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A Global Path Toward Diversity? Assessing the Influence of Domestic Frameworks on Diversity Initiatives, a French/United States Comparison.

Drawing on an in depth, qualitative sociological study comparing diversity initiatives in the workplace in France and in the US, this paper argues that beyond an ongoing, worldwide convergence of managerial discourses, diversity initiatives are still strongly determined by national political and legal antidiscrimination frameworks.

Since the early 1990s in the US, and throughout the following two decades in many other countries – notably in European countries –, the rhetoric of diversity has become a new managerial norm in the workplace. Prominent corporate discourses on diversity have tended to disconnect diversity from national frameworks in two ways. First, diversity has been defined as a voluntary recognition and valorization of the heterogeneity of the workforce in order to pursue business goals (Thomas 1990). Public policies and laws designed to redress existing inequalities between groups have been moved away from diversity rationales. Second, since the early 2000s, diversity initiatives in major private companies have been increasingly linked to market globalization strategies such as achieving intercultural management or seizing new markets in the non-Western world. Diversity programs have been less and less framed as an outcome of domestic imperatives. Diversity professionals as well as corporate management actors in big companies across the world have embraced this dominant discourse with very little regional and domestic variations.

This discursive shift from equal opportunities to diversity management, understood as a form of “managerialization of law”, has been extensively documented (Dobbin & Kelly 1998; Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita 2001; Bereni 2009). However, despite a few exceptions (Özbilgin & Tatli 2008; Tatli 2010), the scholarly literature on diversity has mostly relied on the study of diversity management discourses. This field of study still lacks a comprehensive approach of how those diversity discourses relate to diversity *practices* in a variety of national contexts. This paper aims at doing so. Focusing on socially situated practices and concrete dilemmas faced by diversity professionals interviewed in France (n=30) and the US (n=25), it assesses the weight of domestic political, legal, and cultural frameworks in the shaping of diversity initiatives in two contrasted national contexts.

In the US, while diversity professionals tend to distance themselves from “legal compliance”, equal employment opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action (AA) regulations in place since the civil rights era in the mid 1960s (Skrentny 1996; Skrentny 2002) still strongly influence the ways in which diversity initiatives are designed. Although diversity discourses increasingly emphasize on the multidimensional character of diversity, diluting race and gender in a wide range of individual characteristics, hiring and promoting women and minorities in management positions

still appears at the core of actual diversity initiatives in most economic organizations. In addition, while diversity discourses have shifted away from procedural and redistributive justice goals in the managerial literature, diversity professionals – who include an overwhelming majority of women and minorities –, when interviewed, still display a strong concern about redressing actual inequalities specifically experienced by women and minorities.

As several other European countries, France has set up an extensive anti-discrimination legislation in the early 2000s under the pressure of European Union's directives. Although this domestic legislation includes twenty one discrimination grounds including "origins" and "nationality", the diversity initiatives that have emerged over the past decade in France focus around three concerns, which have been at the center of corporate social and equality policies long before the adoption of a systematic antidiscrimination legislation: gender, age, and disability. There is a striking discrepancy between diversity discourses that emphasize "all aspects" of human diversity, on the one hand, and diversity practices that strikingly limit themselves to only three categories, on the other hand. Domestic public policies are critical to understand this selective, practical meaning of diversity in French corporations: efforts towards eliminating racial discrimination are discouraged by the legal impossibility to collect data based on race/ethnicity, under the heading of "republican universalism"; on the other hand, public policies have constrained French corporations to take positive action and in some case positive discrimination measures (hiring quotas for disabled employees; sex-based quotas in corporate boards) to specifically redress the disadvantage of women, "seniors" and people with disabilities. Diversity professionals tend to downplay the influence of these public policies, singling out the "voluntary" dimension of business-driven diversity initiatives. However, I will argue that this public policy framework fuels and legitimizes corporate elites' common sense about what should be a good diversity policy in several French owned multinational firms –far away from the French national borders.

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