Transnational Corporations and Expert Management Control Systems: A Levinasian Philosophical Ethical Critique

N. B. Macintosh
T. Shearer
Queens University

A. Riccaboni
University of Siena

Abstract:

In this paper, taking cues from Shearer [2002] and Baxter and Chua [2003], we investigate how large transnational corporations act as institutions that connect the local and the global by means of expert management control systems to disrupt and radically change the culture and management ethos of foreign firms which they acquire in ways that affect the lives of employees spread around the world. For this purpose, we appropriate Giddens’s [1990, 1991] concepts of disembedding, expert systems, trust, time-space-distantiation, and reembedding and illustrate these by drawing on Bosco, Riccaboni and Scapens’s [2002] study of the takeover of the Italian firm Nuovo Pignone by the USA based General Electric Corporation and the instantiation of its expert management control system into Nuovo Pignone.

More and more, however, such actions and globalization in general exert a greater and greater discipline over the individual and collective lives of employees in such organizations leaving them increasingly unable to control, direct, challenge or change the systems in which they are engulfed. We address this dilemma from the perspective of Emanuel Levinas’s [1968, 1988, 1997] philosophical ethics-of-being-for-the-other to mount an invigorated critical account of such actions.

We find that such an approach provides a valuable vehicle for establishing a broader accountability on the part of transnational corporations than that incorporated in either the discourse of contemporary economic theory or the conventional management control literature. Under the gaze of a Levinasian ethics, the financial reports and expert systems of transnationals seem to fall far short of the demands for accountability required in the very act of providing an account to the world at large.