Opinions: What business anthropology is, what it might become… and what, perhaps, it should not be

Overture

Brian Moeran

One theme that came to the fore when Christina and I were putting together this issue was what, exactly, business anthropology *is*. As we intimated in our Editorial for the launch of the *JBA* earlier this year, in some ways there did not seem to be a need to add to the various sub-disciplines of anthropology already dealing with organization, work, industry, corporate affairs, and other forms of economic and applied anthropology. And yet, as we saw it, there *is* a constituency of readers who think of themselves as business, rather than economic, applied, organizational, corporate and so on, anthropologists. So what makes them *different*? And how might we appeal to that sense of difference?

This line of thinking has underpinned the first two issues of the *JBA*. Given that we ourselves have not been entirely sure about how far to spread our sub-disciplinary net, we decided that I should get in touch with a number of distinguished scholars around the world who might have an interest in business anthropology, even though they were sometimes working in different disciplinary fields. Perhaps they would

have something of interest to tell us. The gist of the message that I sent out to two or three dozen people in late August went as follows:

> While some scholars are very excited about the notion of 'business anthropology', others (including myself at times) are less sure about what it might consist in. I've decided to ask a number of scholars who are either anthropologists or close in spirit to the discipline to write somewhere between one and three thousand words on what they think business anthropology is or might be. Do you think you might be able to help out?

Two senior scholars who received this request happily admitted that their initial reaction was 'no way' – at least not by the deadline I initially gave them. But then one of them went to the gym, while the other seems to have opened a bottle of wine, and they found that these activities were conducive to both thought and writing. Their contributions came back the following morning! Many others have thought the invited topic important enough to put aside other pressing tasks in order to meet my rather swift deadline. I am extremely grateful to them for their support.

Although one or two of those to whom I addressed my initial request appear to have given it their serious attention before declining to participate, many others opted out with the classical excuse of being 'too busy' to write the requested number of words. Two or three never bothered to reply. The most elegant excuse came from Paul DiMaggio who in his e-mail wrote:

> Although not everyone would agree, I've always felt that to write an opinion piece, one should have an opinion, and that to have an opinion, one should know something about the issue – Unfortunately, since I am not an anthropologist, I really don't have an opinion, or a basis for an opinion, on this issue.

What could be fairer than that?

The articles (a baker's, or perhaps anthropologist's, dozen) that follow are more and less subjective reflections by thirteen scholars on the nature of business anthropology. Most of them are anthropologists of one sort or another; others have been working in the fields of ethnology and sociology for many years. Most are employed in academic departments in universities and business schools; two are now retired; and one is working full-time in marketing research and advertising. In an ideal world, I would like to have solicited the opinions of more practitioners, as well as of academics employed in different fields of research – cultural, management, or tourism studies, for example. My excuse for failing to do so, as by now you will have quickly grasped, was 'lack of time!'

We hope you enjoy these opinion pieces. Hopefully, some of those who were unable to participate first time round will, once they have read

the reflections that follow, pause for thought and write something in time for the next issue of the *JBA*. Hopefully, too, the opinions expressed here on what business anthropology is, might be, and perhaps should not be, will inspire discussion among the *JBA*'s readers in general. So, if you feel like adding to, or commenting on, the points made in what follows, please send them to our Managing Editor, Frederik Larsen (fl.jba@cbs.dk), who will then post them under *Comments* on the *JBA*'s home page. We need more discussion of what we are about.

……………………………………………………

Musings

Eric J. Arnould (Universities of Bath and Southern Denmark)

The following is not written from a privileged vantage point. But as it appears to me, privileged vantage points are not so obvious in business anthropology. Contributors to this enterprise occupy such diverse roles and engage in such varied projects, none of which can claim dominance. A handful pursue academic anthropological careers; another band are scattered about in business schools in North America and Europe; an entrepreneurial troop make their living in diverse management consultancy practices; a significant number are oriented towards public service in the tumultuous NGO community; and a final tribe are attached to major corporate enterprises again in a range of niches. Moreover, newcomers seem to spring from across an array of anthropological graduate programs which generally display no special commitment to the enterprise of business anthropology. That we recognize these sometimes distant affinal relations through this new journal and the slightly less newborn EPIC powwows is remarkable testimony to a desire for voice, point of view, and legitimate seat at the anthropological table. What follows are some respectful if slightly polemical comments intended to stimulate rejoinders and other reflections.

Business Anthropology as Resistant Practice

Insofar as it insists upon the cultural as a fundamental epistemological and ontological premise, as I strongly believe it should, business anthropology must always be pushing uphill against two dominant instances, even institutions, of bourgeois cultural expression. This view is inspired by Sahlins (1976) perceptive, but perhaps neglected essay. As Sahlins (1999) has more recently noted, culture has fallen out of favor in anthropology, but should not do for the very good reasons he suggests.

One of the two instances the cultural trope should confront is emic notions of psychology, and even much of the academic variety, that enshrines the individual as the timeless and universal subject and object of knowledge and meaningful action, against all the evidence of anthropology. Following Sahlins and Marcel Mauss before him (1938), we should see the heroic self-defining individual as a cultural model, not a natural one. The other instance is economics, which enshrines a certain abstract ideal of action as teleology, based moreover on an empirically falsifiable myth about the origin of money and economic behavior more generally (Graeber 2011). In other words, business anthropology should push back against the relentless naturalizing of these cultural expressions, both because this is where anthropology gains its competitive advantage as a source of practical insight, and because this perspective is critical for promoting theoretical insights. That is, when anthropologists insist on the socially and cultural embeddedness of individual action, and elucidate the particular contours of that embeddedness we generate insight. Similarly, when we elucidate the manifold ways in which things are produced, circulated, and disposed in dialectic interaction with social and cultural contexts we similarly generate telling insight. And now comes around again a third orientation to resist, that of behavioral determinism enshrined in a misreading of human biological systems as pre-cultural ones, i.e., neuro-marketing (Schneider and Woolgar 2012). The anthropological insistence on the priority of meaning, those webs of significance that Geertz (1973) colorfully revealed, has to some degree carried the day in forward thinking businesses. But there is much danger that the cultural turn (Sherry 1991) in business thinking will be replaced by a neuro-biological turn unless business anthropology mounts a serious critique of biological determinism. In this way, the American branch of business anthropology can reassert a commitment to the Boasian critique of simplified social Darwinism, while building on recent research in the anthropology of mind and body.

Business Anthropology as Reflexive Practice

Business anthropologists, like cultural anthropologists, always require for their success no small measure of reflexivity. This is of necessity a two-tracked process: on the one hand, the ethnographic and ethnological track that asks "what is going on here," given the boundaries of the dominant paradigms of bourgeois culture. So what is being asked of the business anthropologist, the assignments she is given, the testimony she is invited to give, the insight she is invited to provide will always be assessed in terms of these paradigmatic boundaries. And so the business anthropologist has to think tactically about how to frame, by for example finding ways to put executive decision makers within the experiential

frame of their customers, and how to provide the culturally deft metaphor that makes the strange blindingly obvious to executive decision makers. In the former case, I think for example, of point of view videography that illustrates the isolation, interminability, and lack of information the average visitor to the emergency room may face. In the latter, I think of revealing to execs that everyday consumer goods in the US context are jokingly referred to as wedding presents in a Latin American context, to bring home their cultural impropriety.

Business Anthropology as Handmaiden of Innovation

Of course, anthropological insight has been central to the innovation process in devising new products and services and even service systems, but going forward it may well turn its attention to a larger project. Business is not what it used to be, or at least the commitment to a single firm-based model of business practice has been destabilized in recent years. And so it is possible to imagine that all of the alternative market forms that currently constitute a tiny fraction of the world of business, and in which anthropologists sometimes find a role as advisors and advocates (Fair Trade, Community Supported Agriculture, social enterprise, microfinance, rural sales programs) may evolve towards some thing or things other than the capitalist forms nurtured into florescence in the 19th and 20th centuries. Can anthropological expertise in community, household, (kinship) networks, the gift, cultural ecology, and social reproduction help us imagine new modes of value creating systems? Here additional foundational work seems to be that of students of globalization processes, but also may be sited in the heretofore tentative insistence in economic anthropology that definite commercial forms of material practice should be viewed as legitimate, culturally specific modes of action (but see, for example Lydon 2009).

Business Anthropology as a Theoretical Project

And thus, reinforcing the first form of reflexivity is the point that despite its unsavoury historical ties to the colonial project, anthropology is also heir to robust intellectual traditions dating back 250 years to the Enlightenment. The meta-lesson of George Stocking's many labors on the history of anthropology should inspire business anthropologists to drink deeply and promiscuously at the well of previous anthropological thought. There are many lessons in the deep corpus of both basic and applied theory (e.g., medical anthropology, development anthropology, public policy work, etc.) of which some younger colleagues seem blithely unaware. Cataloguing here all the theoretical contributions and their contemporary reverberations anthropologists have made would end in reproducing something like Borges' map of the world. But the general

point is that business anthropology should be first and foremost edifying anthropological theory and not the poor step child of management, marketing, finance or accountancy or simply reduced to a method for rendering such practices more efficient and effective. Thus, for example, much theoretical work has been produced on consumption by scholars affiliated with the consumer culture theoretical tradition, the material culture school at University College London, the sociology of consumption nurtured at the Birmingham School, and so on. But I do not see much evidence that this work has become part of a shared theoretical vocabulary across the other diverse sub-tribes of business anthropologists referred to at the outset. We also have some wonderful if scattered work on finance, management, HR, and the like, catalogued in Ann Jordan's (2011) heroic text, but these are theoretically sparse, I think. Objects like *The Audit Society* (Power 1997), *Collateral Knowledge* (Rise 2011), and a current favorite *Donner et Prendre* (Alter 2009; see also Batteau 2000), which reveals the theoretical insights on organization to be derived from Maussian exchange theory, perhaps point some ways towards more theoretically robust contributions. Thus while Grant McCracken (2009) has called for the institutionalization of a Chief Cultural Officer, he has neglected the problem that such a CCO would have a relatively limited theoretical tool kit to draw on in addressing various business sub-cultures, logics, and projects compared to competing C-suite colleagues in finance or engineering for instance. Perhaps JBA or EPIC might host reflections or workshops on the relevance of particular theorists for business anthropological practice.

Reflexivity Again

Reflexivity is also important in assessing the nature of practice. For example, a recent ethnographic research project turns up strong evidence that one of the products of ethnographic fieldwork in business to consumer marketing Research, that is B2C research, is what might be called figurations of target markets (rather than representations) that resemble the fetishes devised in analogizing ontological contexts (Cayla and Arnould, n.d.; Descola 2005). These heterodox boundary objects circulate through firms and across departmental boundaries and seem to assume an ambiguous power to organize the practice of teams of designers and engineers subsequent to their creation. These and other such anthropological objects – for example, graphic presentations of Big Data – produced through business ethnographic practice merit epistemological, ontological and ethical reflection. The contributions of Latour and Callon's actor network perspectives seem of self-evident theoretical and practical value. That is to say, our research should examine how ethnographic products are appropriated and assimilated into systems of organization knowledge and knowledge management.

At a more general level, if I may risk a critical tone, it seems to me that, in the review of canonical texts (Jordan 2011), case studies in business anthropology are perhaps somewhat over committed to ontological realism, and that the re-recognition of the mythic, magical, narrative, ontologically challenging, and – dare I say – tribal dimensions both of business and business anthropological praxis would be of some value. In other words, bringing in again the lessons of *Writing Culture* to the work we do as business anthropologists may be of value. This is something quite different than some theory-denying postmodernism, however; rather a recommitment to reviewing the insights that foundational social philosophers like Marx, Mauss, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, Luhman, Bauman, Morin, Bataille, Baudrillard, Weiner, and others may offer in probing deeper into what we do as socio-historically constituted actors.

Conclusion

Business anthropology may act more forcefully on the strength of its own convictions, for like other of the hybridized anthropologies of agriculture, medicine, development, education, or health, it fosters the virtue of being in the world as it is, rather than how it was or how we might like it to be. As some sociologists have been perhaps quicker to recognize, we live in a globally marketized cultural ecosystem, whether we like it or not. This must be the subject of an anthropology that wishes to avoid the antiquarianism and solipsism that always threatens a discipline for which reflexivity has become so key since the postcolonial turn. And this means that there should be interconnecting networks of knowledge production and communication, an anthropology of business, an anthropology for business, and a business for anthropology all theorized as such, as well as a critical school of all of them. To achieve this, not only may discussion and debate be encouraged in the pages of JBA and in sessions at EPIC and other anthropological conferences, but more robust academic programs are required such as the Southern Denmark University's brand new degree in Marketing Management and Anthropology. Further, those who have achieved success may well wish to endow scholarships or programs in business anthropology at top degree-granting institutions.

References

Alter, Norbert (2009), *Donner et Prendre : La coopération en entreprise, Paris :* La Découverte.

Batteau Allen W. (2000), "Negations and Ambiguities in the Cultures of Organization," *American Anthropologist*, 102 (December), 726-740.

Cayla, Julian and Eric J. Arnould (n.d.), "Consumer Fetish: The Symbolic Imaginary of Consumer Research," Sydney: Australian Graduate School of Management.

Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (1986), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Descola, Philippe (2005), *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris : Gallimard.

Geertz, Clifford (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Boston: Basic Books.

Graeber, David (2011), *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Melville House.

Jordan, Ann (2013), *Business Anthropology*, 2nd edition, Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Lydon, Ghislaine (2009), *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth Century Western Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mauss, Marcel (1968/1938), "A category of the human spirit: the notion of the self," *Psychoanalytic Review*, LV, 457-481.

McCracken (2009), *Chief Culture Officer: How to Create a Living, Breathing Corporation*, Boston: Basic Books.

Power, Michael (1997), *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ries, Annelise (2011), *Collateral Knowledge, Legal Reasoning in the Global Financial Markets*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schneider, Tanja & Steve Woolgar (2012), "Technologies of ironic revelation: enacting consumers in neuromarkets," *Consumption Markets & Culture,* 15 (June), 169-189.

Sherry, John F., Jr (1990), "Postmodern alternatives: the interpretive turn in consumer research," Handbook of consumer behavior," in *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, Thomas S. Robertson and Harold H. Kassarjian, eds, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 549-591.

………………………………………………………

Howard S. Becker (Independent Researcher)

When Brian Moeran proposed the topic of "business anthropology" to me, asking me what I thought it might mean, I immediately thought of two quite different referents of the phrase.

The first way of thinking about this, the one that I whole heartedly

approve of, is nothing more than good anthropology or sociology (for me the two aren't very different) done in an organization or community that engages in business as conventionally defined. The name that immediately came to mind was Melville Dalton, whose *Men Who Manage* describes the way the several businesses he worked in actually operated (as opposed to how they said they operated). The choicest gem in the book is his reconceptualization of employee theft as an informal reward system: the company let people (at every level, from vice-president to ordinary workers) steal company property in return for them agreeing to do things the bosses wanted done but which they couldn't legitimately ask their employees to do. In one memorable case, a vice-president wanted a birdhouse built on the grounds of his country house, and it was in fact built by company carpenters on company time using company owned materials. The carpenters got to steal what they needed for their own home improvement projects. This would just be anti-business muckraking *IF* Dalton hadn't identified the crucial elements suggested by the idea of an informal reward system.

Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*, a darker book, goes to the heart of the moral problems that conventional business organizations pose for their managerial employees. Many such studies over the years might not even have been labeled industrial sociology, let alone business anthropology, and were known to social scientists but probably not to many people in the business world. Lucy Suchman pioneered the anthropological study of the organization of daily life in the office, a tack Leigh Star, and other sociologists of science followed, which is now identified by the substantial mouthful "Computer Assisted Cooperative Work" (CACW).

The other kind of work that came to mind when Brian asked me to write about business anthropology can be succinctly described as "making a business out of anthropology." It's represented by the people (mostly) who post their writings at http://businessanthropology.blogspot.com. And by the popular writer Paco Underhill who, with his collaborators, follows shoppers around stores seeing where they stop and look, where they buy and where they turn up their noses and walk on. I generally don't approve of this kind of work. I'll be the first to admit that I haven't read a lot in this area and so am prepared to be proved wrong.

Here's my complaint: research like this typically takes the client's questions (and there are always clients in this form of research, people paying you to study something for them and thereby solve *their* problems, rather than your own) as givens. What the client wants to know is what the researcher wants to find out. Well, you are probably saying, what's wrong with that? What's wrong is that clients typically do not submit the whole problem for investigation. Some things are off limits, things the

client doesn't think are important or relevant, which quite often means things the client does not want mentioned or thought about at all.

Here's a mild example. Many years ago, several colleagues and I did a several year study of a medical school. We were sociologists but we worked in classical anthropological style, spending days and weeks and months in all the places in the school and its associated hospitals that students spent time. We hung round, went to classes with them, went on medical rounds with them and the doctors who taught them, watched as they examined patients, and so on. We focused on the student experience and its collective character (what people like us were calling "student culture"), so we spent most of our time with the students.

But one day I was talking casually with one of the medical faculty and started asking him a lot of questions, questions which interested him and to which he responded seriously. Until he stopped and said, "Wait a minute. Are you studying *me*?" I said that, since I was studying the school and he was part of the school's faculty, of course I was studying him. He got a Little angry and tried to straighten my thinking out for me, explaining that he and the other faculty were not the problem; it was the students who were the problem to be studied. When we figured out what was wrong with them, then we could help with the faculty's problems.

That's almost invariably what happens when you study schools. You study the students because *they* are the problem. Of course, as a social scientist, you know that the problems of an organization are the problems of—a whole organization, not some part of it, with other parts off limits to investigation. The same thing occurs in studies of businesses undertaken at their invitation or behest. They explain what "the problem" is, usually something to do with some other kinds of people than the ones who are inviting you in, and especially so if they are paying for the research to be done. The employees are the problem, the customers are the problem, everyone is the problem except the people who are paying for it.

And, of course, research done under such constraints can't possibly solve anyone's problems, since they leave out some of the key players involved in creating the problem(s). As a result, the solutions someone who is selling anthropological services has to offer are partial and doomed to failure. If the solution involves—as the solutions we suggested to the medical faculty to solve their problems did—someone in a position of privilege and power giving up some of that, they almost surely won't do it, and will instead be glad to pay for a solution that won't work. That will at least let them look like they're doing something. It's the same sort of solution as the one you get by appointing a committee, except you pay outsiders for it.

That's why hardheaded businessmen so often buy the most

specious kind of advice, advice that they must know won't solve any problems. Another anecdote. My daughter worked for a major international airline years ago, back when employees could often secure first class accommodations for their relatives for nothing. So I was sitting in a first class seat next to a classy looking older gentleman who identified himself as the CEO of a major conglomerate and, on learning that I was a sociologist, volunteered that he had just changed the work culture of his company. I said that was interesting but I hadn't thought it was that easy to do. He explained that they had hired an expert (he didn't say if it was an anthropologist, but it might well have been—who else is an expert on culture?) who helped them work out what the new culture would be and how to explain it to the employees who would thenceforth enact it (if that's the verb). I said that my understanding was that culture was a set of shared solutions people worked out themselves to problems they had in common, and that if he told them what their culture was going to be, that would just be one more problem they would have to devise a (cultural) solution for. At which he picked up his magazine and didn't say another word for the rest of the flight. My theory was that he had heard that a business culture was a good thing to have and you might as well have the best that money can buy, but that what he bought was not based on anything that had been published in *Man* (now the *JRAI*) or the *American Anthropologist*.

Hiring experts to tell you what your culture should be, and the other kinds of ideas a business anthropologist might provide, might solve internal political problems in a company. But whatever the business anthropologist produces, it probably won't be a contribution to anthropological knowledge. A business anthropologist might very well learn a lot of interesting stuff in the course of doing whatever he did, but wouldn't be getting his fee for applying the data gathered to problems of interest to the general run of anthropologists. (Is that why a new journal is needed to hold the accumulated findings of the new specialty?)

I don't know why business executives spend money on research of this kind. But I can guess at what's going on, based on two sources. One is the wisdom I acquired at a very young age from my father, who was a partner in a small advertising agency in Chicago during the Thirties and Forties. He said that the reason his clients advertised was not that they believed it worked but that they were afraid not to, just in case it actually did work. They thought that unlikely, but everyone else was doing it, so what the hell.

Not a very trustworthy source, of course. But Michael Schudson, in his 1986 book *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion,* demonstrated similarly negative conclusions about advertising, testing the claims of the field's representatives against the extensive literature which sought to prove its worth. He discovered, among other things, that my father's most

pessimistic but scientifically astute thought was true. The only kind of advertising that reliably increased sales was price advertising. If you advertised the same product at a slightly lower price you would get all the sales, and it would happen almost immediately. No other form of advertising had such conclusive positive results. But that knowledge was useless. Because all you could do with it was lower the price and then everyone else would do the same thing and nothing would have been accomplished other than lowering your gross sales figures. More generally, Schudson's review showed that advertising never does much good of any kind. The example of Milton Hershey, who never spent a penny advertising his chocolate bars (which people in the ad business tried to hush up or ignore) showed the essential worthlessness of the whole enterprise.

What's more likely to be involved in buying research results from anthropologists (as from psychologists before them) is a search for ideas, no matter how goofy they are and without any concern for the kind of science they're based on. If a completely specious study gives me an idea for a new product or a new advertising slogan or marketing gimmick, I can take it from there, and test it out in my own way.

And that might be the opening for business anthropology, not providing scientific results business people can use the way they might use the results of chemical or biological research, but as a source of new ideas, most of which won't work. Still, maybe one will and that will be enough to make it all worthwhile.

……………………………………………………

Dominic Boyer (Rice University)

I have two dominant associations with "business anthropology" as a field of knowledge. The first is a narrower definition: the mobilization of anthropological research techniques within and for the benefit of private sector companies. As Marietta Baba notes in a definitive historical overview of business anthropology (2006), anthropologists have worked with the private sector for as long as anthropology has existed as a professional field. And, anthropologists have performed "applied," organization-oriented research within businesses at least since Lloyd Warner's work with Western Electric in the 1930s. However, during the Cold War, anthropology's extra-academic engagements moved more in the direction of service to state or non-governmental development projects. As Baba notes, the 1971 AAA ethics code's prohibition of proprietary research symbolized how marginal applied private sector research had become (2006:13). The concept of "business anthropology"

an sich, then took shape in the 1980s as part of a reinvigorated engagement of anthropology with the private sector (see Jordan 2010:19).

There seem to have been both push and pull factors involved in anthropology's return to business. On the one hand, the 1980s marked the first phase of the widespread authorization of neoliberal dicta of society-as-market and individual-as-entrepreneur/consumer in various domains of expertise. It would be inaccurate to say that, on this basis, research in business settings (let alone research partnerships with businesses) suddenly gained a positive valuation in anthropology. More fairly, one might say that the mainstreaming of neoliberal attitudes in domains of expert and popular knowledge helped neutralize the negative valuation of business enough to allow for a more lively and legitimate subdisciplinary margin to emerge. The founding of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology in 1984 to offer business practitioners and academic consultants space within the AAA surely symbolizes this partial re-opening of mainstream professional anthropology to business.

However, business moved toward anthropology as well. In the 1980s, corporations, especially those operating in information, communication and design fields, began to seek out anthropological methodological and conceptual expertise more actively. I cannot explain why this happened with great certainty. But my hunch is that the post-industrialization of northern economies in the 1980s placed a new premium on experimentation with less "tangible" modes of commoditization, such as semiosis (e.g., "branding") and user-experience. Suddenly, anthropological expertise in matters of semiotic and participant-observational analysis seemed plausibly advantageous. The most famous laboratory for such experiments was likely Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center), especially Lucy Suchman's now legendary research on human-machine interfaces (1987). Her projects at PARC directly or indirectly inspired others in the emergent fields of participatory design, user experience and consumer behavior, notably Jeanette Blomberg, Melissa Cefkin, John Sherry and Rick E. Robinson, the last of whom went on to found E Lab LLC, the first "ethnographic design" firm in the early 1990s (see Wasson 2000). I was an occasional tourist to the E Lab offices for personal reasons and had several uncanny encounters with business anthropology in-the-making, for example when I wandered into one meeting room and saw a flow chart based on Bourdieuian practice theory as part of a client presentation or when Clifford Geertz was frequently invoked to backstop the firm's proprietary analytic model. My defensive, somewhat cynical view at the time was that E Lab was attempting to privatize a public good (anthropological theory). But the heart of E Lab's business model was actually more focused on

troubleshooting user-object interfaces. In their consulting, E Lab typically analyzed the epistemic, experiential and environmental factors determining user behavior and then advised how interfacing could be optimized. Indeed, although E Lab had already closed its doors by the time that the actants of Actor Network Theory started to make landfall in anthropology in the early 2000s, "ethnographic design" had, in many ways, a similar interest in exploring the interstices of agency and actancy (and indeed this perhaps explains the current resurgence of interest in Suchman's work as anthropological science and technology studies has mainstreamed). Although there is no doubt that many anthropologists still view business anthropology as ethically problematic, in its best moments it is capable of providing excellent reflexively attentive organizational ethnography. In an era when there have likely never been so many of us studying "cultures of expertise" inside and outside organizational environments, business anthropology appears to be an increasingly fertile area of research at the juncture of academic and corporate interests.

This brings me at last to my second, more open-ended association with "business anthropology," the one that is perhaps ultimately more in the spirit of Brian Moeran and Christina Garsten's vision for this journal. What I hope this journal will encourage is more anthropological exploration of the rise of "business" as a prominent form of life and imagination across the planet. I would distinguish that project from an analysis, for example, of the origins and consequences of neoliberal policy consensus and from the study of "neoliberalism" as an epistemic and cultural force in various parts of the world. "Business" certainly has done well in the neoliberal era but it existed before neoliberalism and will in all probability survive it. "Business," in my view of things, involves a field of linguistic registers in which Business English features prominently; it involves certain styles of dress and hexis, certain aesthetics of work, leisure and environments; it involves preferred modes of conviviality, relationality and sexuality; it involves certain experiences of time and space and always more motion; it involves media messages and an entire knowledge industry whose artifacts are featured prominently in spaces (airports, for example) designed to enable business; it involves, above all, intuitions, worldviews and principles of judgment. "Business" offers rich terrain for anthropological reflection and I find such reflection incredibly important since the global samenesses and variations of business exert profound influence on conditions of life and processes of social imagination across the world. Business recruits and organizes desires, promises futures, incites imitation and action. Regardless of the future of neoliberalism – I, for one, hope we are witnessing the decline of its monopoly on truth – the codes of "business," I feel confident, will continue to mutate and endure. "Business anthropology" will thus offer us

excellent red threads to the future and means for engaging the cultures of power.

References

Baba, Marietta L. 2006. "Anthropology and Business." *Encyclopedia of Anthropology.* H. James Birx, ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Pp 83-117.

Jordan, Ann T. 2010. "The Importance of Business Anthropology: Its Unique Contribution." *International Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1):15-25.

Suchman, Lucy. 1987. *Plans and situated actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication.* Cambridge University Press: New York.

Wasson, Christina. 2000. "Ethnography in the Field of Design." *Human Organization* 59(4):377-388.

…………………………………………………………

Ulf Hannerz (Stockholm University)

One of my early publications was perhaps an instance of business anthropology – an article on "Marginal Entrepreneurship and Economic Change in the Cayman Islands" (Hannerz 1973). It was a fairly serendipitous by-product of research on local politics, focusing on tourism and inspired, like so much of Scandinavian anthropology at the time, by Fredrik Barth and the "Bergen School" – its slim volume on *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway* (1963) was a sort of local classic, although its mode of publication probably meant that it did not reach a more dispersed anthropological public. Anyway, since then I cannot claim to have been actively involved in business anthropology, so what follows draws on what may be described as a view from afar. And is perhaps quite banal.

I think business anthropology should be an important part of anthropology – I see anthropology as a study of all human life, and business is in these times a central part of that. (There is an unfortunate tendency in some contemporary anthropology, I think, to retreat to quite marginal and/or trivial topics.) I also believe that in mapping its field of activity, one can perhaps learn something from earlier debates over emergent sub-disciplines in anthropology. One question may be about the direction of the flow of ideas and knowledge. When urban anthropology developed on a significant scale, in the 1970s or so, it seemed that the

assumption was that anthropology could contribute to urban studies – and so a consequence of this was that much early anthropology in cities was about "urban villages", an application of ethnographic routines with little in the way of conceptual and theoretical development. I wrote my book *Exploring the City* (1980) in large part as an attempt to turn this around, and to ask what urban anthropology could add to the wider anthropological project of understanding human diversity. Business anthropology might be in a similar situation – anthropology may well contribute to an understanding of business, but how can this particular anthropology contribute to the development of anthropological thought generally?

Then there is the case of the engagement of anthropology with development studies, also in large part from the 1970s onwards – not a field in which I have been active myself, although I have been an observer thereof. Here there has been the tendency to a split between the "development anthropology" of more or less hands-on practitioners, frequently in non-academic employment, and the "anthropology of development", a more theoretical critique of the notion of development itself, and its political implications. I can see the possibility – should I say risk? – of a divergence between a "business anthropology" and an "anthropology of business" along similar lines. My preference would be to hold them together in at least a productive dialogue, and with reflective practitioners involved.

More dramatically, there have been the recurrent controversies, mostly in American anthropology, over the involvements of (a rather small number of) anthropologists in military affairs, counterinsurgency, international security, "human terrain" studies, whatever it has all been called. Most of their colleagues, at least those heard from, have been strongly opposed to such engagements. I would mostly not expect business anthropology to generate quite so heated arguments, but I do sense that there are anthropologists with fairly general anti-business inclinations who might wish that there were no such sub-discipline as business anthropology, and no colleagues wishing to get into it. One productive consequence of this might be that the field will have a quite active and continuous debate over ethics in research and application – what are the acceptable goals and methods of business anthropology?

I am generally in favor of openness – that may indeed be a banal declaration. In business anthropology, however, it may involve some particular issues. One of the keywords of our times is "transparency", and in public life, not least in places where politics are in principle liberal and democratic, there is indeed some tendency not only to celebrate it but to put it into practice. In business, you can hardly expect quite so much of it. There is competition and there are business secrets. How do business anthropologists handle this – to get at the secrets, where this is desirable

in research, and to participate in keeping secrets, where this becomes a part of their line of work? Again, there are ethical as well as methodological questions here.

Openness, I would suggest, is also a matter of dealing with sub-disciplinary borderlands. Although business anthropology may have had a fairly low profile so far, it is certainly close to, and may overlap with, some number of more institutionalized fields. Economic anthropology may have had its ups and downs, but at present seems to be in a phase of renewal. It is certainly not synonymous with business anthropology, but there should be a great deal of interaction between them. Anthropology and adjacent fields have had an interest in studies of advertising for some time, and this is clearly an area where commerce and culture come together in creativity. Entrepreneurship remains a field of scholarly concern. Tourism studies form a large interdisciplinary field. I would prefer these, and probably numerous others, to be "blurred genres" rather than specializations with sharply drawn boundaries.

Finally, I hope business anthropology in its continued development will attend not only to business in itself, but also to those organized activities which directly depend on it, and on which it depends. I have in mind especially the media engaged in business commentary, and the institutions of business training: "business schools" and others. And I think that the *Journal of Business Anthropology* could well keep an eye on what is happening in popular business literature – those bestsellers I see when I look at the book stands in international airports, where "frequent fliers" choose their food for thought. Here is a field of global public culture which seems to me to be still waiting for more anthropological commentary.

References

Barth, Fredrik (ed.) 1963. *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway.* Bergen and Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1973. Marginal Entrepreneurship and Economic Change in the Cayman Islands. *Ethnos*, 38: 101-112.

…………………………………………………

Marianne Lien (University of Oslo)

> "Until we have revealed how corporate power feels like truth
> instead of like force, we will not comprehend it."
>
> Kalman Applbaum, *Rethinking Economies*, London, January 2008

Can we love capitalists enough to study them?

A few years ago, the anthropological truism that you have to love your people in order to do them ethnographic justice raised some doubts about the possibility of studying capitalism. Some were concerned that we were too angry with capitalists to study them properly; others that our complicity with the agents of capitalism would make an ethnography of capitalism implausible.[1] Now that the most recent financial crisis has exposed flaws of financialisation (cf. Hart 2011) and Occupy-movements recruit academics to the streets, while, at the same time, universities are run by managerial models, the question could seem all the more relevant. Yet, the current state of affairs hardly even gives us a choice.

It is certainly the case that anthropologists have broken new ground recently through ethnographies of markets, finance, manufacturing, and management. This year's launch of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* reflects a renewed interest in economic anthropology, and thematic issues of mainstream anthropological journals reflect a sudden interest in contemporary finance.[2] But we are still a long way away from being relevant in the way that we could. Decades of marginalising economic anthropology have left the discipline somewhat unprepared[3] for the important challenges that the world currently faces (climate change, financial crises). These are challenges for which the causes, as well as the solutions, are to be found within the societies that most anthropologists are likely to call their own. And although the financial crisis and subsequent bail-outs reveal the entanglements of the economy with everything social and political, it is still economists who are turned to for solutions. It is generally them, not

---

[1] The questions were raised during the seminar Rethinking Economic Anthropology, in London January 2008 (before the financial bubble hit the headlines) and I wish to thank Sandy Robertson for phrasing these questions so succinctly .

[2] See especially the *Cultural Anthropology*'s theme issue on Finance, May 2012 http://culanth.org/?q=node/561.

[3] But see Keith Hart, whose thorough commentaries on the world economy in general and the financial crisis in particular are a consistent exception (see e.g. Hart 2000, Hart and Ortiz 2008, Hart 2011).

us, who are called upon for grand narratives of how we got ourselves into the mess and how to get out of it.

We know, of course, that even the most 'market-like' markets have Maussian traits. Even when we locate our study in what appear to be prototypical capitalist institutions, such as the trading floors of European stock exchanges (Hasselström 2003, Zaloom 2006), Tokyo's fish market (Bestor 2004), or marketing departments of food manufacture (Lien 1997), we find our sites inhabited by people who are often much less keen on separating gifts from commodities than economic theories assume.[4] More recently, advances in the study of financial markets (Ho 2009) and financial management (Røyrvik 2011) have taught us more about how finance and corporate power are constructed from within. Such studies are extremely important. Yet, in light of the current penetration of the market into all spheres of life, there is no need to limit oneself to studies of 'capitalism at the core' to understand how it works. If capitalism is pervasive, it hardly derives its strength from any one particular site or centre, but from the networks and relations that economic practices engender. Perhaps we could begin by letting go of the idea that cores even exist. Because, as recent ethnographies of marketing have revealed, if we look for people who orchestrate this mess, we are not likely to find them.[5] Most people who are insiders to the financial trade or marketing see the action as being 'elsewhere', and are often as oblivious as ordinary consumers about the consequences of the choices they make.

If there is no inside/outside, if we are all somehow implicated, and no-one in particular is to blame, our economic world becomes more complicated, but also, paradoxically, more accessible. It means that, in principle, our current economy can be studied anywhere. The question becomes then, not so much of whether we love or hate capitalists, but of how people who are not normally classified as 'the capitalist other' accommodate, and even cultivate, rhetorics of the market through day-to-day practices. It becomes a question about the 'capitalist within': not as the self-interested entrepreneur who relentlessly maximises utility for his (yes, mostly *his*) own advantage (cf. neoclassical economics); but as reluctant, complicit or indifferent agents in the processes whereby economy becomes instituted, self-evident and, by the same token, somewhat impenetrable (cf. Polanyi). Such a pursuit would be less about the study of 'the other', and more about belief systems and material practices that together constitute the very foundation of peoples' daily lives. In other words, it involves the study of ourselves. As the latter is far

---

[4] As James Carrier puts it, 'sociability is a weed that propagates on the most stony ground' (Carrier 1998: 43, in Carrier and Miller 1998).

[5] As Daniel Miller notes, when you look at businesses, it turns out that 'economic calculation' in the formal sense is continuously placed outside the frame of real economic transactions (Miller in Carrier and Miller 1998; see also Lien 1997; Hasselström 2003).

less developed in anthropology than the former, such a pursuit would necessarily need to be inventive, original, and bold. Some tools and guidebooks exist already, but many more would be invented along the way. The potential outcome is not only a truly postcolonial discipline (one which no longer relies epistemologically on the distinction between own and other culture/society), but also one that complements other disciplines (economics, for example) in producing narratives and partial solutions to the many challenges we currently face. In other words, it would imply a discipline which sees the investigation of practical problems as being as relevant to the discipline as any other problem, and not one which, in the words of Evans-Pritchard (1946: 93) belongs in the 'non-scientific field of administration' (see Moeran and Garsten 2012).

So how do we proceed? First of all, we need to turn our attention from what makes the economists' model of the market *wrong*, to what it is that makes it so *strong.* We need to come to grips with the mechanisms that make businesses, as well as the trope of the market – expansive, forceful, efficient and capable of coordinating human and non-human resources on an unprecedented scale. How do we account for the persuasive power of the market model, and of economics as a whole? Two sets of issues seem particularly pressing: one related to sustained *autonomy* of the economic sphere (Hayek vs. Keynes); the other to the *mobility* of models of the market.

How does this translate into anthropology? In a short book called *The Hit Man's Dilemma*, Keith Hart has argued that the boundary between the personal and the impersonal is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Hart uses the image of a 'hit man' – a gangster licensed to kill – as a metaphor for the 'moral problems inherent in building modern society on the basis of impersonal institutions' (Hart 2005: 12). Important ethnographic questions arise from this approach, such as how people, within and outside of business, handle the subtle boundaries of personal and impersonal agency, and how such boundaries are configured within the institutions in which people operate. I believe that a focus on institutions, rhetorics and practices, through which the distinction between the personal and the impersonal are continuously reproduced, may help us come to grips with some of the tensions, as well as the mechanisms that sustain the perceived autonomy of the economic sphere. Thus, we may contribute to a better understanding of the dichotomous relation between 'market' and 'society' which frames so much of our transactional activity in Western societies.

The perceived autonomy of the field of economics is also likely to be fundamental to its current mobility. It has been argued that the universalising potential of economics rests upon its capability for abstraction (Carrier and Miller 1998). But while abstraction is essential, it does not, in itself, make things move. As Penny Harvey has argued with reference to science, abstract truths require social dramas to achieve their scalar effects (Harvey 2007). As anthropologists we are particularly

well positioned to study the social dramas that allow neo-liberalism to march on.

In order to do so, we need to examine how the day-to-day practices that unfold around us solidify and transform themselves and become solid points of reference, underpinning our ontological premises. In other words, we need to study how economic realities become real to us.

Such a programme necessarily transcends any narrow definition of 'business' as the sites in which transactions are being made, as well as an orthodox distinction between anthropologies of 'the other' and anthropologies 'at home'. It would also benefit from a comparative approach. Carving out an economic anthropology along these lines requires that we continuously challenge the institutional, as well as ontological, boundaries that are reproduced through the delineations 'business', 'markets' and 'economics'. It means that business anthropology is defined less by the kind of people and practices it studies, and more by the kinds of questions it asks.

So what can anthropology contribute? As always, it is our humanity that makes us good ethnographers. It is not the idea that there is a strange 'exotic culture' out there, but rather the other pole of our anthropological legacy: the notion of the universal that suggests that ethnography is possible because we are all human. As Miyazaki (2012) notes: 'the world of finance is made and remade by thinking subjects just like us who dream, are disappointed and try to gather together the courage to go on once again'.

We don't need to love capitalists in order to study them, but we need to humanise them. I believe that it is precisely our compassion, and our willingness to step beyond boundaries of the personal and impersonal that may help us towards an understanding of capitalism that may – if we ask the most difficult questions – contribute to a better understanding of our troubled times.

References

Bestor, Ted, C. 2004 *Tsukiji; The Fish Market at the Center of the World.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Carrier, James and Daniel Miller 1998 *Virtualism. A New Political Economy.* Oxford: Berg.

Czarniawska, Barbara 2012 Organization theory meets anthropology. A story of an encounter. *Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1): 118-140.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1946 'Applied anthropology'. *Africa* 16: 92-8.

Hart, Keith 2000 *The Memory Bank; Money in an Unequal World.* London: Profile Books.

Hart, Keith 2005 *The Hit Man's Dilemma: On Business, Personal and Impersonal.* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Hart, Keith 2011 The financial crisis and the end of all-purpose money, *Economic Sociology: the European Electronic Newsletter* 12 (2) 4-10.

Hart, Keith and H. Ortiz 2008 Anthropology in the financial crisis. *Anthropology Today* 24 (6) 1-3

Harvey, Penny 2007 'Arresting mobility or locating expertise; 'Globalisation' and the 'Knowledge Society'. In: M. E. Lien and M. Melhuus (eds.) *Holding Worlds Together; Ethnographies of Knowing and Belonging.* Oxford: Berghahn

Hasselström, Anna 2003 *On and off the trading-floor. An Inquiry into the Every-day Fashioning of Financial Market Knowledge.* Stockholm: Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm.

Ho, Karen 2009 *Liquidated. An Ethnography of Wall Street.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Lien, Marianne E. 1997 *Marketing and Modernity.* Oxford: Berg.

Miyazaki Hirokazu 2012 *'The end of finance?' Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology Online.* May 17th 2012*.* http://culanth.org/?q=node/574

Moeran, Brian and Christina Garsten 2012 'What's in a Name? Editors' Introduction to the Journal of Business Anthropology. *Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1) 1-19.

Røyrvik, Emil A. 2011 *The Allures of Capitalism.* Oxford: Berghahn.

Zaloom, Caitlin 2006 *Out of the Pits. Traders and Technology from Chicago to London.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

…………………………………………………

Orvar Löfgren (University of Lund)

"I'll never forget my first internship day working for a consultancy firm. I was expected to do an ethnography of a suburban setting that was about to be re-branded. In the evening I got a call from my new boss saying, 'Are you ready to start tomorrow morning? I'll drop by your apartment tonight and give you a video recorder and some instructions.' After an hour he appeared and called me to come down to his car. He was so stressed that he just gave me a couple of quick hints before handing over the camera. 'Are you ready to go ahead?' he asked, and all I could answer was a faint 'yes'. Next day I went out there and tried to remember my training in ethnography, finding out what to look for. I was just thrown right into it."

The student came from a new Masters program in Applied Cultural Analysis (MACA), that I have been involved in over recent years in the Department of European Ethnology at the University of Lund, Sweden. It is a training that takes students from the humanities and social sciences into the applied research world of corporations and public institutions. Together with my colleague Billy Ehn, I have been interviewing students about their experiences in 'going out there' and doing business ethnography, as interns, thesis writers, and later hired ethnographers. We have also interviewed consultants with a background in anthropology and European ethnology who have long experience in trying to bridge the gap between academia and the business world (see the discussion in Ehn & Löfgren 2009).

Much of business anthropology today occurs in the border-zones between traditional academic research and applied studies by consultants and business ethnographers. I am interested in what goes on in these territories, but also why the dialogue between different actors is often weak. A complaint heard from consultants was "once you leave Academia to do commercial anthropology, you can never come back and nobody takes much notice of what you are doing out there." There is, therefore, every reason to try to improve the dialogue and it is clear that academia has a lot to learn from the world of applied research in the business field.

Listening to the students' experiences was one way to begin this dialogue, and it has also been refreshing to hear consultants take a critical look at the traditions, routines and rituals of research among those of us who have remained in academia. What can they problematize in those research practices and perspectives that we too often take for granted?

The MACA program is based upon a cooperation between Lund and Copenhagen universities, and students and teachers have to take a 50 minute commute across the national border. "Two universities and two national academic styles for the price one," is the way our slogan might be run. It is a hands-on training with a focus on learning to understand the expectations "out there". It is about doing projects and ethnographies under tough time pressures and learning to communicate aims and results in other ways than student papers and reports. Most important and challenging, it is about learning that it is not enough to provide a critical analysis of the problem assigned, but about being prepared to answer the dreaded question: so what? How does one transform a business ethnography into implementation, with concrete suggestions for further action?

For many students it is still a bit of a cultural shock to take on their first projects in the new settings. One of them got an internship in a big utilities company. He will never forget the first comment he got when, as a cultural analyst, he was presenting his new project and academic

background to his new colleagues. His aim was to do a cultural analysis of how the customers viewed the company that provided electricity for domestic use. "Culture? Damn it, we don't deal with culture here. We sell electricity!" Well, he had to start explaining what he meant about cultural analysis and tell his new colleagues about customers' reactions to the company he had encountered: for example the indecipherable complex monthly bills that they opened with trembling hands during the cold and expensive winter months. He realized that his immediate task was to elaborate on the many cultural charges found in an intangible product like electricity – a basic, invisible element in everyday life often surrounded by conflicts in the household. Who forgot to turn off the light again and who is constantly fiddling with the thermostat? Questions like waste and thrift, saving pennies or battling global warming, were often present. Electricity was a commodity very much framed within different cultural understandings, conventions and moral norms.

For many other students their first challenges were similar. They had to try to get employers or clients to understand the "cultural" part of cultural analysis. The arguments they used in the seminar rooms usually did not work here. One had to find new ways of getting the message across. What is it that I have to offer? What are my competences and analytical skills? What is the anthropological or ethnographic contribution to business studies?

One student got involved in a project on waste management and found that the engineers she was going to work with looked puzzled when she said: "waste is very much about culture". She convinced them by doing a quick project in which a group of students with diverse cultural backgrounds were asked to label and sort different kinds of food waste. How did they decide what should go where in the fridge, or devise a particular kitchen system for sorting garbage? Gradually she was able to convince the engineers that waste reflected basic cultural ideas of value, order and power, as well as having strong emotional charges.

The lessons to be learnt concerning communication are important, since a common complaint that we meet among students is that they lack confidence in their skills as cultural analysts, or don't know how to present those skills in simple words. Coming from the humanities where there isn't much of a tradition of assured self-presentation, students are often insecure: what do I know, what kinds of competences do I have compared to an economist, a political scientist or a hands-on engineer? There is much that you have learned that you don't even see as analytical skills or assets.

Some were afraid that their critical skills would not be appreciated "out there" in the world of business. Writing about the tasks of a critical ethnography, Jim Thomas (1993: 2ff) points out that cultural

worlds tend to entrap people in taken-for-granted reality, and the role of researchers is to question commonsense assumptions by describing and analysing otherwise hidden agendas that inhibit, repress and constrain people in their everyday lives. He reminds us that the dimension of power is always there, though often found in surprising places and forms.

Strikingly enough, it is precisely this critical perspective that the consultants found most important in the academic luggage they carried with them into their new careers. This again underlines the importance of academic training in nurturing and developing critical thinking. As teachers we need to remind students that research that desperately starts out by trying to be "useful" or "easily applicable" may in fact end up becoming predictable or non-challenging if it loses its open, reflective and critical perspective.

What employers and clients in the corporate world often expect is "the surprise effect". Bringing ethnography into the field of business studies should create new and different kinds of knowledge – making the mundane exotic or challenging. When they consider hiring an ethnographer, they want something different from the traditional world of surveys and focus groups.

As students returned from the field and their first applied jobs, they brought back important insights, but also new skills and tools. They provided us with feedback on what was important in their earlier training and what could be improved. They had new experiences of team-work, communicating with people for whom cultural analysis was an unknown field, but they also acquired skills of working under strong time-pressures or making findings clear and sharp. Most important, they returned with a feeling of actually having an analytical toolbox to turn to when all of a sudden finding themselves with a video recorder on a cold morning in a nondescript suburb that is eagerly waiting to be documented.

References

Ehn, Billy & Löfgren, Orvar (2009) 'Ethnography in the market place'. *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research. Vol. 1, 2009:1-16.* www.**cultureunbound**.ep.liu.se

Thomas, Jim (1993) *Doing Critical Ethnography.* London: Sage.

....

George E. Marcus (University of California, Irvine)

"Kim Clark says that Romney was 'very smart, but also great with senior executives, really capable of developing relationships with them. You have to be really good on your feet, good at understanding what people's concerns are and how they think.'" [Comment on Romney's time as a business consultant at Bain Capital]

> Nicholas Lemann, "Transaction Man: Mormonism, Private Equity,
>
> and the Making of a Candidate." *The New Yorker*, Oct. 1, 2012

Asked of Ira Glass, creator of NPR's *This American Life*, "What was the last truly great book you read?" "Michael Lewis's *The Big Short*… He's telling the story of the mortgage crisis and his angle couldn't be better: he follows the guys who knew it was coming and bet on it. This lets him explain how they knew and tell the story through these amazing contrarians…"

> *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, August 19, 2012.

"Every contemporary ethnographic project faces in its formative moments a distinctive conundrum. The long-established anthropological archive does little in the way of providing access and, in fact, may frustrate entry to the kind of ethnographic settings that most of us seek to explore: epistemic communities in which emergent social and cultural forms are being devised and enacted by our

subjects themselves. Put bluntly, the methodological preoccupations and theoretical conceits that have both legitimated and enabled the powerfully imagined scene of fieldwork exchange between anthropologists and subject in the past are of diminished value or have been fully eclipsed in many settings today. Yet, at precisely the moment that we find ourselves bereft of an intellectual apparatus, we learn that within these milieus of contemporary fieldwork, the role of the ethnographer is, incidentally, anticipated. In other words, a space is created for the ethnographer prior to her arrival on the scene. The ethnographer is thus no longer fully a stranger, but a figure whose presence is awaited and foreseen, if only figuratively. And, these expectations can establish manifold bases for innovative forms of ethnographic collaboration."

Douglas Holmes, prolegomenon to his study of central bankers,

Forthcoming, University of Chicago Press

What business anthropology is, or could be (the question posed by Brian Moeran), very much depends on the contemporary protocols of ethnographic research in the anthropological tradition; especially as they are challenged and implemented within the kind of elaborate, big (global?), deeply trans-cultural projects in which business, finance, government, philanthropies, universities, sciences, NGOs, and social movements are complexly entangled in the name of collaborations, as the imperative norm of sociality in big projects, and of market principles as faith. Of course, business has its own norms, forms, history – culture – and this has long defined a special field of scholarly research for a number of disciplines and inter-disciplines, in which anthropology has in fact joined in. But it is the broader entanglements and meshings, the embracing of the social and cultural itself – sensitivity to stakeholders, shareholders, and the 'vision thing' – led by advances in bio and information technologies that are perhaps distinctive of business in this era. This doesn't mean that business is more virtuous – by far – but it is more sensitive to, and aware of, the complexity of its fields of operation. Along with the marketing of ideas and technologies, it is perhaps a bit more open – both to speculative thinking, but with a short term tolerance for the time it takes to produce what it recognizes as results (not always synonymous with profits); and to a range of experiments that are social/cultural in their conception and often technical in their mode of production or implementation.

I dipped into this tendency in one of the *Late Editions* volumes that I edited at the fin-de-siecle: *Corporate Futures: the Corporation as a Culturally Sensitive Form* (1997, University of Chicago Press). That work was perhaps short sighted about the broader (global) organizations and arrangements – new collaborations (contracts?) – then in formation between business, government, universities, and the NGO sector. However, during the first decade of the new century especially, the fieldwork of distinctively anthropological ethnographic research became defined by its positioning within these global assemblages (Ong and Collier 2005), to use one of the influential conceptual framing markers of this period. The long-established techniques and commitments of ethnographic research remain recognizable. It is how they are applied and situated, and how fieldwork, as a recursive space of movement in inquiry, is negotiated for each project of research, that to me constitute some interesting new challenges to what kinds of anthropological

knowledge might emerge from research on business in encompassing assemblages. And here the determining framework in anthropology is the rationale of social, cultural, and indeed, moral critique in the name of which so much ethnography has been written and argued since the so-called 'reflexive turn' after the 1980s debates about authority, representation, and the narrative practices of ethnographic writing. Ethnographers must not only work within the networks of collaboration that define the assemblages in which fieldwork occurs, but they must become part of them, or at least build parts of them for their own purposes. This is the politics of collaborative fieldwork that lacks sufficient discussion among anthropologists, as well as a sufficient sense of experimentation with method.

Do ethnographers have the power, or the relationships of patronage and funding, to forge collaborations for their purposes within larger defining ones? This is unclear and an exciting question to explore. What kind of parasitic collaborations can anthropologists create to conduct their own fieldwork within the professional, expert designs of others? For the non-applied academic anthropologist outside the business of consulting, these questions define new challenges to constituting fieldwork as it has been traditionally conceived – as something the anthropologist makes, does, and is responsible for herself.

I might mention here in passing two developing projects that in my view are especially impressive for their production of just such collaborative forms from a deeply ethnographic sensibility, but without the latter's methodological orthodoxies. The field takes shape as a kind of 'collaboratory' in which the ethnographic is diffused in its highly designed management: the asthma files web project, created by Mike and Kim Fortun (www.theasthmafiles.com); and Meridian 180, dealing with Asia, Pacific, and U.S. relations, created and directed by Annelise Riles (www.meridian180.org). Both create the sort of collaborative space which might generate fieldwork projects of the traditional kind, but which are prior to them, and are a kind of cocoon for their development. It seems to me that a business anthropology, or an anthropology of finance, or an anthropology of science etc., will increasingly come to depend on the formation, in various imaginative and cunningly adaptive forms, of just such cocoons, for ethnography as we have known it, within the norms and imperatives of particular cultures of collaboration – amid global assemblages. But this is still pretty much the future, or one future (but I think a very near one).

In the meantime, scholarly specializations like business anthropology operate as specific individual fieldwork projects of research amid larger projects that organize the kinds of assemblages that I have evoked. Here, the particular style or ideology of ethnographic practice

matters crucially in terms of what kind of anthropological knowledge of/in business, science, finance, humanitarianism, etc. gets produced.

I want to identify here three such distinctive contemporary styles, modes, or ideologies of ethnographic research in action, making their way in this world of assemblages. All three involve sustained participant observation, immersion, the cultivation of particular subjects, and a certain liking of 'quirkiness' that characterize the aesthetic of classic ethnography; all three derive from or react to the rationale of critique that has so defined research in anthropology for over two decades; and at their best, they overlap and are mutually informative. Style does matter in terms of what ethnographic research produces as knowledge, and thus what shapes research in the complex arrangements and institutions that define business (or finance, or science and technology, or infrastructure, or any global assemblage).

I'll briefly characterize each of the three and expand a bit on the third, in which I have been most invested. I will call them comparative alterity, reflexive critique, and alignment with the found paraethnographic.

Comparative Alterity

Much productive ethnography on contemporary assemblages is being produced by the key classic virtue and technique of anthropological analysis of 'making it strange' – partly by the broad comparative commitments of the discipline and partly by the exemplary and sophisticated creation of analytic frames of this kind.

For pedagogy and illustration, anthropology has always played with exercises such as juxtaposing the 'doctor' and the 'shaman', for example. But the comparative use of material and concepts developed in anthropology's historic and continuing ethnographic archive of world peoples and cultures in the ethnography of contemporary assemblages, is strong, vigorous, and perhaps motivated by a 'revitalization' movement in the discipline, which seeks to restore or reinstantiate its founding concerns. This style has been pioneered and most acutely and prominently practiced by Marilyn Strathern, in my opinion, and by now has created a defined circle of mutual reference and practice in ethnography that is linked to revitalizing concepts such as animism, the gift, and the past and ongoing study of ritual and exchange systems generally, as sources of theory, ideas, and analytic frames for application to understanding, say, reproductive technologies, digital intellectual property, and many business topics, such as innovation advertising, etc. The spirit, however, is to revitalize anthropology and its historic questions, rather than to provide an ethnography of the contemporary.

I think of this work in anthropology linked to a similar sensibility in the analyses of influential actor-network theory, spawned by the research projects of Bruno Latour, first in science studies, but now applied more broadly (consider the key role of 'actants' and the revival of interest in animism in the style of ethnographic alterity that I want to identify).

This style focuses primary attention on novel and emerging ontologies (for which analogies to older anthropological concepts are well suited), and pays far less attention to epistemological questions which were at the core of the emergence of the current project of critique that encompasses so much present anthropological research. In its reclamatory tendency, this style of ethnography – while creative in its exposure of new ontologies – is self-consciously a departure from the project of critique of the past two decades. For example, it might like to forget Foucault for a while, and perhaps revive the discussions around the work of Levi-Strauss.

Reflexive Critique

I use this term to refer to a style of ethnographic work that has flourished since the so-called 'theory' period of the 1980s into the early 1990s, across disciplines that study culture and consider various forms of critique as the core practice of their research traditions. In anthropology, this period gave rise to many angles, tendencies, and theory sects, but its practice richly continues in a so-called 'reflexive turn', where the work of ethnography is theoretically framed in terms of a long history of critical theory and philosophy that remains its primary conceptual resource. It is also very interested in the new ontologies of assemblages, but does not de-emphasize epistemological questions that have shaped the predominant paradigm of critical research in recent anthropology. The contemporary is engaged and negotiated by ethnographers in constant dialogue with this theory tradition as a source of creating new analytic concepts (like those that come more from biology than culture today) and framing arguments. There is hope, and occasional experiment, in this style through ethnographic fieldwork to contribute to the increased (self-critical) reflexivity of organizations, institutions, and processes in which the fieldwork is undertaken. Equally important are the relation and contribution of ethnography, at the level of applied analytics, so to speak, to the great (mostly Western) traditions of critical social theory and philosophy. Alterity (emerging novel ontologies on a global scale) is a disciplinary concern here as well, but the intellectual resources of this style derive less from the tradition of concepts that anthropology itself has pioneered, and more from continued involvement in the rich revival

of critical theory itself in recent decades, and its continuing vitality in research programs and applications, like critical ethnography.

Alignment with the Found Paraethnographic

This style is an offshoot, perhaps a more eccentric and experimental one, of the style of reflexive critique. It goes very deep, so to speak, for its concepts – and even its rationale as ethnographic research – into its relations with particular subjects and the politics of these relations, before it surfaces and returns to, or reintegrates itself with the disciplinary history and traditions of question-asking and argument-making specific to anthropology. It is premised on the idea, firstly, that any line of critique that anthropology or its inter-disciplines think of, and through, in the academic sphere has its embedded parallel expressions and anticipations in the multi-sited scene of contemporary fieldwork itself, though not necessarily as obviously as characterizing a readily discernible 'native point of view' of one particular actor or subject; and, secondly, that ethnography best proceeds by creating concepts for itself by finding and engaging with such found 'paraethnographic' thinking whatever its found forms (this is very much the epistemological integrated with the novel and the ontological that the alterity style so values).

The three epigrams that begin this commentary are intended to express the spirit and strategy of this particular style of ethnography. Its special problems are the politics of association, and the strategies of recursive movement in a field which crosses both expert and non-expert knowledge-making endeavors. It is the style most challenged by the imperatives of collaboration in assemblages – to become part of them, while retaining a sphere of independent inquiry. Its key interest is in basing eventual ethnographic results, reported to the academy, on alignment (and collaboration) with found critical perspectives, and on their translation and processing while doing fieldwork. This raises novel questions of the forms of scholarly communication that exceed their conventional framings as problems of theory or method. Instead, there is a commitment to a kind of experimental practice with what Hans-Jorg Rheinberger, in his probing of experiment in scientific method, has called 'epistemic things', but, in ethnography, without the firm commitment that these epistemic things (the found paraethnographic) can be resolved through experiment into more precise, general, and enduring results.

How experimental, epistemic things in fieldwork become 'worked' into something more, requires more active strategies than classic fieldwork techniques envision. Studios, labs, and workshops in and alongside the pursuit of fieldwork move its evolving ideas around in ways that wouldn't be done by actors and subjects themselves. When created in

an ethnographically informed way, experiments with and on 'epistemic things' constitute trials of ethnography's evolving ideas before they reach professional reception. They are a primary prototypical means by which they first address professional reception. This aspect of ethnography perhaps resembles the way that the best reporting pursues 'stories' (as in the quoted admiration for an account by Michael Lewis of the recent financial collapse by following/aligning with those who benefited from it).

This is a style that I favor (with a personal history in the study of elites when that idea was still quite exotic in anthropology). The challenge is to work collaboratively within expert cultures as 'other', but without succumbing to their blind sides. Of course, the politics, ethics, and normative aspects of this kind of work with 'elites', especially when it comes to business, is often foremost in anthropological discussions, which to some degree have retarded its development. But exemplary work, especially in science studies, and on other assemblages (in finance, law, and infrastructures, especially), has forged a more probing course for this essentially primary focus on deriving anthropological thinking from engagement/alignment with thinking in the field all the way up (or back) to its restatements in academic scholarly debates.

At base, the differences in these three styles of ethnography concern how eventually anthropology gives value added or higher consciousness to what ethnography finds in the field. Alterity finds it in comparative difference domesticated (viz., ontology over epistemology); reflexive critique finds it in the enduring bank/exchange of critical thought; alignment with the paraethnographic ferrets it out relentlessly in the recursive scenes of fieldwork by experimenting with moving situated expressions of perspectives around and engaging them with others in a way that actors otherwise would not. Aligning with the paraethnographic in fieldwork – observing observers observing – leads to broader views but no resolutions. It finally shares intellectual responsibility for argument in a demonstrated way through experimental invention and the fortunes of fieldwork.

……And finally, a comment on the situation of academic anthropologists now entering, in substantial numbers and from a range of theoretical and topical angles, the space of concern and activity that has long been occupied by the many anthropologists who have diversely made their careers in consulting and applied positions. This has been a virtual 'no man's land' of discussion, debate – and indeed, collaboration internal to anthropology – in the past. It has been more than occasionally a ground for tension and sensitivity. There are indeed differences of concern and emphasis. The professionally consulting anthropologist might ask: what is the value added (the 'so what?' question) of ethnographic critique in any

of the three styles. Or, s/he might say: "I already know this and am acting on it." The academic anthropologist responds with suspicion that the professional business anthropologist is 'selling out', or that the full development of ingenious, critical thinking in what is observed and studied is stunted by the constraints and demands of research for hire. Happily, over the past decade, increasing, more interesting and productive discussions—and even collaborations (see the very encouraging and impressive account by Maurer and Mainwaring in this issue of the *JBA*) – are emerging in a sustained manner in this contentious space, and there are more hybrid practices of anthropology in the academy and outside (though inside academia, working with social movements seems more acceptable as applied work than working with business; in assemblages, however, the lines can become very blurred). The mutual recent interest of academic and applied anthropologists in design practices, thinking and disciplines, seems to be a powerful medium for cross discussions and collaborations. I merely point to the founding and flourishing of the annual EPIC, Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference(s), and the stream of publications and discussions that they have encouraged.

Social science disciplines are highly self-conscious organizations within assemblages, and the internal debates in anthropology – including the long-standing academic-applied divide about how to study the contemporary ethnographically, and how to constitute its research in business, in science, in finance etc. – depends most cogently upon how fieldwork, with all of its classic virtues, gets established and invented in each project of research. Collectively, we need better ways of seeing and understanding this process beyond discussion of it as a matter of methodology or political-moral virtue – whether in academic pursuits or professional consulting and non-academic employment.

Reference

Ong, Aihwa and Stephen Collier (eds.) 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. London: Blackwell.

…………………………………………………

Robert J. Morais (Weinman Schnee Morais, Inc., New York)

The first articles on business anthropology trickled into the marketing and advertising trade press during the 1980s, the tenor of each piece implying that the author was discovering the business value of anthropology, normally in the form of ethnography, for the first time. Titles shouting, "It's anthropological! Research takes 'cultural bent'" heralded a methodology that would enable business executives to discover naturalistic consumer behavior and mine deep marketing insights. Over the past three decades, these kinds of articles have continued to appear; "Designing for Technology's Unknown Tribes" ran in the August 2012 issue of *Mechanical Engineering*. Also harkening back to the 1980s, business anthropologist pioneer Steve Barnett stoked the flames in the advertising trade press as he taught a coterie of anthropologists how to engage in commercial projects. Articles and books by scholars and scholar-practitioners began to flow, and the pace has intensified recently. In the past five years, there has been a torrent of scholarly publications, conference meetings, and online posts that describe, analyze, and champion business anthropology.

But what *is* business anthropology and what should it be in the future? My reflections are based upon my reading of others' work and my own experience as an observant participant in marketing research and advertising. My current practice is that of a Principal at a marketing research firm, with which I have been affiliated since 2006. For 25 years prior, I was an advertising executive, working in the areas of account management and account planning. My recommendations here are eminently pragmatic; they aim to advance the careers of business anthropologists first and contribute to the theory of business anthropology second. I have expressed some of these observations elsewhere, particularly in *Advertising and Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice and Cultural Perspectives* (2012) with Timothy de Waal Malefyt, but I am offering additional thinking here.

Anthropology and Ethnography

In the trade press and in practice, business anthropology is often conflated with, and delivered as, ethnography. This is not surprising because business anthropologists have focused almost exclusively on ethnography as their unique selling proposition (USP). This mode of operation made sense in the early phase of marketing and design anthropology, when ethnography was a novel technique to access consumer needs, wants, attitudes, and brand experiences. The methodology sold well to its target customers, business executives, in part because ethnography was exotic and intriguing. Corporate research and marketing managers, along with the advertising agency professionals they hired, embraced ethnography as more than a new research fad. It was a means to become smarter than their competition. Ethnography promised to help them win in the marketplace, and it often did.

Within about ten years, the success of ethnography as a commercial research method led to a proliferation of observational research "experts" whose education and experience had little connection to *bona fide* ethnography or anthropology. In most instances, corporate and advertising agency executives did not know the difference. Observation of consumers in homes, supermarkets, offices, and so on by researchers with no anthropological training gained traction just as ethnography became a "go to" methodology within the marketing research toolkit. Business anthropologists found themselves competing with self-defined ethnographers, and the work of untrained practitioners has clouded the value of more profound ethnographic marketing research.

Anthropological theory can inform ethnographic work and it can also provide frameworks to analyze consumer beliefs, ideas, sentiments, actions, and culture that are not directly observed. Anthropological concepts can be applied in non-ethnographic research settings such as focus groups, too. With this in mind, business anthropologists should move beyond the singular application of ethnography as a research methodology. We should think of ourselves, and market our skills, as anthropologists who *sometimes* conduct ethnography. Well executed, theoretically informed ethnography will always be valuable for industry. It will have new applications online, as Robert Kozinets contends when he advocates for Netnography, an approach that business anthropologists have been slow to explore. However, thinking about ourselves as anthropologists in addition to ethnographers will lead us to a richer understanding of the interaction between commerce and culture. A USP is an effective way to market a brand; ethnography as a USP for business anthropologists is not the best tactic for building and sustaining an applied career.

Strategic Engagement

Business anthropologists contribute profound interpretation and creative ideas, many of which can improve organizational operations, generate product innovations, ignite advertising executions, and drive business success. Too few of us work intimately on the codification of marketing and advertising strategies, the blueprints for initiatives that follow our research projects. Perhaps this is a function of the roles we play as anthropologists. Our primary responsibility is research. Although we are lauded for providing the foundation for imaginative strategies, we seldom contribute actively to the *crafting* of strategic documents. Greater participation in the nuts and bolts, not to mention the blood, sweat, and tears, of the strategic development process will expand our research-only role. If business anthropologists wrote strategy in the way we write culture, our profession and our clients' businesses would benefit.

Business Immersion

Grant McCracken suggests that corporations should staff a position called Chief Culture Officer. This high level role is more of an aspiration for business anthropologists than a realistic objective, but McCracken's idea is a worthy one. Anthropologists should have senior jobs at corporations, and perhaps

someday we shall. In the meantime, those of us who are employed outside manufacturing companies must understand our clients' businesses. We need to view marketing research projects, for example, in the context of overall client learning needs, their marketplace position, corporate capabilities, and company philosophy; we must be able to assess how research projects will help a client meet their market share and financial goals. Our clients will be best served if we know their company's and product's **s**trengths, **w**eaknesses, **o**pportunities, and **t**hreats, the components of a SWOT analysis.

Many business anthropologists are employed within corporations in research and development (R&D), design, marketing, and organizational behavior. Anthropologists who serve as mid-level employees within these kinds of companies should broaden their thinking about the range of functions they can perform. They could work as brand managers, for instance, where they would bring an anthropological sensibility to their assignments, but not necessarily be employed as full-time business anthropologists. Some younger, and even a few established, anthropologists may wish to pursue graduate business education, through selected coursework, an MBA, or a similar degree. Others may begin their business careers as I did: my anthropology degree was put on a shelf when I entered advertising and learned the profession. Only later in my career, when I grasped how the advertising industry functioned and became an employee responsible for managing clients and advertising projects, did I begin "using" my degree. Through all or any of these means, business anthropologists will be able to understand more than just applied research; we will understand business.

Hybrid Approaches

Anthropology is by nature interdisciplinary, borrowing from psychology, sociology, history, economics, literature, and biology, among many other fields. As Malefyt and I suggest in *Advertising and Anthropology*, the use of psychology in particular connects to the way clients think about marketing research and often answers their learning needs more completely than an anthropological perspective alone. I am not suggesting that anthropologists abandon their core strengths and become research psychologists. Rather, I propose that we apply methods and concepts from psychology (and other disciplines) when they enhance our comprehension of consumer behavior and attitudes and then link that analysis with interpretations of consumer culture. Psychological anthropology and cultural psychology represent viable academic disciplines, and business anthropologists have much to gain by embracing them. My company employs both PhD-level psychologists and anthropologists. We often work together combining, for example, anthropologically-informed analysis about ritual transformations with the psychological concept of mindfulness. Business anthropologists who adapt analytical frameworks and methods from other fields will produce extremely valuable insights. The contribution they make to their clients will be expanded and their own practices will benefit as well.

A Voice for Public Anthropology

In a 2010 speech to the American Anthropological Association published in the September 2011 *American Anthropologist*, Jeremy Sabloff lamented the lack of anthropologists in the role of public intellectual. "Where have you gone, Margaret Mead?" he inquired. Sabloff suggested that anthropology's "rich diversity has a great deal to offer the public...policy makers in particular." As is apparent in Sabloff's phrase, public anthropology defined as *anthropology in the public interest* is endemic to what is increasingly termed, "engaged anthropology." When Hans Baer reviewed the field of engaged anthropology for *American Anthropologist* in 2011, he did not mention business anthropology. The closest he came to our sub-discipline was the topic of corporate globalization, which he linked to "power and inequities in the world system"; the other topics he included were squarely in the realm of noble pursuits: global health, climate change, natural disasters, and indigenous rights. As I read Baer's article, I was struck by how marginalized business anthropology is even within applied anthropology. A glance at the articles in any given issue of *Human Organization* or *Practicing Anthropology* provides additional evidence of this state of affairs. Only rarely do papers on business anthropology see print in these journals. I wonder: are business anthropologists pariahs within mainstream anthropology because we engage in commerce rather than in efforts to repair the world?

Moreover, despite the many business anthropology trade articles and the recent burst of articles and books, our efforts are still largely invisible to the public. Speaking to Sabloff's comments on public anthropology as a whole, this should not be the case. Business anthropology, because it functions *in the world*, can become a clear and powerful public expression of what anthropologists do and how we can contribute – and why anthropology matters. In fact, I believe that business anthropology can become a leading voice for public and engaged anthropology. Much of business anthropology, especially studies in marketing, advertising and design, is inherently interesting to the public. Clotaire Rapaille and Paco Underhill, neither of whom is a conventional anthropologist or a contributor to scholarly literature, have written popular books about the application of anthropological ideas and techniques in advertising and marketing. More of us should share our studies with the public, while protecting client confidentiality, as we must. The rewards can be gratifying. I wrote a short article in March 2012 on behalf of the American Anthropological Association for *The Huffington Post* that analyzed the American television series *Mad Men*. Based on the likes, tweets, shares, and emails, that piece probably gained greater readership than all of my scholarly publications combined (www.huffingtonpost.com/american-anthropological-association/mad-men-anthropology_b_1354540.html). As business anthropologists publish and speak more widely, perhaps academics will accept that we are positioned especially well to help carry the banner of anthropology to a wider population. We will need to harden ourselves against

skepticism within the academy about the ethics and worth of business anthropology, but we should write for the public nonetheless.

Conclusion

Business challenges are vexing. Change is constant. Competition is relentless. Anthropologists who wish to engage in marketing, advertising, innovation, design, and organizational studies must adapt to these conditions. We should expand our professional selling proposition beyond ethnography and incorporate other disciplines. We must actively contribute to strategy formulation, understand our clients' businesses, and take on more varied roles. We will advance business anthropology and anthropology as a discipline if we share our work with general as well as academic audiences.

There are additional issues that business anthropology should address; professional ethics, student training, greater interaction with academia, and job creation, among many others. These concerns are being discussed in print, at conferences, and informally among practitioners and scholars. As we continue a dialog and institute actions on the possibilities and promise of business anthropology, it will become a better, stronger, and more successful enterprise.

…………………………………………………

Hirochika Nakamaki (National Museum of Ethnology, Suita, Japan)

I wish to respond to Brian Moeran's invitation to talk about business anthropology by discussing its development in Japan, under the rubric of *keiei jinruigaku*. There are two origins of the term *keiei jinruigaku* (business anthropology) in Japan. One was created and fostered in The Academy of International Management Cultures and Transdisciplinary Studies, led by Motofusa Murayama, professor at Chiba University, and is sometimes referred to as the Chiba School of *keiei jinruigaku*. Its major publication has been *Keiei Jinruigaku: Human Theory of Animal Vitality* (edited by Motofusa Murayama and Kikuo Ogashiwa, Tokyo: Sōseisha, 1998).

Another group originated in the National Museum of Ethnology (commonly referred to as Minpaku) as an inter-university research project called 'The Cultural Anthropological Study of the Company and *Salaryman*', starting in 1993. It was organized around two persons: Koichiro Hioki and Hirochika Nakamaki, scholars of business administration and the anthropology of religion, respectively. Six books have been edited by these two scholars and published by Tōhō Shuppan, in Osaka, under the same title of *keiei jinruigaku* (but rendered into English as 'the anthropology of administration'). Two other books were

also put out by this group through the same publisher, with the title of 'company [or corporate] anthropology' (*kaisha jinruigaku*), consisting of collections of short essays on company life.

Now the question is: what has happened during the course of this fusion of two major disciplines? On the one hand, anthropologists began to study their own culture, instead of other cultures, and moreover focused on highly systematized organizations such as the company and bureaucracy. On the other hand, scholars of business administration also took part in fieldwork – something that they had not previously done. The first common target of research was the company museum. Over the years, we visited more than one hundred such museums together or individually throughout Japan. Hioki, for instance, looked at the veneration of company founders in museum displays and wrote about their legitimacy. Nakamaki, on the other hand, regarded the company museum as a pantheon, and compared displays of history and business as analogies of the Buddhist temple and Shinto shrine respectively, in that the former mainly concerns ancestor rites and the latter promotes mundane prosperity.

Our next project was to tackle company funerals. These flourished during the period of rapid economic growth (1960s and 70s) and continue to be observed in Japan, although nowadays hotels are preferred to Buddhist temples as ritual spaces. A company funeral is financed and managed by the company itself in honour of its VIPs, and is usually held at a much later date on a large scale, while the bereaved family has a smaller private funeral immediately after the deceased has passed away. We analyzed this peculiar phenomenon of a social event which represents the change of human and corporate relations in company life.

More recently, we have challenged company mythology. Hioki assumed three types of mythology: namely, the founding myth, hero myth, and brand myth. Members of the group contributed papers in which they tried to decipher mythological themes in the business world. In the founding myth, for instance, the founder of a restaurant, who had had experience in a Zen temple in his youth, established a training course for his employees to enhance their service with a 'Zen mind'. In the hero myth, there is a paper about an employee who was about to be punished as a scapegoat, but who suddenly became a hero through practicing the logic of 'making gain after loss'. In the brand myth, a company history was treated as a mythological text and analyzed as a process of mythification in which an anecdote from the founder's discourse, 'Try to do it', became a company style of business. Others among us have asserted that cultural organizations such as public museums and orchestras also produce myths.

If there are distinguishing features of our group's approach to *keiei jinruigaku*, they may be seen as follows. One is that we look at the company not only as *gesellshaft* but also as *gemeinshaft* – in other words, as cultural community. Each company has its uniqueness as an 'ethnic group' and possesses rituals and myths. The company history registers its diachronic occurrences and the company museum displays its most valuable persons and items. The company is a cultural entity which is productive and creative in its 'company climate'. Another feature is that we try to interpret the meanings of company presence. Our approach is not purely scientific, nor objective, but rather hermeneutic in the sense that we try to decipher 'story making' and 'ritual practice'.

In June 2010, an international forum was held by the leading members of the *keiei jinruigaku* research group at Minpaku, and entitled 'The First International Forum on Business and Anthropology'. The term 'Business Anthropology' (without the 'and') was carefully avoided on the grounds that we feared that we might lose the participation of some scholars of business administration. Distinguished scholars of business anthropology were invited including Brian Moeran, Ann Jordan, Tomoko Hamada Connolly, Mitchell Sedgwick, Dixon Heung Wah Wong, Han Seung-mi and Zhang Jijiao, to name some of those who attended from abroad. Publication of revised papers presented at the conference are forthcoming in English as *Business and Anthropology: A Focus on Sacred Space* in the *Senri Ethnological Studies* series put out by the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku).

…………………………………………………

Alan Smart (University of Calgary)

Josephine Smart (University of Calgary)

Although we have done anthropological research on businesses since our doctoral work in Hong Kong in 1983-1985, our initial reaction on hearing about "business anthropology" was to wonder why it was necessary. Was it not simply reinventing the wheel of economic anthropology? Was it perhaps an attempt to pander to the new prospective patrons of the underfunded discipline of anthropology? An attempt to cordon off the more critical of those who work in economic anthropology? Or simply another case of niche differentiation and empire building?

We were, as a result, relieved on reading the Introduction to the first issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* by Brian Moeran and Christina Garsten. After explicitly denying the desire to empire build,

they make the excellent point that anthropologists who study businesses need broad scholarship, and that increasingly people come to work on and in businesses from a wide variety of backgrounds, not necessarily from the traditions of economic anthropology, anthropology of work, or applied anthropology. They also note that those working on businesses who are not by training anthropologists, but find the anthropological approach to enterprises useful, may be more likely to recognize themselves in the rubric of business anthropology.

With that said, let us turn to the attractions and challenges of studying businesses. In our cases, we both began with a more traditional topic: informal sector practices. For Alan Smart, that involved squatter settlements, which in Hong Kong included substantial numbers of shopkeepers and small and medium factories. For Josephine Smart, her research focused on illegal street vendors in Hong Kong, mostly self-employed entrepreneurs. Our postdoctoral work on Hong Kong-invested factories in China moved us more into the study of what would more normally be recognized as businesses. This did not develop out of an inherent desire to study businesses, but rather emerged from the serendipitous encounters with small-scale Hong Kong investors in Guangdong at a time when foreign investment was a radically new thing in post-Mao China. Their prominence in Guangdong province conflicted with the mainstream discourse that to do business in China required patience, difficult contract negotiations, and a willingness to defer profits until the middle term, concentrating instead on coming to understandings and relationships across sharp cultural and institutional divides. As small investors could not wait for profits later, we became fascinated by the puzzle of how they could succeed at something that the business press insisted was so challenging for well resourced transnational corporations. Although they had some cultural commonalities, there were also sharp divides for entrepreneurs from the "most capitalist place on earth", or the freest market, as Milton Friedman saw Hong Kong doing business in what in the 1980s was a People's Republic still opposed to capitalism, although experimentation with "socialist market economies" was becoming acceptable. Answering our questions embarked us on what has been 25 years of research into these dynamics.

Our involvement in what now might be called business anthropology arose from fundamental research questions about economic culture, political process, and social and cultural consequences of political and economic innovation, and later from a recognition that the contribution of Hong Kong (and Taiwan) to China's rise through the facilitation of hard currency exports to developed countries was helping to change the world in ways that we are still learning about, and the characteristics of which are constantly transforming. The recent rapid growth of outward direct foreign investment from China to Africa,

Southeast Asia, Latin America, Canada and Australia-New Zealand is a current illustration of the emergence of fascinating new dynamics and puzzles.

The other reason for doing work that always results in raised eyebrows when we tell people that we are anthropologists and doing this kind of work derives from a strong commitment to the relabeling of anthropology in the postcolonial era from the study of "primitive societies" to the study of human ways of life in its full range of diversity across time and space. If we are ever to deserve that grandiose job description, we cannot leave the study of the "capitalist heartlands" to economists, sociologists and business schools. The Polanyian substantivist move of treating non-capitalist economies as socially embedded came with the unfortunate cost of appearing to accept the capitalist side of the Great Transformation as purely economic and explainable by formalist economics. But the more we study capitalist businesses, the more we discover the ways in which they are shot through and fundamentally dependent on human social relations, ideologies and religious beliefs; solidarities and conflicts; reciprocity, trust, faction and feud; and all the other human complexities and capacities that will be carefully analyzed in the virtual pages of this journal's hopefully great future.

In closing, we would like to add our comments to two issues that were briefly raised in the Introduction by Moeran and Garsten in the first issue. Both comments are directed at the widely held ideal of upholding a holistic approach in anthropological research, and the challenges this entails. Within the broad arena of economic anthropology, there is a general understanding and practice that the holistic approach is intended to answer broader questions about society, human existence, and the directions of social-economic change. In our own earlier work on the informal economies in Hong Kong, the squatter housing and illegal street hawking sectors were used to interrogate colonial governance, economic development and cultural dynamics in Hong Kong society over time. We are in good company, given that many researchers share our conviction in the holistic approach with a strong emphasis on proper historical contextualization. Yet it must be noted that such an approach is very demanding, and for reasons of either limited resources such as time or funding, or a diminished recognition of the merit of holism, some research undertaken by anthropologists and other scholars who profess to use anthropological methods turns out to be narrow exercises confined strictly within the boundaries of the "organization" or "enterprise" or "company", and restricted to interviews without participant-observation. In the field of Business Anthropology, there is a potential risk that the label "business" may be misinterpreted by some to see the physical

structure and boundary of the corporation/company/sector as a universe in and of itself.

The second comment points to the ethnographic challenges in doing business anthropology, which often requires the anthropologist to "study up". At the risk of over generalizing, we would suggest that by and large anthropology had its beginning in the study of people "below" us and continues to study down because it is easier to accomplish. In our current research in Canada, the cattle/beef farmers are happy to open their doors to us to look into the social and economic impact of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) on farm production, and animal management. They want their voices heard because they believe the government has not paid them due attention, which in their mind explains a great deal about the ineffectiveness of government policies in counteracting the outcomes of agricultural crisis. We do not see them as "below" us, but they see us as having a greater chance to influence government policy than they do (which, of course, is not true). In contrast, gaining access to government officials and industry people to speak with us is difficult enough, and when you get to interview them, they are often saying nothing more than what their department or company website will tell you. The challenge of studying up is that the people you want and need to speak with are in positions of power to exclude you or to confine your access to people, information and place. Participant observation takes on new levels of difficulty when you study up. We live with farm families on their property when we do fieldwork in Canada; we cannot imagine anyone within the government or a company giving us the open access to executive meetings and industrial secrets that define their competitive edge in a dog-eat-dog world of global business. Should access be allowed, this might be only on conditions that suit the enterprise's agenda and interests. In our research, even the cattle producers are careful not to volunteer information about how and what to feed their cattle in their different stages of growth so that their secret to success in the feed-weight gain ratio will not be lost. There is definitely a lot to think about in terms of the scope and scale of our research in business anthropology, and the necessary adjustments to the ethnographic approach and strategies that can support our research endeavours.

....

Richard Swedberg (Cornell University)

In the e-mail from Brian Moeran, in which he asked me to say something about business anthropology, he described what he wanted as "informal opinion pieces about different scholars' understandings of business anthropology and what it should or might consist of". I found this description very inspiring, but want to warn the reader that I may have produced more of an Xmas list of what I myself would like than a picture of what Brian Moeran and his colleagues have in mind.

My initial reaction to the term 'business anthropology' was very positive. My view of economics has over the years become increasingly pessimistic, in the sense that I see more and more distance between what is going on in reality and what I find discussed in the economics journals. The financial crisis that erupted in the fall of 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers is only one of many examples of something that came as a total surprise to academic economists. If you live in the United States, as I do, you often learn more about the so-called real economy from reading *The New York Times* than from studying *The American Economic Review.*

This is where business anthropology, to my mind, comes into the picture. By closely observing what actually happens, rather than by engaging in theory-driven research of the type that economists tend to engage in, we would have a much better chance of understanding what is actually going on. Modern economics is very abstract; while modern anthropology is refreshingly concrete. Modern economics assumes actors are rational; while modern anthropology thinks the rational element is exaggerated, to the extent that it even exists in the first place.

One can continue along these lines and say that business anthropology represents (or should represent) the very opposite of *homo economicus* on point after point. I am not opposed to engaging in this type of exercise, but since it belongs to a genre that is pretty common by now, I will restrict myself to one more point of comparison. This is that while *homo economicus* does not have a language and does not communicate (except through prices), this is *not* the case with the actor, according to business anthropology. He or she can actually speak, understand the meaning of things, and invest meaning in what he or she does. In brief, economists lack the concept of language as well as culture.

Are there any negative sides to business anthropology or to the associations that one may get while thinking about this expression? I must admit that I started to react a bit negatively to the term 'business' in 'business anthropology' after a while. The reason for this was that I found it restrictive. I thought that it was restrictive because the term 'business' is often used these days to indicate a firm or, more precisely, the management part of a firm. In other words, it excludes workers, support staff and the like.

But in thinking about this issue, I thought that one can also take the term business in a wider sense; and that is probably also what business anthropology intends to do. A business is always more than a business. For one thing, a business includes everyone who works there. And everything they do. While people are at work they do many more things than just work. They get tired, they daydream, they get sick, they make friends, they quarrel, they are happy, they are unhappy. Just think of how many people find their partners and spouses at work!

In continuing to think about this issue I also suddenly remembered Alfred Marshall. Had not Marshall – this man who was the founder of modern economics, the teacher of Keynes, a truly empirical as well as an idealist economist – tried to define economics, precisely by referring to this wider meaning of the term 'business'? I took a look in my copy of *Principles of Economics* (1890) and found that I was right.

Marshall begins his book by stating that "Political Economy or Economics is a study of mankind in *the ordinary business of life*" (Marshall 1986:1; my emphasis). He then goes on to say that "it [economics] is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, *and more important side*, a part of the study of man" (*ibid.*; my emphasis). A little later in his book, he says that "economics is a study of men as they live and move and think in the ordinary business of life [and it is mainly about] man's conduct in the business part of his life" (Marshall 1986:12).

After having reconciled myself with the help of Marshall to the term 'business' in 'business economics', my mind started to wonder in another direction. This time it was about the relationship between business anthropology and the project that I am currently engaged in, and deeply passionate about, namely how to revive social theory by shifting the emphasis to theorizing or more, precisely, to creative theorizing (Swedberg 2012). Maybe there was some link there, I thought. Maybe one can be passionate about business anthropology as well. After all, it was after my lecture on theorizing at the Copenhagen Business School in the spring of 2012 that Brian Moeran had come up to me and told me about the project of business anthropology. "I think there are some points in common", he said.

I agree and I think that there exist at least two important links between the two enterprises. On the one hand, there are some parallels when it comes to understanding the general way in which studies are to be carried out. Both argue that studies should be driven by facts, not by theory. To this I would add that when you try to theorize creatively, you have to start by observing what is happening in as relaxed and sensitive a way as possible, in order to get a good sense of the object of study. In proceeding in this way, at this very early stage of the study, one can pretty

much use any sources, from poems and music to archives and statistics. The one and only rule is: *anything goes!*

Having now something to theorize about, you can start theorizing in the more narrow sense of the term. You first try to find a name for the phenomenon you are studying; you put together a few concepts, to tighten things up; perhaps you also construct a typology, a classification or the like. And then comes the tentative explanation.

All of this, it should be emphasized, takes place *in the context of discovery*: that is, well before one draws up the research design for how the main study (as I call it) is to be carried out. One important reason for theorizing at this early stage is to provide an independent place for theory, well before the issues of methods and how to prove one's case to the scholarly community come onto the agenda.

By proceeding in this way, you maximize the chances for finding something new. You also maximize your chances of developing a new theory to go with the facts.

Now, will business anthropologists also go about things in the way I have just described? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But regardless of the answer, I think that if business anthropologists do want to develop creative and new theory, they will have to be fact- rather than theory-driven. And they will have to assign theorizing an independent place in the research process. And they will have to be passionate about what they do.

The second link between business anthropology and theorizing that occurred to me is the following. To succeed, theorizing will by necessity have to be experimental and go against many of the existing ways of doing social science. It will have to develop new ways of approaching the old and important questions: how do you gather data; how do you construct concepts; how do you explain things?

This always means taking a risk and of failing. But this is the way it goes when you try to innovate. Failures are part of finding the way; and without failing it is not possible to progress. I obviously do not want to end on the theme that business anthropology will fail. But I do hope that its proponents are filled with a passionate interest for their project and that they believe that in order to succeed you also have to be ready to fail.

You have to take risks to accomplish something and you have to do what you do with passion. In social science as in love, Lord Tennison was right:

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

References

Marshall, Alfred. 1986. *Principles of Economics: An Introductory Volume.* 8th ed. London: Macmillan.

Swedberg, Richard. 2012. "Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the Context of Discovery", *Theory and Society* 41:1-40.

…………………………………………………

Richard Wilk (University of Indiana)

I have decided to use this opportunity to talk about business anthropology from what is, perhaps, a slightly unusual angle: that of an anthropology of bad business.

In 1985 while working as a contract employee of the USAID office in Belize, I joined the organizing committee for the new Belize Institute of Management and helped write the proposal to fund the organization. One of the statistics provided by the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry struck me. In 1983 there had been 102 new business starts in the country with a capital investment of over US$100,000, quite a few considering the tiny size of the country and its general poverty. But at the end of 1984 only three were still in business. I remember being shocked by these figures. How did the country expect to keep attracting investors? Political leaders were talking about getting Belizeans who had migrated to the USA to come home and start businesses – did they have any idea what a dismal prospect they were offering? They were also trying to attract Chinese investors through an "economic citizenship" program, which offered a Belize passport for an investment of $50,000, but the Chinese did not want to buy anything except urban rental property.

While doing historical work on food history in the national archives, I ran across some court registries that showed an equally high rate of business bankruptcy in 19th century British Honduras. The main business of the colony – mahogany logging – required a good deal of capital, and whenever a financial crisis in Europe or the USA tightened credit and lowered prices, logging companies went bankrupt and were bought out by creditors. By the end of the 19th century only one large timber business was left, and it was bailed out by the colonial government in the great depression, by then 'too big to fail.'

History tells us that the area was always a haunt of Buccaneers, pirates, fugitive slaves and other outlaws engaged in illicit business and

smuggling. Several early European colonization schemes in the region were promoted through stock 'bubbles' in Europe, leaving colonists stranded with no means of support. Exiles from the American Revolution and Civil War and other regional conflicts like the Caste War in Yucatan fled to Belize, but many moved on because there were better opportunities elsewhere. Over the years, as I did other kinds of archival research, I collected folders full of economic development schemes promoted by a succession of colonial governments, from bananas to ramie, most of which had eventually collapsed or petered out. My favorites were the perennial projects to commercialize the nuts of the Cohune palm tree, usually to produce edible oil from the kernels but sometimes chemicals or charcoal from the extremely hard shell. These rose and fell with great regularity, and one cohune oil plant even built a railroad and employed 300 workers before going bust right after WWI.

As I continued visiting in Belize, I could not help but run into eager investors in hotel bars and restaurants, on ranches and farms, and later the tourist resorts springing up all over the country. Some of their schemes were new – shrimp farms and hatcheries, zip lines, organic farms and ecotourism resorts – but there were also some old favorites like logging, cattle ranches, banana farms and the perennial cohune oil. Of course not all of them failed. As in the past, a few thrive, a few more survive, but all are shadowed by ruins – often hidden far off the highways or covered by encroaching forest. Abandoned ranches, a warehouse tipped at a crazy angle on hasty and insecure swampy foundations, overgrown shrimp farms, and traces of old oil exploration seismic lines, barges lost on the barrier reef, phantom housing developments with their optimistic street signs and crumbling 'for sale' billboards. Not far up the road from where we have built our own house, there is a seven-floor condominium/casino complex with its own international-size airport, unfinished and now slowly decaying. Those who bought condominiums and time-shares clamor for refunds, while the principals answer charges in a Canadian court, and a major investor is listed by the USA Treasury Department as a member of the Mexican Zeta drug cartel.

Businesses fail in Belize today for the same reasons they founder in many developing countries. They are often undercapitalized and poorly planned, and cannot survive long enough to start showing a profit. Foreign investors are often deceived by the relatively low price of land into thinking that other costs of doing business will be low, and are then shocked by the high cost of labor, fuel, and skilled services. Taxes, permits and other government regulations are simpler than most other places in Latin America, but navigating the bureaucracy still requires patience, some cultural knowledge, and some well-placed contacts.

This is where business anthropology has traditionally helped, by explaining how to deal with cultural differences when working in another

culture. A Nigerian sociologist, as well as a couple of expatriate Americans, have written guides to doing business in Belize, and there are many websites and bulletin boards that offer advice, and even long satirical poems warning about the dangers of jumping in without bothering to learn about the country and its people.[6] Business anthropology helps explain why Chinese family businesses are so successful in Belize – they have rapidly expanded in the last few years as new immigrants arrive from the mainland using family credit to build hundreds of new retail outlets and restaurants, even in small villages. The great success of the Mennonite colonies in Belize has also attracted social scientists, who explain how an ethos of hard work, religious enforcement of frugality, and community economic collaboration has led to their domination of agribusiness in the country.

I believe there is a gap in business anthropology, though, when it comes to what drives people to come to Belize, and places like it, to start their businesses in the first place, businesses doomed to failure before they even open. The iguana farm, the organic peanut butter factory, the nude resort in a mangrove swamp. Some of the people I have interviewed over the years talk about their relationship with Belize as a kind of romance, in which they 'fell in love' with the place. Many stories start with a holiday visit, a random meeting with a Belizean in another country, or even looking down on the country from an airplane window. Some prospective investors, no doubt, are lured by the prospect of quick and easy money. But it is much more common to find people who have been prudent and financially very conservative all their lives, but who lose all their common sense and caution after seeing a Caribbean beach property or sunrise from a rainforest waterfall.

A sensible young Viennese couple told me about how they had come to Belize for a visit, and within a week had made a deal to put their life savings into building a gourmet Austrian restaurant (Belize's first!) in an impoverished Garifuna village, near two modest all-inclusive beach resorts. Further down the road an American is building a Sports Bar on a deserted stretch of road. Who knows, they may be a success – like the Italian couple who run a Gelateria a few more kilometers away. More likely they will just be building more ruins, joining the restaurant shaped like a Mayan pyramid, and the geodesic dome bar, standing empty for years. You might think that people might notice that many of the occupied beach houses and condos, as well as most of the working hotels, restaurants, and dive shops sport "for sale" signs, and there are plenty of other vacant properties looking for tenants. But architects and

---

[6]

http://ambergriscaye.com/forum/ubbthreads.php/topics/426237/Belizean_Poem_O de_To_The_Incom.html

contractors tell me that investors rarely want to buy *someone else's* dream house or business; they want to build their own, often in obsessive detail. Such blindness cries out for an anthropological investigation.

Initially I had a very simplistic idea of a kind of generalized "tropical fantasy" that attracted people from Europe and the USA to places like Belize, not just as tourists, but as active investors, residents, and retirees. This would be akin to the kind of Orientalism discussed by Said, or the romantic notions of heightened sexuality that arise in studies of cruise ships and Caribbean sex tourists.

As I have met more foreign and local business owners, both successful and unsuccessful, I have found much more complexity than I expected, and not very much scholarship to help me understand it or put it in a broader context. Many journalists and visitors single out particular ethnic groups as 'lazy' and say others have no 'entrepreneurial spirit' or 'interest in business.' Anthropologists tend to distance themselves from these stereotypes for perfectly understandable reasons. But it is also clear that culture does have an effect on what kind of dreams, goals and schemas people follow in their lives, what kinds of opportunities they grasp. And anthropology should offer a serious analysis of good and bad business, of the kinds of enterprises likely to fail, and grounded explanations for why or why not. Forensic anthropology has reached new heights of popularity on TV because it promises a supernatural ability to solve mysteries. Here is another, more useful everyday kind of mystery that business anthropology can solve through its own form of forensic analysis.

I am asking for a return to some very ambitious goals in the anthropology of business, to questions of the scope and breadth of those Max Weber was asking long ago, or those approached by Geertz in his ambitious *Peddlers and Princes*. The drive to be an economic player in a foreign land has been one of the most important impulses behind the expansion of global capitalism for many centuries now – perhaps for several millennia.   It remains a vitally important question that calls for further attention from a new generation of comparative ethnographers.

…………………………………………………

Coda

Brian Moeran

Each of the two words, 'business' and 'anthropology', presents its difficulties. What do people mean when they use them separately? We all know that 'anthropology' isn't a monolithic discipline, whose tenets and practices are universally adhered to. Anthropology departments in universities in the United States, for example, often make use of the concept of 'four fields' to encompass the differences between cultural, social, physical and applied anthropologies. Yet, in general, American anthropology tends to be 'cultural' in its leanings, whereas anthropology in Scandinavia and the UK is very definitely 'social'. But several European countries (like Germany, for instance) also have their 'cultural' forms of anthropology, which they usually call 'ethnology'. Each of these different takes on what the discipline of anthropology is affects how those interested in the study of business will go about their research.

One or two of those expressing their opinions here explicitly note their difficulty with the word 'business'; one or two others subconsciously avoid it where possible in their main arguments. So what do we mean by 'business'? Webster's *Encyclopedia Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines business in a number of different ways: as an occupation or trade; as the purchase and sale of goods in an attempt to make a profit; as an individual person, partnership, or corporation engaged in such activity through commerce, manufacturing or provision of services; as patronage revealed in, for instance, a store's volume of trade; as the place where such commercial work is carried on; and as that with which a person is principally and seriously concerned (like 'words are a writer's business'). In addition, the dictionary entry lists more than a dozen other colloquial meanings – from assignment to application, by way of earnestness, harsh treatment and defecation – that can lead us into thinking that we understand one another when we use the word, when, perhaps, we don't. This semantic density can cause confusion both historically and across cultures. Six or seven centuries ago, our ancestors thought of 'business' only as industry, diligence, and thus occupation. Other European languages may have equivalent words that cover at least some of the same meanings as 'business' does in English, but Chinese and Japanese, for example, do not. As a result, scholars in these countries are obliged to come up with neologisms of one sort or another for their interpretations of 'business anthropology', which they then supplement with age-old words like 'administration', 'commerce', 'management', 'work', and so on.

So what happens when we combine the multiple nuances underpinning these two words, 'business' and 'anthropology'? The

opinions published here in many ways reflect our view that it isn't all that easy to say what 'business anthropology' is. Is it a kind of anthropology whose proponents study 'business' organizations and forms of one sort or another in a more or less objective manner? (In which case, are they merely conflating business anthropology with ethnography, as Bob Morais suggests?) Or are these anthropologists themselves somehow involved in the businesses concerned, as formally identified anthropologists, or consultants, or marketers, or something like that? In which case, is business anthropology something that anthropologists do *for*, as well as *in*, business? If so, can or should it be distinguished from the kind of research conducted *on* business relations – or, as Bill Maurer and Scott Mainwaring argue in their contribution to this issue of the *JBA*, *with* business partners – by academic anthropologists? Is it, in the end, as Howard Becker posits, nothing more than good anthropology 'done in an organization or community that engages in business as conventionally defined'?

As these opinion pieces clearly demonstrate, the answers given to each of these questions necessarily influence the way in which one goes about talking about how best to theorize research conducted in this branch of anthropology. An anthropologist who strives for an 'objective' understanding of a business organization may well – and in the eyes of many here, should – make use of age-old anthropological theories based on studies of gift-giving, magic, totemism, social dramas, and so on. This kind of approach, following the example set by anthropological studies of development, we may – with Ulf Hannerz – want to call the 'anthropology of business'. One who works in or for a business organization, however, may be more concerned with immediately practical results that result from what Pedro Oliveira refers to as an 'ongoing translation' of equivocations, which then has a positive effect on his or her employer's marketing strategy or financial base line. This, perhaps, is closer to what we mean by 'business anthropology'. For its part, 'anthropology with business' suggests a co-creation of interests, methods and theorizing that combines these two approaches and points to an intriguing way forward for us all. As Orvar Löfgren points out, we need to improve the dialogue between those conducting traditional academic research, on the one hand, and consultants and business ethnographers working in applied research, on the other. This, indeed, is one aim of the *JBA*.

Whichever approach we prefer to adopt – and much will depend on circumstance regarding that ever-changing choice – no one of them should be seen as objectively 'better' than the others (precisely because of the different contexts in which research is conducted). Some of us may have an overall predilection for business anthropology rather than for the anthropology of business, or vice versa. Others may conclude that 'anthropology with business' offers a *je ne sais quoi* – in George Marcus's

term, perhaps, a 'collaboratory' – that the other two approaches do not. Each makes its special contribution to the overall study of business relations, networks, and organizations of all kinds. But each also tends to have its own preoccupations and illuminating moments that are not necessarily shared by the other. Anthropologists working with, in or for businesses, for example, may have to gauge and pay close attention to a client's expectations (Oliveira), while anthropologists of business may well be looking over their shoulders at the latest thing in theory coming from the pens (or keyboards) of colleagues located in institutions that are core to the discipline. The trick, if there is one, is to see business anthropology and the anthropology of business as complementary approaches and somehow to combine the two (Maurer and Mainwaring).

But there should, perhaps, be more to business anthropology (let us, for simplicity's sake, stick to the single term for now). Richard Wilk tellingly reminds us that businesses fail, and that it is our job as anthropologists to apply forensic analysis to reasons for such failures. Indeed, we all know from fieldwork experience that it is when things do *not* go according to plan, when harmony breaks out into discord, that hitherto hidden social norms and assumptions are revealed. Oh for the detailed case study, then, of a business *failure*, rather than the endless successes poured out by the Harvard Business School Press!

Business, in Dominic Boyer's words, 'offers rich terrain for anthropological reflection' of all kinds. This includes extending our anthropological lens to examine the apparent trivia of business, as Hannerz also suggests – from popular business literature to Business English, by way of frequent flier airport lounges and business school rankings. It also invites us to delve into business histories, in the exemplary manner that Ralph Hower, for example, did for advertising in the United States back in 1939. *The History of an Advertising Agency: N.W. Ayer & Son at Work 1869-1939* is still one of the very best sociological analyses of advertising ever written.

So, what might a programme for business anthropology look like? One obvious theme – in particular, for cultural anthropologists studying business – is that of *culture* itself. This may take many forms. For instance, Hirochika Nakamaki observes, in the context of the development of 'administration anthropology' (*keiei jinruigaku*) in Japan, that a focus on business had led many anthropologists to focus on their own, rather than on other, cultures. At the same time, it has become accepted that 'culture' refers not just to people and nations, but to those people's work environments – either in companies (perceived as cultural communities) or in entire industries. Indeed, there is much to be said in support of the argument that those employed in the advertising or whaling industries, for example, share more in common with one another *across* national

cultural frontiers than they do with bankers, farmers, or shopkeepers *within* their own culture.

Corporate culture is often, of course, a management tool, as Howard Becker notes of a fellow traveller who prided himself on having changed the work culture of his company without, apparently, consulting any of his employees. It is, perhaps, for this reason that some of those employed in business can react quite strongly to the word. 'Culture?' exclaimed one man employed in a Swedish utilities company in response to one of Orvar Löfgren's students who was trying to explain what cultural analysis was. 'Damn it! We don't deal with culture here. We sell electricity!'

The challenge for this student was to work collaboratively within a professional culture as 'other', without succumbing to its blind side (Marcus) – a challenge that is at the heart of the article in this issue by Bill Maurer and Scott Mainwaring, who describe in detail the plural possibilities opened up by an anthropologist working *with* colleagues employed in business. Those who work with organizations like the Swedish utilities company or Intel have to explain 'culture' in fine detail, and make it relevant to their employees in such a way that they can move forward and *act*. For this, they need to take part in the nuts and bolts of cultural processes (Morais).

At the same time, Eric Arnould argues, business anthropologists must be prepared to 'push back against the relentless naturalizing of cultural expressions' resulting from, in particular, psychology, behavioural science and biological determinism. We must learn on occasion to resist business, as well as work with, for, or in it. In this context, Marianne Lien asks how we can account for the persuasive power of the market model, as well as of economics as a whole, and suggests that we focus on what makes the economists' model so *strong*, rather than trying to prove it *wrong*. Richard Swedberg provides a partial response to this question. The founder of modern economics, Alfred Marshall, defined the newly emergent discipline as the study of wealth, on the one hand, and 'of men as they live and move and think in the ordinary business of life [and it is mainly about] man's conduct in the business part of his life.' What makes the economic model strong, then, is its focus on the allure of wealth, not people, even though Marshall himself argued that 'the study of man' was 'the more important side' of the discipline. If more anthropologists knew this, they might be less resistant to that branch of their discipline that seeks to examine the business of commerce – a resistance noted above by many commentators. The chances are, though, that they won't. Anthropologists seem inclined to align themselves with artists and others working on the creative side of cultural production: anything to do with money and profit-making is somehow tainted, and not to be touched with an intellectual bargepole!

What is clear from this broad discussion of culture and the economy is that business anthropology must, first and foremost, *engage with theory*. At the moment, and this is a criticism of many different disciplines, there is far too much citation for citation's sake of other people's work. This is in large part to be blamed on the mutually reinforcing structures of university and business school education, on the one hand, and of the journal publishing industry, on the other. But, ultimately, we have nobody to blame but ourselves for getting into this mess in the first place. For the most part, citations tell us little more than that: (a) the writer is positioning her/himself in a field without saying anything of import about your work; or, as part of this endeavour, (b) is a member of a mutual back-slapping group of scholars who cite only themselves, among whom you yourself may be fortunate enough to be a part; or (c) s/he cites you because s/he thinks your work is worse than useless and needs to be damned out of existence. But rarely does the person who cites your work *engage* with it through processes of examination, questioning, analysis, comparison, rephrasing and so on. Worse, too many citations (like that of 'Geertz [1973]' to reference 'thick description' in the management studies literature) are clearly secondary citations. There is a tendency for many of us, alas, to cite someone without actually bothering to read the work in question – as the reappearance, time and time again, of incorrect attributions, dates and/or pages, as well as, even, the spelling of an author's name, attests!

Business anthropologists, then, must be rigorous in this regard. Although we may make use of the occasional general anthropological or sociological theory (put forward by Victor Turner or Pierre Bourdieu, for example), we do not engage enough with what others in the field have written – as Arnould remarks of consumer culture studies, in particular. As a result, and I am extremely conscious of this in the areas in which I myself have conducted research over the years, we have a lot of theories out there that have never been put to the test in other contexts. The challenge is not only how to overcome this *lacuna*, but also how to provide an independent place for theory which, somehow, must take place in a *context of discovery* (Swedberg). It is precisely this that makes business anthropology, with its focus on fieldwork as its primary methodology, potentially so radical.

This invites a second programmatic statement that is so obvious it shouldn't need saying. We must be *comparative*. This entails adopting a holistic approach, as Alan and Josephine Smart point out, which does not confine our analyses to the narrow confines of an 'organization', 'company', or 'enterprise', but extends outwards to embrace a field of relations that contains political ideals, religious beliefs, socio-cultural values, and so on – in other words, society as a whole. Moreover, those anthropologists working in, on, for or against businesses *must* compare

their findings with those of their colleagues working both in other branches of business *and* in other societies. We must continuously challenge the institutional, as well as ontological, boundaries reproduced through such delineations as 'business', 'markets', and 'economics' (Lien). In other words, we need to adopt a broad perspective that does not limit comparison to other cultures. This is an essential aspect of engagement.

Thirdly, as hinted above, we should be discussing *methodology* far more than we do. As anthropologists, we have been brought up to learn about and practice – occasionally even to worship – the defining feature of our discipline: participant observation-style fieldwork. But there are two things about fieldwork that, as business anthropologists, we need to keep in mind: firstly, more often than not, we are 'studying up' (the Smarts); and secondly, ethnography is not unique to the discipline of anthropology as a research methodology (Morais). In recent years, some of our colleagues have argued over its former practices and suggested acceptable new ways of going about our craft: multi-sited fieldwork, for example, or paraethnography. With the digital revolution, too, anthropologists have turned to other ways of recording ethnographic material than by traditional means of pencil and notebook. Some use video and audio equipment; others resort to various interactive *fora* made available by the Internet. Business anthropologists are in the forefront of these trends, challenging the ways in which fieldwork has traditionally been conceived and practised. They often take for granted their own everyday practices that would surprise their academic colleagues (like the fact that consultants of one sort or another may have to share their video material with their clients at the end of each day, for example). It strikes me that they could, and should, be leading the way in this particular field of anthropological interest. As George Marcus says, business anthropology 'will increasingly come to depend on the formation, in various imaginative and cunningly adaptive forms, of... ethnography as we have known it, within the norms and imperatives of particular cultures of collaboration.'

Fourthly, to count ourselves seriously as business anthropologists, we need to engage with *anthropological theory* far more than we do. The last thing we want is for business anthropology to be 'the poor step child of management, marketing, finance or accountancy, or simply reduced to a method of rendering such practices more efficient and affective' (Arnould). Clearly, some anthropological theories – postmodernism, subaltern studies, deterritorialization – may not immediately seem that pertinent to our research and experiences. However, other classical concepts – such as animism, totemism, magic, and the gift – can and should be revitalised (Marcus; see also Oliveira). There is much that we can pursue as we continue to make use of our classic disciplinary technique of making the strange familiar, and familiar strange.

Theoretical topics that immediately come to mind include in no particular order: family businesses, gender, law, entrepreneurship, markets, money and exchange, material culture, power relations, economic, social and cultural capital, limited stock companies, networks, bureaucracies, frame analysis, meetings, ritual, symbolism and religion, CCT (consumer culture theory), globalization, development – the list can go on.

The fact that it *can* go on, and on, and on, is of course a potential weakness, since it is in danger of becoming Borges's map of the world (Arnould). Too many theories may well merely dissipate the potential strength of business anthropology, in improving organizational operations, generating product innovations, igniting business executions, and driving its success (Morais). This is not to say that we should ignore some theories and not others; after all, our fieldwork induces unanticipated lines of theorizing as we align ourselves with what Marcus calls 'the found paraethnographic'. But still, we might think about focussing our theoretical endeavours in order to be able to 'configure' our field of study. The questions then become: what directions should such theoretical endeavours take? And how can we build upon them effectively? Should we go beyond conventional forms of scholarly communication and commit ourselves to experiment, as Löfgren encourages his students to do? How can we make business anthropology, in Howard Becker's phrase, 'a source of new ideas' (remembering that most of them won't work)? How best should we be prepared to fail and, with Richard Swedberg, theorize *experimentally*?

We all have our different theories about theories, but what I personally would like to see over – say – the next ten years is business anthropologists, or anthropologists of business, engaging with: (1) social relations and structures of power in, between, and dependent upon business organizations of all kinds, but particularly firms, in a broad social context; (2) explicit comparison between these social forms (companies, industries, conglomerates, and so on) and the various cultures (work, management, professional, regional, national, and so forth) that, in one way or another, impinge upon and form them, and by which they themselves are developed and sustained; (3) the things and technologies (goods, commodities, equipment, tools) in and with which business people of all kinds are entangled and which afford their organizational forms; and (4) fieldwork methods.

At the same time, if we were able to render visible to the public what so often remains invisible about business, we might overcome the anxiety expressed by Alan and Josephine Smart that 'we cannot leave the study of the "capitalist heartlands" to economists, sociologists, and business schools.' Business anthropology would then, as Bob Morais argues, (5) become a clear and powerful public expression of why

anthropology matters – especially if it can forge 'parasitic collaborations' with larger defining social relations (Marcus).

If we could do all this, and do it well, and in the course of doing it, provide detailed, readable ethnographic studies of business situations of all kinds, then, perhaps, our colleagues in anthropology might reluctantly agree that business anthropology and the anthropology of business are 'good to think'. And that, without the customary cynical smirk, Levi Strauss can be a brand of jeans, as well as long-lived anthropologist.