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Close Encounters: Anthropologists in the Corporate Arena

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Abstract

The corporate encounter invites casting an anthropological gaze on the objects and practices of corporate worlds. This article delineates three perspectives of the anthropologist on this encounter: (1) with the things corporations make (products and services), (2) with the way they make them (acts of production), and (3) with organizational imperatives (corporate forms). This examination draws specifically on the work of those who operate *from within* the corporate arena by referencing papers from Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC). Corporate actors, in turn, seek more nuanced views on human experience and aim to exploit the "people" and "practices" dimensions of their existence and have turned to anthropologists in the process. A brief exploration of the hopes and disjuncture that help shape the encounter from the point of view of anthropologists' interlocutors inside the corporation rounds out this examination of the anthropologists' corporate encounter.

Keywords

Design, EPIC, organizations, practicing anthropology, products and services

> *It's the key to knowing what's working and what isn't, how people are using technology and other tools in the course of the workday, how workers extract meaning (or don't) from their work, and so forth. We all make sweeping generalizations about these and many other topics, but we don't really know. Corporate anthropology provides the possibility of actually knowing what's happening and why in organizations….*
>
> (Davenport, 2007)

> *…but their greater contribution may be in changing the conversation inside corporations, and providing voice for perspectives and people not often heard.*
>
> (Blomberg, 2009: 224)

Introduction

Upon entering the corporation-as-a-field site years ago, I began hearing talk of a training course for "Customer Obsession". The site was the back-office operations of a large corporation. The employees worked at billing, accounts receivables and collections, work that makes up some of the basic machinery of keeping a business operating. Indeed I discovered that there were not one but two such courses: Customer Obsession 1, and Customer Obsession 2. Flush in the throes of the first days of immersion in a new site, I imagined just how tricky this work of collecting money from people must be! Just what special protection *was* required to avoid provoking threats when dealing with obsessed customers angry at their billing call?

Nothing in my familial, educational, or work background had armed me with more than a passing familiarity with business, let alone how corporations ran. Who knew that they bought their pens from the local office supply store, just like me? Or that many off-shored service workers were actually eager to participate in the team-building and cultural sensitivity training mocked in the US media (albeit, as I witnessed in skits performed by service workers in the Philippines, with a healthy dose of irony and critique)? Or, as I came to learn, that Customer Obsession courses did not prepare employees for dealing with angry customers, but instead trained them to be obsessively customer-centric?

An "encounter" means an unplanned or unexpected meeting. It can also mean a confrontation or a clash. Since at least the 1960s anthropology has been engaged in disciplinary reflections confronting how anthropological forms of knowledge are both complicit with and responsive to powerful, hegemonic socio-political forms, from colonial empires to the military-industrial complex to reifications of power. This was the kind of encounter engaged by Talal Asad and his volume contributors in the 1973 *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (whose cadence I adopted for my own volume, *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* [2009]) as well as work in the tradition of the *Writing Culture* (1986) focused on a critical rethinking of rhetorical strategies of authority in anthropology.

Perhaps more benignly, anthropologists have also been engaged with encounters with a variety of actors and institutions in the constantly evolving sites of modern-day society, from cutting edge science to high finance. This is an anthropology endeavoring to make sense of the contemporary. Globalization, shifting labor and consumer markets, and everyday interactions with the products and services that businesses produce and which profoundly mediate our worlds all contribute to anthropological interest in corporations.

Notably, this interest is in some pockets, mutual. Companies have for some time sought to explore and exploit the "people" and "practices", dimensions of their existence and have turned to anthropology in the process. Whereas a human relations tradition has long existed, often in competition with scientific management, the last several decades have witnessed tugs towards the cultural in the corporation. "…[V]alues, norms, collective ethos, authority in personal relations, and participatory structures of groups now seem to be a salient and very serious frame of thinking for corporate managers at all levels" (Marcus 1998: 5). Corporate actors seek alternative means of understanding and more nuanced views on human experience, not only for the aims of rethinking their own form and identity, but also to inform everyday decisions for business advantage.

And many anthropologists have responded. Indeed when I arrived at the back-office described above, I was not there by agreement to use the site as a setting for a study whose questions and goals were defined and formulated wholly elsewhere, (e.g., a grant funded thesis project). I was there in a consultative role, as part of a joint research-consulting engagement through the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), a not-for-profit research organization affiliated with Xerox PARC and Stanford University. This was 1993. Following on work focused in and around educational settings, IRL also took on projects in the workplace, extending the activities of its anthropological affiliates at PARC such as Jeanette Blomberg, Brigitte Jordan, Julian Orr, and Lucy Suchman who had been engaged for more than a decade in investigating environments and practices of complex, technological production.[1]

The corporate encounter invites casting an anthropological gaze upon the objects and practices of corporate worlds. In this article I delineate three areas that have garnered this attention: (1) encounters with the things corporations make, that is, products and services; (2) encounters with the way they make them, with acts of production; and (3) encounters with the organization and with the corporate form. Such encounters also call for an accounting of the conceptual frames and positional stances from which the anthropological gaze is rendered. Accordingly I focus here in particular on the works of those who are directly engaged as mutual actors with others operating from within the corporate arena. I draw on work from the first eight years of the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) for this inquiry. EPIC provides an occasion for practicing corporate anthropologists to engage each other in joint sense-making. I conclude by briefly considering what underlies the view from the side of the corporation, to ask anew why those in corporations seem to invite this encounter. But first I begin by situating this corporate encounter.

Anthropology as mutual actor

There is a larger corpus of critical inquiry into the social and cultural impact of the corporate form, a corpus which is showing signs of coalescing into a sustained line of scholarship. This is evidenced by the inauguration of the *Journal for Business Anthropology* itself, in its recognition that "the limited stock market company is one of *the* most pervasive forms of social organization throughout the world" and that "business corporations of various forms are significant drivers of globalization processes, which make them focal points in our ambition to spur discussions around business anthropology" ("Why Business Anthropology?"). The 2011 *Current Anthropology* special issue on "Corporate Lives: New Perspectives on the Social Life of the Corporate Form" (Partridge et al.) is another case in point. For the purposes of this article, however, I leave aside this broader arena of scholarship on the impact of the corporate form and contain my comments to work conducted primarily from within corporate settings.

[1] Bits and pieces of the stories of both the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL) and Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) are scattered throughout the literature. Baba (2006), Cefkin (2009) and Wild (2012) address parts of this history. Suchman (forthcoming, 2011) and Syzmanski and Whalen (2011) offer exemplar descriptions of the practices of anthropological work at PARC, and Jordan (2011) offers a review of the collaboration between IRL and PARC.

The anthropological form of concern in this article operates in the borderlands of practicing and scholarly purposes and is conducted by those engaged to address inquiries of direct interest to the corporation. A participant in corporate settings in such roles as researcher, consultant, manager, and designer, the anthropologist operates as a mutual corporate actor with other members of the corporation. Anthropology is called out as an acceptable and often desired area of expertise in job descriptions for positions as diverse as product designer to learning consultant. Work can be found in management consultancies, design and market research firms, advertising agencies, small think tanks and across numerous divisions of high tech, finance, manufacturing and consumer products and services companies. Online forums – blogs, user groups and websites – have proliferated, hosting both commentary on the subjects under examination as well as to service the growing community of participants who use them to share tips, exchange resources, and invite perspective on questions and quandaries. Publication venues for sharing case studies, as well as exploring methodological considerations, are expanding. And universities are taking note as well, with new concentrations of study oriented to applied organizational and corporate work.

In the process, anthropologists are finding new ways of working and are exploring a multitude of opportunities to experiment with forms of representing anthropological knowledge. One of the key sites for such explorations is the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference, or EPIC. Held annually since 2005, the conference is organized around an innovative range of program elements with double-blind peer reviewed papers forming a large portion of the presentations.

EPIC itself emerged out of anthropologists' corporate encounter.

> The idea for this conference… has long been discussed among many of the people conducting ethnographic research in and for industry. Over the years, "we" have met in workshops, paper sessions, over dinner, drinks and coffees at a number of other conferences to ask 'Where can we really talk openly about our work?'
>
> (Anderson and Lovejoy, 2005: ii)

To be clear, anthropologists make up a significant number of the roughly 300 international participants who attend the conference annually, and anthropological concerns and frames of thought continue to occupy a strong core. However, the larger EPIC community is by no means all anthropologists. By now a well established approach across many disciplines and practices, ethnography – not anthropology – acts as the organizing basis of the conference. Indeed those whose primary area of expertise is business, computer science, sociology, and especially design are active participants.

Nonetheless the wistfulness of the question posed above – the desire for a safe place to 'really talk openly' – directly indexes the anthropological questions at the heart of EPIC. It references a desire to claim a space to push on what anthropologists who are working in business and corporations are learning without being singularly held to account for participating in the corporate sector. It also speaks to the desire to have the space to explore the theoretical, methodological and representational issues raised by this work more deeply than most practitioners' daily work contexts afford. The statement introducing the theme for the inaugural conference pushes on the kind of thinking promised by the event.

> The EPIC theme for 2005 was Sociality. Ethnographers working in industry are expected to pay attention to corporate priorities and current trends. One of the predominant corporate themes has been a focus on the individualization and personalization of products and services. Although ethnography can address this issue, one that has received less attention is the social and collective nature of people's lives. We hoped the theme "sociality" would spark debate and discussion around methods we use in our research, present our findings and conduct ourselves in industry settings. By having this common focus on the conference we collectively expand the boundaries of our knowledge and practice.
>
> (Anderson and Lovejoy, 2005: ii)

The eight year corpus of work from EPIC suggests that encounters with products and services, with production processes, and with the organizational form of the corporation itself, give shape to the corporate encounter. Sampling only from the EPIC archives admittedly leaves out other significant work by anthropologists positioned as actors in the corporate context. Recent examples such as Dourish and Bell's *Divining a Digital Future* (2011), McCracken's *Chief Culture Officer* (2009), Sunderland and Denny's *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* (2007), and articles appearing in the *International Journal of Business Anthropology* point to the diversity of such work. Indeed many EPIC presenters publish elsewhere as well. Nonetheless EPIC provides a valuable site from which to examine the corporate encounter. The conference attracts those writing as practitioners and engaged in the very development of practicing corporate anthropology. While the conference has borrowed the genre of published proceedings from some participants' (particularly those in corporate research labs) scientific colleagues, and the proceedings are taken seriously as means to demand seriousness and care in the work, there is nonetheless an openness to an active working out of ideas and challenges. Participants look forward to the conference as a place to present and sort through questions raised by their engagements, providing a pulse of the contemporary.

Encounters with products and services

One of the most vibrant sites for the corporate encounter is in interactions with the things corporations produce; with the products and services they create and put into the world. This encounter concerns casting an anthropological gaze on the meanings these products and services have, the lives they live, and how they are transformed by and are transformative of people's lives. Here anthropologists grapple with understanding how the social and cultural lives of people embrace, avoid, or transform the product and service configurations presumed by the corporation. Anthropologists are often in a position to undertake such examinations because they are being asked to in some way affect them or the markets they circulate in. While at times the work is intended to directly address the design of products and services or the marketing that will promote them, it does not necessarily entail a one-to-one correspondence between research and market or product development and can be oriented towards much broader and longer term research strategies.

Computing technologies, the internet and mobile phones show up repeatedly in the work presented at EPIC, a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that many participants are employed by the high-tech firms that fuel these industries. Asokan (2008) analyzes how computers and cell phones both disrupt and are appropriated into cultural practices for managing and negotiating between the individual and community, public and private, in India. These technologies, she suggests, help support the ability of individuals to be in multiple states at once, to be in a shared space while engaged in a private exchange. Asokan observed a range of ways that kids, for instance, manage their use of cell phones and computers by manipulating screen real estate so as to avoid a parent's likelihood of looking over a shoulder when entering through a particular door or by putting cell phones on vibrate to control when to have a conversation. She suggests they do this in order to "carve out their own space in the heart of the social activity at home" (2008: 182) while avoiding alienating the family by appearing too secretive. Similar themes are explored by Rangaswamy and Yamsami (2011), also in India but with attention to the ever dynamic mobile internet management, while others (Ortlieb, 2011;

Ortlieb and Jones, 2006; Jones, 2005; Nafus et al., 2007) have examined forms of collaboration and social management specifically mediated online and through websites.

The technology enabled home is another example. Roberts (2008) takes the reader on a journey through rural Ireland, the social life of the elderly, and challenges and opportunities for technological reconfiguration. The objects framing Robert's investigation, and the focus of the Product Research and Incubation division of Intel's Digital Health group, are "technological platforms that can support independent living for older people" (2008: 203). Informed by an understanding of changing demographics and changes to rural infrastructures (e.g., closing of public centers such as post offices and the rise of 'super' hospitals), the researchers postulate a link between technological enabled independent living and minibus service. Mobility is critical to the ability of the elderly to remain in the environments of their choice.

> Bus journeys simultaneously reveal and construct community life for passengers. Journeying makes tangible the links between the landscape, community, locality and sociality. The bus is a location where things come into alignment. The consequent conversation and reverie reveals not only the nature of place and sociality in such specific rural contexts but the importance of understanding that transport is about more than displacement. Mobility services offer a means of escaping the home – they create joy, independence, access to healthcare and sociable lives.
>
> (Roberts 2008: 209)

Ethnographic investigations revealed that "buses are as much events as they are functional 'facilities'" (p. 211) and that "for ageing passengers travel had its own intrinsic benefits" (ibid.). These findings contradicted a dominant view of enabling independence *within* the home.

> Our journeys forced us to critically revaluate the idea, and reality, of home for older people and, as such, allowed us to articulate a different vision of independent living and our potential role in enabling that. The idea of independent living is one in which a social life, and access to services, outside of the home is the *sine qua non* of independence for older people since it frees them from dependence and creates a strong sense of autonomy. In this sense the home is no longer the sole unit of analysis when understanding ageing and it might not be useful to think of the home as focus of our innovation efforts. A well

> illustrated story about the importance of infrastructures and sociality beyond the home for older people produced a fresh narrative about independent living that supplemented the existing organizational narratives of technology enabled ageing-in-place.
>
> (Roberts 2008: 214)

Money also shows up as an object of interest, for instance, in the realm of banking, finance, and investment (Beers and Whitney, 2006). Peinado et al. (2011) describe a research and design project with a consortium of French banks and insurance companies. The Altran "Club Innovation Banque Finance Assurance" wished to develop a more service-centered approach to financial services. The sponsors presented the research problem as follows: to understand people's "irrational as opposed to rational choices with respect to financial products and services" (2011: 261). They wanted the research to "investigate the changing relationship to money people supposedly were developing due to life's lengthening – how this ultimately affected their choices in terms of life savings, insurance and so forth." (ibid.)

The researchers found that more general views of money – not a response to lengthening life-span – shaped people's expectations. The mismatch between's people's broader sense of money as part of social relations and the very product-focused way in which the banks and insurance companies conceptualized it was evident. Moreover they found that issues of trust – of bankers, let alone banking institutions – mattered enormously. "Interviewees repeatedly brought back all representations with respect to bank and insurance companies to issues of trust, face-to-face contact, and ethics. The role of bank and insurance companies within society as a whole was questioned." (2011: 265). However these relational dimensions of financial services were not a part of employees' assessments, which only measured their performance on the number of financial products sold.

Anthropological explorations of the lived existence of products and services in social and cultural worlds very often reveal something different than what the producers might have imagined. In this way anthropologists are led through the filter of the object back to the corporation. They encounter questions of how products and services are brought into existence and the assumptions that have informed them.

Encounters with production

By working from within the corporate sector anthropologists enter into the processes of production. Here the concern is with how the products and services that corporations introduce into the market are produced, and includes a focus on the processes of knowledge production engaged by the corporation, processes that anthropologists participate in and inform. Reflections emerging from this work formed the core of *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter* (2009).

> Examined from the perspective of anthropological researchers engaged to influence organizational decisions and actions, the volume explores how sites of research are construed and experienced as well as how practitioner-researchers confront questions of their own positioning. The authors reflect on their struggles to prompt different ways of thinking, knowing, and doing in these organizations. Proceeding by way of descriptions of particular projects, practices, and subjects of the researchers' work, the volume also broadens the aperture to consider how ethnographic work in industry is in dialogue with broader social and cultural discourses.
>
> (Cefkin, 2009: 2)

The reflective impulse attendant to participation in processes of production is notable as well in works presented at EPIC.

In general the agreed to normative approaches for guiding action in corporations are those driven by quantitative, repeatable, and verifiable methods. Numbers, scale, planning and efficiency matter. Or as Tunstall observes: "In the business universe of production, the two main representational strategies that business decision-makers use to enable the production and distribution of services and products are (1) the chart and (2) the spreadsheet." (2006: 127). (Tunstall argues for engagement with these by way of "yielding" to the productive forces of industry in the manner of the balance of yin and yang. She advocates engaging in "seductive play" with these productive forces via eight representational strategies available to and employed by ethnographers in business settings.) These norms and the practices they engender pervade key sites of anthropological interaction in business settings including strategy (built around trends, market analysis), business planning (where business cases play a core role), marketing (driven by surveys and segmentations) and product or service development (where cost-benefit analysis, segmentations, and engineering planning all play key roles).

In the bank and insurance consortium project examined by Peinado et al. (2011) described above, the sponsors (members of participating banks and insurance companies) remained closely involved. Mostly trained as computer engineers, they tended to view qualitative research as soft and based on intuition. The work of the anthropologist required engaging the sponsors in building an understanding of qualitative research. The sponsors also tended to view people's choices about financial and insurance products as either rational or irrational. These world views influenced how products and services were developed and supported. "The clients demanded counsel, while the bank and insurance company hierarchy demanded sales." (2011: 265) Here the work of the anthropologist was to reframe the sponsors' understanding from one of rationality to that of trust.

Granka and Larvie (2008) offer sensitive reflections on the encounter between anthropologists and corporate processes of production by way of their experience working in the engineering-dominant context of Google. This is an environment where technical know-how drives processes of production and authorized expertise trumps all other forms of knowledge.

Granka and Larvie note that by getting close to users ethnographic approaches positioned them as a conduit to a kind of transformation. They would create opportunities for technologists to have a 'real' encounter with users, often for the first time. Aware that this experience had a strong affective dimension for technologists, they paid a good deal of attention to how the experience was shaped. They would often identify extreme or "edge" contexts so as to create a degree of discomfort, enhancing technologists' sense of defamiliarization and creating what they call a "conversion experience", temporalizing technologists' experience into a 'before and after'.

Nonetheless, they identify a number of ways in which their thinking and approach clashes with reigning paradigms. Whereas Van Marriwijk (2010) reports on the challenge anthropologists face in being expected to have ready-made answers, Granka and Larvie conversely suggest that their entree into processes of production denied them the status of expert. Their focus on non-experts (i.e., end-users) as legitimate interlocutors clashed with the ethos of engineering, which "has philosophical roots in a modernizing ethos that juxtaposes the expert against the naïve, and reinforces the social division between creators and consumers of technology (e.g., Holston 1989)." (p. 255) Moreover, anthropologists were viewed as being at a disadvantage when it comes to making things.

> How can we talk about specifics if we don't understand the capabilities and limitations of the tools for the creation of the technology? If we can't code, are we really qualified to debate the specifics of a technological product? Too often, we are thought of much as the people we introduce our teams to – as people who stand in as opportunities to

> rethinking some of the concepts related to technology, but not as legitimate creators of that technology. In this example, the "real" corresponds to the "naïve", or the consumer of technology rather than the creators. The "real" we broker may end up rubbing off on us, effectively turning us into "naïve consumers" rather than creators of technology.
> (Granka and Larvie 2008: 256)

These observations mirror others' observations (Cefkin, 2009; Ross, 2003) that contestations over what counts as value and who produces it continue to play out in the daily life of corporate employees.

For Granka and Larvie the corporate encounter is double-edged.

> …we find ourselves facing something of a conundrum. If it takes major shifts in thinking to produce the kinds of innovations for which we will be credited, are we then less likely to focus on the mundane, everyday failures of technology that also might show us opportunities for new and better stuff?
> (Granka and Larvie 2008: 258)

They worry that in their emphasis on creating experiences of defamiliarization for their technology counterparts "we unwittingly overemphasize the spectacular at the detriment of the ordinary and mundane" (p. 255). It brings them full circle to feelings of displacement vis-à-vis the broader anthropological community.[2] They continue:

> We may well suspect that the theatric of ethnography required to be effective in the workplace may locate us as ethnographers outside of the boundaries of "decent" anthropology. Much like in Goffman's (1963) studies of people with "spoiled" identities, we find ourselves as outsiders to multiple groups to which we might once have belonged: team members, company business planners and even our own disciplinary colleagues.
> (Granka and Larvie 2008: 258)

In yet other cases, anthropologists reflect on biases designed in to production processes. Based on ethnographic examinations of

[2] This kind of double-edged encounter is taken up directly as well by Sunderland (forthcoming) in calling out the "monstrous" role of the anthropologist in navigating tensions on the theory-practice divide. It is also a theme that emerges repeatedly and powerfully by anthropologists working in and around the military and other defense and security organizations. See Albro et al. (2011) for first hand accounts from anthropologists.

transitional spaces in Brazil, anderson and de Paula (2006) contend that there is a "we'ness" in transitional spaces, a sense of being familiar strangers, being a part of something outside the self and family. But this is something overlooked in the innovation practices of US companies. Asboe (2008) raises the question of whether and how design anthropology can participate in the productive processes of the more resource constrained small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). He suggests that the ability to dedicate focus singularly in looking at and understanding end-users is a luxury of larger firms. Instead, participation in the production processes of SMEs requires that the anthropologist play multiple roles. It requires understanding the networks through which ideas emerge and decisions are made. This, he suggests, give this anthropologist the potential to impact and reframe innovation processes fundamentally throughout SMEs.

In fact, each year at EPIC a number of contributions reflect explicitly on the impact of ethnographic work and how it lands in business (Dalal and Wall, 2005; Dautcher and Griffin, 2010; de Paula et al., 2009; Flynn and Lovejoy, 2008; Halse and Clark, 2008; Hanson and Sariemento, 2008; Mack and Squires, 2011; Schwartz, 2011; Schwarz et al., 2009; Thomas and Lang, 2008; Vinyets, 2009). Here anthropologists directly face the ways in which assumptions shaping products and services are built into the process. In turn they also confront questions of their own role in shaping the processes and results of production.

Encounters with corporate forms

A third set of encounters engaged by corporate anthropologists are those with the structures and formations of the corporation itself. This encounter concerns an inward focus on internal operations, on how companies organize to get things done and the practices and worldviews that inform them. Here the focus is of work and the workplace, casting an eye on the socio-technical infrastructures through which organizations run.

Overall encounters with corporate structures and ways of working garner somewhat less attention at EPIC. Overwhelmingly the work represented is that done to inform companies' external facing products and services. The role of the anthropologist is often equated with that of a "guide" to the outside world (Howard and Mortenson, 2009). Considerations of such things as corporate governance, organizational structures, and the everyday practices, tools and rituals of work have nonetheless dotted the proceedings. Mack and Kaplan (2009) take up the question of organizational policy. They explore what happens when a seemingly trivial corporate policy – that governing mail delivery to employees – is changed. Employed as workplace anthropologists for Pitney Bowes, a US based Fortune 500 company best known for its mail meters, their effort was commensurate with changes to mail policy due to environmental considerations, the search for efficiency, and potential Do Not Mail legislation. Within Pitney Bowes:

> The specific policy was to limit the delivery of Standard Mail (items such as catalogs, advertisements, and magazines) to Fridays only, and to stop delivering "personal" mail altogether in the three largest Pitney Bowes offices where mail services were managed by Pitney Bowes Management Services (PBMS, a business unit that provides mail delivery and associated services to hundreds of companies around the world). Up to that point all mail regardless of postage class or intended usage was delivered to employees every day. The stated aim of the policy change was to reduce the environmental impact of mail and to increase efficiency.
>
> (Mack and Kaplan 2009: 62)

Their investigation included a focus on both mailroom employees and recipients of mail across multiple divisions. They found that the policy directive was communicated through the common hierarchical cascade model, where managers were informed (by memo) of the change with the idea that they would in turn inform the employees they managed. However many managers either failed to note the change themselves or failed to communicate it to employees, resulting in employees being unaware of the changes until they received mail stamped with a notice that such pieces of mail would not be delivered in the future. This left the employees in the dark as to the meaning and intent of the policy change. In addition, implementing the policy required interpretation and took shape differently in different locations. What mail counted as "personal", for instance? Were all catalogues and hand-written pieces of mail "personal"?

Moreover, it became clear that the policy was designed without clarity as to the ramifications on people's work. For example, for some employees trade journals signaled a reminder to submit publications or investigate new tools for their work. For the marketing team, magazines and newspapers were tools for tracking advertisement placement opportunities and moves by their competitors. For a lawyer a notice from the bar association might have a bearing on the legal standing of his work. In the end not only did the policy change fail to achieve the stated goals, it ended up alienating employees, forcing a disruption in employees' sense of engagement.

> A seemingly banal internal policy can have serious implications on an organization's external image; in the present case, the change triggered strong reactions among employees as to their perceptions of the company. It also impacted the way work got done inside the business. If employees had been engaged in the policy making and implementation process, employees might not only have become "engaged," they could be directly involved in managing external perceptions of their company. Policy can be a way of engaging employees in achieving corporate goals as opposed to just telling them this is what is being done. In order to ensure that policy is followed, understood, and bought into, management would need to involve employees in policy changes and the reasons behind them.
>
> (Mack and Kaplan 2009: 69)

Blomberg (2011) also focuses on the question of what happens when corporations attempt change and uses this lens to focus attention on the limits of standardization in the context of globalization. Blomberg's case concerns the delivery of outsourced IT services such as server maintenance, application management, and help desk support. In this case manipulations to organizational structure together with process redesign were targeted as the route to change.

The transformation, informed through the principles of LEAN manufacturing as applied to service contexts, involved four specific efforts: (1) work segmentation; (2) pooling resources; (3) using metrics to identify inefficiencies and defects; and (4) worker co-location. The change to how the work was being delivered was considerable. Whereas previously service delivery personal would be dedicated to particular clients, sometimes even working at the client's location, this change moved them out of client locations into regional service delivery centers. It also reassigned the personnel into pools servicing multiple clients; they were no longer dedicated to a single client.

A fundamental goal of the transformation, Blomberg notes, was to "make the way that services would be delivered "the same" no matter the location from which they were delivered" (p. 135). Noting that this kind of standardization risked disempowering workers and resulting in ill-fitting practices, she focuses here on regional variances in the transformation. Examining four regional centralized delivery centers – two in the United States, one in India and one in Central Europe – she shows how each center's particular history and make-up strongly affected how the changes were received by employees and the unique challenges each center faced. One of the US centers was made of up seasoned employees with well established work practices, many of whom had worked from home. The move into the center where the workers were co-located caused personal disruption such as long commutes, challenged workers sense of autonomy and expertise, and disrupted relationships with "their" clients. In contrast, the other US center was newly established in a part of the country where the company had no prior presence. In this case a key challenge was the lack of experienced employees from whom to learn and adapt. The challenges in the India and Europe centers were yet different again, with the former challenged by frequent job-hopping given the highly competitive corporate IT labor market and the later faced with having to adapt their localized systems and practices into new global standards. Blomberg uses these observations and analysis to consider more broadly the hierarchical regimes of control guiding organizational management.

> The priorities in many executive suites continue to stress centralized control, including monitoring performance and compliance with enterprise standards. While there is some acknowledgement of the emergent nature of change, the organizational impulse is to attempt to control change through mandates and compliance assessments. Regimes of control make it difficult to resist change initiatives even when they are not creating the desired outcomes and can lead to behaviors where for example passing assessments becomes the goal rather than integrating the change into everyday practice. This can result in additional work with little value to the enterprise other than to demonstrate compliance. Pressure to strictly adhere to a standard even when ill-suited to local contingencies can result in adjustments occurring only after "breakdowns" which negatively affects such things as client satisfaction, employee retention, and service quality.
>
> (Blomberg 2011: 148)

Corporate events, practices and tools occasion other instances of the corporate encounter. In a prior study (Cefkin, 2007) I challenged naturalized assumptions about data and information flows by examining their context of use. I used the vehicle of meetings held to review data entered into enterprise-wide information systems, specifically sales pipeline management systems (Customer Relationship Management, or CRM) for this investigation. Regular meetings held to discuss existing sales opportunities (known as "cadences" in the fieldsite described in the paper) form an expected and familiar part of the life of sales personnel in companies of all kinds. Why do such meetings persist in an era where information systems ideally contain all the necessary information? What role do these forms of interaction play in the employee experience?

Drawing in particular on research within a global IT firm, a striking observation was that despite the centrality of numbers as core to managerial control, the work of providing and reading numbers was profoundly interpretive. For example, what did the stated dollar amount of a forecasted (but not yet finalized) sale actually reference, an estimate of the client's budget? Or was it the actual cost of the solution or a best guess about competitors' bids? One of the functions of the meetings was to engage this kind of sense-making.

In the main fieldsite discussed, a globally distributed organization, meetings were held collectively at the sales team level.

> Cadence calls (both due to geographical distribution and to allow people to call in from client sites or at home during off hours) almost always include participants joining by phone. Some cadence meetings are held entirely as conference calls. Participants often experience distraction and interference, timing their schedule to join the meeting, for example, by cell phone en route from one client call to another. Others may be joining the meeting in the middle of the night from a distant time zone. Multi-tasking is rampant and is made visible by the frequent pauses and requests to repeat questions or comments.
> (Cefkin 2007: 191)

The group element notwithstanding, the meeting operated as something of a call-and-response between the manager and each member of the team. Exchanges between the sales manager and sales team member were imperative, interchange amongst peers was optional.

Recalling that information systems are designed towards an ideal of containing all the necessary data (explored and problematized by Slobin and Cherkasky [2010] in their look at the quest for the '360 degree view of a customer' by way of massive data analytics), it's worth asking why this discussion persists. A key function of this practice and the form it takes, I argued, was to impact sellers' actions and sensibilities:

> That the process repeats from week to week with a high likelihood of the same information being reviewed repeatedly suggests that the particular significance of any given adjustment to the content is negligible…The overall form and repetition of the meeting compels the meaning of the process. The form itself generates an expectation of movement and action. This imperative, reinforced as part of the rhythmscape of business workers, exceeds the function of articulating data and exchanging information. The form of the meeting, with its repeated series of one-on-one interactions of manager and sales rep held in front of an audience …produces an urgency, an imperative to act.
> (Cefkin 2007: 197)

Encounters with corporate forms go hand-in-hand with anthropologists' up-close examination of how things work within the corporation. Other work presented at EPIC has considered such issues as employee engagement, loyalty, and change management (Brondo et al., 2005; Holmes, 2010; Martin et al., 2007). By turning a lens on what happens and how it is seen and experienced from within, the corporate encounter extends consideration of the corporate form as a particular rendering of organizational, economic and social action.

Views from the corporation

An encounter is engaged from a perspective. The question remains, what are the views of anthropologists' corporate interlocutors on this encounter? At risk of oversimplification, I wish to close by suggesting something about what motivates and shapes the encounter from the point of view of anthropologists' interlocutors inside the corporation[3].

Management guru Tom Davenport echoes a straight-forward and commonly expressed interest in anthropology, focusing on the use of ethnography as a route to "actually knowing what's happening and why" (2007). After jocularly serving up a litany of complaints about working with anthropologists….

> Anthropologists can be a pain in the butt. They will want to watch for a long time before coming to a conclusion – longer than you will deem reasonable. They will question your fundamental assumptions. They will insist on interpreting every little thing. They may even resist your

[3] Few empirical analyses of corporate members' motivations and interests in engaging anthropological work have been performed. Cayla and Arnould (2012) provide a foray down this path.

> desire to intervene in the work process they've studied, particularly if it means worse working conditions for the workers involved.
>
> (Davenport 2007)

… he nevertheless voices a bullish endorsement of its promise to achieve the kind of practical insight useful to the problem solving and innovation desires of business. This is an insight gained, according to Davenport, from ethnography's practices of observation. This view is uncomfortably embraced by anthropologists themselves who at the same time work to resist simple reductions of anthropological understanding to positivistic modes of observational enquiry (a challenge nicely explored at EPIC by Nafus and anderson, 2006).

Beyond the immediate practical implications hinted at by Davenport, a host of socio-economic dynamics also underlies corporate actors' interest in anthropology. Technological advances, global regulatory changes, labor migrations, and transnational flows of commerce are just some of the factors combining to transform the channels and dynamics of the socially embedded market. Existing markets are being extended and new markets created, reshaping local structures. A fisherman in rural Thailand or an agriculturalist in India, for example, can now use internet-enabled mobile devices to check up-to-the-minute market conditions before bringing their catch and produce to market. Consumers are increasingly buying into on-going relationships with service providers such as cellular or ISP providers and financial managers, and thus being enrolled as actors in production and supply chain processes (e.g., from computer assembly on a Dell website to furniture assembly at home after a trip to IKEA). Trends in open source and collaborative consumption and the coupling of production and consumption in user-generated, peer-to-peer production are challenging existing models of reward and ownership structures.

Deeper understanding of how these dynamics are playing out on the ground and are transforming (and being transformed by) changing worldviews promises insight relevant to the efforts of corporations to respond to and create new opportunities. Suchman notes: "Writing against the tradition of classical economics, particularly in its separation of 'the economy' from 'society' or 'culture', recent scholarship has developed the argument that economic and cultural activities are inseparably interrelated. This is so insofar as identifications of products, markets, competitors, and the like fundamentally presuppose the mobilisation of cultural knowledge" (forthcoming).

Indeed corporations themselves participate in and help catalyze moves towards open innovation and production, tapping into and engaging partner and consumer networks and inventing the mechanisms and infrastructures that support these emerging forms of engagement. They have also endeavored to respond to a perceived consumer-driven imperative. How can a company stay relevant if consumers are no longer bound by the local and can instead access global markets? And as companies enroll consumers into their production processes they are asking, similarly, what they need to know about those with whom they are now in collaboration. Hence "[f]igured as the expert on culture, it follows that the anthropologist would have an obvious currency in the making of markets" (Suchman, forthcoming).

The promise of anthropology in shaping the possibilities and futures for corporations is one way to understand the corporate encounter. Another is to view it in light of a sense of disjuncture experienced from the felt inadequacy of the dominant assumptions guiding corporate existence. Despite the rise of "the social" in the age of user-generated content, social media, and collaborative consumption, for instance, individual actors form the dominant rubric through which corporations frame their own practices, strategies, and goals. The hyper-rationalized view that goals and actions can be counted on to operate together seamlessly persists. Even where there is recognition of the social or the cultural, these tend to be viewed as variables, as discreet, if fuzzy, dimensions amenable to control and management.

And yet participants in and observers of corporate practice are regularly confronted by the breakdown of such assumptions. This was evidenced, for instance, in reporting on the 2008 economic crises. Stories circulated of how technocratic tools such as the formulas and models guiding risk management credit default swaps so mesmerized economic, political, and managerial actors that the partiality of the view embodied in these tools was ignored or forgotten. A common trope in such reports was to point to the limitations of algorithmic regimes and model-driven decision-making practices. They highlighted instead seemingly unforeseen human behaviors and practices. The perspective of New York Times columnist Paul Krugman (e.g., "How Could Economists Have Gotten it so Wrong?" 2009) resonated with that of Financial Times editor (and anthropologist), Gillian Tett (e.g., 2009), in providing an anthropologically-inflected understanding of how the economic downfall was brought on in large part due to the reified (partial) thinking of powerful actors.

Corporate managers, strategists, and even those on the front-lines continue to seek out alternate forms of understanding. Anthropology's emphasis on people and on emergent and dynamic processes of meaning construction and value formation together with anthropological modalities of engagement – working with people on the ground, bringing together multiple points of view, and engaging members themselves to face challenges and formulate responses – are seen as routes to transcend these limitations. Indeed a limited number of papers at EPIC have started to venture down the path of exploring broader, socio-economic dynamics as encountered through their practice within organizations. Bezaitis and anderson (2011) outline a approach to informing strategy through ethnographic inquiry that is framed around uncertainty and "flux". A question underlying my 2007 analysis of the cadence process used to manage the sales pipeline described above was to inquire into how corporate actors participate in the making of markets, and in particular how corporate forms add dimension to market forms as naturalized acts. I introduced the notion of a "rhythmscape" as an immersive, acoustic space which "suggests a way to identify and elaborate on performative dimensions of market production and consumption by opening up a different route into understand experience than the dominant visual and logo-centric means of interpretation." (Cefkin 2007: 198). Acknowledging that "corporate ethnography finds it extremely difficult to connect such large-scale analysis of social change with day-to-day demands of internal or external clients for research" (Wakeford 2011, 243), Wakeford proposes a shift in the framing metaphor guiding corporate ethnographic praxis from "networked sociality" (in the vein of Castells and Wittel) to Sloterdijk's "sphereology" and "social foam" as a way out of individuated, information-dominant frames of understanding. The challenge explored by Wakeford is the inadequacy of network models to attend to the shared affects which transcend the individual or assumptions of singular shared domain of action and meaning. Echoing my 2007 suggestion to attend to the extra-informational elements of corporate practice and to make room for immersive, sensorial dimensions, Wakeford argues for social foam as a conceptual resource for re-emphasizing the conditions, localness and liveness of social action.

Encounters, I intonated at the start, carry a sense of unexpectedness, even confrontation. The meetings described here are only "unexpected" and "confrontational", however, in a particular discursive space. Anthropologists' encounters with the things corporations produce, with sites and acts of production, and with the organizational form inform a very intended meeting. This is especially true of those who engage these sites as mutual actors, as active and accountable participants in these sites. Indeed this is a tale, perhaps above all else, of a motivated encounter, an encounter intended to bring about new realizations and the possibilities of change.

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