Foreword One: Why Become a Business Anthropologist?

Alex Stewart

Why become a business anthropologist? You will not see many want ads designed for this career. Too ready an answer obscures important questions. How do you get to be a business anthropologist? Moreover, how would you like such a job if you got it? How would you feel about the impact of your efforts? Is this really a job or more of a career path that leads into various fields of inquiry?

If these questions interest you, this book is for you. Its chapters have much to offer about both the challenges and contributions of business anthropology. As I summarize these, I will not be referring to particular chapters below. When I started to do this, this Foreword quickly became overwhelmed with lengthy parentheses for each of my comments and assertions. The themes, then, are further developed throughout the chapters of this interesting volume.

As for the challenges, the first has been mentioned: you have to craft an idiosyncratic job. To do this you will need some familiarity with the world of business, a world you may or may not have encountered as a student. And if, on the other hand, you have studied business, this may be a quite unfamiliar terrain on which you venture your first steps. How do you gain the necessary knowledge, or at least an acquaintance with its terms and concepts? Many non-business graduates find themselves hired into business; once there, they do learn the ropes. In this context, much learning is firm-specific. If would-be business anthropologists are to find parallel success, they will need to find (probably opportunistically) a business context where the peculiarities of technology, environment, and so forth can be mastered. Of course it helps to find a context that matches their personal interests and passions in order to be committed to the fieldwork or ethnography that is so often a part of business anthropology.

The fieldworker in business settings has to understand the local idioms and also generic business concepts, such as overhead, channels, cost of capital and so on. This generic knowledge can also aid in gaining access to the field. For purposes of knowledge and of access, anthropology students who might pursue business avenues could also consider a minor in business. If they graduate without such a minor, then an MBA could be helpful if it is deemed worth the time and the expense. As an alternative, trade books and internet offerings could prove to be worthwhile. Non-business graduates in business have to get up to speed somehow, and a small industry has emerged to help them out. The problem with these options is that their value is hard to evaluate in advance. (I took the MBA route. A warning to others who try this: business school will put you in culture shock for the first semester or longer.)

Business anthropologists need to understand business language -- whether in organizational behavior, marketing, finance, or technology -- in order to interpret the speech and other acts around them. In this, they are no different from any others in their need to know the language of their sites. Some of their other challenges are shared with other applied anthropologists but not necessarily with academic anthropology. One of these is the need for speed and the attendant necessity for a well defined focus of studies. Applied anthropologists also often work in cross-disciplinary teams. This is an added source of friction in itself, but especially so as
anthropologists are often expected to defer to colleagues from other disciplines, particularly economics and psychology (as many chapters note below). Moreover, the minor role that anthropologists may find themselves in may lead to ethical conundrums. The dominance of these other fields is also a reason that useful findings by anthropologists have often failed to be implemented (as the early business anthropologist Len Sayles and I wrote: Sayles & Stewart, 1995).

On the downside, therefore, business anthropologists face the frustrations of the politics and micro-cultures of applied research. On the upside, they may avoid the frustrations of the politics and micro-cultures of anthropological departments. Signs of the benefits of this avoidance are evident throughout the pages of this volume. The writing is straightforward. The academic jargon is minimal. Concern with research method, by contrast, is much in evidence; more so than, I believe, is typical of recent cultural or social anthropology. This can only be good, if the goals include approximating truth as best one can and having the findings taken seriously by practical people.

Business anthropologists will not always have the impact they aspire to. However, evidence-based research, clearly presented, can succeed in having an impact in the world at large. This potential is one reason to become business anthropologists. They can and they have improved the design of work processes and flows and the design of goods or services thus produced. By “studying up” (Nader 1969) rather than studying only the less powerful, they also improve our understanding of elites who affect much of life in complex societies. They can also choose to offer their help, not large established firms, but micro-entrepreneurs (Chapter 12 below) who build up wealth for the poor. In all of these endeavors, they can take pride in their place in a distinguished tradition, beginning with “industrial ethnology” and continuing now with the multiple branches of business anthropology.

Milwaukee, April 2011
Foreword Two: Business Anthropology Is a Growing Field of Study

Harry Wels

Business anthropology is a growing field of study and an emerging professional market as this interesting book “Readings in Business Anthropology” will explain in much detail in its various parts and chapters. In a sense, it could be argued that ‘anthropology’ itself has become business. This is not unique to anthropology, as nowadays almost all universities, and the scientists and scholars it houses, must show serious business-sense to be able to stay in academia. This implies in neo-liberal terms that ‘growth’ is a *sine qua non* for disciplinary sustainability. It could well be that without the adjective of ‘business,’ anthropology will have difficulties to grow and sustain itself as an independent discipline in the university. I remember vividly that in the second half of the 1980s anthropology in the Netherlands, and more specifically at VU University Amsterdam, was suffering from a steadily decreasing number of students. To “apply” or link anthropological theoretical and methodological perspectives to “organization and management” was considered a good strategy to acquire a growth market in order to turn the tide. And it did! The study “Culture, Organization and Management,” as we labeled what was basically and in terms of its curriculum a study in business anthropology, attracted hundreds of students already in its first few years, and actually “saved” the anthropology department from closure. In that sense “business anthropology” proved its point.

To my mind, the 1980s have been very important for giving “culture talk,” a concept I borrow from Mahmood Mamdani, in organization, management, and economics a decisive boost. It was a time that economic successes in Japan were explained by many by referring to its particular cultural make up (later followed and copied by similar explanations about other “Asian Tigers”). It was the same time and age that corporate successes were increasingly explained by referring to so-called “strong” organizational cultures: a “strong” culture would boost your business performance. Business anthropology courses and approaches started to flourish around the globe. The various waves and large numbers of students that followed in the wake of this particular “cultural renaissance” have now all found their ways into society and business and as (older) university staff; we regularly come across our alumni in various places and positions in the global corporate world. It is interesting to observe how many of them are basically spreading the message of their intellectual upbringing in business anthropology even further around the world by proclaiming the message that this book also radiates: business anthropology is the way to go in this globalized world; developing cultural sensitivity is good (for) business!

This edited volume is timely as it perfectly captures the essence of the applied character of business anthropology in the 21st century and at the same time is able to contextualize business anthropology in relation to its roots in the anthropological discipline in the 20th century and, in the process, recalibrating its orientation. I applaud the editors of this volume for their initiative.
and I dare to recommend the book especially to every businessperson who would like to learn more about the business advantages of building cultural sensitivity in this globalized corporate world.

April 2011, VU University Amsterdam
Introduction

Business Anthropology Is Dynamic and Growing

Robert Guang Tian, Daming Zhou, and Alfons H. van Marrewijk

Anthropology is a discipline that over the last hundred or so years has developed a wide array of qualitative techniques for understanding people and their behavior. For many years, practitioners in the business sector considered these analytic methods to be inferior to quantitative, so-called “rigorous scientific” methods. However, recent organizational studies heavily criticize these positivistic methods (Bate 1994; Alvesson and Svenginson 2008). Business anthropologists all over the world have supported these critics (Aguilera 1996; Ferraro 1998; Jordon 2003). It is widely recognized that business anthropology uses qualitative and ethnographic methods as an alternative to more formal methodologies (Jordan 2003, Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). Specific tools include participant observation, informal and structured interviews, and other “naturalistic,” informal, and face-to-face methods of investigation. Business anthropologists play a key role in developing culturally sensitive policies and strategies in a world that is increasingly typified by cross-cultural contacts.

We define business anthropology as a practically oriented scholastic field in which business anthropologists apply anthropological theories and methods to identify and solve real business problems in everyday life. Business anthropologists include all those anthropologists who study the business fields of management, operations, marketing, consumer behavior, organizational culture, human resources management, international business, and so on through anthropological methods, particularly through ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, informal and structured interviews, and other anthropologically based research methods. Business anthropologists are able to play key roles in the business world by helping corporations develop culturally appropriate ways of doing business with suppliers, business partners, or customers (Baba 2006; Tian, Lillis, and van Marrewijk 2010).

We are very excited about the growth of business anthropology as a field of study, and we are very positive that this growing field will be employing more and more anthropologists in the future. Technological advances and globalization not only change the way people do business but also the way they think about business. Business leaders must rethink what they can offer to their customers, how they can offer goods and services, with whom they will collaborate for these new products and services, what they say, what they do, and how they view the world. Business anthropologists are in an excellent position to provide these kinds of insights through their unique methods and unique contributions. We believe that in our globalized world there is a great need for anthropologists in business consulting, organizational behavior, human resources management, competitive intelligence, globalization, product design and development, marketing, and consumer behavior studies (Jordan 2003, 2010; Tian, Lillis, and van Marrewijk 2010).
The anthropological perspective on business distinguishes itself from other perspectives as a method of fieldwork activity (the “doing” of ethnographic fieldwork by means of participant observation), as a paradigm (the “thinking” using anthropological concepts), and as a narrative style (the “writing”) (Bate 1997). In line with Bate, Dr. Ann Jordan stresses that business anthropologists tap various sources of information by getting to know the people within the organization (Jordan 2003). This *emic* perspective is central to the anthropological approach. Furthermore, business anthropologists take a “holistic” approach, which is to study human behavior within the social, historical, spatial and economical context. In this way, micro studies of employees and customers are connected to meso and macro societal levels. They assume the social construction of cultural differences, which can be used strategically in cultural collaboration in strategic alliances and mergers (van Marrewijk 2009).

A prominent example is the role of business anthropologists in the consumer industry. In recent decades rapid technological developments have stimulated the growth of complex organizations in consumer industries. These complex organizations face the challenge of accessing fragmented consumer markets, as traditional ways of doing business have become less effective. They must continuously improve their business models as well as consciously modify their existing products and services to satisfy their customers. Consequently, interactions between producers and consumers have become more important than ever before in order to be profitable. These changing conditions have created many opportunities for anthropologists who enable their knowledge and methods to play a distinctive role in today’s business world (Tian 2007, Tian and Walle 2009).

Moreover, business anthropologists may work in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Jordan 2003; Pant and Alberti 1997). Based on our own personal and professional networks, we estimate that in today’s world there are several thousand well-qualified anthropologists working in business organizations of one sort or another. Increasingly, business anthropology is an appropriate approach for both scholars and business executives to understand why and how individuals around them do as they do, why and how organizations function in the ways that they function, as well as why and how consumers choose to purchase the goods and services that they prefer (Jordan 2003; Tian, Lillis, and van Marrewijk 2010). Because of this growing interest, more and more business anthropologists work as faculty members in universities and business schools from Asia to America, from Europe to Africa.

As a result, the time that anthropologists working in business organizations were “exotic” news in newspapers and business magazines is over. Now, serious newspaper and management articles show how American and European corporations increasingly hire anthropologists to design new technology, to learn to know their customers, and to improve their businesses (for example, see Cohen and Sarphatie 2007, Corbett 2008, Davenport 2007, Gruener 2004, Miller 2005, Tett 2005). As larger groups of managers, marketers, engineers, and designers read these articles, the special qualities of business anthropologists are now better known.

Not only practitioners are interested in business anthropology. Academics in organization studies, consumer behavior, marketing, public policy, product design, and international business studies increasingly include anthropological theories and methods in their research (Bate 1997). In addition, business educators can effectively apply anthropological theories and methods into their teaching practice, and in fact many business schools have started to redesign their curricula with the consideration of anthropological contributions (Tian & Walle 2009, Tian 2005). To support the growing interest in business anthropology, we all realized that we should create an