

PREFACE

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The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group is pleased to have hosted a Multiple Modernities Conference of leading international social scientists in the Berlin Wissenschaftszentrum on May 20-21, 2001. This publication makes the conference papers available to the public and especially to researchers and students who did not have the opportunity to attend the meeting.

The attention that we in The Strategy Institute have given to the field of multiple modernities grows out of our broad interest in the nature of strategy. Cooperation with academic researchers from various disciplines enables us to develop a richer understanding of strategy and of the social, cultural, and political environment for business. The Berlin conference contributed substantially to that goal. It is our intention to make our findings available through publications.

The idea that we live in a world of different modernities, Western and non-Western, is a challenge to typical economic thinking, which tends to homogenize the economic environment by defining generally accepted, universally applicable “laws” and “rules” and by generally ignoring the noneconomic factors influencing economic decisions. The Berlin conference provided substantial insights into the complexities of a global economy. The general interest of the business world in the publications of Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History and the Last Man*) and Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*) is a sign of an increasing focus on noneconomic matters. Although all major Western companies try to exploit — in the best meaning of the word — all global opportunities that are economically advantageous to them, they are becoming increasingly aware that different societies require different questions, different answers, and different approaches. Unfortunately, the search for the right questions, answers, and approaches has not yet yielded practical, useful consequences for business and public policy. So far the World

Economic Forum, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization have failed to provide useful guidance. Clearly, we are only at the beginning of a complex dialogue.

Of course, the gap between a high-level sociological interpretation of history and the mundane daily decisions of a business struggling to survive or expand cannot be bridged by a few simple rules or concepts. The gap needs to be explored. The distance is too great and simple solutions are nonexistent. But looking into various aspects of multiple modernities in search of a road map of understanding should be worth the effort. Such was the purpose of the Berlin Conference. As the papers indicate, there is no master solution for dealing with a world of multiple modernities or even a list of questions that pin down the problems. The purpose of the conference was to elicit a broad spectrum of interpretations and begin a dialogue among them. Therefore, the papers offer hunches, ideas to be explored, and weak signals that can be pursued to arrive at a better explanation of the complexities of our global economy.

We do not exactly know what reality is, because reality remains subject to cultural interpretation. Multiple modernities is one of many competing interpretations of history and of our current reality, of our globalizing world and the cultures in it. It helps us think through today's global world by providing a new forum in which to seek answers. At this early stage, however, we expect first to find new questions.

We encourage readers with a strong interest in economic affairs to embrace the world of multiple modernities because it clearly broadens one's economic horizon. We hope readers with an explicit sociological or historical interest will engage in the field because we must all have a vital interest in the analysis of our societies and the meaning of history, where we are, where we are coming from and, in particular, where we are going. If readers merge the economic, sociological, and historical interests in their minds, they may have the best starting point for a richer interpretation of today's world and its future development.