

# Business Anthropology

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## Abstract

This essay outlines the overall scope and location of business anthropology within the overall field of the discipline. It outlines its foundations as an applied form of anthropology in early developments in the United States (in particular, in Western Electric's Hawthorne Project and the Human Relations School at Harvard University), as well as in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, before turning to five areas of research and practice: academic ethnographies of business practices, regional studies, case studies developed by practitioners, theoretical applications, and methods. The essay then asks what a future program for business anthropology might look like and suggests four areas for theoretical development against a background of education, engagement, and comparative work. These are an examination of structures of power in, between, and dependent on business organizations of all kinds; cross-cultural comparison of work cultures; attention to the materials, technologies, and goods with which business people engage and which afford their organizational forms; and explicit attention to cutting-edge fieldwork methods.

## OVERVIEW

*Business anthropology* refers to ethnographic research conducted in, for, with, and on business organizations of one sort or another. Such research has been carried out both by anthropologists employed full-time in academic institutions and by professional anthropologists employed as such in large organizations like Intel, General Motors, and Xerox, or working for, or running their own, consultancy and marketing firms. As such, it is very much an applied form of anthropology that makes extensive use of fieldwork and ethnographic methods.

The applications to which business anthropology has been put are extremely varied. They include, for example, studies of time, place and space, communication, organizational cultures, managerial ideologies, transnational joint ventures, migration, repatriation experiences, people's understandings of and relations with technologies, marketing and branding strategies, design methodologies and concepts, ethnic and gender differences, consumption behavior, and so on among others. Like many other

forms of applied anthropology, business anthropology tends to be project driven. It is often carried out by means of teams, whose members work together intensively over comparatively short periods of time, making regular use of sophisticated and advanced ethnographic methods with which clients tend to engage actively (e.g., in viewing with the fieldworker the daily rushes of video footage of ethnographic activities and interviews). It applies anthropological theories developed in seemingly unrelated fields such as ritual, magic, and animism, as well as in others closer at hand (family systems, markets, and exchange mechanisms), to business situations in different parts of the world.

As a term, *business anthropology* embraces a broad spectrum of already existing branches of the discipline. These include “corporate,” “enterprise,” “organizational,” and other anthropologies, which themselves owe some allegiance to more traditional sub-disciplines of anthropology such as economic anthropology, industrial anthropology, and the anthropology of work. The term itself seems to have been coined in the mid-1980s, but has only come into consistent and regular usage during the first decade of the new millennium, which has seen the publication of several new monographs and edited books, together with the launching of two journals from 2010 [the *Journal of Business Anthropology* ([www.cbs.dk/jba](http://www.cbs.dk/jba)), and the *International Journal of Business Anthropology*].

There is, potentially, a double confusion concerning the term *business anthropology*. The first concerns the word “business,” which reflects some of the terminological uncertainty alluded to above over anthropologists’ study of work and its surrounding institutions in contemporary societies. Yet, the argument may be made that oil riggers, weavers, dealers, planters, farmers, and camel drivers are all linked by the fact that they engage in *trade*—in the sense that they practice a particular line of business, often involving the purchase, sale, and exchange of commodities; and that they pursue an occupation, which often makes use of skilled manual or mechanical work, as a livelihood. In addition, in trade they engage in practices that form many of the building blocks of anthropological theory: material culture and technology; gifts, commodities and money; labor and other forms of social exchange; (fictive) kinship, patronage, quasi-groups, and networks; rituals, symbolism and power; the development and maintenance of taste; and so on. Thus, defined as the anthropology of trading relations, business anthropology reaches out to other disciplines such as business history, cultural studies, management and organization studies, some parts of sociology, and even cultural economics.

The second confusion concerns “anthropology” and, more specifically, “anthropologist.” Not only is it at times difficult to fathom the theoretical and methodological connections between—say—cognitive and development, or

legal and sensory, anthropologies. Distinctions between anthropologists and other professions are not always that clear cut. Managers, for example, all exhibit ethnographic skills to one degree or another. They talk and listen to the people with whom they deal; try to understand what they are *not* saying, and why; and plan organizational and business strategies accordingly. The same can be said of advertising executives, journalists and detectives, among other occupations, all of whom zigzag back and forth between observation and theoretical reasoning, and the endless spiral of modifications that each brings to the other.

### FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Given that the development of anthropology was from the very beginning predicated upon its being of practical use to “the utilities and requirements of society” (mainly in terms of colonial administration, rather than of business as such), it is not surprising to learn that, despite its apparently recent emergence as a defined branch of the discipline, the study of business in anthropology goes back to the 1920s. Marietta Baba, among others, has documented in detail how the received view is that anthropology’s relationship with the domain of business began in the United States with Western Electric’s Hawthorne Project (1927–1932) and the subsequent rise (and fall) of Elton Mayo’s Human Relations School. Anthropologists such as Lloyd Warner contributed to these projects by initiating studies of human and social behavior in corporations such as IBM, Sears & Roebuck, and Western Electric. At the same time, they also launched ethnographic studies of consumption, branding and advertising through the successful spin-off of a consulting firm by anthropologists at the University of Chicago. The Society for Applied Anthropology was founded in the United States in 1941.

In many respects, the anthropological study of business is primarily an *American* development, and the businesses studied have for the most part been themselves either American or located in the United States. This is, perhaps, to be expected. It is in the United States that applied anthropology, in its multiple forms, has been most institutionalized in the post-secondary education system. However, business (under its guise as applied) anthropology has not been entirely American. A number of British anthropologists (including Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown) were also involved and theoretically influential in different ways during the period between the 1930s and 1950s. Resulting developments in the United Kingdom have included the founding of the Tavistock Institute in 1946; the institution of the Manchester factory shop floor studies of the 1950s and 1960s by South African anthropologist, Max Gluckman; and the funding of (mainly British) anthropological research by the Carnegie Corporation and Rockefeller Foundation.

The main conclusion to be drawn from studies during this early period of business anthropology is that “business anthropology” did not exist as such in name. Rather, as intimated earlier, researchers would carry out independent studies of different forms of economic activity and organization—Norwegian herring fleets, labor migration in Uganda, family firms in the Lebanon, and so on—and not worry too much about how precisely to categorize their research other than as “anthropology.”

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Selecting what might be regarded as “cutting-edge” research in the field of business anthropology is an unenviable task. While very aware of its limitations, this section will focus on five areas of research and practice: (i) ethnographies of business conducted by anthropologists employed full-time in academia; (ii) regional studies, (iii) case studies developed by freelance, professional practitioners; (iv) theoretical applications of business anthropology; and (v) methods.

First, if we accept that business anthropology is the anthropology of trading relations, we can cite a number of classical anthropological monographs as forming the foundation of business anthropology. Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, for example, would be one; Hortense Powdermaker’s *Hollywood, the Dream Factory* another. Neither of these authors would have thought of themselves as “business” anthropologists as such. The same is almost certainly true of James “Woody” Watson, who has published a study of emigration and the Chinese lineage, and of Sylvia Yanagisako, with her more recent account of family firms and the silk industry in northern Italy.

Yet it is clear that these works are examples of what is now commonly referred to as *business* anthropology, although they are also very close to, and in some cases explicitly identify with, economic anthropology. One thinks here of Stuart Plattner’s study of a local art market in Kansas, or of Marianne Lien’s of a Norwegian food company. The financial crash in 2009 has seen the publication of a number of monographs in the emergent field of the anthropology of finance: notably Karen Ho’s timely account of Wall Street in *Liquidated* and Melissa Fisher’s long-term study of the women of Wall Street. This and other research by Annelise Riles and Hiro Miyazaki has built on earlier work by Ellen Hertz on the Shanghai stock market, Bill Maurer on Islamic finance and currencies, and Caitlin Zaloom on Chicago traders’ relations with technology.

Second, although two of the works cited just above describe finance and trading relations outside the United States, it is probably fair to say that the anthropological study of business—and thus business anthropology—is an *American* development, and that the businesses studied tend themselves to

be either American or located in the United States. Yet, we should note in this context that research on contemporary business formations—in particular, the limited stock company—was undertaken comparatively early on in a non-Western society: that of Japan. Robert Cole's study of blue collar workers, Thomas Rohlen's of a Japanese bank, Ronald Dore's of a British and Japanese factory, and Rodney Clark's of *The Japanese Company* all preceded by a decade or so the emergence of the term *business anthropology* in the mid-1980s. Indeed, Japan has been a fruitful source for later anthropological accounts of trading relations. These include Brian Moeran's detailed monograph of a Japanese advertising agency, and Ted Bestor's analysis of the fish market of Tsukiji in Tokyo.

Japan is not the only focus of attention in the anthropology of business. A large number of anthropologists have studied firms and organizations in various European countries as part of an ongoing interest in different cultural forms of capitalism. In this respect, Danny Miller has conducted an ethnographic study of capitalism in Trinidad, while cultural variation has underpinned research on advertising agencies in India, China, and Sri Lanka. The problem is how to keep abreast of such regional research, especially when it is still not classified fully under the rubric of "business anthropology."

The third area of research in this field consists of what may be referred to, perhaps a little crudely, as *case studies*. Professional business anthropologists are usually employed on projects, which they are later permitted by their clients to write about. Some of this work appears in anthropology journals like *Human Organization* and *Applied Anthropology*, but a lot more appears in edited volumes such as Melissa Cefkin's *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter*, and Brigitte Jordan's *Advancing Ethnography in Corporate Environments*. There are also two or three monographs by professional anthropologists who make use of numerous case studies in which they have been engaged over time to illustrate theoretical issues. One thinks here of Patti Sunderland and Rita Denny's *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* and Timothy Malefyt and Bob Morais's investigation of *Advertising and Anthropology*.

Fourthly, it is clear that for many professional business anthropologists who are neither "here" in industry nor "there" in academia, theorizing their work presents problems. This is in large part, perhaps, because they subconsciously adopt academic anthropologists' unspoken assumption that theory is somehow "better than" practice, so that being a good ethnographer in itself is insufficient to make a "great" anthropologist. However, for the professional business anthropologist, theory is not limited to its academic emanations. It is also a major component of the ways in which clients think about their problems (in terms of brand management, product communication, marketing strategy, and so on), and practitioners therefore find

themselves having to weigh and balance academic and business theoretical inputs when proposing solutions to clients' problems.

This conundrum tends to affect the work of professional business anthropologists outlined under "case studies" above. When they apply general anthropological theories, the latter tend to be specific to particular business situations (which themselves may also be amenable to theoretical developments in another discipline, such as psychology, for example). We find age-old anthropological concepts such as totemism, animism, and contagious magic applied to branding strategies, for example; spatial orientation metaphors to the organization of the home; and ritual tournaments (or tournaments of values) to competitive presentations in advertising, awards ceremonies, and trade fairs more generally. However, the question naturally arises: to what extent are such theoretical applications generalizable to other branches of business?

Finally, methods. One of business anthropology's strengths, in particular as it has been carried out among professional practitioners, has been in its cutting-edge methods—many of them now being carried across into more mainstream anthropology. Often working in teams with comparatively short deadlines, practitioners have sought ways to improve and validate data collection techniques and both client and informant interaction. They have made use of informants' diaries, e-mails, blogs, and various forms of sociodigitization (Facebook, YouTube, and so on) when researching particular problems. They regularly use video to capture social interaction and share it with their clients, while also pursuing classical ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and interviews.

### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This, albeit incomplete, outline of key research issues raises the more general question: what might a program for business anthropology look like in the future? There are three key issues underpinning the development of a coherent research program. One is opportunities for learning; a second, engagement; and the third, comparison.

Firstly, business anthropologists, especially those employed in academic institutions, need to fight to revitalize current anthropology programs taught in universities and other institutions of higher learning. In an era when most anthropology students get jobs in business organizations of one sort or another, there is a strong case for arguing that anthropology programs should be preparing students specifically for such job opportunities, rather than giving them endless doses of ethnographic and theoretical discussions that are in large part irrelevant to their future careers. An education in anthropology that includes, rather than ignores, the role of business in social

and cultural relations should lead to an increase in interest in, and numbers of people practicing, business anthropology.

Secondly, business anthropologists need, far more than they do, to engage with anthropological theories. They must go beyond making passive use of theories, first by recontextualizing them in different business situations, and then by applying them consistently across sectors and societies. If one accepts, for example, Rodney Clark's argument that joint stock companies have major social, financial, political, cultural, and structural repercussions on the organization of any society, then we need to ask, in contexts outside Japan, just *how* and *to what extent*, for example, they distribute wealth, engage with local, regional and national governments, support education and research, sponsor sporting and cultural events, and so on in different societies. What differences do we find? In addition, how do these differences inflect people's understandings of firms in different societies?

A second aspect of engagement concerns business anthropologists' engagement with scholars studying business from different disciplinary perspectives. How can business anthropology help those in management or organization studies, strategy, marketing, business history, consumer culture studies, and so on, understand the varieties of business practices and organizational forms that they study? There is, at present, an unfortunate "silozation" at work, which separates those working in business anthropology from those employed in business schools around the world. Somehow this needs to be overcome by anthropologists engaging more with those working in similar areas in other disciplines.

Thirdly, as implied above, business anthropology must be comparative. 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. Are analogies to be drawn between north Italian silk manufacturing family firms, on the one hand, and family restaurant owners in Chinatown in London, on the other? If so, what are they? In addition, how do they compare with the ideals and practices of Japanese corporate "familism"? What are the mechanisms sustaining a preference for family forms as a means of making a living from different kinds of business activities over generations and across cultures? Business anthropologists need to adopt a broader perspective than they generally do.

Given these key issues, we may ask: in what directions should theoretical endeavors in business anthropology proceed in future?

Firstly, anthropologists could usefully examine social relations and structures of power in, between, and dependent on business organizations of all kinds, but particularly firms.

Secondly, they might usefully make 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.

Thirdly, they should pay far more attention to materials, technologies and things (goods, commodities, equipment, tools) with which business people of all kinds engage, in which they are entangled, and which afford their organizational forms.

In addition, finally, they should advertise more forcefully the benefits of the fieldwork methods that they have developed in business contexts.

If all of this were done, and done well, we might find that business anthropology brings together both a French structural anthropologist and a brand of jeans and that business is, indeed, “good to think.”

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