

Deep Diversity

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I came upon business anthropology accidentally, for in my first academic career, which ended approximately 30 years ago, there was no such thing as business anthropology. One of my professors at the University of Chicago, Manning Nash, studied modern economic forms, but he was a bit of an oddball: we, as graduate students, all *knew* that *real* anthropology was about studying indigenous villages in remote settings, preferably risking tropical diseases in the course of fieldwork. Studies of business, and other contemporary institutions, were left to the Sociology Department.

Thirty years ago, finding this paradigm too limiting for a discipline that styled itself as the science of humanity, I left a tenured position at Michigan State University, first to work in on Capitol Hill Washington DC and subsequently in a software firm in Naperville, Illinois. In Washington I created the Institute for Illinois, a first-of-its-kind state-oriented congressional research institute, which had some successes until the political winds shifted and I found myself out of a job. In 1988 I joined a software start-up, which had four employees when I joined and more than a hundred when I left seven years later. In the course of those seven years I built its research and training function into a million-dollar-a-year business. Our customers were primarily government and corporate entities such as General Motors and the US Air Force.

This software firm, Wisdom Systems, Inc., had three basic business

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lines: process improvement, project management, and factory automation and analytic software. As an anthropologist, I was definitely an oddball there. The fact that I came from a family of engineers may have helped me to adjust. Perhaps of equal significance was the fact that I had some modest abilities as an entrepreneur and a salesman. My skills as a salesman, while certainly *infra dig.* in the academic world, have served me well every time I venture outside of the ivory tower. Later I will pick up on the importance of sales (one of the core rituals of the business world, at least in the United States) and the circulation of skills.

Our process improvement and project management work consisted of working with teams of engineers to implement automated systems and streamline processes. Within every large business there is much waste in the form of process inefficiencies, although as an ethnographer I find such waste interesting. What to the outsider may appear as an economic inefficiency often has an underlying social rationale, whether in the use of tangible tokens (e.g., paper records) rather than automated displays to exchange information, the hoarding of information to maintain control, or the sequestration of corporate resources as status displays. As an observer, the question of who owns the waste and who benefits from it suggests probing deeper for structures of sociality, pivoting on status and gift exchanges, beneath the façade of rational management.

One source of this waste is a fetish in some quarters for automation. The sociality of work is frequently atomized by automation, and this commonplace observation has been examined by anthropologists (Agar 1988; or Cefkin 2014, for example). Insisting that projects be delivered in the form of a computer program always increases a project budget by at least a factor of two or three, and creates great opportunities for software companies such as the one I worked for. Insisting that project results be delivered in the form of object code also makes any subsequent modifications more expensive, and locks in hidden inefficiencies. All of this echoes economist Robert Solow's 1987 observation, "You see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics."

There were three notable experiences, in addition to all the revenue I brought in, that validated for me the benefits of an anthropologist working in a heavily engineering-dominated firm. The first of these came in 1989, which as part of our training program, I was asked to give a lecture on the human side of engineered systems. This was 1989, and the phrase "corporate culture" was on everyone's lips: "Corporate culture" burst on the scene in 1982, and its diffusion from management literature into the military (and subsequently into the world of anthropology; Batteau 2013a), by fortunate coincidence, was right at the time I arrived. In the process of this diffusion, "culture" was transforming from a structural concept into a feel-good, casual Fridays sort of thing. So, reaching back into my earlier structuralist training, I developed a lecture, "Land, Women, and Cattle" which explained that culture was about

possession and exchange and identification with scarce goods. Anthropologists will immediately recognize my metaphors: in the military, for example, the scarce good and circulating medium is neither cattle nor women, as was the case among the Nuer, but postings and experiences, signaled by a chest full of medals. This *intellectual arbitrage*, of translating concepts from one domain into another, and in the process creating new value, is one that anthropologists ought to be skilled at.

A second experience came in January, 1991, when we were conducting a study of factory processes for an automated gear factory. We were working with a gear manufacturer in Minnesota, and on Friday I was told to pack my bags and catch a flight to Minneapolis on Monday (in the middle of January). For the next two snowy weeks I camped out at a motel and spent my days in the factory interviewing production workers, supervisors, managers, and salesmen, and developing a comprehensive model of how the factory worked. Late one snowy evening, while I was back in my motel room typing up my notes, it occurred to me that this had some great similarities to Bronislaw Malinowski camped out in his tent on the edge of a Trobriand village. I was going into the village, er, factory, every day to interview the natives on subjects initially I knew nothing about, and in the end producing an account that accurately reflected how things worked in the factory *and* was meaningful to my audience. There were, of course, three decisive differences: Everything was in English; the immersion was compressed from many months into two weeks; and, instead of having to beg my way into peoples' homes or offices as was the case in all of my previous fieldwork, they set me up with an office inside the factory and appointed a liaison who would fetch subjects for me to interview. I was, of course, aware of the superficiality and the power differentials that all of this entailed. Despite this, I remember quite vividly the sense that all of my previous fieldwork had prepared me for this very pragmatic engagement.

A third transformative experience came in 1994 when I was talking to a program assistant at the National Science Foundation. This was when people were just beginning to discover the internet—I had obtained a CompuServe e-mail account in 1992, but for the first few months I wasn't sure what to do with it, because I didn't know anyone else who used e-mail. This program assistant asked me if I thought this thing called the internet might have some social implications. This was in 1994, and there wasn't any such thing as a graphical web browser, and a social network was something mostly enacted face-to-face at cocktail parties. I said "of course," and we began arranging a workshop on the social aspects of the internet. (Paradoxically, the engineering programs at NSF were initially more excited about this than the social science programs.)

If you live long enough, sometimes you get lucky with the timing. We scheduled our workshop for June, 1995, and a few months earlier the National Center for Supercomputing Applications released Mosaic, the

first graphical web browser and the forerunner of Netscape. Suddenly the internet, now more than just a text medium attracting only nerdy attention, was on everyone's lips. We held this workshop on June 1-2, 1995, and released a report, "Culture, Society, and Advanced Information Technology" (Batteau *et al.*, 1995). Some of us wanted the title to reference the internet, but in the summer of 1995 it wasn't clear just how transformative the internet would be: maybe it was just another delivery vehicle for business data, rather than a new social space. From the perspective of nineteen years later, we all know how that turned out, but at the time it was far from clear. Within Science and Technology Studies, this is called "interpretive flexibility." Any new technology in its infancy can be shaped in multiple ways depending on the groups and problems involved, but ultimately creating a "path dependency" that is just as constraining of technological possibility as any electromechanical properties of its materials (Lemmonier 1993). This re-interpretation, one might suggest, is just as creative as the original invention.

Within both Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies there is by now a substantial recognition of the contingency of technological development. Brian Pfaffenberger's concept of "technological dramas," building on Victor Turner's concept of social drama, captures both the intensity and the uncertainty of any technological advance. The place and period of liminality that any good drama provides is where creativity and excitement are born. The Social Construction of Technology perspective sees technological configurations as combinations of artifacts, relevant social groups, and problems. (Pfaffenberger 1992; Bijker 1985; Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987). Actor Network Theory finds that the durability of technologies is not in the artifacts *per se* as much as it is in the networks of artifacts and more fully social actors, all of whom are capable of agency (Latour 2005). Within social media such as FaceBook and Instagram, there are new circuits of images and ideas and reputations.

One could view these experiences of technology development and implementation as conventional business challenges: a new interpretation of human factors, an analysis of factory automation, an exploration of a new technology. Instead, I chose to see them from a new, yet still pragmatic perspective, something my boss later told me that he valued in me. This new, pragmatic perspective, which I will call the *orthogonal viewpoint*, leads one to see problems of automation not just as technical problems, but as people problems: something that may seem obvious to social scientists, but which is far from obvious in the engineering world. Frequently the attitude is that the technology is perfect, and it is just those darn users who keep screwing it up. To go a step further, I would say that this entire classification of "people problems" v. "technical problems" is only a cultural convention with no further ontological basis. In other words, we have to manage the people, not just the hardware and software.

A further structuralist insight contributing to this orthogonal viewpoint is that culture is not just about “habits” (which, in any case, is a very weak category of analysis), but about institutions: about settled arrangements for living and working together, codified thought-worlds with their own boundaries, policing mechanisms, asymmetries of power, and totemic identities. Changing institutions is far more difficult than changing your habits. This association of totemic identities with asymmetries of power is an indication of how people accept and become attached to oppressive arrangements, a subject that has received considerable sociological and historical examination (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Frank 2004).

Orthogonal viewpoints such as these originate from the experience of fieldwork—or rather, field immersion, preferably in a remote setting—which is the rite of passage for most anthropologists. When one has lived for an extended period of time in an unfamiliar village, cut off from one’s normal social moorings, when cultural disorientation becomes embedded in one’s daily routine, one acquires a profound conviction that all social forms are conventional, that otherness is not alien, and that belonging and familiarity are rare and fragile flowers. It is this experience and this conviction, more than any methodological or conceptual apparatus, that defines and is sustained by anthropology, and that enables the orthogonal view.

This ability to see problems with fresh eyes is enabled and rejuvenated by fieldwork. One of the great advantages of my current academic career, in contrast to the one that I left thirty years ago, has been the opportunity for extended periods of immersion in several new cultures in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Again, one sometimes gets lucky with the timing: the academia of the 1960s and 1970s, the world I was trained in and for, is a world we have lost, a world in which settled paradigms and settled institutional privileges were upended, and everyone is scrambling, intellectually as well as pragmatically, to figure out what is going on. The twin arrivals of postmodernism and neoliberalism in the late 1970s and 1980s—two sides, I would argue, of the same token—upended both the theories we were taught in the 1970s and the social hierarchies behind those theories. Thatcherism and Reaganism were the political face in democracies of Foucauldianism and Derridaism in the academy: new paradigms and discourse régimes that some found liberating, and others found threatening.

From the perspective of 30 years later we can see that the 1980s were the cusp of a social and technological revolution, of which the so-called information revolution was just one aspect. Some of the greatest innovations of the 1980s and 1990s were less about hardware and software, and more about new business models and new institutional configurations: figuring out that in some lines of business it is more profitable to give your products away than to sell them, and that building

brand loyalty and identification and user communities is a more sustainable business model than simply assuring a profit on every transaction. In social life, the fact that ideal interests (*wertrationalität*) frequently trump material interests (*zweckrationalität*) is mystifying only within orthodox economics. The different temporalities that go into different business strategies (long-term v. short-term) are worth anthropological consideration.

Three or four anthropological concepts, I would suggest, help one make sense out of all of this. The first is a broader understanding of value, an understanding that value goes far beyond utility. Business, of course, is about the circulation and monetizing of value, but how we conceive of value is a question that is now intently discussed (Lamont 2012; Graeber 2001). The distinction between Value (monetized price) and values (multivalent, performative) and the manner in which values are negotiated within complex networks is something anthropologists have frequently written about (Moeran 2014). Three centuries ago, a growing awareness of cultural differences led to a utilitarian conception of value, which is the foundation of modern economics. Utilitarianism, as Bradley Trainor and I have argued in the pages of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* (Batteau and Trainor 2014), is a least-common-denominator solution to the problem of differing value systems. This paradigm, I would suggest, is beginning to falter, and there may be a rhetorical opening for new understandings of value, including the value-creation potential of narrative. In the business world, a primary circuit for creating value and connections is created by the stories that salesmen tell, to their customers, to their bosses, and to each other.

A second anthropological concept is an appreciation of sociality: that we are not just bundles of market transactions, but rather we are social beings, and that our ties to others are *the* most fundamental facts of our existence. Karl Polanyi (1947) provided the emphatic statement of this nearly 70 years ago, and within economic anthropology the substantivist/formalist distinction is foundational. Marshall Sahlins (1976) demonstrated that practicality is embedded within matrices of cultural assumptions. However, this is not universally accepted, even within the so-called social sciences. Understanding the meanings and implications of sociality, and overcoming the blinders of individualism, is one of our intellectual challenges.

Closely related to this, I would suggest, is an understanding of network effects, and how network topologies alter social experiences. Networks are about connection, but they are also about *dis*-connection, as any high school student knows. Within mathematics there is a substantial literature on network topologies and behavior, this remains to be fully exploited by anthropologists: the social implications of scale-free and Erdos networks, for example, suggest that as the world becomes more connected, freedom and opportunity are not necessarily enhanced. Scale-

free networks (Barabasi 2003; Barabasi and Bonabeau 2003), *pace* Max Weber, are the iron cages of the neoliberal era. Business anthropologists such as Moeran (2014) and Baba (2006) have explored the consequences of networks within local formations, but the global implications of network topologies has mostly been left to historians (Castells 1996, but cf. Batteau 2009).

To state the problem directly, do all forms of value scale? Some forms of value, such as monetary wealth, clearly do, but other forms, such as intimacy, clearly do not. That is, when one enlarges the circuits of exchange, does one add value, or debase value? In the Middle Ages, works of art were objects of cult-like devotion (Benjamin 1936), but once reproducible became objects of public admiration and consumption: private moments were turned into public displays. From a utilitarian point of view this can be viewed as a good, but clearly something is lost.

A final concept might be to add some insight into money. There is an immense literature, which I can only allude to here, on the nature of money, its temporalities and socialities, and its many faces of value. Business is about creating Value through the circulation and monetizing of value. *Barter*, which has existed for millennia, is the circulation of value that is not monetized; barter doesn't scale all that well, and in the business world is a marked form of exchange (i.e., not "real" business). Occasionally international businesses engage in barter, also known as "countertrade," as a means of circumventing currency restrictions. Only with the invention and circulation of money, a subject to which people like Bill Maurer, David Graeber and Niall Ferguson have added insight, did business as we know it become possible. Money is both a medium of exchange and a repository of value; yet, as anthropologists such as Mick Taussig and Viviana Zelizer have demonstrated, it can assume fantastic new shapes and configurations. (Ferguson 2008; Graeber 2001; Maurer 2006; Taussig 1980; Zelizer 1994; Parry and Bloch 1989).

But what is value, and what can or should be monetized or commodified? This is a question where anthropologists have commented extensively, and where ethics intersects with epistemology, and where our cross-cultural insights should contribute to ongoing debates. To state the problem simplistically, when we monetize something, do we add value, or debase it? In arriving at something's Value, do we degrade its value? And what do we mean by value? Saussure, of course, gives us an answer to this, and when we monetize some value we enhance its circulation (and presumptively increase its value). At the same time, we all agree that there are some objects and values that should not be commodified and monetized: human beings, obviously, but also friendships and other sacred commitments. And what about *trust*? One of the many calamities of the 1980s was that *trust*, as the foundation of financial institutions, was transformed from patrimonial compacts into a series of market contracts, and made vulnerable to all of the attendant

weaknesses of markets: asymmetric information, a tendency toward panics, and a bias toward opaque complexity (Batteau 2013b). For Business Education and Anthropology to engage with each other, there needs to be fashioned a true exchange of these different understandings, less within the footnotes of articles in second-tier journals, and more at an institutional level where standards of worth are codified. The academic world, no less than the art world, establishes worth and value less on the individual performance and more on the complex circulation of artifacts (including footnotes and citations), reputations, institutional endorsements, and public acclamation (Moeran 2014:82ff.).

A critical node in the circulation of value, particularly in American business, is the rôle of the salesman. Sales, in contrast to a mere order-taking, constructs complex circuits of value embracing a business and its customers:

Selling, and its companion, advertising, present a gift to the would-be customer: a firm handshake, the voice of conviction, an exciting image. If accepted, the gift is returned with that most valuable of corporate commodities, “customer loyalty.” Ideally, the customer comes to identify with the company and its products, whether by wearing the logo or displaying tokens of loyalty, such as a placard or a desk set (Batteau 2011:244).

My characterization of these exchanges as a gift is intended to invoke Marcel Mauss’s characterization of non-mercantile exchange, a theme intensively examined by Alain Caillé and the *Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales* (M.A.U.S.S.) (Caillé 2014). In American business, possibly moreso than that of other nations, *sales* is the coin of the realm, the *lingua franca*, a common denominator uniting personnel at all levels of management, which is possibly expectable in “a nation of salesmen” (Schorris 1994) of rootless individualism yearning for sociality.

A challenge for anthropology—and for conventional business education, I might add—is to comprehend and mutually embrace new forms of institutional diversity. In anthropology’s formative years, boundaries among government, business, and academia, were quite clear, and for a learned élite to be mucking around in commerce was considered mildly disturbing. These attitudes persist in some quarters, although numerous historical developments over the past century have softened the picture. In some quarters, however, business remains academia’s Other, vaguely understood and best kept at a distance. The dynamics of “othering,” which we describe and deplore in studies of inter-ethnic relations, are alive and well in interdisciplinary debates.

New institutional configurations—public-private partnerships, “complexes” such as the military-industrial complex or the “iron triangles” of congressional committees, federal agencies, and local constituencies, new business models that emphasize giving products away rather than selling them, and new configurations and repositories of

value such as brand equities—are the twenty-first century’s barriers to mutual comprehension, just as racial and linguistic diversity was a challenge in the colonial era. The 21st century has also witnessed corruption on an unprecedented scale, a fact that *wertfrei* social science may be handicapped in addressing. Anthropologists, I would suggest, need to be just as adventuresome in the 21st century as our forebears were in the colonial era, risking not tropical diseases but moral hazards, to bring back to civilization an enlarged and empathetic understanding of these new human possibilities.

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