

Response to Beeman & Appel:

Between Access and Critique

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I am pleased that my article was able to open toward further discussion, even if some of the content was met with criticism. After reading the final draft, the company unilaterally revoked the agreement with me, as it perceived the article as a personal attack rather than a scientific analysis. From a different point of view, Hannah Appel also finds a number of shortcomings in her commentary. Interestingly, though, I find that these various criticisms lend support to what I primarily intended to discuss with the article – both regarding methodological challenges involved in studying corporations ethnographically, which Bill Beeman primarily reflects upon and which also relates to the company’s revocation of the agreement, and the key issue addressed by Appel concerning the impact (or lack thereof) of critique.

Let me begin with the methodological challenges. I indeed experienced tensions emerging from what Beeman describes as the “dual ethnography” in the study of corporations: the negotiations and recent revocation of the agreement demonstrate that in analyzing the societal impact of corporations, one aspect of the ethnography with corporate actors may evidently affect the other part, i.e. the possibility of studying their internal operations. It is both revealing and unfortunate that the

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JBA 8(1): 35-40
Spring 2019

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ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

European-based management team took offense at my analysis to such an extent that it cancelled the agreement, even though I had not breached any of the clauses we agreed upon and they had also made only minor comments concerning the facts. This occurrence confirms, as I discuss in the article, that from their point of view, corporations may have reasons to be reluctant about opening up to scholars. With little control about what scholars focus on, and how they interpret the “facts”, a company may be wary, because, as Beeman mentions, “the need to protect corporate reputation is enormous in contemporary times.” This last point, I would argue, relates to the impact of critique.

Moreover, and also relevant to the study of the corporate worldview(s), corporate actors may perceive their impact in a radically different and at times in a much more moral way; in my own research, the firm perceived certain projects it had initiated as serving rural residents rather than its own operations. Openness to this possibility by no means exempts such worldviews and “good” intentions from critical scrutiny, yet it could nevertheless be anthropologically valuable to study how corporate *employees* themselves operate as situated *human* actors. Accordingly, this may also help us to understand why, when eventual analyses present a picture different than what corporations had hoped for, they may feel “betrayed” (Josephides 2015). Since I already hinted at this in the article, the agribusiness’ disagreement with my analysis did not come as a complete surprise, particularly because I increasingly experienced a lack of openness (although not from all employees, as the staff in Zambia appeared much more reflective about the challenges and financial problems they were facing than those employees at the European headquarters). And while I can try to imagine myself in the company’s own shoes and attempt to understand their sense of “betrayal”, from my standpoint the episode highlights a notable lack of corporate imagination and a profound inability to part ways with overly-simplified “Public Relations” representations.

In rebuking my analysis, my main contact at the company headquarters argued, for example, that the company’s development had been according to plan; that its engagement with the neighboring residents was driven, first and foremost, by moral concern for them; that this concern had little do with external critique, but rather intrinsic moral motivation; and that the company was not facing financial difficulties. Yet, numerous other observations and data collected from my field site contradict this rosy picture. Moreover, when I asked my contact for additional details, she argued that confidentiality prevented the company from answering my queries in detail.¹ Thus, I felt I had valid reasons to be

¹ The company’s sustainable development manager also asked how I was giving back to rural residents in the area, as I was evidently also making a living from the research I conducted in the area. To some extent this is a valid question, which anthropologists could address more substantially. Yet, the comparison

distrusting. If corporate headquarters had been more open to engaging in a discussion – Why were certain promises not met? Why did the investment develop in the way that it did? Why were certain issues addressed and others not? – then the analysis would have been enriched, and might have led to a different publication. Such exchanges could have provided insight, for example, into the company’s claim that external critique had any impact on their operations. Was their lack of openness mainly about power? Would admitting that external critique can have impact signal that the company is not in full control? Obviously, corporate self-reflection may also have been too much to ask for, especially under financial constraints. Cancelling the agreement makes it even more unlikely that I will obtain answers. Interestingly, though, the episode in itself generates new data, not only about corporate PR, but also occasions to reflect on how severing access to the company’s internal operations (which was already limited, in any case) will impact future analyses. Moreover, my own analyses will be less restricted by the terms of the revoked agreement, in particular my agreement to anonymize details about the country of origin.

With the article, Beeman’s comments, and the additional information provided in the present response, I hope that this discussion of methodological challenges in the study of corporate actors will be relevant to anthropology in general, and to anthropologists involved in the study of corporations in particular. It is unfortunate, in this respect, that Appel does not offer detail about how she dealt with some of these issues in her research on the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea. Did corporate actors respond to her analyses, and, if so, what was their reaction? Was her first introduction, and subsequent interactions with the oil industry, different than her eventual analyses? To what extent did she encounter a possible feeling of “betrayal”? From my standpoint, it would be valuable and interesting to learn more about how anthropologists engaging with corporate actors deal with such and related issues.

Critique: Waiting for the Revolution

I am certainly not the first to study corporate responses to critique, although there is still much more to explore, both regarding corporate responses and capitalism, more generally. The second aim of my article was rather to discuss some of my struggles to interpret the role and impact of critique. I am indeed, as Appel rightly states, “muddling through [my] own relationships to reform, revolution, and the economic imagination”. Who does not muddle through various interpretations and possible political implications of their empirical research?

also misses the point, as I did arrive in the area making all kind of promises, as the company did.

What I did not really grasp is her comment that “Salverda seems *a priori* tripped by the tension between ‘structural conditions of capitalism’ and its specificities in a given project, and perhaps by a synechdocal transposition of capitalism writ large”. Like many anthropologists, perhaps also including Appel in her work on the oil industry, I use a particular case study to discuss more general phenomena. On that basis, I would argue that patterns observed in the Zambian case can be compared to, and may illuminate something about, contemporary and historical corporate interactions with public critique.

Building upon these observations, I think of capitalism as a continuum of manifold outcomes, rather than a singular phenomenon. A broad range of phenomena conceptually defined as “capitalism” share a generalized tendency for confrontations along the lines of Karl Polanyi’s double movement, in which outcomes vary in time and place, by definition. This does not imply, naturally, that a better world beyond this continuum cannot be envisioned, or that the European agribusiness in Zambia offers an enlightened example. There are many examples of far less scrupulous corporate actors in Zambia than the one that I observed, though Appel rightly gestures toward the legacy of a long (exploitative) history that is still at play in Zambia. Moreover, she correctly assumes that, in my particular case, the corporate response to critique has its limitations, and that I do not address certain issues, such as tax advantages.

Much of what can be seen in the Zambian case does not substantially reverse inequalities, yet the installation of wells and the building of brick houses can be considered a (partial) response to critique. My aim is to consider the particularity of this corporate response, and not to decide whether or not rural residents were better off in the past than they are today. A number of local residents certainly considered their brick houses an improvement, yet I do not consider this proof of a better quality of life in comparison to the past. In conversations with my colleagues in Zambia, however, we posed questions about the extent to which rural residents can be compared Ferguson’s more urban residents, and thus maybe also whether or not we can observe a similar kind of *loss* Appel refers to.

Appel highlights tensions between reformist vs. revolutionary approaches, which is certainly relevant to my argument. In analyzing the role of critique, I did not intend to make a case for (or against) “reformist” arguments, as Appel’s comments could be read to suggest. I agree with her reference to Barbara Smith, who suggests that even when one works toward reforms, we should not lose sight of the need for “fundamental change”. My intention, which might have been spelled out more clearly, was not to weigh in on debates about the reform of capitalism from within, but rather discuss challenges in analyzing the impact of critique (in my case study and in capitalism writ large) in the absence of, or in

comparison to, more transformative changes.

I still remain somewhat puzzled as to how to address this question analytically. On the one hand, I sometimes have the impression that in discussing improvements for the better within capitalist societies (e.g., 8-hour work days), one is taken for a “reformist” – and somehow, thereby, a defender of capitalism. This is why I thought it would be interesting to explore tensions between my empirical observations and the most critical voices in the discipline. On the other hand, I share many of the sharpest critique about capitalist exploitation, the lacks of distributive and environmental justice, and so forth. Nonetheless, I have the feeling that the critique, at least in some cases, sometime closes off the possibility of analyzing the role and impact of critique itself. I have, for example, encountered colleagues who dismissed any impact of critique I discussed, suggesting that everyone knows that all capitalism is capable of is raw exploitation.

Instead of framing the debate in terms of (limited) reform vs. revolution, my aim is to better understand responses to demands for reform and fundamental change. It could be that revolutionary demands still have an impact, even if they do not achieve their initial goals, i.e. as a sort of watered-down reform version of the original demands. Pointing to a lack of fundamental change may overlook this sort of dynamic.

My interest in the article is analytical rather than to take a political stance on reform vs. revolution, so to speak. Although I equally wish for fundamental change, and perceive corporate dominance as highly problematic, large corporations are a reality in our midst that –for better or for worse – are also responsive to societal concerns. In my analysis of corporate engagement with critique, the empirical confirms political concerns about corporate power (and lack of reflection) to a large extent. Yet, in the article I also highlighted that there is also some degree of doubt about how to interpret certain developments – and I hope to learn more about whether or not, or how, my colleagues deal with such doubt. My analysis certainly has its limits, yet stemming from my observations (both in Zambia, in the literature, and in general) it is clear that there is more to learn about the role of critique, and whether or not, and why or why not, the work of activists, including many anthropologists, have any impact.

I hope my work contributes to such discussions concerning the impact of critique in capitalist societies, to address Appel’s question about what I would like to see come of my scholarship. At the same time, as was the case with a previous article on the role of a countermovement opposing “land grabbing” (Salverda 2018), I also intended to provide (activists with) some hope – or what Appel describes as “the terrain of imaginative possibility around transnationalist capitalist practices”. There is certainly much to critique, and to despair, concerning the global land

rush, yet there has been relatively little discussion about how those at whom critiques are targeted interact and engage with such critiques. My evidence indicates that not all of the critics' work was in vain, although I would be the last to argue that it has been sufficient. Yet, in "waiting for the revolution," I think it is also useful to discuss (and provide some hope about) the role and impact of critique within capitalist societies. Hence, together with the insightful and welcome comments of both Beeman and Appel – and in an odd way, also the company's revocation of the agreement – I hope the issues discussed here will allow for further debate.

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