

Anthropology *of* versus Anthropology *for* Business: Exploring the Borders and Crossovers Between an Anthropology of Business and Anthropological Consultancy

Guest Editor: Daniela Peluso

Foreword

Melissa Fisher

Four years ago, I published my ethnography *Wall Street Women* and an article entitled: *Towards a Feminist Para-Ethnography on Gender Equality Policy Making in Business* (2012 a and b). In the article, drawing on nearly two decades of research—fieldwork with women on Wall Street, consulting work as a business anthropologist, and a new project on global gender equity initiatives—I discussed the challenges of studying ethnographically the global gender policy movement. Working in new assemblages of institutions, persons, and practices, I wrote, had altered my understanding of the purpose of anthropology. Following state, corporate, and academic actors coming together at conferences, I saw that I was navigating a field in which others were already conducting research, taking action and making policy on gender, and that these elite actors were themselves already engaged in some form of ethnographic inquiry.

My article argued that global gender equity initiatives were *feminist para-ethnographic sites*. My term built on the work of Douglas

Page 1 of 7

JBA 6(1): 1-7
Spring 2017

© The Author(s) 2017
ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

Holmes and George Marcus on *para-ethnography*, “the conception that traditional objects of study have developed something like an ethnography of both their predicaments and those who have encroached upon them, and their knowledge practices in this regard are in some ways parallel to the anthropologist’s and deserving of more consideration than mere representation in the archives of the world’s people that anthropologists have created” (Holmes and Marcus 2006:35). In the essay, I described my experience zig-zagging from a purportedly “pure” academic ethnographic project on finance to ostensibly applied ethnographic projects on behalf of businesses, to participating and observing in a set of meetings about global gender initiatives in which I was no longer sure of the boundaries between of/for business, researcher/informant, and business/non-business.

My narrative about my experiences and my methodological reflections of engaging in both the anthropology of and the anthropology for business, were part of an ongoing effort to understand the relationship between anthropology and business, including the positionality of ethnographers and their informants over the past several decades (Downey and Fisher 2006). While by no means a unique endeavor, the consideration of the histories, methods, theories, and epistemologies of an emergent field of business anthropology as such had not been particularly commonplace during my graduate years at Columbia University’s Anthropology Department in the 1990s or at my first academic position in Georgetown University’s Anthropology Department. Imagine my surprise, then, when on the heels of the publications of my book on Wall Street women and the article on feminist-para-ethnography, I had the opportunity to comment on the 2012 American Anthropological Association’s panel *Anthropology of Versus Anthropology for Business*—revised and expanded versions of five panel papers that form this special issue of *Business Anthropology*. Indeed, I was intrigued by the fact that the panel was being organized by one of my colleagues from graduate school, Daniela Peluso, an anthropologist best known (at the time) for her work in the Amazon. It turned out that a number of other participants had also moved from more traditional anthropological field sites to business inflected venues, bringing to bear their critical anthropological theories and methods. These new sites included organizations typically associated with business such as advertising agencies headquartered in NYC (Malefyt, this volume) and a global Danish consumer electronic company (Krause-Jenson, this volume). But they also encompassed institutions that, at least up until recently, were not considered businesses: The Department of Sanitation in NYC (Nagle, this volume). Beyond this, one anthropologist conducted a longitudinal, in-depth ethnographic study of the institutional field that makes up the industrial meat industry (Stull, this volume); and one even addressed ethnographers’ positionality in field research associated with business, including a discussion of the para-ethnographic in relation to

corporate ethnography (Sedgwick, this volume).

The purpose of this special issue of *Business Anthropology* on “Anthropology of Versus Anthropology for Business: Exploring the Borders and Crossovers between an Anthropology of Business and An Anthropological Consultancy” is to critically interrogate different types of anthropological engagements with business and industry, while simultaneously investigating their overlaps. The papers highlight the complexity of thinking about precisely how to interpret this landscape. They raise three central questions: What exactly *is* business anthropology in the 21st Century? How has neoliberal capitalism, expressed by the encroachment of finance into organizational life, reshaped the field-sites and forms of ethnographic inquiry of business anthropology? What is the relationship between ethnographers and their informants in the field of business, and how do these relationships shape the production of knowledge?

The papers in this volume reveal that there is no one such thing as business anthropology. Nor is the field simply defined by its inhabitants, academic anthropologists studying business organizations and those working on behalf of industry (along with the distinctions and overlaps between them) (Moeran 2014). Rather, the objects of study, methods, and theories discussed by the contributors reveal that their work overlaps far more with the discipline of anthropology’s concerns writ large than is often acknowledged. After decades of focusing mostly on the poor, minorities, and other marginalized peoples in so-called “developing countries,” they are part of two if not three generations of anthropologists studying advertising agents, human resource consultants, advocacy groups, and other experts in the global north and the global south.

Courses in, for example, “the anthropology of capitalism” began emerging even before the 2008 financial crisis, and have only grown since along with essays and ethnographies on traders, neoliberalism, and capitalism (Fisher and Downey 2006; Greenhouse 2012; Holmes 2013). These works, along with the papers in this volume, illuminate the importance of bringing social and cultural analysis to the study of corporate corridors and business strategy meetings (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013). In some ways, what is happening in this area of anthropology mirrors shifts in history. For many decades, business history was a small subfield that focused largely on corporations (Lipartito and Sicilia 2004). During the last decade and a half, however, that field has moved to look more broadly at the history of capitalism (Ott 2011). In business anthropology, while some continue to focus their work more squarely on corporations (like Malefyt, this volume), others (like Stull, this volume) are looking at entire supply chains as in the case of the production of industrial meat - from growers, to eaters, from processors to retailers, from multinational corporations to unauthorized immigrant workers. Business here is not conceptualized or studied as an isolated

organizational form or practice. Instead, as Marietta Baba drawing on new institutional theory points out, it refers to an institutional field composed of organizations and actors, including for example, firms, suppliers, and even, activists (2012).

Paralleling discussions in the papers in this volume about the variation of corporate forms, supply chains, and workers, is a shift in anthropology more generally to consider the multiple, often contingent and unstable networks and social relations that make up capitalism (Bear et al 2015). Particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, both business anthropologists and anthropologists studying capitalism are examining businesses as a way to understand increasing forms of inequality and wealth. Unpacking how particular authors in this volume engage with concerns circulating within the anthropology of capitalism requires reading their work against other bodies of work. One might juxtapose Stull's study of the corporate control of America's food system, including the industrial meat chain, to anthropologist Anna Tsing's theorization of supply chain capitalism (Ibid, 2009). Both are interested in understanding and addressing the impact of changing conditions of global business on workers. These include, for example, the ways firms (and the elites that run them) disavow the legacy of unions and the struggle for better wages and working conditions by outsourcing and/ or using immigrant labor (Ibid, 157; Stull this volume). Or one might read Nagle's analysis of the Department of Sanitation in New York City as having attributes of a powerful corporation in conjunction with anthropologist Julian Brash's *Bloomberg's New York*—a study of the emergence and now dominance of Bloomberg's corporate model of urban governance in NYC (Brash 2011). Together they reveal the ways government institutions are increasingly run like businesses.

All of the contributors to this volume reflect on the relationship(s) between the business of anthropology and anthropology of business by tracing their own experiences moving within, outside of, and between academia and industry. Several do so in an auto-ethnographic sense, drawing on autobiography as a strategy to make sense of their professional experience and write about their shifting role as anthropologists in these various and varying contexts over time. Drawing over nearly three decades of research on industrial meat, Stull offers a "confessional tale" describing how his experience expanded beyond the impact of the industry on communities to include engaging in advocacy on behalf of plant workers, growers, and the environment. Picking up on this thread, Nagel recounts her trials and tribulations in becoming the anthropologist-in-residence for New York City's Department of Sanitation and the multiple roles she inhabits in her capacity as resident - including writing on, speaking about, and communicating on behalf the DSNY.

The pieces by Malefyt, Krause-Jenson, and Sedgwick explore the complex relationships between researcher and informants/collaborators,

and how these relationships shape the production of knowledge and work product. Like my earlier work on feminist corporate ethnography and para-ethnography (2012), they bring questions of positionality in the ethnographic study of and for business to the fore. In so doing, they again reveal the often unacknowledged and indeed understudied links between business anthropology as a field and broader concerns circulating within cultural anthropology about the refunctioning of ethnography in the contemporary moment (Cefkin 2009; Westbrook 2009). Drawing on fifteen years of experiences in advertising, Malefyt argues that working from within an agency allows corporate anthropologists to form close relationships with clients that produce knowledge about consumer practices that are not only in the “client’s best interest for his or her brand, but are also essential to sustaining relationships that continue future modes of production in the advertising industry (Malefyt, this volume).” Similarly, Krause-Jensen considers his relationship as an academic anthropologist studying Bang & Olufsen with human resource consultants, some of whom had anthropological backgrounds and used ethnographic methods to study the corporate culture of the firm. His work shows that along with striking similarities between himself and the consultants, there were important differences in the conditions and aims of their work. Notably, unlike Malefyt who worked on behalf of the advertising agency and was responsible for developing branding and marketing strategies for clients, Krause-Jensen was not held accountable for analyzing and strategizing about, in his case, changing corporate values of the firm. Rather he was interested in how anthropological concepts like culture were used in management discourse and practice. While acknowledging some overlaps between academic anthropologists and anthropologists-consultants, he argues that the primary aim for academics is to refine theory and understanding.

Rather than draw on a specific ethnographic corporate case or professional history of engaging in the anthropology of business, Sedgwick’s article focuses more broadly on the history and politics of ethnographer’s positionality in field research, paying particular attention to questions of positionality between ethnographers and their subjects in business. This includes the ways fieldwork when studying up often turns traditional power relations between anthropologists and informant upside-down. Business anthropologists are often less rather than more powerful than their subjects. Drawing on work on revisionist ethnography, Sedgwick argues that paying closer attention to the circumstances of studying up in business could further drive reconsiderations of methodology and ethics, and therefore ways of knowing in anthropology. This includes, for example, a consideration of the para-ethnographic to corporate ethnography. As discussed earlier, “para-ethnography” is an approach that considers what it means to take seriously the efforts of anthropologists’ informants in the co-production of knowledge (Holmes and Marcus 2006). As such, Sedgwick’s piece

explicitly calls for anthropologists of business to contribute more largely to the field of anthropology, something that has not yet transpired.

This volume provides a wide range of perspectives on the overlaps and disconnects between the anthropology of business and business anthropology. Aspects also challenge traditional understandings of the relationship of the field of business anthropology to cultural anthropology writ large. As such, together they provide a set of provocations designed to provoke consideration of how business anthropologists contribute important insights to the larger discipline about theory, methods and our understanding of the neoliberal moment.

References

- Baba, M. 2012 'Anthropology and Business: Influence and Interests.' *Journal of Business Anthropology* 1(1): 20-71.
- Bear, L., K. Ho, A. Tsing, and S. Yanagisako 2015 'Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism.' *Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology website, March 30, 2015.*
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>
- Brash, J. 2011 *Bloomberg's New York: Class and Governance in the Luxury City*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press.
- Cefkin M. ed. 2009 *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter: Reflections on the Research in and of Corporations*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Downey, G. and M. S. Fisher. 2006 "Introduction: The Anthropology of Capital and the Frontiers of Ethnography." In *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*, ed. Greg Downey and Melissa S. Fisher, 1-32. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Fisher, M. 2012a *Wall Street Women*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- _____ 2012b 'Toward a Feminist Para-Ethnography on Gender Equality Policy Making in Business'. *Collaborative Anthropologies*. December. Volume 5(1): 1-27.
- Garsten, C. and A Nyqvist 2013. 'Entries: Engaging Organizational Worlds.' In C. Garsten and A Nyqvist (eds.) *Organizational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organizations*, pp. 1-25. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenhouse, C. (ed.) 2012 *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism*. University of Pennsylvania: Penn Press.
- Holmes, D. R. 2013 *Economy of Words: Communicative Imperatives in Central Banks*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Holmes, D. R., and G. E. Marcus 2006 'Fast Capitalism: Para-Ethnography and the Rise of the Symbolic Analyst.' In M. Fisher and G. Downey (eds.) *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*, pp. 209-36. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lipartito, K. and D. Sicila. 2004 'Introduction: Cross Corporate Boundaries'. In K. Lipartito and D. Sicila (eds.) *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture*, pp. 1-28. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moeran, B. 2014 'Theorizing Business & Anthropology'. In R. Denny and P. Sunderland (eds.) *Handbook of Anthropology of Business*, pp. 69-82. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press Inc.

Ott, J. 2011 *When Wall Street Met Main Street*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Tsing, A. 2009 'Supply Chains and the Human Condition'. *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 21:2, 148-176.

Westbrook, D. 2008. *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Melissa Fisher is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University (NYU) and an Associate Researcher in the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. She is the author of *Wall Street Women* (Duke Press 2012) and co-editor of *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy* (Duke University Press 2006). She is engaged in two ongoing ethnographic research projects. The first is on anticipatory global gendered governance. The second is on entrepreneurship, alternative economies, and new forms of racial and gendered activism, based on fieldwork in New York City and Berlin.