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Showing them the door (nicely): rejection discourses and practices of a global elite

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# Showing them the door (nicely): rejection discourses and practices of a global elite

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the door

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a critical approach of the identification and rejection strategies in discourses and practices of a “global elite” of business leaders and managers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A literature review of mainstream and more critical management and sociology literature on global or transnational elites and classes is presented. The identification and rejection discursive strategies of some (French) multinational corporations’ managers and internationalization agents are then empirically and qualitatively observed and analyzed.

**Findings** – The findings are interpreted under the following strategies: constructive strategies, reproductive and legitimizing strategies and exclusion strategies. Some members of the global elite deploy a cosmopolitan and welcoming discourse to not only identify legitimate members of that class but also turn this discourse into one of exclusion, that is, find ways through language, and practice, to exclude those they perceive as illegitimate.

**Research limitations/implications** – Management research on global elites needs more critical thinking and reflexivity to avoid acting as a mere vector of global managerial doxa. Studying values, practices and reactions of other less “prestigious” classes confronted with those elites (small- and medium-sized enterprises’ entrepreneurs, individuals from emerging countries, etc.) may contribute to such perspective.

**Originality/value** – The paper shows that the literature (in management) often speaks very highly of global elites. It identifies some dynamics of power between members of that/those classes and individuals who intend to join them and thus provides explanations about the elite’s unwritten codes of conduct, pre-requisites for consideration and inclusion and shows how global classes/elites discursively legitimize and exclude others.

**Keywords** Discourse strategies, Global managers, International elite

**Paper type** Research paper

Leaders of the future will need to have a lot more empathy and sensitivity – not just for people from their own countries, but also for people from different countries and cultures. They are going to need global empathy. C. Ghosn (Kirkland, 2012)

Carlos Ghosn, the French–Lebanese–Brazilian chief executive officer (CEO) of the multinational automaker Renault and the Renault–Nissan alliance, was born in Brazil, raised in Lebanon and France, graduated from French higher education establishments, spent years at Michelin, Europe’s largest tire maker, worked in several plants in France before being appointed CEO of Michelin’s South American and then North American



operations. He then joined Nissan, in Japan, as its CEO and spearheaded major structural changes. Through his personal and professional background, Ghosn embodies the “global elite”: globally educated, trained, experienced, multi-lingual individuals with global networks, vaunting the importance of international openness and advocating some form of global perspective, empathy or citizenship.

With the dramatic rise of globalization and international business, partly attributed to “The New Global Elite” (Newsweek, 2008) and “The Rise of the New Global Elite” (Freeland, 2011), some of these global leaders are now frequently on the front page of magazines, newspapers and the business press. Global leaders, but also a growing number of global managers with strong international backgrounds, skills and experience, are best defined by “their ability to create value by helping their organizations adopt a global perspective” (Unruh and Cabrera, 2013, p. 3).

This global elite is made up of managers in multinational companies, political leaders or diplomats and international bureaucrats (Sklair, 2001). This article focuses on global leaders and managers. Research on global managers has proliferated over the past decade, and it focuses mainly on the study of the skills required by global managers or leaders (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002) and how to develop these skills (Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001). Supposedly these skills include an ability to adjust to other cultures (Earley and Ang, 2003) to reconcile global and local levels (Nummela *et al.*, 2004), to be able to create international networks (Carroll and Carson, 2003; Elliot and Urry, 2010) and to share neoliberal business values (Sklair, 2001). This rather positive and homogeneous vision of the elite has made some researchers (Sklair, 2001; Robinson and Harris, 2000) consider that they represent a distinct class: “a group of people who share a common relationship to the process of social production and reproduction, constituted relationally on the basis of social power struggles” (Robinson, 2004, p. 47) and should be studied accordingly. For example, Richardson *et al.* (2011) have investigated the relation between this “global class” and “Others”, focusing, in particular, on the dynamics, power relations, domination and exclusion. However, such studies neither elucidate what goes through global leaders and managers’ minds when approached by newcomers nor do they make it possible to understand the process by which such newcomers are selected, integrated or rejected.

“Despite its name, the “global elite” is not an exclusive group”, claimed a recent article (Unruh and Cabrera, 2013, p. 3) offering a plan of action for working one’s way into that elite. The purpose of this article is to challenge such a claim and contribute to a critical approach to the global executive class and its discourses and practices. Based on qualitative research among multinational corporations’ (MNC) managers and internationalization agents, this study intends to lift the veil on some of the identification and rejection strategies in discourses and practices of the elite. Our main argument is that some members of the global elite deploy a cosmopolitan, welcoming discourse to identify “true”, legitimate members of that class but also turn this discourse into one of exclusion, that is, they find ways, through language and practice, to exclude those they perceive as illegitimate, intrusive newcomers who do not share their “global” values.

The following sections present the concept of *global elite* and the relevance of a class-based perspective. Then we describe the approach to data collection and analysis together with the discursive strategy approach applied here. The findings are interpreted under the following strategies: constructive strategies, reproductive and

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legitimizing strategies and exclusion strategies. The article ends with a discussion of the critical implications of our findings.

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### **Global leaders or global class**

*Global leaders and managers: an approachable, cosmopolitan elite*

The global – or transnational – elite comprises the leaders and managers of transnational corporations (e.g. directors and (top) managers of the world's largest corporations); bureaucrats, cadres and technicians who administer the international financial agencies (e.g. the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank); politicians, diplomats and bureaucrats from the North and South; and transnational forums' (e.g. Davos World Economic Forum, the Bilderberg Group) speakers and participants but also charismatic figures from public life, show business, the mass media and all their advisers (Robinson and Harris, 2000; Sklair, 2001). A very large body of literature in management has researched the personal competencies, traits, characteristics and skills required to be a global leader, a global manager or a global entrepreneur (Adler, 1997; Black *et al.*, 1999; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2001; Caligiuri, 2006; Terrell and Rosenbusch, 2013, p. 1,057). The most commonly cited skills include listening skills, willingness to learn from others, ability to reconcile global and local levels (Nummela *et al.*, 2004), acceptance of complexity and system thinking (Srinivas, 1995), opportunity-seeking ability (Murtha *et al.*, 1998), incorporation of foreign values (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Maznevski and Lane, 2004), aversion to cultural essentialism (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002) and to be able to forge strong relationships with other members of the community (Carroll and Carson, 2003). Global leaders, managers or entrepreneurs are "global" because they have had numerous international experiences, which make them culturally sensitive (Earley and Ang, 2003) and open-minded, able to understand, adapt to, appreciate, value and leverage cultural differences (Kedia and Mukherji, 1999), and also by their commitment to neoliberalism as a universal business value (Robinson, 2011; Sklair, 2001). This set of skills and values has been described as "global mind-set" by international management researchers (Nummela *et al.*, 2004; Levy *et al.*, 2007). Although no clear consensus has emerged regarding the exact list of those elements or how they develop (Terrell and Rosenbusch, 2013), global managers/leaders have been portrayed as a homogeneous group of individuals, with positive competencies related to strong adjustment capacities and a cosmopolitan perspective on the world. However, the literature does not provide a definitive description of the process and means through which individuals become part of the elite (Terrell and Rosenbusch, 2013).

*Global leaders and managers: a global ruling class?*

A number of studies in sociology have focused on the global elite, the international bourgeoisie (Van der Pijl, 1998) or the international, global or transnational capitalist class (Sklair, 2001; Robinson and Harris, 2000), and how dominant groups of individuals "fuse into a class (or class fraction) within transnational space" (Robinson and Harris, 2000, p. 14). A "class" represents "a group of people who share a common relationship to the process of social production and reproduction, constituted relationally on the basis of social power struggles" (Robinson, 2004, p. 47). As described in the previous paragraphs, the typical member of the global or transnational class has been portrayed as a *cosmopolitan* leader or manager (Merton, 1968; Gouldner, 1957) endowed with

various skills making him or her able to transcend national boundaries to improve his or her position, to move upwards, to new and better places (Ossewaarde, 2007). Apart from the interests attached to their preeminent positions, their individual strategies and personal affinities, members of the “elite” and/or the “global” or “transnational” class are a “fraternity of the successful” (Mills, 1956, p. 281), based on mutual recognition of global skills, values, worldviews acquired through education and personal and professional experience.

Beyond the efforts made to identify and define the elite or class, its nature, its members, their skills, competencies, worldviews, loci of power and so on, some have investigated the relation between this class and “Others”, focusing, in particular, on the dynamics of power, power relations, domination, racism and exclusion within that class and *vis-à-vis* other classes. In particular, Richardson *et al.* (2011) (inspired by van Dijk, 1993; Wodak and Reisigl, 2008) turned their attention to the analysis of “elite racism”, investigating how the “elite” creates and reproduces resentment against “Others” through its discourse in various media (newspapers editorials, academic discourse, interviews with managers, etc.) An important finding is that the global elite, like any other class, assesses who is suitable for entry and, more disparagingly, who is considered “dull” and unacceptable. Empirical studies, often based on social network analysis (Mizruchi, 1996; Domhoff, 2013) do provide a topography and important information about global elites and the objective relations existing between members. However, they do not help understand the way this elite group includes or excludes other people into their group. For a complete perspective of the elite phenomenon, Bourdieu and Wacquant (2000) called for a critical assessment of the accepted and hegemonic intellectual representations of the world shared by the elite via “a globalised or globally hegemonic discourse or set of representations” (Friedman, 2000, p. 139). Specifically, van Dijk (1984, p. 13) advises analysis of “the rationalization and justification of discriminatory acts against minority groups” and identified (discursive) strategies to legitimate and enact the distinction of “the Other”. In general, one of those strategies is “to link a positive self-representation – i.e. one acceptable to society and signalling tolerance – with an existing negative attitude to foreigners” (Wodak and Reisigl, 2008, p. 380).

Confronting that finding with our knowledge of the management literature, which often presents the global elite as a benevolent cosmopolitan group of individuals, we undertook to question the motives underlying the deployment of representations and discourses by this elite. In this paper, we argue that, ironically, the global elite’s positive (self-) representations of the world may actually be part of a strategy to segregate and exclude “outsiders”, “Others” and newcomers perceived as illegitimate or unworthy. As Foucault (1977, p. 199) shows, understanding discursive practices will help us delimit:

[...] a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories. Thus each discursive practice implies a play of prescriptions that designate exclusions and choices.

Analyzing the discourses and practices of members of the global elite will enable us to empirically identify discrete power dynamics between members of that elite and individuals who intend to join that group. It will help us provide what Richardson *et al.* (2011, p. 212) call the “unwritten codes of elite conduct” that are pre-requisites for

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network consideration and inclusion and how they discursively legitimize and exclude the “Others”.

Showing them  
the door

## Research design and method

### *Empirical data*

The research reported in this paper is part of a research project initiated in 2008, in France and China. The project examined the nature of interpersonal ties or networks between small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) entrepreneurs, MNC managers and internationalization agents – members of public and private export/trade promotion agencies (the bodies charged with implementing the programmes supporting SME internationalisation, [European Commission, 2007](#)) and their potential impact upon the creation and/or development of business ventures overseas. After a first set of four or five interviews, the researchers realized that some interviewees identified as members of the “global elite” (i.e. MNC leaders and managers and internationalization agents) alluded to social divisions or classes in their discourse, distinguishing “themselves” from “Others”, mostly SME managers and who were generally newcomers in the field of international business, particularly to China. As a consequence, at a second stage, we modified our research questions to investigate the issues presented in this paper.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, data were collected on the following three points:

- (1) the informant’s professional background, national and international work experience, travel, training and education;
- (2) their use of networks and personal relationships for international business development, the meaning ascribed to those networks and perceptions of people met and/or contacted during the internationalization process; and
- (3) their assessment of their performance and development in China (and other countries).

In total, 35 semi-structured interviews took place, lasting 1-6 hours, over 10 months in France and China. Twenty-five interviewees were identified as part of the “global elite” (global leaders and managers working for MNCs, public internationalisation agents or diplomats, international consultants, all with years of experience in the field, see [Table I](#)). We focus on this category for the purpose of this article. In this paper, we adopt a broader definition of the global elite as a global ruling managerial class. As such, we consider the elite as an interconnected network of individuals, owners and controllers of transnational corporations, globalizing bureaucrats and politicians, professionals and consumerist elites (merchants and media), who may not always be entirely united on every issue but, together, “constitute a global power elite, dominant class or inner circle in the sense that these terms have been used to characterize the dominant class structures of specific countries” ([Sklair, 2000](#), p. 67-68). We consider them as one ruling class, as they share economic interests, similar lifestyles, education and consumption patterns, outward-oriented globalizing rather than inward-oriented localizing perspectives, claim to be citizens of the world, as well as of their places of birth and exert some form of economic, political and cultural or ideological control over other populations ([Sklair, 2005](#), p. 486). In addition, the first author also directly observed meetings organized by internationalization agents to advertise/promote their initiatives to potential participants to triangulate the data.



**Table I.**  
Interview data

Name	Position	Previous experience[]	Sector	Gender	Company tenure (years)	Workplace location	International experience (years)
<i>Global Elite</i>							
JCL	Internationalization agent		Ministry of Foreign Affairs	M	> 10	International	1-5
EO	Internationalization agent		Ministry of Industry	F	1-5	France	0
CBL	Internationalization agent	M	Lawyer	F	> 10	International	> 10
NA	Internationalization agent	ENT-M	Consulting	M	> 10	International	> 10
MW	Internationalization agent	M	Chinese Business	M	> 10	International	> 10
			Development Agency				
OC	Internationalization agent	ENT M	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	M	1-5	China	> 10
MD	Internationalization agent		Ministry of Foreign Affairs	M	> 10	France	1-5
JLP	Internationalization agent		Ministry of Foreign Affairs	M	> 10	France	1-5
AP	Internationalization agent		Regional economic services	F	1-5	France	1-5
MM	Internationalization agent	ENT	Regional economic services	M	1-5	China	1-5
BD	Internationalization agent		Regional economic services	F	5-10	International	1-5
AL	Internationalization agent		Regional economic services	F	> 10	France	1-5
JPM	Internationalization agent		Regional economic services	M	> 10	France	0
ID	Internationalization agent		Regional economic services	M	> 10	France	0
DA	Internationalization agent	ENT-M	Consulting	F	5-10	International	1-5
PT	Internationalization agent	ENT-M	Consulting	M	5-10	International	> 10
BP	Internationalization agent		National economic services	F	1-5	International	1-5
AC	Internationalization agent		National economic services	F	1-5	International	1-5
JCP	Manager		Nuclear industry	M	> 10	International	5-10
JMA	Manager		Nuclear industry	M	> 10	International	5-10
MG	Manager		Consulting	M	> 10	International	5-10
PD	Manager		Energy	M	> 10	International	1-5
OH	Entrepreneur		Electronic Metering	M	> 10	France	0
JBF	Entrepreneur	M	Automotive	M	> 10	International	3
JFS	Entrepreneur	M	Engineering	M	> 10	International	1-5

**Notes:** <sup>1</sup> "ENT": entrepreneur; "M": "manager"

### *Data analysis*

We applied a multi-faceted approach to analysis of the interviews (Vaara and Monin, 2010) and proceeded in two stages. First, the results were analyzed thematically and individually to look for regular patterns with regard to the skills deemed necessary to internationalize, that is, to become part of the international business community, embodied in particular by the elite. Results were also analyzed thematically and individually to identify how informants perceived themselves and “Others”. The initial coding was carried out using NVivo8 according to the categories of the interview guide (categories were defined prior to coding and progressively augmented, matching the three topics explored by the interview guide). The initial coding scheme consisted of:

- How individuals define who/what they are, how they perceive themselves in the internationalization process and what are, in their opinion, the skills necessary to deal with that process (i.e. “what it means to be me, a global manager”).
- How individuals perceive and define “Others” and, by contrast, how they define themselves (what it means to be “not-me”/to be “them”) but also how they perceive Others’ behaviors and reactions.

Second, equipped with these themes, we returned to reinterpret the interviews and were soon convinced that a discourse analysis of the 25 interviews might yield additional insights. Discourse analysis suggests that a discourse (written or spoken) acts to influence social practice, but is also (re)constituted by social practice (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Studying the micro-level element in the individual discourse can help understand the way discourse is shaped and spoken by the elite (Grant *et al.*, 2004; Vaara and Tienari, 2002).

Specifically, we focused on discursive strategies, that is to say how people access, classify and mobilize different themes in their discourse to strive for specific goals (Hardy *et al.*, 2000). De Cillia *et al.* (1999) showed that individuals can develop social roles, as well as identities through discourses and that these play a role in the production and construction of social conditions. The same authors identified three main strategies:

- (1) constructing strategies (on which topic or values a group constructs its identity);
- (2) legitimation strategies (how people justify their position); and
- (3) dismantling or excluding strategies (against what/whom are they opposed) that help us to understand how respondents construct an elite position, perpetuate or legitimate a status quo and also exclude “Others”.

We complemented the legitimation strategies with the discursive strategies highlighted by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999): authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis. These two analytical tools helped us to describe both the power games embedded in global elite discourses in the identity justification of this elite group and their exclusion strategies toward the newcomers.

### **Discursive strategies of the global elite**

In this section, we describe the discourse-analytical tools used in this study and illustrate the main categories with extracts from the 25 respondents’ interviews. This section presents three of the discursive strategies identified:



- (1) constructive strategies used to build a particular identity;
- (2) perpetuation strategies that help support and reproduce the elite's position; and
- (3) exclusion strategies through which the elite builds its identity by contrasting it to "Others"

*Constructive strategies: building a particular common identity*

In this section, we identify how the elite constructs its identity discursively. First, they define the values and skills they share and esteem. Second, the construction of this common identity is reinforced by linguistic acts ("we-group" evaluation and positive representation) that help to construct commonalities.

*Identifying common values.* We have identified two main topics that relate to the construction of a collective identity. The actors of the global elite often define themselves as "global managers": skilled professionals able to create and manage business ventures anywhere in the world. This self-definition is primarily based on two sets of skills or competencies acquired through their education and previous experiences (cross-cultural skills and professional/business skills) that forge a common understanding and identity.

For these individuals, a global manager is endowed with cross-cultural skills, which include foreign language proficiency and cross-cultural awareness or sensitivity (knowledge of geographically dispersed markets and cultures and any other skill that may help overcome barriers associated with differences in language, culture, business practices and legislation). The first skill deemed necessary to belong to this group is (foreign) language proficiency. Mastering one or many foreign languages is the result of a long socialization process abroad and is described as a guarantee of adjustment everywhere in the world. Fluency in English is not considered as an additional competence but as a prerequisite (as opposed to fluency in Mandarin for instance).

Other important skills are related to the development of cross-cultural sensitivity, host market knowledge and the ability to adjust to local peculiarities. For example, a brief analysis of training courses offered by international trade promotion agencies and agents reveals that all include some form of tutorial presenting how to adapt to specific features of local business practice ("China seminar" hosted by internationalisation agency Ubifrance, in partnership with Société Générale, in 2010).

Therefore, equipped with diverse international experience, language skills and cultural adjustment capacity, these individuals express an ability to overcome cultural differences, which therefore have minimal impact on their work:

No matter where we go now, it doesn't take us long to "settle in." JMA (French, MNC manager)

This ability to overcome cross-cultural barriers is linked to the second set of aptitudes that determine membership to the "global managers" category: professional/business skills.

Business skills are considered as another kind of expertise necessary for the global elite in this internationalization process. A global business culture is learned through primary socialization, mainly in international business schools. Business and management principles are considered as universal and therefore cultural differences are considered as secondary in the internationalization process:

We are all trained in Marketing, Accounting, Finance, etc. because, more than anything, these are the skills required to do business, wherever you are. MM (French former MNC manager and internationalisation agent).

In the respondents' terms, business skills usually also include the ability to craft a (long-term) strategy, tenacity and hard-work, reflection rather than knee-jerk reactions. Besides, peer-to-peer interaction is essential to practice and maintain these skills, to launch and consolidate a business abroad:

For me the two (projects) that we built in X were supported by the Koreans; the Americans from [company X] were there, I know because I have some pals in [company X] who were there, and then I met the project leader who is also a friend etc (JCP; French MNC manager and internationalisation agent).

This manager shows that this network is made up of individuals from different countries. However, cultural diversity is considered as a source of enriching variety to conduct business rather than as a cause of painful disparity. In other words, the members of the global elite living and working in China consider cultural diversity as a strength rather than a liability and have managed to create a network around a common global culture. He explains that information circulates, creating a kind of "closed-in community", where trust and friendship are mainly based on similar experiences abroad and to the participation to international business meetings and social events.

*Expressing commonalities.* This constructive strategy, based on a common definition of what it means to be a global manager, is reinforced by linguistic acts that serve to establish a particular global identity. The main linguistic procedure is the creation of a "we-group" in connection with this group identified as "global managers". It is connected to an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) that believes in the values identified in the previous section (cross-cultural and global business skills, and a cosmopolitan ethos). It is a shared mentality that principally serves to highlight a global distinctiveness:

In this world, some people are "cul-de-sacs" and others are "bridges". I like to consider myself as a "bridge", I work with people who are "bridges", connecting others. MW (French, Internationalisation agent)

It also serves to promote a feeling of solidarity among this elite in international assignment situations. Lastly, this constructive strategy is strengthened by positive self-representations, as in the following example:

We work with people who "give and take", not with those who only "take". We give a lot to "givers", the "takers" are not interesting and they don't last long around here anyway. MW (French, Internationalisation agent)

#### *Perpetuation and legitimation strategies: to support the continuous existence of such a community*

We studied the perpetuation and legitimization strategies of this global elite (how they maintain, defend and support their global identity) with the help of the four strategies identified by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999): authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis.

*Authorization.* This strategy is a reference to persons or institutions that legitimize the existence of the group. The elite legitimizes its existence with the help of references to authorities that recognize their capacity to master the defined international "rules of the game" (cross-cultural, global business skills and

understanding). For instance, MW, an internationalization agent working for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in China explains that he has received prestigious awards, as evidence of his cross-cultural and business efforts (the China Friendship Award, as he mentions, the “highest award for foreign experts who have made outstanding contributions to the country’s economic and social progress”, etc.). His discourse legitimizes his position through his recognition by higher authorities (the French and Chinese Governments).

Respondents legitimize the fact that they have developed cross-cultural skills through previous personal and work experience abroad, and mainly through their work with multinational corporations or organizations:

It so happens that personally I had four years’ experience in the USA, and in what I would call “French services”. [...] So I know what it’s like. You don’t go and settle in a country without asking around you, saying “What are the problems you have?” – MD (French, former MNC manager)

The duration of various international experiences and the “collection” of such international postings is also an authorization argument, providing them with legitimacy in the global field.

*Rationalization.* Some respondents legitimize their action using references to specific actions accepted as relevant in their context. These actions are defined according to the cross-cultural and global business skills they assume that they have. The usefulness of these skills is exemplified in the following:

In Shanghai, Mumbai, Milan or Paris, it’s always the same process. We arrive somewhere, we observe how people behave and, somehow, we mimic them. You know the saying: “when in Rome [...]” That’s what we do: we watch and adapt. And after a few years travelling around, it just becomes second nature, you don’t even see differences, nothing is “exotic” anymore! JMA (French, MNC manager)

This last argument is important: like other interviewees, JMA shows that belonging to this group is not only a matter of education but also depends on time spent abroad. This long-lasting contact with “l’international” (“the International (scene)”, in French, a personification that reinforces the idea of an invisible global power) even transforms their identity and gives them what they call a “second nature”. This “second nature” justification helps them maintain and support their global identity and elite position because it reinforces their idea that they have a long term vision embedded within them. This can also be noticed when they mention their language skills:

I Speak several languages, my action is absolutely unlimited, I can go anywhere in the world. MM (French MNC manager and internationalization agent).

*Moral evaluation.* Respondents legitimize and perpetuate their status by making references to a specific value system. The skills and capacities they assume to have (cross cultural and universal global business skills) are founded on a value system that is itself based on a universal vision of business and a cosmopolitan ethos. First, these actors think they are “global” because they consider they can always understand each other, whatever their country/culture of origin. This common understanding is related to having the same global vision of business:

We understand each other because even if we don't have the same products and not always the same markets etc. we do have the same culture [...] I mean business culture (MG, French MNC manager and internationalization agent).

While they do consider that adjustments to local contexts are needed, business practice is said to be more or less the same wherever they are, providing they interact with similar people who understand "what it takes to do international business". Thus, this sameness or commonality of interest calls for solidarity (through a network) among them.

*Mythopoesis.* Mythopoesis is storytelling related to an imagined past or a vision of the future that is used to legitimize the existence of this elite and perpetuate its position. We previously showed that they share a common past (in MNCs or in national institutions for the promotion of international trade; with an education mainly in Business Schools or the Grande Ecole system). This common past helps them construct a community. But the reference to the future is also very important in their comments:

I dare say that we are thinkers. [...] It requires more than just managing the daily routine. If you stop watching what's going on around the world, sooner or later you are finished. [...] It's a bit like the butterfly effect: what happens today in China or elsewhere may have a very significant impact on us in the future, on our markets, customers, competitors, etc. BD (French, internationalisation agent)

This quote exemplifies the way the elite constructs the world and which they convey in their discourses. This "thinking" capacity distinguishes them from the "doers", as we will see in the next section. Thus, this capacity to anticipate (and thus to act in the future) legitimizes their sense of importance in the global arena.

*Exclusion strategies: construction against the identity of another group.*

The elite also (re)create themselves in relation to "Others", against whom it is important to be opposed to maintain a common identity (Barth, 1969). Any identification process calls for the exclusion of those considered as different (represented in our study by French entrepreneurs, going to China for the first time). We observed three main strategies used by the global elite toward this group that acted as a discourse of exclusion: pointing out differences, stereotyping and condescension.

*Pointing out differences.* Not only do members of the global elite define which characteristics and skills are important to succeed overseas but they also evaluate "Others" (and especially aspiring global actors) in the light of these skills. Respondents in this category first not only identify the characteristics of those who belong to their group but they also define those who do not. This distinction is based on two main claims:

- (1) *They* (SME people, aspiring international entrepreneurs/managers) are different from us, they are not "distinguished" (eminent, elegant, refined).
- (2) *They* only deserve limited attention because they don't belong to our world/they are irrelevant.

The following sentence clearly exemplifies and highlights how the differences are constructed in their discourse:

“SME” Don’t tell anyone but I often say “S” stands for “small means and small ambitions”, I mean there are people for whom “strategy” is almost a swearword, you know. Small means, small ambitions, so as for exporting, you just do it for the kudos rather than really to go into exports (PD, French MNC manager and internationalization agent).

*Stereotyping/negative representation.* In addition, the global elite makes stereotypical generalizations that reinforce dichotomies between groups of international actors. While the elite group is described as endowed with all kinds of cross-cultural and strategic skills, outsiders, aspiring international entrepreneurs and managers are described negatively. For the elite group (who mainly belong to MNCs or institutions involved in export promotion), company size, the lack of money and strategic vision but also parochialism and suspicion towards anything or anyone “foreign” are key factors that draw a line between “true”, “distinguished” international/global business people and petty “amateurs” or “novices”:

It is just like Asterix. They try and preserve their village. What they don’t understand is that Caesar and Rome have won already, or soon will. We’re not living in some comic book. [...] They are like ostriches, burying their heads in the sand [...] or contemplating their navels if you prefer (NA, French, MNC manager and internationalisation agent).

*Condescension.* Lastly, the exclusion strategies are reinforced by a process of condescension toward the other group identified as “aspiring global managers”. The elite express contempt towards those who do not belong to their group, complaining about their lack of cultural and strategic skills:

So it’s often someone who isn’t prepared: who speaks English terribly, who judges everything with the self-confidence of a French company chairman with success behind him, with his company running like clockwork, who is in his fifties, who is looking for red and blue ribbons for his buttonhole and who is there, criticising, not aggressively but very self-sufficient. And that’s why often it doesn’t work, because you need humility and consistency, and you have to work at it in the field (MW, French, former MNC manager and internationalization agent).

In this quote, this agent criticizes the lack of knowledge of what he tacitly understands to be the “rules of the games”. It also reveals a form of condescension; that is, the fact that someone at the top of a social hierarchy adopts the speech or style of those at the bottom. Condescension can be empirically observed when MNC managers, diplomats and agents intentionally use childish or plain language to explain how business should be done for instance:

I don’t think it is particularly difficult to understand [...] We tell them: “you need a plan, a business plan. Do you understand what that is? What is your strategy? Do you have a strategy? What is your target market? etc. Many don’t even know what we’re talking about [...]. Before thinking about going abroad [...] many of them need basic business literacy. [...] I spend a significant amount of my time explaining such basic principles (JLP, French internationalisation agent).

## Discussion

Studies describing who global leaders, managers and/or elites are, how they think and behave, providing advice and guidance on how to join them have proliferated. Most studies in management offer a rather positive perspective on those populations, often picturing them as successful and role-model global professionals

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(Kedia and Mukherji, 1999; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Maznevski and Lane, 2004). Showing them  
the door

Other disciplines, sociology in particular, have considered such individuals from a different and less rosy perspective, often analyzing their networks and focusing on how they organize and reproduce domination over other groups of people. Global leaders, managers and the elite have been presented as an emerging global class, enacting, promoting and benefiting from (neo-)capitalism, liberalism and globalization (Robinson, 2004), creating the conditions most propitious to the mobility and free operation of (financial) capital (Robinson and Harris, 2000), often to the detriment of other emerging global populations and classes. The mainstream management literature has often focused on the virtues of global elites, leaders and managers, and has tended to forget that, below them “in the global hierarchy is a small and shrinking layer of middle classes, who [...] form a fragile buffer between the transnational elite and the world’s poor majority” (Robinson, 2000, p. 90).

This paper combines these two perspectives, providing a critical approach to global leaders and managers, showing how (French) members of the global elite discursively define themselves and, at the same time, reject or exclude those not part of this elite. Specifically, it sheds some light on how global leaders and managers, who are often portrayed and frequently describe themselves in glowing terms as open-minded, culturally sensitive and cosmopolitan individuals (i.e. endowed with a “global mind-set”), can also deploy discursive strategies to exclude those who (supposedly) do not share such values and mind-sets. Global elite members define themselves in opposition to local, parochial counterparts and other professionals rooted in their domestic context with local or, at best, national connections. Along with a number of scholars (in particular Friedman, 2000 and Bauman, 1998), we argue, in this paper, that cosmopolitanism and other positive values, mind-sets, skills and competencies attributed to and vaunted by members of the global elite are ironically or cynically mobilized in their discourse to exclude those who do not share such views. Members of a new global or transnational elite describe the world from their perspective and, contrary to what they openly claim, they:

[...] dislike the local, the national, the indigenous and are often quite enthralled by a new kind of cosmopolitan internationalism very much based on the metaphors of consumption and appropriation, and often combined with a desire for connoisseurship concerning the vast array of world objects that are accessible to them (Friedman, 2000, p. 143).

Departing from the rather naïve description of global elites as enlightened cosmopolitan minds provided by the business press (Unruh and Cabrera, 2013), the discourse that unfolds here is actually that of the identification and perpetuation of the elite. The description and analysis we have provided show how members of the elite define and align views, preferences and values they consider to be legitimate, thus constructing a common identity that contrasts with other classes. The elements shared, partly unconsciously, in the elite’s discourse “results in the prevalence of a particular brand of consensus – one that is undoubtedly in the service of the forces of economic globalization” (Richardson *et al.*, 2011, p. 217). Seemingly positive values and behaviors such as global cultural sensitivity and cosmopolitanism form a kind of “doxa” (Bourdieu, 1977) or orthodoxy; members of the elite are actually “so



convinced of the enlightened nature of their worldview, that they fail to recognise it as inherently partisan” (Richardson *et al.*, 2011, p. 214).

In a world where wealth and power are increasingly decentralized and reshuffled, where newcomers from various parts of the globe rise and increasingly challenge the dominant classes and their identifications with “traditional” values, institutions and networks (Friedman, 2000), these classes must “change to stay the same” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 278). The adoption of a “global mind-set” (or global values and practices) and its discourse defines a new “sense of one’s place” and one’s sense of belonging (Bourdieu, 1984), contributes to define and set the boundaries of the global or transnational social space in which top managers and leaders evolve. Scholars have a role to play in critically assessing and revealing the social dynamics; the forces of social and ideological reproduction structuring that space among different classes – elites, middle classes and lower classes. Management academics often view globalization “from above” and speak highly of “global leaders and managers”, thus contributing to propagate a dominant model and the image of a world overseen by “benevolent cosmopolitan capitalists” while overlooking their strategies and the fate of the vast majority of non-elites, who may be just as cosmopolitan and endowed with wide-ranging skills (Kothari, 2008), but do not display the most glorious aspects of management or capitalism. We have focused on a broader picture. Mainstream management literature and education promote and legitimize neo-liberal values, some of which are revealed in this study. Changing prevailing beliefs, values and practices may be difficult. The challenge for critical management scholars is to get the critical messages across, to raise awareness of the social, ideological dynamics that exist between emerging global or transnational classes and to question the practical relevance of the values vaunted by the elite and the managerial press (Murphy, 2006; Vaara and Fay, 2012). Consequently, we wonder if these “global values” or “global mind-set” that introduces divisions between individuals should still be promoted or explained without its “dark side”.

This exploratory study has some limitations. The case of French members of the global managerial class or elite should not be considered as idiosyncratic but as “a particular case of the possible” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 75) forms of values, strategies and practices. Future research should focus on values and practices shared by other populations and classes in various national contexts. This study focuses only on the production and perpetuation of this global discourse by the elite, but it would be particularly interesting to understand how the newcomers in the internationalization process who aspire to become global actors react to confrontation with the international elite.

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### Further reading

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