

The Editor's Two Cents

Greg Urban

Academic anthropologists are by no means alone in harboring suspicions about the motives of corporations. For-profit enterprises are, after all, powerful actors in the world, fully capable of doing harm. How do such external views of corporations stack up against those of corporate insiders, especially people involved in decision-making or advisory positions, who may see themselves as promoting human betterment? Business anthropologists are well positioned to address such questions, with researchers on both sides, some anthropologists working as employees or consultants, others analyzing corporate effects. Yet conversations across the perspectives are few and far between if they exist at all. So, we sensed an opportunity when Tijo Salverda sent us his manuscript, "Conflicting Interpretations: On Analyzing an Agribusiness' Concerns about Critique," now the lead article in this issue.

An academic researcher, Tijo sought permission from a European agribusiness to conduct research on their operations in Zambia. In reflecting upon the process of negotiating with the company, he found himself empathizing with their concern about "the potential for bad publicity and the apparent hidden agendas of researchers..." At the same time, his own "initial thoughts turned to whether the corporation had something to hide" — acknowledging a mutual suspicion. Remarkably enough, he engaged in introspection regarding the possibility that his

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own disciplinary position might bias his observations: “With the aim in mind to publish in a critical journal and gain respect from fellow scholars, my focus may also have been on critiquing capitalist enterprises rather than on positive developments — to the extent that I may almost ‘hope’ the investment will hardly have a positive impact, so I can safely confirm the limitations of capitalism.”

Is a broader dialogue about such issues possible within the discipline of anthropology? Or are anthropologists themselves locked in mutually impenetrable worlds? After Tijo’s article was accepted, we sent it out for comment to two anthropologists who have worked extensively with corporations. Their comments, along with Tijo’s response, form part of the present issue. Bill Beeman is a business (and linguistic) anthropologist who has worked inside and for companies, although not (at least to our knowledge) in Africa. Hannah Appel, for her part, has worked in Africa researching an American oil and gas company operating off the coast of Equatorial Guinea. To our knowledge, she has not been employed by the company. Together their thoughtful responses, along with Tijo’s reply, open a space for possible further conversation. We urge readers to send us thoughts on these important matters.

This is not, I repeat not, a themed issue, and we do have four additional wide-ranging articles. Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom ask whether the World Economic Forum, as a non-market actor, does the bidding (puppet-like) of the corporations that fund it. Or does it, in some measure, develop an independent voice? With Sasha Maher, we travel to New Zealand, examining the seemingly paradoxical role of a neoliberal state, as actor, endeavoring to prod business leaders (rather than business leaders prodding the state) to fight local protectionism and stimulate global trade in the aftermath of the 2017 U.S. decision to withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Then with Helene Ilkjaer we peer into the future of airline travel, looking at a Danish start-up developing new technology (an “intelligent trolley”) for scanning carry-ons, using its consumer tests to simultaneously assess the feasibility of scaling up and pitch the product to potential investors. Lastly, we tag along with Mette Marie Vad Karsten on a whirlwind four-week ethnographic assessment of why a “no-brainer” app used by a parts wholesaler to optimize work-time for plumbers and electricians did not work out quite as planned. She uses this research — wherein conversations take place while she holds a flashlight under a sink or carries building materials up the stairs — to explore the compressed time frame in which business ethnography must often take place. Her question: how does such research stack up against the “gold standard” of long-term fieldwork?

To cap off this issue, we are delighted to present the first installment in our promised new occasional series: *Millennial and Post-Millennial Perspectives on Business Anthropology*. Here, recent Princeton

graduate Elisabeth Powell tells us how she found herself drawn into business anthropology while her brain kept urging her to follow economics along the well-worn path to a lucrative career.

One last item before I sign off. Hopefully, you all already know about the upcoming Global Business Anthropology Summit, to be held at Fordham University. This follows up on the highly successful first-ever Global Business Anthropology Summit organized by Allen Batteau (kudos to Allen!) and held last May at Wayne State University in Detroit. This year the meeting will take place on May 29-30, 2019 at Fordham's Gabelli School of Business — Lincoln Center Campus in Manhattan, NYC. If you don't know about, it's not too late to find out. Go to the Business Anthropology website (<https://www.businessanthro.com/>) and click on the tab above labeled (appropriately enough) "2019 Summit."

Now, enjoy JBA Volume 8, Number 1, Spring 2019!