

The Business End of Anthropology: A Student's Exploration of a Culture of Commerce

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On scores of occasions and in every situation, the string of queries leading to the Inevitable One begins: "What do you do? What are you going to school for? Business and what? *What are you going to do with THAT?*" Business and anthropology are two words hardly ever used in the same sentence, and yet I'm planning to make a career out of both of them. "Are you crazy?" is the next question (usually) unspoken, and yet barely under the surface.

In searching for a way to explain the connection, and in defending my future, I've had to make the leaps of faith that anthropologists are ready to take their discipline in a new direction, and that people in the "business world" are recognizing the value of cultural insight. Often, the latter appears to carry more truth than the former. Managers are, on average, increasingly happy to accept anthropologists into their midst and happy to learn about the insights that can be gleaned from our abilities. At least as far as the view from the other side of the fence, the time is ripe for business anthropology to thrive.

Even though business anthropology was born in the 1980s and the field has developed some structure as well as produced a few renowned experts such as Dr. Marietta Baba, there are still countless opportunities for exploration. Cultural anthropology has always been a science of research, of finding out the facts of cultural differences and processes. We pride ourselves on being objective observers; we look at cultures as a whole and attempt to identify their essence and what makes them work. We have been trained in the arts of cultural sensitivity and research methodologies and have studied nearly every culture on the planet. Academic positions are now dwindling, and people who love anthropology are forced to settle for working where the jobs are: in business. This is inevitably seen as a fall from grace, as "business" is often seen (especially from the lofty tower of anthropology) as evil, dirty, or immoral. I find this reputation intriguing. After all, our entire society is based on trade and commerce. Wasn't the first evidence of writing on stone tablets from Sumer revealed to be accounting ledgers to keep track of early trade and exchanges? Aren't most cities a result of settlements along well-traveled trade routes? Wasn't America "discovered" by in a happy accident along the way on a quest to find

a faster trade route to Asia? The development of trade has an evolutionary history just as does any other component of culture. Goods-sellers eventually realized they could produce more with the help of others, increase their return, and therefore buy more of someone else's goods. People began to conglomerate in cooperation as trade became the norm, and boom: the birth of business and a culture of commerce.

I wasn't always as accepting of business and commercialism. In fact, I had a distinct "us versus them" attitude, preferring to adopt the position of hero in my quest to learn about business in order to fight for the poor, victimized consumer as well as to aid the stained social fabric and precarious environmental balance of our time that could certainly be traced back to business, commerce, and the whole corporate "system." Therefore, I entered business school a skeptic, armed with the will to battle the intrinsic evil nature of the corporate world. Slowly I began to realize that I had it all wrong. People in business aren't any different from anyone else. They are anyone and everyone, including your neighbor, your sister, your doctor, and your closest friend. The people of our culture operate inside the corporate matrix not necessarily by greedy will, but because our society is constructed that way. It's become the "natural" operating mechanism.

The most interesting thing that I've discovered in my quest for Truth is that we seem to have fallen upon a relatively self-sustaining system as a result of a competitive, consumer-driven market that keeps businesses on their toes. The Enrons and Arthur Andersens of the landscape are simply bad apples that are usually eventually weeded out, just as in any evolutionary environment. However, these companies are endlessly and tiredly cited as evidence for the intrinsically immoral nature of business in the broadest context (in my business classes they are despised, and are usually mentioned as the butt of jokes or given as an example for what not to do). Businesses aren't intrinsically bad; they are products of cultural evolution. Placing a value judgment on the very drivers of our free-market economy (which exists the way it is whether we like it or not) in the broad context of totality is naive and useless. The fact is, whether we agree with, support, distrust, or despise the world of

business is irrelevant. Our opinions will not change the state of the economy, and I maintain that the sooner we lose our negative prejudices, the more productive we become and the more positive, applicable, and valuable anthropology's influence will be to society. Our culture has evolved to be this way, and the integrated presence of "business" is simply a cultural fact. As anthropologists, we should be the first ones to maintain objectivity and acceptance despite the fact that our perceptions may be skewed by an emic perspective.

The marketplace represents countless companies, each vying for consumer dollars and market share while their successes and failures ebb and flow like the tide. Some of these survive and some do not (the variables tend to be rather unpredictable). The entrepreneurial spirit of the New Economy brings with it the winds of change, as the economical structure shifts away from big business and toward consumer-based needs fulfillment for new products and services. Yet each player in this market is an organization of people (who are consumers themselves) with its own individual cultural norms, values, and behaviors. When you consider globalization and vastly increased international trade interactions, the possibilities for cultural study become virtually endless. Therefore, there is real and immediate potential for anthropologists to apply our methods and insights to organizational cultures and subcultures within our own midst. Business is all around us, interacting with the people in our very culture every day, at every moment. Think of how many times and in how many ways you interface with an organization. The daily interactions between consumers, vendors, employees, management hierarchies, and departmental units of organizations create an intricate web of relationships and behavior patterns. The business anthropologist, armed with both quantitative and qualitative research methods, is in an excellent position to interpret those complexities to the benefit of the firm. For those students who still can't bear the thought of "being on their side," there

are also opportunities in consumer, social, or environmental advocacy, as well as nonprofit organizations. Businesses tend to respond strongly and quickly to environmental pressures (the competitive nature of the market makes response a necessity), and with our research skills, we are in an excellent position to turn over rocks and uncover injustices or immoralities, thereby increasing the efficiency and well-being of the whole. Any organization is a cultural unit, and the anthropologist who understands business and possesses business skills can be helpful in countless areas. Once trained in quantitative research methods in anthropology the student can easily acquire business quantitative skills and apply them in countless situations, and when cross-utilized with qualitative abilities and cultural sensitivities the business anthropologist becomes an information-processing machine.

Critics will argue that I am too idealistic, that the rose-colored glasses and protective nature of the University have skewed my perception of the "real world." In addition, my lack of extended experience in the perceived battlefield of corporate America may be used by some to dismiss my viewpoint as irrelevant. To this I will answer: perhaps. But it seems to me that anthropology could use some idealism and reinvigoration. Therefore, I believe it is time to reevaluate the heuristics we carry as a discipline that create blinders to reality and blockages to progress, and not only embrace, but facilitate, the use of our talents to discover cultural truths in the commercial sector of our society.

Notes

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