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Foreword: Why Become a Business Anthropologist?

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Why become a business anthropologist? The first reason is obvious: it beats being unemployed. This answer, however, obscures important questions. How do you get to be a business anthropologist? You will not see many want ads designed for this career. And how would you like the job if you got it? How would you feel about the impacts of your efforts?

If these questions interest you, this book is for you. Its chapters offer many insights about the likely challenges and the possible contributions of business anthropology. As I summarize both, I will not be citing the particular chapters below. When I started to cite them this Foreword bogged down in lengthy parentheses, because my themes are further developed throughout the chapters of this interesting volume.

As for the challenges, the first has already been mentioned: you have to craft an idiosyncratic job. To do this you will need some familiarity with the world of business, a world you may not have encountered as a student. How would you gain the necessary knowledge, or at least an acquaintance with its widely used terms and concepts? It clearly can be done. Many non-business graduates find themselves hired by businesses and once there they do learn the ropes. Much of their learning is firm-specific. For would-be business anthropologists to find parallel success, they will need to find a business context where the peculiarities of technology, environment and so forth can be mastered. Their entry will likely be opportunistic, but of course it helps to find a context that matches their personal passions, whether positive or, I suppose, negative.

The fieldworker in business settings needs to understand both the local idiom and generic business concepts, such as overhead, channels, and cost of capital. The generic knowledge can also aid in gaining access to the field. For purposes of both knowledge and of access, anthropology students with an interest in business avenues could consider taking a minor in business. If they graduate without such a minor an MBA would be helpful but it might not be worth the time and the expense. As an alternative, trade books and internet offerings could prove to be worthwhile. Non-business graduates in business have to get up to speed somehow and a small industry has emerged to help them out. The problem with these options is that their value is hard to evaluate in advance. (I took the MBA route. A warning to others who try this: business school will send you into culture shock for the first semester or longer.)

Business anthropologists need to understand business language in order to interpret the speech and other acts around them. In this they are no different than any others in their need to know the language of their sites. Some of their other challenges are shared with other applied anthropologists but not typically with less applied anthropologists. One of these is the need for speed and the attendant need for a well defined focus in their studies. Another is the tendency for applied anthropologists to work in cross-disciplinary teams. This is an added source of frictions in itself but especially so as anthropologists are often expected to defer to colleagues from other disciplines, particularly economics and psychology. Moreover, the secondary role that anthropologists may find themselves in can lead to less influence over decisions about research design, report content, and ethical conundrums. The dominance of these other fields is also a reason that useful findings by anthropologists have often failed to be implemented (as the early business anthropologist Len Sayles and I have written: Sayles & Stewart, 1995).

On the downside, then, business anthropologists face the frustrations of the politics and micro-cultures of applied research. On the upside, depending on their career paths, they may be able to avoid the frustrations of the politics and micro-cultures of academic departments. Signs of the benefits of this avoidance are evident throughout this volume. The writing is straightforward. The academic jargon is minimal. Concern with research method, by contrast, is much in evidence; more so than, I believe, is typical of recent cultural or social anthropology. This can only be good, if one's goals include approximating truth as best one can and having the findings taken seriously by practical people.

Business anthropologists will not always have the impact they aspire to. However, evidence-based research, clearly presented, can succeed in having an impact in the world at large. This potential is one reason to become business anthropologists. They can, and they have, improved the design of work processes and flows and the design of goods or services thus produced. By "studying up" (Nader, 1969) rather than studying only the less powerful, they have also improved our understanding of elites who affect much of life in complex societies. They have also been able to offer their help not only to large established firms, but also to entrepreneurs who build up wealth for the poor. In all of these endeavors they can take pride for taking their place in a most distinguished tradition that began with "industrial ethnology" and continues to grow with the multiple branches of "business anthropology".

<div align="center">Milwaukee, April 2011</div>

References

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