

EDITORIAL

## Business Anthropology: Always In-The-Making

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Welcome to yet another issue of the *JBA*!

As probably most, if not all, of us have experienced at some point in our anthropological trajectories, the discipline of anthropology can be quite difficult to define or explain in just a few words. At dinner parties or family gatherings, many of us have surely been faced with the question of “What is it, really, that anthropology is about?” And, not rarely, followed by the more instrumental question: “What can you actually use it for?” These questions may often be posed by well-meaning and loving friends or relatives – some of whom may also, admittedly, be somewhat puzzled or even worried about our choice of education and career – who eagerly want to know what this “strange” domain of knowledge and practice is all about.

In these situations, as many of us have learned, there are several options. You can choose to go with the very brief version, explaining that anthropology is essentially a study of “culture” or, perhaps, of “humans as social and cultural beings.” Another option is to draw on the history of the discipline, describing that anthropologists traditionally travelled to what was considered remote areas of the world to explore how life was lived in those places, and, importantly, that they now use the same methods and

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approaches to explore all kinds of topics all over the world, also in places close to their own homes. Anthropologists, to use a common expression, thus make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Often, this seems to give people some sense of what anthropology is about, at least in our experience.

A further option might be to emphasize the discipline's core focus on social and cultural dimensions, perhaps by drawing parallels to other, allied disciplines. You could, for instance, elaborate that, while psychology and political science may be said to study, respectively, individual thought and behavior and societal structures and powers, anthropology wedges itself in between these disciplines; that is, anthropologists are interested in individuals or people *as part of* societies or communities. Clearly, this may be a rather caricatured description of both psychology and political science, as well as of anthropology, but it often works. Again, this is in our experience.

Depending on your time and energy, you could also say to yourself that "now, it is the time to finally give your friends and relatives a lecture about anthropology that will, once and for all, teach them what it is that anthropology is really about." If this is your decision, you can embark on a long speech about the history of anthropology, speaking about Durkheim, Mauss, Boas, Benedict, Mead, Lévi-Strauss, Bateson, Douglas, Geertz, and many others, as well as about classic themes such as kinship, exchange, religion, culture, evolution, language, symbols, globalization, and so on and so forth. Indeed, this would be a highly ambitious endeavor, and the chances of success – of actually teaching your friends and relatives what anthropology is all about – would probably, let's be honest, be very slim. Again-again, this is, of course, just in our experience.

Now, to be more serious, it is evident that anthropology can be explained in a range of ways. At our own institution, the Department of Anthropology at University of Copenhagen, all first-year students have for about 30 years now been introduced to the discipline through Thomas Hylland Eriksen's splendid introduction *Small Places, Large Issues* (2023), first published in Norwegian in 1993. The book's title alone encapsulates an essence of anthropology: the commitment to deep empirical research and the engagement with foundational human questions – the specific and the general. Or, as Tim Ingold (2018) has put it: "Anthropology, in my definition, is *philosophy with the people in*" (2018: 4, original emphasis). Such descriptions open the discipline to engage with almost any thinkable subject while, at the same time, retaining a distinct disciplinary gaze. Yet, they also indicate the broad scope and numerous possible variations and portrayals of anthropology, as we have hinted at above. For Ingold, such variations, and perhaps even disagreements, are "a sign of vitality, not of weakness" (2018: 3). Notably, he continues: "For whatever else it may be, anthropology will always be a discipline-in-the-making: it can be no more finished than the social life with which it is concerned" (2018: 3). This key

aspect – that anthropology must always “move with the world,” as it were – may also be one of the reasons why it can seem so challenging to explain in a few words what it is about.

Just a quick glance through some of the past issues of the *JBA* will hint at how business anthropology has also “moved with the world” over the years. While the first issues were highly concerned with carving out the field of business anthropology (Moeran and Garsten 2012; Moeran et al. 2012), subsequent issues have focused on a multitude of subjects such as management (Røyrvik 2013), advertising (Malefyt 2012; Olsen 2016), finance (Maurer and Mainwaring 2012; Rudnycky et al. 2013), business ethics (Gallenga 2016; Kaba 2016), culture (Schein et al. 2015), creative work (Hagen 2015; Vangkilde 2015), design (Hale 2018; Miller and Hitch 2018), and entrepreneurship (Sanyal 2019; Winn 2014), as well as ethics (Morais and Malefyt 2014) and methods (Briody et al. 2013) in business anthropology, to mention but a few. Indeed, it is by no means possible to do full justice to the many different contributions published in the *JBA*, not least because the journal draws upon a broad definition of business (Vangkilde, Breslin, and Lex 2023, 2024). This variety, and the field’s “movements with the world,” is unquestionably, we agree with Ingold, a sign of vitality and strength. But even more than this, we hope that these movements also serve to add a sense of timeliness and relevance to the journal, which make it easier to explain what business anthropology is all about, what business anthropologists do, and, not least, why it matters.

On this basis, we present in this issue a set of publications that all engage with timely and pertinent questions. In the first research article, Robin Valenzuela focuses on a challenge that ethnographic consultants increasingly seem to face: the involvement of their clients in fieldwork. Drawing on her experience as a qualitative market researcher, Valenzuela explores the ethical and practical tensions that arise when clients wish to participate in ethnographic field research, particularly when this research involves marginalized groups or sensitive topics. Valenzuela highlights the “friction of entrenched praxis” (cf. Chesluk and Youngblood 2023) in industry ethnography, with particular focus on the dominant discourse of consumer empathy. In this respect, she raises critical questions and encourages anthropologists to establish non-negotiable boundaries to protect the research subjects.

The second research article, written by Judith Awacorach, Quentin Gausset, and Kenneth Orido, addresses the timely issue of sustainability, specifically in relation to deforestation and loss of biodiversity in Uganda. The authors zoom in on the development and market adoption of green charcoal briquettes, which is an environmentally friendly alternative to wood charcoal. Crucially, however, the acceptance of green charcoal by Ugandan consumers has proved to be very slow. Drawing on observations and interviews with a number of stakeholders, the article applies Michael Porter’s (1985) value chain model to conceptualize and identify barriers

to a successful production and marketing of green charcoal. In particular, through their detailed or “thick” empirical descriptions of the value chain, the authors highlight key challenges in access to capital, production of a competitive product, and marketing of green charcoal, arguing that these are interconnected and that all aspects of the green charcoal enterprise, including support from financial institutions and governmental policies, must work simultaneously to effectively compete with wood charcoal. In other words, it is argued that what is needed to foster a more sustainable solution to energy production and consumption is a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the value chain of green charcoal.

In the next publication – an essay by Lora Koycheva – the focus is on the intersections between anthropology and entrepreneurship, both as a field of study and as a practice of venture creation. Koycheva highlights how anthropologists and entrepreneurs share particular conditions and practices, specifically concerning uncertainty, failure, and pivoting which are fundamental to the creation of both anthropological knowledge and business ventures. On this basis, Koycheva argues that anthropological thinking and practice can productively inform and shape entrepreneurial endeavors, and she calls for anthropologists to engage more directly and actively in new venture creation. Anthropologists, in a nutshell, are well equipped, she contends, to become entrepreneurs themselves.

Finally, we present what we term a video article, which comprises the ethnographic film, *Voices of Green*, by Hannah Birch and a companion piece that Birch has written together with Caroline Anna Salling about the film. Focusing on the island of Bornholm, the video article explores local perspectives on green transitions in Denmark with a specific emphasis on how residents on the island organize and act on climate change through business initiatives centered around local participation and ownership. Drawing on fieldwork at a renewable energy project and a regenerative farm, the film highlights the political and economic obstacles which the residents faced in developing their transition-oriented businesses. In the companion piece, Birch and Salling argue that visual anthropology offers a valuable lens for both understanding and supporting local ownership and action, which, they contend, are crucial if businesses are to contribute to enabling effective green transitions.

We hope that you will enjoy these different publications. While business anthropology is evidently always in-the-making, moving with the world, the publications in the *JBA* may hopefully help you explain to others what our discipline is all about and why we find it significant and valuable. Please feel free – this is really needless to say! – to use the many different *JBA* publications for this purpose. At any time.

We wish you happy reading!

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