

### EDITORIAL

## A World in Pieces?

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First of all, an apology. This issue of the JBA has been delayed, and we are publishing it in 2025, even though it is formally the second issue of 2024 in the JBA series. While this is clearly unfortunate – and, as mentioned, we apologize – the delay has, for us, had the unexpected effect that we have received several messages from readers who have asked us when the next JBA issue will be published. We are delighted by this indication that, yes!, publications in the JBA are being read, which the numbers of downloads and abstract views on the journal publishing platform also clearly tell us. In fact, these numbers have increased by approximately 50% during the past 18 months or so. Moreover, our new presence via our page on LinkedIn is steadily gaining new followers almost every day. What we are trying to say, in other words, is this: If you wish to contribute to the field of business anthropology with your academic research, professional practice, creative ideas, or in some other way, we urge you to consider the JBA as your outlet. While JBA, of course, stands for *Journal of Business Anthropology*, we remind everyone that, as pointed out in an earlier editorial (Moeran 2013), it could also be read as an abbreviation for Just Be Active!

Now, with this initial encouragement in place, we wish to briefly introduce what we can offer in this issue. It is difficult to do so, however, without at least tentatively pointing to a few connections to the world in

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which we currently live. “A turbulent world,” as one of us wrote recently in an e-mail to one of our US-based collaborators who responded immediately by saying: “That’s an understatement!” While this is not the place to go into a lengthy discussion of world politics and its recent developments – with significant effects on established national alliances, the geo-political landscape, consumer behavior, corporate action, and so much more – it does seem as if an essay written by Clifford Geertz (2000) some 25 years ago has gained renewed relevance. In this essay, intriguingly entitled “The World in Pieces: Culture and Politics at the End of the Century,” Geertz reflects upon a new kind of world “order,” if you will. With a “world in pieces,” a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he writes about how the world has changed:

The world we have been living in [...] – a world of compact powers and contending blocs, the arrangements and rearrangements of macro-alliances – is no more. What there is instead, and how we ought to go about thinking about it, is, however, distinctly less clear (2000: 219).

For Geertz, the challenge is to find new concepts and ways of theorizing that are responsive to a world in pieces. His proposed solution is neither to abandon synthesizing notions altogether nor to conjure up even more large-scale and totalizing concepts, but rather to pursue what we may see as a fairly classical anthropological approach: “In a splintered world,” he emphasizes, “we must address the splinters” (2000: 221). This is to say that what is needed, in Geertz’s view, is a commitment to “sorting through concrete matters so as to develop circumstantial comparisons – specific inquiries into specific differences” (2000: 223); or, in other words, to delve into particularities and discontinuities and then to draw from them a sense of connectedness (2000: 224). He contends:

But if guidelines for navigating in a splintered, disassembled world are to be found, they will have to come from such patient, modest, close-in work. Neither cool scenes nor hot scenarios will really do. We need to find out how, rather exactly, the land lies (2000: 223).

It would be hard to disagree, not least in an anthropology journal. Indeed, we need to find out how the land lies.

In the first research article in this JBA issue, Nina Holm Vohnsen explores what she terms “corporate utopias,” arguing that utopian novels of the past have given way to corporate visions. Based on an examination of three distinct corporate visions – Rob Rhinehart’s vision for a highly engineered food production, Elon Musk’s vision for colonizing Mars, and Patri Friedman and Joe Quirk’s vision for commercializing citizenship – Vohnsen puts forward the thought-provoking argument that, today, those who challenge established structures of power and problem-solving are tech CEOs and investors. The capacity of corporate utopias to capture the

global imagination, Vohnsen proposes, is indicative of a more general dissatisfaction with national governments' ability to tackle global issues. Importantly, this is leading to a concentration of global problem-solving in the hands of tech entrepreneurs and investors. Although written some months before the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States and the new role of Elon Musk as his supporter and advisor, Vohnsen's article seems more relevant than ever.

In the next research article, Mette Marie Vad Karsten explores the digitization of professional expertise in the context of the recent boom in intelligent and generative digital technologies. Drawing on fieldwork in a Danish organization working with fire safety, Karsten tells a story of some of the hopes and aspirations involved in digitization while, crucially, also tracing some of the tensions between the imperative of user involvement vis-à-vis the need for professional expertise and caution in fire safety. It is demonstrated how digitization not only significantly impacts expertise, but may also entail a reshuffling of industry hierarchies. Ultimately, such tensions and challenges may oftentimes lead to project stagnation and unrealized promises.

In the following publication, we revive the genre of field reports. Josep Puigbo Testagorda invites the reader into coworking spaces in the Poblenou district of Barcelona, Spain. Having conducted ethnographic fieldwork in these spaces, Testagorda describes how some unexpected methodological challenges emerged during participant observation as the coworking spaces did not align with some of the key insights established in previous research. As a novice ethnographer, this made Testagorda doubt his methodological abilities (was he doing fieldwork right? Was he a bad ethnographer?) and the role of ethnography, until he realized that ethnographic research does not follow a standard formula, but requires continuous adaptation in response to the evolving empirical reality. In fact, some fascinating empirical material was right there in front of him. Testagorda just had to find a way to actually "see" it.

Finally, we present a book review written by Patricia Sunderland who describes and discusses the recently published *The Market of the Gods: How Religious Innovations Emerge. From Judaism to Christianity* by Dominique Desjeux.

To be sure, at a time where the world may, for some of us at least, seem to be "in pieces," these JBA contributions will not solve everything. Of course not. But they may hopefully play their little part when we begin "to find out how, rather exactly, the land lies" (Geertz 2000: 223).

Enjoy!

## References

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