

## **Adaptation or Assimilation – Business’s Response to the Clash of Civilization Forbes CEO Forum - Copenhagen, Denmark June 19-20, 2006**

Political temperatures are rising in Europe and the age-old question of adaptation or assimilation is resurfacing with a vengeance. The French riots, starting with two accidental deaths, exposes the economic and social marginalization of immigrant communities. The Danish cartoons, ending in scores of deaths across a half dozen countries, exposes a deep misunderstanding of the extent of the cultural divide. Recent attacks of products because of their national origins, the advertising images used to promote them, or their perceived benefits all indicate that cultural adaptation or assimilation affects business as well as the society.

These events and the causes underlying them threaten the social peace Europe enjoyed over the last thirty years. A solution is not immediately evident and current proposals are hotly debated. Will Europe eventually become a melting pot *a la Américaine* or perhaps a cultural mosaic following Canadian style? Will Central Europeans pull Western Europe’s shared values further east and south? Will the possible integration of Turkey and Islamic Balkans add balance or create disequilibrium? Will indigenous and immigrating youth of Europe create a solution or polarize the problem? What is their opinion and what role do they want? Will Europe’s culture change significantly by adapting to new generational, cultural, and religious values or will the new entrants (by birth, absorption, or immigration) adapt to Europe’s rules?

The business implications are likely to be profound. Many European firms are responding to these issues by creating diversity management programs. How far should these go? How effective are they? Is the “invisible CV”, devoid of all demographic information, the answer to fair treatment? Should the elite European schools install quota systems to insure equal access to minority groups? Should firms extend their efforts past employees to the larger social environment that includes how to treat customers and how to market to other cultural or religious consumer groups? What are governments going to do and how much will this cost firms?

These issues strike at the heart of European culture. In this discussion, leading CEOs will offer a business perspective to the clash of civilization debate and help chart a path through this dilemma for the business community.