

EDITORIAL

## In Search of Newness

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In the past decades, it has been hard to ignore that a key characteristic of business is an unmistakable preoccupation, perhaps even obsession, with newness. In all corners of business, newness – along with its many allied notions such as creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, all of which are centered around newness in one way or another – is considered to be absolutely critical for survival. “Create/Innovate or die. This is the taken-for-granted ‘truth’ in the social, political and economic context in which we currently live,” as Emma L. Jeanes (2006:127) emphasized almost 20 years ago. While certain business activities are not, of course, supposed to be all that creative (after all, most business organizations do not aim for creative accounting, for instance), the message and the rhetoric have been very clear for decades now. A much-quoted statement, for instance, came from Gary Hamel who, back in 1999 under the headline “Bringing Silicon Valley Inside,” made the significance of innovation and entrepreneurship evident to all readers of the *Harvard Business Review*:

Face it: out there in some garage, an entrepreneur is forging a bullet with your company’s name on it. Once the bullet leaves the barrel, you won’t be able to dodge it. You’ve got one option: you have to shoot first. You have to out-innovate the innovators, out-entrepreneur the entrepreneurs (1999:72).

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It could hardly be mistaken. Creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, and other concepts closely related to newness had become a kind of modern mantras, as Jeanes (2006) emphasized in a discussion of creativity. In fact, the mantra of creativity, she continued, had become “so accepted [...] that criticism seems foolish; mere evidence of the entrenched conservatism that needs to be challenged” (2006: 127).

Among anthropologists, this preoccupation with, and search for, newness has not gone unnoticed. Not least in business anthropology, a broad range of publications on creativity (Moeran and Christensen 2013; Moeran 2014), innovation (Lex 2016; Mikkelsen and Vangkilde 2021), and entrepreneurship (Briody and Stewart 2019; Pfeilstetter 2021), as well as related themes – such as design (Murphy 2016; Smith et al. 2016), anticipation (Vangkilde 2015; Garsten and Sörbom 2021), and futures (Salazer et al. 2017; Brandt and Vangkilde 2023) – have come out in the past decade. While some of these publications focus on the relevance and contributions of anthropology in processes of actively and strategically generating newness, others are more interested in critically uncovering the cultural imaginaries and socio-political processes underlying attempts to bring forth “the new.” Regardless of which of these approaches that one may adhere to, anthropological studies *for* and *of* newness, if you will (see Murphy 2016; Peluso 2017), have essentially disclosed and stressed how newness and its generation are always fundamentally embedded in a range of relations – socially, culturally, materially, politically, temporally, spatially, etc. The generation of newness, then, is never a mere individual idiosyncrasy, but a social, or *relational*, phenomenon.

If only for the obvious reason that newness concerns and involves human agents and that “humans are *social* to the core,” as Kirsten Hastrup (2007: 193) has phrased it, newness is, thus, to paraphrase Hastrup, “a profoundly *social* fact – as eccentric as it may be” (2007: 193). This means that newness must always make sense within a given context of meaning (2007: 200), and it must also resonate with other people’s experiences and perceptions if it is to “move the world” (Liep 2001: 1). In other words, perception is key here, as newness is always to be *perceived* as such. Or, to quote Steve Woolgar (1998: 442), “somehow, somewhere, someone has to be convinced that it is a ‘new idea’.” Moreover, the motivation to seek or create newness is commonly grounded in social experience and, just as importantly, has effects on such experience. An anthropological approach to newness, thus, zooms in on its inherent relationality.

Now, this emphasis on the “relationality of newness” is not meant to imply that all agents – human as well as non-human – are on the same footing. Evidently, although newness is grounded in, and emerges from, the *interactions* and the *interrelations* between a number of human and non-human agents, asymmetries exist between them as these agents are differently positioned and, importantly, have varying degrees of success in making an impact. In other words, to reword Woolgar above, the point

is also that somehow, sometimes, someone stands out from the crowd because they succeed in making a difference. Interestingly, this seems to resonate, at least in some ways, with how Ruth Benedict back in 1932 pointed to “the influence of gifted individuals who have bent the culture in the direction of their own capacities” (1932: 26).

This issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* is essentially, and in various ways, concerned with this complex dynamic of influential agents and their embeddedness in broader relations. As such, it goes to the core of anthropology, particularly in its exploration of continuity and change as inherent in fields of relations. More specifically, we present a set of themed essays on “Anthropology and Entrepreneurship Research,” which contribute to a growing body of literature on the anthropology of entrepreneurship, also explored in a previous issue of the *JBA* (2019, vol. 8, no. 2) and recently discussed in a book by Richard Pfeilstetter (2021), which is reviewed in the present issue. In the themed essays, a variety of intriguing insights on entrepreneurship are described and discussed, based on fieldwork in such different localities as India, Mexico, Nigeria, Italy, and the US. For a much more enlightening introduction to this set of essays, we encourage you to read the introduction by Edward Liebow and Patricia Sunderland.

Finally, we are delighted to publish a detailed and creative report from the Global Business Anthropology Summit (GBAS) Mexico 2023. The report aims to capture the experiences, knowledge, and activities of the summit through a polyphonic text that includes both visual sketches and photographs. For those who participated in the summit, we are convinced that it will be a pleasant throwback to the event. And for those who were not able to participate, we promise that it is a great way to get the feeling of having part of it, although *in absentia*.

We hope that you will enjoy it all.

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