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Sub-theme 29: [hybrid] Global Challenges: An Interdisciplinarity View on the Role of MNEs

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Call for Papers

Hybrid sub-theme!
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Over the past 40 years research on multinational enterprises (MNEs) has provided a rich stock of knowledge on cross-border and cross-cultural management as well as insights into the (re)structuring of MNEs, including their handling of inter- and intra-organizational relationships. Most of this research has been conducted in the highly specialised, self-designated field of International Business and Management (IBM), often in a problematically instrumental, functionalist and managerialist manner. Studies on the social impact of MNEs' activities on the wider society and non-economic stakeholders inside and outside the unit of the firm remain scarce and scattered over a range of "adjacent", social science disciplines such as Organizational Theory (OT), International Political Economy, Social Geography, Development Studies, Economic Sociology and Critical International Business (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019). Over time, critical studies on the economic, political and societal effects of MNEs have gained ground in these domains, for example probing the ethically and legally dubious activities and the impact of MNEs on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as employees in the Global South and in the platform economy. Critical scholars have furthermore inquired about the ways MNE activities are intertwined with the global financial system, the functioning of welfare states, labour relations in the Global North and South, and climate change and ecological crises.

A recent call has seen the UN, arguably the most recognizable of international organizations, pair up with leading scholars of mainstream IBM scholars to demand more systematic and in-depth research on the 'grand challenges' and 'big questions' for society as these are related to MNE activities (Buckley et al., 2017; United Nations, 2015). Such efforts are to be lauded as they question the dominant rationalistic conceptual frameworks through which the MNE is typically studied, as well as the prevailing quantitative research traditions through which such research takes place, thereby potentially opening up prospects for novel debates and insights in IBM. Unfortunately, these efforts have largely been thwarted in practice and have not quite triggered a major transformation of in the central preoccupations, conceptualizations and methodologies in the domain of mainstream IBM to date (Bozkurt & Geppert, 2021; Dörrenbächer & Geppert, 2017).

In comparison to IBM, Organization Studies has been considerably more open for interdisciplinary research and continuously developed a more critical understanding of contemporary MNEs as powerful organizations by highlighting their socio-economic constitution, inner political dynamics and role as powerful political actors (Geppert et al., 2016). Research has for instance drawn on institutional theory, discursive approaches, relational perspectives, convention theory, organizational power and politics approaches, social movement theory, industrial relations and cultural sociology (e. g. Brandl & Schneider, 2017; De Bakker et al., 2013; Delmestri & Brumana, 2017; Levy & Reiche, 2018; Moore, 2017; Morgan et al., 2001; Whittle et al., 2016). In short, there is no shortage of critical ideas and approaches in OT, but broader debates about what kind of 'grand challenges' we face, how we can deal with them conceptually, methodologically and in practice – as researchers, consultants, customers and employees – have often only taken place inside of narrowly defined academic 'silos', such as IBM or OT.

This sub-theme aims therefore to probe interdisciplinary spaces that remain underappreciated and underexplored. We want to respond to various calls for interdisciplinarity when studying the 'Grand Challenges' that we face in the economy and society which are often both triggered by and dealt with by the contemporary MNE as well as the powerful key actors within and around it. We call for interdisciplinary contributions that can be conceptually, empirically and methodologically oriented. Foremost, we invite submissions from OT and IBM scholars, but we are also interested in submissions from scholars in neighbouring disciplines who explore how global challenges in its various forms are set off by MNEs activities and how MNEs strategically engage in dealing with them. Our call asks for submissions that touch on this indicative rather than comprehensive list of themes and topics:

- Theories, conceptual approaches and methods for interdisciplinary work on 'grand challenges' in and around MNEs
- The role of geopolitics and de-globalization on global value chains and the socio-political constitution of the MNE
- Climate change, the green transition and the MNE
- Migration crisis and the MNE
- Poverty and the MNE
- Forms of slavery in contemporary MNEs
- Precarious work and change of employment relations within and through MNEs
- Nationalistic movements and challenges for the strategizing of MNEs
- The effect of pandemics and systemic shocks for the strategizing of MNEs
- Evolving notions of and struggles related to race, class, gender and other parameters of inequality in and around MNE activities

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