and again is framed in terms of “shock therapy.” Accordingly, the necessity for many different key measures (e.g., privatization) to support and secure this process is stated repeatedly. This applies, in particular, to a broad range of political, legal, social, and economic reforms that would encourage the introduction and stabilization of capitalist institutions and practices that, in and of themselves, are perceived as being without any alternative. To again quote Ivancevich, DeFrank, and Gregory (1992, 45):

As suggested throughout this article, management must be motivated and enthusiastic about leading the way to competitive free market transactions.

When and if . . . managers are given more opportunities to develop trade relationships, set prices, and plan their production work, the Soviet system can begin competing in the world market place.

Next to this, and somewhat less taken for granted, several actions and activities are normatively postulated and set as indispensable. Here we also find several “soft” measures such as developing new products or learning new skills that are assumed necessary under the new conditions.

There is a long-term need in Russia for deep restructuring, involving enhanced management skills, extensive capital investment, and new product development. (Wright et al. 1998, 75)

Yet the changes experienced during the 1990s and early 2000s shattered many of the expectations and hopes that had heightened the pressure to legitimate Western standpoints “after the fact.” In light of the empirical evidence from CEE, Western managers had to admit that many processes had not turned out to be automatisms but rather had entailed numerous unintended consequences leading to new problems and hardships. These very observations and experiences had the potential to raise serious questions about the initial optimistic expectations regarding the reliability of reforms, the stability of the new political and economic contexts, the profitability of joint ventures and direct investments, and the very premises and convictions these were all based on. As Wright et al. (1998, 76, 82) sadly put it:

Reformers hoped that the replacement of the state with private owners would introduce improved structures of corporate governance, which would, in turn, generate new strategies resulting in improved performance. . . . [However,] any restructuring has often been passive, involving little managerial initiative and much inertia.

What was the discursive reaction to this disappointment? The debates did not question the fundamental concepts and assumptions of IB theory but sought to explain the unexplainable by stressing other reasons for the unexpected turn of events. In this context, the cultural predispositions and behavioral patterns of the CEE cultures were blamed. What Wright et al. (1998) only hinted at in their statement quoted above was made more explicit by other authors.

The inertia of SOEs and the associated mentality of managers have been difficult to overcome even after privatization. (Rondinelli and Black 2000, 87)

After a period of training, Polish employees in French hypermarkets were expected to have acquired Western attitudes . . . [but] the Poles did not seem ready to learn the knowledge the French had come to transfer. (Hurt and Hurt 2005, 38)

The behavioral patterns blocking and hampering the capitalist transformations in CEE are frequently said to be centuries-old traditions, so that, in the end, the determinism of culture turns out to be even stronger than the determinism of the “natural laws” described above.

Many barriers to knowledge transfer can be attributed to specific aspects of Russian culture, values, attitudes, and behaviors that affect managerial practices. (May, Puffer, and McCarthy 2005, 25)

Thus, in reflecting about what went wrong in CEE, Western managers actually cemented their certainties and convictions instead of rethinking them. This is why their discourses on certainty and uncertainty can be considered an illustrative example that the power of a scholarly paradigm, once entrenched and hegemonial, is hard, if not impossible, to change or modify, even in light of empirical evidence.

### Universalism Versus Particularism of Practices

The complex tension between the proclaimed universalism of Western entrepreneurial practices and their only limited applicability to CEE is one of the driving moments of the managerial discourses we have investigated. In this context, the deficit-discourse on CEE business culture, as reconstructed above, is to a large extent shaped by a normative ideal of Western entrepreneurship held to be universal, and, thus, apt to work as a role model for CEE managers on their way to free-market capitalism.

Like managers in other Central and Eastern European economies, Hungarian managers at the beginning of the 1990s were also found to be short on initiative and long-term objectives. Managers in the early phase of a transition tend to be undermotivated from working in a culture devoid of profit seeking (Steensma et al. 2005, 218).

This assessment is not limited to the upper echelons of the business hierarchies but also applies to lower-level employees, who likewise show little initiative at their workplace, as Frese et al. (1996, 37) drastically describe:

Secretaries may fail to do a task because they have the wrong telephone number, even though they could obtain the number from another person. Or blue-collar workers may wait next to broken machines until a supervisor comes by, instead of looking for him or her or for a technician who could fix the machines.

These descriptions, moreover, clearly demonstrate that the authors' perceptions are ultimately rooted in the paradigm of modernization theory: the strong belief that there is only one development path to free-market capitalism, which the CEE countries have not fully embarked on, if they have embarked on it at all.

The bankruptcy of the Communist system and the development towards a market economy in Central Europe very quickly led business leaders to assume that Western, globally accepted, and time-tested management practices would be transferred to post-socialist economies as the “one-best-way.” Central European firms would simply have to catch up. (Hurt and Hurt 2005, 36)

Because they are deeply rooted in the modernization paradigm, many voices in the discourse take it for granted that Western concepts and ideas can easily be transferred to CEE on a one-to-one basis. Since Western development is seen as defining the road that CEE countries would have to take, there is little doubt in the managerial discourses that the instruments of “Western capitalism” provide the tools for shaping developments in CEE.

Although the debate on whether Western management principles and practices are applicable in an alien environment is not new, a substantial number of management models implicitly assume that Western management approaches and techniques can easily be transferred across borders. (Michailova 2000, 100).

Nevertheless, some voices, even during the early years of the transformation, openly problematized the proclaimed universalism of Western managerial concepts. On the one hand, these voices argued that conditions in CEE were too specific and different from the ones in Western countries to allow for a simple transfer of Western managerial practices to CEE contexts. This went hand in hand with an increasing awareness of the often only limited applicability of those practices to CEE.

Believing that all Eastern Europe needs is American-style management is a myth. (McNulty 1992, 80)

Our managers must realize that their way of thinking and doing business just do[es] not work in Eastern Europe or any other part of the world. Our methods have to be adapted . . . (McNulty 1992, 87)

On the other hand, several authors refer to the specific cultural embeddedness of those concepts and practices in the West European or North American managerial traditions. To transfer them to what is seen as a completely different cultural setting, they essentially argue, would most probably cause some “cultural clashes.”

Given the fact that previous planning focused heavily on physical volumes and engineering concepts of efficiency, the new move to a market money-based economy make[s] costs and profits difficult to understand in many enterprises. Concepts of return on capital are essentially unknown in most of the member companies. (Taucher 1992, 170)

At the same time, however, the same discussants try to explain why people and businesses in CEE were performing the way they did, and the answers given draw heavily on cultural determinism, suggesting that commercial failure was a logical, and by no means surprising, result of the unmodified transfer of Western management concepts to a CEE setting. This opened the doors to centuries-old stereotypes about CEE. Although often degrading and even insulting in the eyes of the people concerned, these stereotypes continue to play an important role in managerial discussions of CEE to this very day.

The requirement of profitability is accepted as the new theory but taken no more seriously than Stalin's economics of socialism. Instead of Marx and Lenin the reformed manager is likely to quote from Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, but in his heart of hearts he expects to “manage” very much as before—though he would never admit this, not even to himself. (Hermann and Hermann 1990, 288)

The environment in Russia and Central and Eastern European countries is often described as traditionally hostile to entrepreneurial activities; in Russia, it was aversive as far back as the tsarist era. (Puffer and McCarthy 2001, 29)

The resort to cultural determinism in the quest to explain why supposedly universal management concepts and practices did not work that well in CEE prevents a critical questioning of the concepts themselves and the premises they are based on. It is not the concepts that are wrong but, rather, the cultural environment of CEE that prevents Central and Eastern Europeans from appreciating them.

## Knowledge and Learning

Against the backdrop of the widespread assumption that the developments in CEE after 1989 were a historically necessary movement toward free-market capitalism and democracy, the debate about knowledge and a multitude of different learning/unlearning activities makes up a major part of the managerial discourses. Just to give two striking examples here:

The East German system of education and management organisation produced managers unable to meet the new demands of a market economy in either the old East or West Germany. (Randlesome 1992, 74)

Most managers were not starting with a *tabula rasa*; to accomplish real change they had to go through a process of unfreezing the elements in their backgrounds that inhibited receptivity to learning market-oriented practices. (May, Puffer, and McCarthy 2005, 25)

In this context, Western businesses conceived of themselves paternalistically as educational agents in transitional CEE economies, teaching “Western” business practices to a “foreign,” even “hostile” world.

The foreign parent-joint venture relationship can be viewed as a teacher-student relationship (Steensma et al. 2005, 219).

In this context, the very ability of Western businesses to serve as “teachers” was mostly taken for granted. The paternalistic attitudes of Western businesses and managers toward CEE did not allow for much doubt as to whether they would actually be able and ready to teach Central and Eastern Europeans free-market capitalism. Accordingly, the instruments of management education and training are mostly not critically assessed either. On the macro level, privatization, competition, and entrepreneurship are perceived as tools to engineer the transition as a kind of a shock therapy. On the micro level, the educational discourses only demonstrate the lack of patience of Western businesses with their CEE students: “the trainers found that a combination of carrot and stick was essential to promote action” (May, Puffer, and McCarthy 2005, 31). And there is little discursive compassion for CEE citizens struggling with the hardships produced by the shock therapies.

The so-called shock therapy policies associated with transition to a market economy have clearly imposed hardships on the citizenry of the Central and Eastern European countries. (Mueller and Clarke 1998, 322)

Interestingly, the managerial discourses constructed CEE as a kind of “laboratory” for the testing of “Western” theories and concepts that help to develop and deepen Western knowledge about engineering change under adverse conditions.

During the decade of the 1990s, Russia was a veritable laboratory for observing how entrepreneurial behavior can spring up in a country with extremely limited experience in, and a marked disdain for, entrepreneurship. (Puffer and McCarthy 2001, 25)

However, these “experiments” partly resulted in some highly ambiguous and even irritating experiences from a Western perspective.

A within-subjects experimental design was used to analyze the impacts that three popular and successful techniques used in U.S. studies had on the performance of workers in the largest textile factory in the Russian republic of the former Soviet Union. Two techniques, providing extrinsic rewards and behavioral management, had significant, positive effects, but a participative technique led to a decrease in performance. (Welsh, Luthans, and Sommer 1993, 58)

Moreover, as already described above, the transfer of knowledge and teaching/learning situations is perceived and framed in the discourse as a “battle of wills” or “mental combat,” a clash not only between some rather different experiences and knowledge stocks but also between sharply contrasting teaching and learning styles.

Thus, the Agency became a political battlefield where the competing institutional logics of market rationality and bureaucratic planning collided. (Tilczik 2010, 1491)

All this also led to serious criticisms of Western authors who (self-)critically diagnosed a deeply rooted misunderstanding about CEE and their citizens, particularly their managers and employees. In this connection, Western business executives are sometimes criticized for being blind to the distinctively different cultures and traditions of CEE.

Too many American consultants and managers are failing in their efforts in Eastern Europe by misjudging Europeans’ educational attainments and by ignorance of their life styles, ways of learning, management and teaching methods, and cultural values. (McNulty, 1992, 79)

Yet these strands of the managerial discourses did not become hegemonic in the period we have analyzed.

With respect to the construction of managerial knowledge about CEE, several different phases can be identified. Articles from the early 1990s, especially, were often based on anecdotal evidence and had some of the traits of eyewitness accounts. Due to the widespread knowledge deficit about CEE in Western circles, any first-hand experience in the region was gratefully welcomed and readily accepted as empirical evidence.

The presence of “state work” and “private work” in the same company creates powerful incentives to misuse state resources. I drove for some kilometres behind a large diesel delivery truck for one of the prominent state-owned enterprises that was towing a small private car—a very unlikely official business activity. Was the driver using the truck for his personal business or fulfilling a private contract for the enterprise? (Pearce 1991, 83)

Later on, researchers increasingly began to apply some “classic” arm’s-length quantitative methods to their study of CEE economies. The articles were more and more framed along the requirements of top-tier international journals (e.g., strict methodology, quantitative surveys, numerous interviews). In addition, there were several prominent scholars among the authors of these studies, and the “exotic outsiders” became rare. The use of qualitative, critical in-depth studies, however, continued to lag, and increased only slowly during the 2000s. These studies were paralleled by a growing plea for comparative cultural studies to explain the above-mentioned ambiguities and irritants relating to the supposed universalism of Western management concepts and their only limited applicability to CEE economies.

## DISCUSSION

Our article identifies and describes four major discursive strands of the managerial discourse about CEE and the role played by images of CEE. It highlights that these discourses constructed images of CEE and a Western identity in one and the same discursive operation, because concepts of the West are present in almost every statement made about the CEE economies. We have also demonstrated how the different concepts and core values of IB theory, such as entrepreneurship, accountability, initiative, and competition, have helped to shape these images and how they structured the images of CEE circulating in the managerial debates. Last but not least, it also makes clear that these images have mainly served as arguments to legitimate the business activities and strategies pursued by Western actors in CEE.

In more general terms, our analysis confirms several important past findings. We found that Western authors and Western arguments clearly dominate the managerial discourses, as already argued by other scholars (Alt and Lang 2004; Steger and Lang 2011), which only emphasizes that the processes of knowledge production and dissemination must be perceived as highly power-driven (Foucault 1971). We also found that research became more scientific but also more classical throughout the two and a half decades, mirroring some kind of mimetic process (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Meanwhile, despite the high dynamism of the transformation processes in CEE and the clear developmental path of the methodical and scientific character of the studies observed, the overall perspective on CEE has remained rather stable over the whole period. Business experience in CEE during the transformation obviously did not lead to a substantial renegotiation of Western managerial practices, or to a questioning of the premises and core values upon which they rested. The underlying concepts of “deficits,” “backwardness,” and “catching up,” derived from modernization theory, were—and still are—driving much of the debate. Western management concepts were not thoroughly questioned, even in light of contradictory experiences and empirical evidence. Ironically enough, the very failure of Western business projects in CEE served, in many cases, to cement Western certainties about the validity of Western norms and the deficits of CEE culture.

Our analysis has several implications for IB theory and practice. In pointing out these implications, several avenues for future research are also highlighted. First, it provides a retrospective critical analysis of Western actors’ perceptions of CEE contexts, analyzing the views of managers, firms, and scholarly authors operating in this part of the world during the immediate post-Cold War period, when CEE economies and societies were undergoing the transition from planned to free-market economies. This emphasizes the importance of a historical-discourse analysis that looks at the managerial discussions about CEE as an integral part of the transformation process in and of themselves, and this can help in deriving lessons for academics as well as for managers and politicians.

Second, in reflecting the cultural embeddedness of the managerial meta-discourses on CEE, the article critically assesses the widely unquestioned generalizability and universality of key concepts circulating in IB theory and practice, such as entrepreneurship, corporate governance, incentives, and accountability. These unquestioned concepts often generated questionable advice to managers and politicians, evoked misunderstandings and conflicts, and, finally, often resulted in disappointing performance of CEE businesses. Our analysis, therefore, also urges a critical perspective on the scientific analysis of transformational processes itself.

Third, in analyzing the images of CEE in managerial discourses from a meta-perspective, the article problematizes the connection between overall perceptions and concrete corporate decision-making in CEE contexts. We thus argue that practices of leadership, corporate governance, and corporate social responsibility are, to some extent, defined by the images of CEE and its management, and at the same time, the decisions, once taken, also have an influence on the outside view of CEE business and management. Consequently, future research should give more weight to the key actors, their attitudes and perceptions, and their roles and impacts in transformation processes. This will help in qualifying the traditional concepts of economic rationality, including rational choice and utility maximizing, in this context.

Fourth, in identifying deep-rooted and often implicit conflicts resulting from outside views and managerial behavior based on them, our analysis serves to identify and reflect cultural premises of managerial action and corporate decision-making that are often neglected by IB theory and practice. In analyzing managerial discourses at the turn of the twenty-first century as a historical phenomenon that was both an indicator of and a factor in the processes of corporate leadership and governance, we may be better able to comprehend the role of cultural variables in economic behavior.

Fifth, the article identifies language and discourse as a currently emerging topic in IB theory and practice, tying in with recent special issues of prominent journals in the field, such as *Organization Studies* (no. 1, 2004), *Academy of Management Review* (no. 4, 2004), *Journal of Management Studies* (no. 2, 2014), and *Journal of International Business Studies* (no. 5, 2014).

Regarding implications for practice, one might argue that this study is only about some nice narratives irrelevant to business operations on the ground. This opinion, however, would be misleading, since the discourses observed and discussed here have far-reaching consequences for IB practice. First, the constructs and interpretations described above are not held just by a few scholars removed from this world. They represent major features of the mental maps of dominant Western actors in the CEE field. Since the transformation processes in CEE can be considered a veritable power game in which “the winner takes all,” these constructs and interpretations become highly relevant. Second, these dominant views on CEE often lead to questionable guidance provided to managers and politicians; for instance, regarding what will automatically happen in CEE in the future, what concepts and instruments they should apply, or how to treat CEE managers. Third, due to the deeply entrenched hierarchical script (“enlightened West” vs. “dark East”) that most Western actors have in mind when getting involved with CEE, misunderstandings will inevitably arise and, most probably, stick. This particularly relates to the “real” intentions and targets of the different actors, both from the West as well as from the East, involved in this process. Fourth, clashes and conflicts are often found to be the “logical” consequence of these perceptions and misperceptions, self-descriptions, and external ascriptions. In most cases, we assume, the conflicts are hidden and only seldom expressed openly and communicated, but in the end, this does not make them easier to resolve and overcome. Fifth, the images discussed above were often responsible for disappointing results and bad performance in the end, as the vicious circle of misperceptions and prejudices led to wrong assessments about the situation Western businesses were acting in.

Our article, of course, also has some limitations. It is, first of all, a relatively small sample of elements from a wide discourse, and considerable work still needs to be done in order to refine and strengthen our findings and propositions. Furthermore, one may question why we selected exactly this sample and did not, for instance, base our analysis on books or popular media.

Finally, but still important, our methodology may be criticized for being rather particularistic and thus focusing more on the discursive than the practical level of what is “really” happening in CEE. Notwithstanding these criticisms, we believe that our article will contribute to the discussion about CEE management research by opening up a traditional “black box” and offering some new insights into a complicated topic.

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## APPENDIX: LIST OF ARTICLES REVIEWED

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