

# Christoph Barmeyer

## An interview with an intercultural “Meister” in the academic world



**B**ack in the old days, when photographs and television programs were in black and white, people saw the world with Cartesian “either-or” logic. A yes-or-no choice is easy — we perceive dilemmas as opposing poles. Fast forward to the multidimensional reality of our present globalized world, where a Manichean mindset is no longer viable.

An example would be a merger between two companies, which don’t share the same philosophy. One has had success with low-cost mass production; the other with low-volume, high-value niche products. To choose one strategy over the other is to throw away potential synergies. A reconciliation of opposites means being able to see beyond binary solutions.

*This is what Christoph Barmeyer does best. As a professor, he chairs the Intercultural Management program at the University of Passau. Instead of concentrating on differences and opposing values, he looks at how people, organizations and cultures can complement each other: constructive intercultural management.*

*Even more interesting is the path Dr. Barmeyer took. Raised near Cologne, he didn’t receive a classical education but that of the free-thinking Waldorf School. He studied banking yet went on to become an expert in French-German intercultural management. A respected lecturer, consultant and*

*author, his enthusiasm for the field was also felt at SIETAR Deutschland, where he served on the Board for four years in the mid ’90s.*

*I was especially interested in his unconventional background and, as I’d hoped, our conversation proved to be most enriching...*

**Let us begin with you telling us the early experiences that led to you to the intercultural field.**

I was born and raised in Brühl, a small town near the Rhine, about 10 km southwest of Cologne. From my earliest years through to the *Abitur*, I went to what’s known as a Waldorf school, founded by Rudolf Steiner. It is based on a humanistic movement that postulates social solidarity is achieved through individual freedom. Its aims are to develop faculties of imagination and intuition through a form of independent thinking. This movement influenced organizations in biodynamic agriculture, medicine, organizational development and social finance, but above all in education. Pedagogy and content of this school are linked to the stages of development and needs of the child and there are no grades — I loved going to school! The whole experience of a non-restrictive atmosphere opens up horizons, to see the world differently and be sensitive to people, nature, life. This cultural socialization laid the foundation of my thinking and work.

My parents are francophiles and we went on holiday to a

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*Christoph Barmeyer received a solid education at the liberal and free-spirited Waldorf school.*



Club Med in France when I was five. I remember being put in the “mini-club”. The children around me behaved in strange ways, ate strange things and nobody spoke German. After three days, my parents took me out because I was so unhappy. Absolute culture shock.

Then, when I was 16, I spent a half a year at a school just outside of Paris. I also had a French *copine* and, through her, I learned a lot about the relativity of worldviews in general, the language, the culture, above all myself. Still, after the *Arbitur* it was time to be serious. I started a three-year apprenticeship at a Dresden bank — the famous “*duales System*”, where half your time is spent working, the other half is going to school. But at this school and bank, I wasn’t independent, couldn’t do things that made sense to me. This was my second culture shock.

After the apprenticeship, I found an international business program (*Kulturwirt*) that emphasized languages and cultures at the University of Passau, a beautiful little Bavarian town near the Austrian border. I could combine business, languages, social sciences sociology. It was a very good theoretical base for my later profession.

### **Did you only study in Passau?**

No, the program required me to work and study abroad. I spent over a year in Montreal, where I met Nancy Adler,

and we prepared together with the *Goethe Institut* and Bernd Müller-Jacquier a conference on intercultural communication. It was the early '90s and hardly anyone knew what interculturalism was.

I also did an internship at JPB - *La synergie franco-allemande* in Paris and got deep insights at French and German management styles. I completed a doctorate in Saarbrücken, where I helped my supervisor build up an intercultural communications department. I also had a fantastic experience at the *Summer Institute of Intercultural Communication* in Portland.

Afterwards, I spent eight years teaching intercultural human resource management and communication at the University of Strasbourg. It was an extraordinary experience — different foods, different behavior, different management. I also did training and consulting for both French and German companies. The business world is stimulating in a practical way and you can examine models for leadership, team conflicts, working with clients. It was a nice contrast to research and academia.

Little by little, I found myself examining the strengths and weaknesses of different organizations. Without really realizing it, I was becoming a *Brückenbauer*, a bridge builder. I became chair of Intercultural Management at the University

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*Teaching at the University of Strasbourg for eight years had a profound influence on his work in French-German relations.*

of Passau in 2008 ... at the university where I studied. Life is full of cycles as interculturalists know.

### **What do students learn in your department?**

Students learn a lot about cultural logics and intercultural interactions. One third of the program is business studies and they specialize in a region, such as Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe or South America. I do some innovative interactive courses on virtual teams or business simulations (we call it in German *Unternehmensplanspiele*). Bachelor and Master theses touch also on innovative topics, such as the international transfer of management practices or the role of bicultural people in multinationals. We prepare students for work in international organizations, where they'll need business, intercultural and language skills. This is important because students can't all become intercultural trainers.

### **You are a specialist in French and German management. What are some of the differences?**

Well, even if much depends on individuals and contexts, social dialogue in Germany is far more intense than in France. The *Mitbestimmungsrecht* (codetermination rights) has been in place for decades. Employees participate in company decisions in a horizontal way, on an equal status with management.

French organizations are still dominated by a hierarchal, centralized management style. The country is characterized



by high power-distance and decision-making is top-down. Outside observers think the French style is autocratic but, in many ways, it isn't. French managers are people-oriented and they are strong in managing human relations. Many of my German and English colleagues, especially women, prefer a French *patron* who sees management as something human. In Germany, the manager is more objective, more distant. But above all, intercultural corporation between French and Germans can be very complementary as I found it in my research and consulting projects. And I try to advise them on how these specificities can be understood as resources and used in a complementary way. French-German collaboration is for me in some ways a model on how successful multinational organizations, such as Airbus, Arte and Alleeo (the high speed train joint-venture of Deutsche Bahn und SNCF) can complement each other.

### **What are some of your other interests in the intercultural field?**

I am above all interested in the constructive, positive handling of cultural differences, especially in organizations. At the moment I'm publishing with Peter Franklin at Konstanz University of Applied Sciences a case study book on constructive intercultural management, on how people, organizations and cultures can complement each other. Instead of always looking at differences and misunderstandings, we're focusing on attitudes and skills as resources to help organizations com-

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*Dr. Barmeyer's current research is on how to get those with fully different perspectives to complement one another.*



*Painting by Ulrike Haupt*

bine differences in a positive way. This is something like the idea of Taoism; it's also dilemma theory, or what's called negotiated culture: In every interaction, we negotiate meanings. In intercultural interactions, we construct a third culture, a meeting of perspectives. We see differences, combine them and use them as strengths.

### ***In another words, a dialectic form of communication.***

Absolutely. Intercultural research in the last 50 or 60 years has focused on misunderstandings, problems, confusions and conflicts. This may be the influence of psychologists, who have a more problematic view of reality, and also linguists and speech specialists, who analyze the micro-elements of communication. But this is one perspective.

We wanted to change the perspective. We asked colleagues to write something about complementary communication and management and we discovered consultants and research people have real problems in finding examples. It's incredible. The book has really nice case studies about complementary cooperation but some of them are still about otherness and differences.

### ***Can you cite examples of complementary cooperation?***

It's difficult because you can easily drop into these stereotypes. But take Airbus. You'll find the French are very strong in strategy, marketing and selling, which is reflected in the

idea of building the biggest, most innovative airplane in the world. These are French ideas. The German contribution is emphasizing finance, processes, engineering, human resources. I find the same patterns in smaller companies — more innovation and strategy among French managers, more process and product orientation among German ones.

The reasons are cultural and historical. In France, there's a long tradition of teaching strategic management at the *Grandes Ecoles*. Germany, on the other hand, has excellent management schools teaching finance, quality control, how to measure results... It becomes intercultural complementary, when we respect core competences of others. This happens when, for example, German managers say, "Well, maybe we're not as good at strategic innovation as the French." In another words, there are moments where we should lead and moments where we should follow. This helps managers to combine their strengths, which helps the organization to grow.

### ***What about the DaimlerChrysler failure? Was it because the Germans wanted to dominate Chrysler?***

We all have different interpretations: Engineers will tell you Chrysler wasn't the best engineering firm, management scholars focus on divergence strategies and products, sociologists will say it was about power relations and interculturalists see cultural differences and stereotypes. The only complementary product generated was the Crossfire sports car,

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*An excellent example of constructive intercultural management is the Renault-Nissan merger.*

putting American and German engineering together, but it wasn't enough. Tensions were caused by misguided ideas of what a merger should be and they ultimately led to its failure.

### ***Can you tell us of a successful international merger?***

Yes. An excellent example of constructive intercultural management is the Renault-Nissan merger. Nissan has learned a lot about design and what European consumers want. And the Japanese put a lot of Renault motors in Nissan cars. Meanwhile, Renault learned a lot about quality management, lean management and just-on-time techniques.

To do an international merger right, we need competent actors who understand the strengths of different cultures and organizations. The CEO of Renault, Carlos Ghosn, Ghosn was born in Brazil, raised by his Lebanese parents and went to a French school and studied at the French *Grand Ecoles*, started work at Michelin, then at Renault. He said that they weren't going to do a merger but create an alliance: "Renault stays Renault, Nissan remains Nissan, but we'll have an intense, personal exchange." In reality, it was a financial merger and a cultural alliance. He followed a strategic intercultural approach by building cross-functional teams of French and Japanese minds, forced people to work together to create real synergy. It's been a big success.

Another example is Air France and KLM. I think it worked



because there was mutual respect; the companies actually stayed independent. This is called a polycentric strategy: let the Dutch be the Dutch, let the French be the French. Each company has its own *image de marque* and strategy but they purchase goods and services together and consolidate their flight connections. They managed to see what each was good at. Sometimes it's best to keep best practices, not try to merge them in an intercultural way.

***I'm working with a German foundation that recently bought an American company, which is listed on the stock exchange. The Americans want to show profits every three months; the German foundation is more interested in long-term profits and employee welfare. How do you align these structures?***

It's very difficult to collaborate with contrary corporate cultures and organizational models — they present insurmountable obstacles. This touches on French sociologist Philippe d'Iribarne's thesis that everything is influenced by the context in which we live. History and the conception of life, the understanding of how the world influences our perception, communication, leadership, work. If some insist on imposing management instruments, they may irritate people and destroy important cultural elements. I have many examples where Germans used their management tools in French companies and the French couldn't cope. It was completely frustrating and foreign to them.

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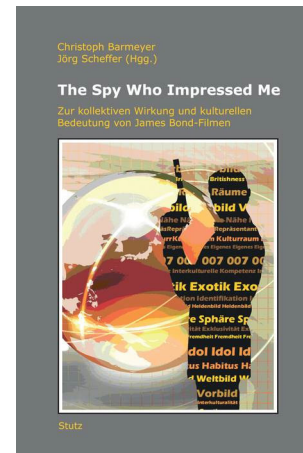
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*'The Spy Who Impressed Me' is a collection of fascinating essays on how James Bond's films have had a cultural impact on our collective imagination. The material is based on a popular class taught by Dr. Barmeyer at Passau University.*



People are often still ethnocentric. They use ethnocentric tools and are surprised when it doesn't work in other contexts. We need to talk about *recontextualization* — giving sense to newly introduced practices, tools, measures. The question becomes “How can we adapt the instruments so that they make sense and work in another context?”

You mentioned the dilemma of long-term versus short-term profits. This is also a strategic, not just only cultural difference, and we have to think about how to resolve it. For instance, by having the American partner learn something about the German view on social welfare. What are the positive aspects of long-term thinking? Can we work on this? See if our management system can integrate both sides? We need to make people think on meta-levels

### **You've been a Board member and active member of Sietar for years. Where do you think it should be heading?**

I think it's important for us to think about our changing world, how we're evolving more and more into multicultural societies and bi- and multicultural people. A lot of trainers still put people in boxes: the Americans are like this...The Germans are like that... The anthropologist Tommy Dahlén criticized this already in his book “Among the Interculturalists“. We need to take into account that some people are part of multiple cultures and identities. We need to adapt our discourse on intercultural communication to hybrid and multiple cultures.

Another area to focus on is negotiated cultures — how to combine working styles, learn from each other, be complementary and create new cultures in constructive ways. SIETAR is a great organization. It puts people together who are really concerned and passionate about intercultural subjects and phenomena. What make it strong are the different backgrounds and experiences of its members.

I came into the field through SIETAR in 1993 and I can honestly say it helped me enormously in what I am professionally doing today. But, like with all institutions, we need to think about what's going on around us and how we can evolve as interculturalists. By working interculturally and contributing a little bit to a better understanding of our world, we also fulfill important humanistic “tasks”.

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*Interview conducted by Patrick Schmidt*

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