GLOBAL AMBITIONS AND LOCAL IDENTITIES
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LOCAL IDENTITIES

An Israeli-American High Tech Merger

Galit Ailon
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January 14th, 1998 was a historic day for Isrocom. It was the first day of a merger between this successful Israeli high-tech company and Amerotech, a New York based competitor. The special event was celebrated in the dining room with a festive breakfast buffet, rich and impressively decorated, complete with uniformed waiters and a busy social mingling commotion. In the corner of the dining room a video clip was played again and again on a large screen to the sound of two romantic pop songs: the English “Only Wanna be with You” and the Hebrew “Holding On.” Flashy video scenes, alternating between New York and Tel Aviv, displayed happy workers waving “Hi”s and smiling “Welcome”s, and serious managers promising to “lead the whole world” in the companies’ product field, assuring that “it is a great opportunity for the workers.” At the entrance, two elegantly dressed women from the Human Resources Department greeted incoming members with an amused “Mazel Tov” and offered them each a shiny pen resting in a box of black velvet, inscribed with the merged company’s new name, “Globalint.” When Nati, one of the senior managers responsible for the merger walked in, one of the women cried, “Here comes the groom! Happy merger, happy merger everyone!”

Judging by the looks of it, a happy merger it was. In the context of this pseudo-wedding celebration, the economic promises of globalization seemed as much within reach as a pile of soon-to-be-opened gifts. Though the success-statistics relating to the many companies that have taken this route before were not always encouraging, nothing but optimism was reflected from the video clipped, corporate ‘vow’ exchange, the elegantly dressed hostesses, the food decor, the sweet pop songs, and the shiny pens in boxes of black velvet. Globalism appeared bright and full of prospects on that first merger day, and the company seemed to have made a full commitment to it.
Yet even on that festive merger-day event, some less romantic attitudes were being expressed by more spontaneous voices around the tables. Near my seat, for example, an engineer made a small parody of the American handshake by fiercely pumping his friend's hand, saying in English with an exaggerated accent, “Very nice to meet you.” Grinning, his friend said, “Can you believe it? They only work until 4 p.m. over there.” Engaging in a conversation about a recent visit of merger partners to the Operations Department, a member at the table described his guests as, “The typical American schmucks, babbling TQM all the time.” A manager replied: “I'm not worried. They are the ones who should be worried. Most of the senior management team are our guys.” When I asked another member who sat next to me what she thought about all this, she laughed, and, with a cynical imitation of the American accent, replied, “Oh . . . it is a great opportunity!” The event of a corporate “wedding” was thus re-created by participants at the table: while video-screened images were being displayed in romantic scenes of unity, members cynically distanced themselves from the bride-to-be. Sustaining a sense of a local<sup>4</sup> collective, they infused the global merger celebration with resistant national overtones. Members, in other words, were engaged in an identity project of their own, one quite distinct from the formal project that was repeatedly announced at the entrance with excited cries of “Mazel Tov.”

To a large extent, the “wedding” between Isrocom and Amerotech is a part of a worldwide trend. As “Global Capitalism” takes root, marking a growing shift from a world economy consisting of reasonably distinct national units toward a more unified system with increasingly interrelated economic processes,<sup>5</sup> international mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, and other forms of corporate globalization are becoming increasingly common. Many companies take advantage of falling trade barriers and the decreasing influence of national institutions of control over work and seek business opportunities throughout the world. Relying upon information technology, companies merge or emerge into global structures, overcoming geographical distance with a “space of flows” (Castells 1989) that collapses boundaries and converges places and time zones.

While apparent in all industries and work settings, these changes seem especially acute in the high-tech sector. Facing competition that is continually bolstered by rapid technological advance, high-tech companies typically adopt a global perspective. They search anywhere in the world for places that offer good access to telecommunications networks and air transportation as a means for maintaining close contact with clients. In addition, since they also seek to improve the knowledge pools that are their most crucial factor of production, high-tech companies locate their units in accordance with the availability of skilled manpower, often spatially differentiating production functions across
the globe. Moreover, alongside the global economic imperatives that relate to clients and labor, these companies are also pioneers in putting their own products and technological breakthroughs to use, as a means for integrating spatially dispersed units (Castells 1989: 74), customizing products, and enhancing productivity. To a large extent, then, high-tech companies are at the forefront of globalization, spearheading and setting in motion many of its business, trade, and technology processes.

As Globalint’s first merger day celebration illustrates, the boundary-blurring processes of globalization raise issues of identity. While the concept “identity” perhaps connotes a sense of essential sameness—of an underlying, authentic, and persistent set of characteristics that is inherent in a person and shared by a group—it is, as many contemporary writers maintain, largely premised upon the experience of difference. Adopting a constructivist outlook, theorists of identity increasingly argue that difference constitutes both the impetus and means for identity formations (for example, Hall, 1996b; Sarup, 1996): it is the underlying drive and overarching vocabulary through which notions of sameness are defined and come to be experienced as “real.” Since globalization blurs or creates disjunctions in the traditional spatial, national, and cultural boundaries, saturating contemporary life with experiences of difference—of others and otherness—the impetus is accentuated and the means multiply. The questions “who am I?” or “who are we?” increasingly rise to the surface, and identities are re-examined and self-concepts redefined (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). New images of sameness are socially constructed through the working of different differences.

Based upon a year-long ethnographic study, this book sets out to examine such identity constructions within Isrocom. Its goals are twofold. First, it seeks to scrutinize the resistant, local-organizational identity project that began around the tables on the first merger-day celebration. It asks what notions of organizational distinctiveness, what images of sameness, were enacted by Isrocom’s members in everyday merger life? Second, it seeks to examine the project’s interrelations with other salient identities that surfaced in the field: national identities, occupational identities, and hierarchical identities. The next two subsections will elaborate on these two goals.

The Organizational Identity as a Social Construct

Many researchers treat the organizational identity as a cognitive belief system. They see it as a neutral albeit managerially defined notion of what is central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization (Albert &
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Whetten 1985) that is collectively internalized and utilized by members to define themselves (for example, Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail 1994; Elsbach & Kramer 1996; Reger, Gustafson, Demarie & Mullane 1994). This concept is the organizational equivalent of the essentialist notion of identity as consisting of an inherent, persistent, underlying sameness (Czarniawska 1997), but, to a large extent, only as far as workers are concerned. Namely, while researchers in the field typically deny workers any active formative role, construing them as mere carriers of a common belief system about the organization, they do not deny but rather assume management’s active role in defining this belief system. Granting the formal version of the organizational identity the status of an objective essence, these researchers treat workers as its passive carriers and managers as its active designers.

It seems, however, that workers too are constructors who are not passive in relation to managerially sanctioned versions of the organizational identity. Far from being total, management’s control always leaves room for the development of resistant subjectivities and oppositional cultures. These play themselves out through the most minute and mundane aspects of everyday life (Jermier, Knights & Nord 1994), but seem to become especially evident at times of change (see Van Maanen 1998). Studies show, for example, that during dramatic shifts in organizational lives, members collectively sustain their own versions of and orientation toward the organization’s history and achievements (Clark 1972), ideology and essence (Biggart 1977), and symbols (Pratt & Rafaeli 1997), bringing to light the cultural space that exists for defining the organizational identity outside or beyond whatever management formally decides it to be.

Indeed, this notion of cultural space seems true of any organization and especially of global ones. If, for example, in a non-global, American high-tech organization characterized by management’s deliberate attempt to “engineer culture” there nonetheless remains space for an “active and artful construction” of the organizational self (Kunda 1992: 216), and in a small Japanese confectionary factory deploying the culturally compelling “company as family” idiom there remains space for the “multiplicities, open-endedness, and contradictions that inevitably accompany the crafting of identities” (Kondo 1990: 202–203), then in global corporations this space seems especially spacious. Here, it has been shown, signs are recontextualized, cultural elements recombined, and meanings re-created (Van Maanen 1992). The formal, global version of membership is continually contested and dynamically negotiated (see Ó Riain 2000), becomes an object of members’ resentment and resistance (Graham 1995), and, moreover, remains fraught with cultural crises and struggles even at the level of management (Hamada 1991). In global corporations, it seems, the means available for contesting the formal
version of the organizational identity are abundant as is the cultural space within which it can occur.

The notion that identity is actively constructed rather than passively internalized resonates with a long tradition of sociological thought. The treatment of identity as a social construct dates back to the work of the “Early Interactionists” who spoke of identity as a collectively defined, non-static, and symbolic process. Cooley (1902), perhaps the first leading contributor to this school of thought, focused on the primary group and argued that a child’s identity is constructed through the imaginative sharing of meanings and judgment about his or her “looking glass self” with this group’s others. Further elaborating this notion of construction, Thomas (1937) claimed that identities can be redefined throughout adulthood, flexibly springing from divergently constructed “definitions of the situation” that are taken on by individuals and their others. Similarly, Mead (1934) argued that people develop understandings about themselves in relation to meanings that are constructed through the symbolic process of “taking on the role of the other.” Furthermore, in Mead’s view people take quite an active role in these constructions, having a fairly large measure of ability to mold and remold, select and transform them in their internal dialogue between the “I” and the “me.” Thus, according to the Early Interactionists, the meanings that arise in relation to group attachments are dynamic products of communication and interpretation processes that transpire between and, as Mead pointed out, within people.

Many of these insights have been taken up and further explored by later generations of researchers. One of them, Erving Goffman (1959), focused less on the origin, development, and change of identities and more on their multiplicity. Developing a dramaturgical approach for the study of social interactions, he argued that identities are constructed for the purpose of managing impressions during everyday life performances, their shape changing in accordance with whatever it is that people seek to convince the others with whom they interact that they have become (see Van Maanen 1979). To use a term later developed by Stone (1962), identities are in this sense “situated,” flexibly cast as social objects of divergent and shifting shapes in accordance with the interpretational mood of the interaction. While later writings, including those of Goffman himself, insisted that despite multiplicity some interrelations between identities remain, the notion of multiplicity further highlights the ability that people have to manipulate symbols, words, and meanings and mold their identities in a flexible manner.

This view has been taken to an extreme by postmodernist thinkers. Observing processes in the world today, postmodernists argue for the intensification of complexity: not only do people possess multiple identities but the symbolic means for constructing these identities are also multiplying,
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becoming increasingly fragmented as globalization progresses. Accordingly, there is today a postmodernist view of globalization as a kind of variegated, multicolored culture that consists of disjunctured flows, multiple and mobile meanings, creative juxtapositions, fusions, movements, and hybridizations (for example, Featherstone 1990; 1995; Appadurai 1990). As this view dissolves the once taken-for-granted linkage between cultures and bounded terrains (see, for example, Lavie & Swedenburg 1996), it challenges past notions of identities as fixed, stable, unitary, and homogeneous (Hall 1996b). In their place, it promotes a notion of self as decentered (Kondo 1990), consisting of identities that are multiple and mobile constructs; boundless interplays of differences; infinite combinations of cultural possibilities that can be picked up and chosen like clothes from shelves (see Mathews 2000). The reality of global cultural fragmentation in the postmodernist view thus accentuates the lack (or at least scarcity) of externally imposed identity essences, emphasizing instead the space, freedom, and possibilities that people have in defining their belongings.16

Thus, the tendency of many of the existing studies of organizational identity to overlook the issue of social construction does not coincide with a long tradition of thought. In her Narrating the Organization, Barbara Czarniawska (1997) seems to be the first to fully recognize this, claiming that the fact that “identity is created in the interactions between individuals in the social context” (p. 44) must be taken into account. Treating the organization as a superperson of sorts, she views the process of social construction as a storytelling institution, arguing that the organizational identity is a narrated autobiography that is created through conversations against a repertoire of accessible and flexible plots (the romantic marriage plot that was so visible on the first merger day seems a good example). Nevertheless, although no doubt a significant contribution, this conceptualization places a greater emphasis on the ways that members narrate sameness-over-time rather than on the way that they act upon and enact difference in everyday life. As this study examines a new merger, a context in which intergroup relations are something to be daily handled, it must focus not only on the means for constructing sameness, but also on the means for constructing difference: a handshake parody, a cynical imitation, remarks about how “they” work or why “they” should worry, and so forth.

In other words, following Czarniawska’s lead, but not her path, this study explores how Isrocom’s members socially constructed their organizational identity in daily merger life. In the spirit of studies of organizational change and globalization, it searches for the symbolic meanings that members actively attributed to this identity, the ways that they reacted to and resisted the global “married” version of it, and the social processes through which they designated a sense of collective
distinctiveness. Its search, nevertheless, does not end here. As claimed, it has another, second goal.

**Multiplicity and Interconnectedness**

The organizational identity is not a universe unto itself. If only for the need to maintain an “illusion” of an integrated self—to mesh multiplicity within synchronous self-images—it has a bearing upon other identities. This interconnectedness has been documented in several ethnographic studies of organizations. To take an extreme example, in *Asylums*, Goffman (1961) shows that the meanings that are generated by and that define membership in an organization lead to progressive changes in the broad system of beliefs a person has concerning who she is. Such effects are not confined to “total institutions.” As Arlie Hochschild (1983) shows in *The Managed Heart* and Dorinne Kondo (1990) in *Crafting Selves*, conceptions of organizational membership and belonging have complex consequences in work organizations as well, influencing members’ attitudes toward and perceptions of their other, non-organizational identities in ways that give rise to ironies and tensions. Accordingly, in an attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the issue of identity, the second objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the processes of organizational identity construction that unfolded in the context of Isrocom’s merger and other identities that came to the social fore.

This question of the relationship between the organizational and other identities is, it should be noted, of growing concern, especially with regard to global organizations. Most evident is the rising interest of managerially oriented writers in the relationship between the organizational and national identity. Namely, writers ask whether the formal, global identity of a transnational organization is or ever could be successful in overcoming members’ existing national attachments. Their answers diverge. On one hand, writers such as Kenichi Ohmae, author of *The Borderless World* (1999) and *The End of the Nation State* (1995), claim that organizational globalization is indeed leading to the withering away of national attachments. Promoting a set of managerial techniques designed to homogenize the internal work-life of such organizations, Ohmae claims that within corporations reaching the highest stage of globalism “people may work ‘in’ different national environments, but are not ‘of’ them. What they are ‘of’ is the global corporation” (1999: 103). This view is supported by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1996: 89), who claims that such global corporations “may entail a kind and a degree of tuning out, a weakened personal involvement with the nation and national culture, a shift from the disposition to take it for granted; possibly a
critical distance to it.” In this sense, global corporations are thought to hold the potential for becoming a dominant transnational source of identity; a source of nationally indifferent, global attachments.

On the other hand, many management writers claim that national identities are hardly withering away and are in fact quite persistent and salient in global organizational contexts. Focusing more on behavioral characteristics than on members’ sense of belonging, these writers are openly discouraged by the prospects of corporate globalization, laying the blame for repeated international M&As (mergers and acquisitions) failures on persistent identities of members from different national backgrounds. They claim that compared to national M&As, international M&As entail potentially more enhanced intergroup incompatibility and more pronounced intergroup clashes, enhancing the overt and covert hostility that characterize such contexts, and hindering effective consolidations (see Calorie, Lubatkin, and Very 1994; Child, Faulkner & Pitkethly, 2001; Veiga, Lubatkin, Calorie & Very, 2000; Olie, 1994). Concomitantly, managers are warned that the “urge to merge” (Schonfeld 1997) should be balanced by awareness that the blending of two companies may cause a culture clash, marking out identity boundaries that management needs to dissolve, and undermining its efforts to synthesize organizational identities.

This latter view, which speaks of the perpetuation of national identities within the global organization, has also been systematically conceptualized and validated by the field of cross-cultural research. Defining identity as value-based and cognitively constraining (Erez & Earley 1993; Bachrach, Bamberger & Erez 1996), writers in this field claim that national identities persistently manifest themselves in global organizations through patterns of behavior that are distinctive and typical of members’ cultures of origin (Hofstede 1980; 1991; 2001). Consequently, in their view, global work-life is marked by a stubborn lack of fit between the behavioral manifestations of cognitively pervasive and unyielding “identity-based systems of interpretation and sense making that the actors involved in these enterprises bring with them” (Bachrach et al. 1996: viii) and the global goals and forms of the organization. In this view, then, the global effort is impeded by the perpetuation of national identities and their manifestation in the behavior of the predetermined selves that are their carriers.

Empirical validation for this view is, for the most part, persuasive. There seems to be some valid truth and, it might be added, common sense in the claim that Israelis, for example, “act Israeli” or Americans “act American,” as well as in the claim that there exists some broadly definable gap in the cognitive underpinnings of such observable behavioral differences. And yet apparently much is missing from this account. As cross-cultural writers conceptualize national identity solely in objectivist and essentialist terms,
they fail to take into account the freedom that members have in defining what belongings mean, in shaping identities. For example, when one of the participants in the corporate “wedding” celebration defined his merger partners as “The typical American schmucks, babbling TQM all the time,” he seemed to have had some freedom to select and stress certain elements, to reproduce national stereotypes and use them in a certain way. In this sense, he amounted to much more than a passive, static, objectively predetermined, typical Israeli personality: he also appeared to be a constructor, defining and making symbolic use of national identity rather than passively reproducing it. His remark, in other words, illustrates that national identity is not merely an objective essence, but also a flexible and shapeable social construct. Failing to take account of this, cross-cultural researchers seem to fall back on a personality theme that may be valid but is so static and bounded that its relevance to the ongoing social dynamics of everyday global life seems limited.

Another related drawback of cross-cultural and, for that matter, the other, opposing view about organizational globalization is the perception of identity choices as automatic. Whether speaking of the loosening of national identities in global organizations or of their perpetuation, writers holding both of these views conceptualize the problem of identity in terms of a tradeoff between two basic attachments, the national and the global. They promote the assumption that the strengthening of one automatically entails the loosening of the other; that the two are mutually exclusive. The notion of identities’ multiple coexistence renders this assumption problematic, as does empirical evidence that indicates that the management of global and national attachments entails tension and demands difficult, far from automatic choices (Mathews 2000). Most strikingly, studies of expatriates and sojourners offer evidence that this management involves complex and ongoing adjustments. National attachments, it is shown, remain meaningful even in the case of those posted at the most extreme international contexts, continuing to coexist alongside the most accelerated cosmopolitan identity projects (Ben-Ari 1996; Thompson & Tambyah 1999; Arieli 2001).

In addition, the assumption of mutual exclusiveness also fails to take into account the fact that other identities are involved in choices that concern global and national identities. In the first merger day event, for example, there was also an appeal to “the workers,” a mention of “the senior management team,” as well as a reference to the merger partners as occupational colleagues overly preoccupied with TQM. The fact that some of “the typical American schmucks” were also a globally defined “we”—coworkers, co-managers, occupational colleagues—raises many questions: how was this intersection experienced? How did members choose themselves, construct themselves, out of their pool of multiple identities? What were the consequences of their choices?
In sum, in organizations both within the high-tech sector and outside it globalization increasingly blurs the social boundaries within which identities were defined and came to be seen as stable, problematizing them to a great extent. While seeking to evaluate the significance of identities in the global workplace, writings on this topic generally seem to fall short of doing so. Their focus on presumably objective, pen-and-pencil categorizations of identity essences and their conceptualization of global and national identities as mutually exclusive seem a limited and overly simplified orientation to the topic. In contrast to these as well as to the mainstream theoretical orientation toward organizational identity, it has been argued that identities are not single essences but multiple social constructions. Accordingly, a study of them necessitates an inquiry into the everyday global work-life through which they emerge and are enacted. It necessitates going to the people who, in the course of living this global work-life, seek to define, make sense of, and manage their attachments and senses of belonging. A study of identities, in short, should be a study in context.

The Ethnographic Study of Isrocom

The objective of examining identities in context is pursued through an ethnographic study of Isrocom. Ethnography is designed to search for the meanings imputed to the objects of the social worlds that people inhabit (Blumer 1969; Geertz 1973), and is based upon the establishment of close familiarity with the most mundane aspects of everyday life. While to some extent under-represented in the field of organizational studies or at least in some of its central publication journals (see, for example, Van Maanen 1998b), here too there is growing recognition of the value of the ethnographic method in enabling researchers to grapple with “the specific, always contextual understandings and explanations given by social actors that provide purpose and meaning to their behavior” (Van Maanen 1979b: 12).

The fact that the methodological means fit this study’s goals should not be taken to imply that all aspects of the research process were the result of premeditated choices. For one thing, the goals themselves were not predetermined but emergent, their importance and centrality revealed only after fieldwork began. Furthermore, Isrocom was not a deliberate choice. Rather, the decision to study this specific organization was determined by what is perhaps one of the most typical characteristics of ethnographic research in organizational settings: the contingency of access. In my case, it was a lucky constellation of a social network: I was a graduate student at the Department of Labor Studies at Tel Aviv University, a faculty member in my department was acquainted with one of Isrocom’s senior executives, and the
latter expressed an interest in and consented to allowing a student to conduct research in the organization.

The ethnographic study of Isrocom began on the first day of the merger, January 14th, 1998, and lasted a year. Apart from a standard nondisclosure agreement committing me to secrecy with regard to technological patents and financial data, I was granted a freedom of access. Thanks to a “visitor” tag I was able to enter and wander around the organizational premises freely and independently. During most of the year I used that tag four to five days a week. The exceptions were the months of June, July, and August. During these months my visits to Isrocom were cut down to once a week due to a partial maternity leave.

Despite the tag and the freedom of access (or perhaps because of them), during the initial stages of fieldwork members sometimes expressed apprehensions concerning the purpose of my stay in the field. Asking them for an interview or for permission to observe, I was at times confronted with frank questions about my role. Namely, some members expressed disbelief at my declared lack of organizational status and goal (“Why would managers let you waste the time of so many workers on interviews if there is nothing in it for them?” was the basic argument) and also, after brief interrogations, of my status as a researcher (“What kind of research is it if you don’t have hypotheses?”). As a response, I repeatedly assured anyone who asked that I was not in any way a representative of management, that I was merely interested in conducting research, and that I had no intentions of using my research to come up with any managerial prescriptions. After a while, these apprehensions subsided, and it was my impression that members more or less grew accustomed to my presence in the field. Though I doubt that I was ever perceived as “a fly on the wall”—the falsity of this old ethnographic hyperbole is by now widely recognized—I am fairly certain that I was not perceived as an extension of management. It seems to me that I was accepted as a researcher conducting an unusual sort of study with interests that were neutral albeit somewhat unclear.

In the course of my visits to Isrocom I used a variety of fieldwork techniques. To begin with, I conducted formal interviews with members. These interviews were generally in-depth and unstructured, each taking shape as a more or less free-flowing conversation ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours. The interviews usually began with a promise of anonymity, a general statement concerning my interest in studying the merger, and a question or two about the interviewee. After that, I tried to follow whatever topic people wanted to talk about, going along with their line of thought. While I usually tape-recorded the interviews as a way of assuring the validity of the material to be used for analysis, sometimes interviewees requested me not to do so. In such cases I wrote down the conversation while the interview was being conducted, trying very hard not to miss a word.