

Anthropology as ‘Brand’: Reflections on corporate anthropology

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Abstract: Contemporary theorizing regarding relations of consumption emphasizes the contingent, appropriative processes by which commodities simultaneously inflect the lives of their purchasers and are remade within the particular practices of their use. This paper takes up this theme with respect to the shifting out of anthropology from academic and public institutions into the worlds of commercial research, development, marketing and corporate public relations. I consider the consumption of anthropology within these worlds under three aspects. First, the interest that professional anthropology holds for commercial enterprise can be seen as a continuation of the longstanding promise of anthropology as a discipline that provides uniquely intimate access to relevant others: access gained by going out to territories beyond the boundaries of the familiar in order to bring back news of the exotic. Second, the interest in anthropology involves the anthropologist herself in an identity marked as exotic other within the context of commercial and technological worlds: an other brought home to live inside and become part of the enterprise. Finally, the consumption of anthropology involves us in taking onto ourselves aspects of a ‘brand’ identity, with the various dilemmas, uncertainties and possibilities that such positionings imply. In all of these ways, the anthropologist’s own exoticism derives from her association with the various others taken to be her objects of study, for whom she at once stands proxy, and whom at the same time she transforms from banal to exotic through her interests in them.

On February 24, 1991 an article appeared in the business pages of the *New York Times*, in the ‘Managing’ section, titled ‘Coping with Cultural Polyglots’. The article, by reporter Claudia Deutsch, told of a small (but by implication increasing) number of anthropologists employed by major corporations. This article was followed by another in the same year in the magazine *Business Week*, titled ‘Studying the Natives on the Shop Floor’ (Garza1991). In the almost fifteen years since similar articles have appeared periodically, with titles like ‘Anthropologists Go Native in the Corporate Village’, in the then new magazine *Fast Company* (Kane 1996), ‘Into the Wild Unknown of Workplace Culture’, *U.S. News & World Report* (Koerner 1998),

'Fieldwork in the Tribal Office', MIT's *Technology Review* (Buderer 1998), 'Coming of Age in Palo Alto: Anthropologists Find a Niche Studying Consumers for Companies in Silicon Valley', *New York Times* (Hafner 1999), 'It's a jungle out there: Corporate Anthropology: Dirt-free research', *CNN.Com* (Walsh 2001), *Fast Company* (again) (Tischler 2004) and the *New Scientist* (Knight 2004).

My most recent experience of this strange form of media perseveration occurred in 2005, when a *Business Week* reporter named Spencer Ante contacted me requesting an interview. His email message explained that he was doing "a big story on the rise of ethnography and anthropology in business." I replied that I felt that I could not bring myself to do another interview on this topic, which I pointed out had been 'news' for over a decade, including in *Business Week's* own pages. I reproduce here the next installments of our email exchange:

Spencer: I understand. For the record, though, I am not saying this is new. Rather, I am arguing that its importance has grown, and it has become more widely used and more deeply integrated throughout a larger swath of industries. I was, however, hoping you could clarify one thing: Did your research on the photocopier at Xerox PARC [Palo Alto Research Center] ... lead to any new products being built at Xerox? The legend is that you were credited with creating the green copy button at Xerox or some other easy-to-use features. If you could explain that one mystery I would greatly appreciate it...

LS: Re the clarification, this is something I would definitely welcome your writing about! Ironically, the story about the green button (as I guess with many legends) is actually the opposite of what I would characterize as my contribution, which was rather to question the green button's efficacy! This was in the context of a study of what was

named the 'operability problem' on the 8200 copier, a machine released in the late 1980s and marketed as easy to use, in part through a TV ad that focused on pushing the green start button as all one needed to know in order to use it. [SLIDE] After its release Xerox received a number of complaints from customers that the machine was too complicated, which initiated the project at PARC on which my study was based. My part of the project involved trying to understand what experience lay behind the complaint that the machine was too complicated, and the outcome of that was an argument on my part that questioned the wisdom and viability of marketing any machine as easy to use. I argued that however improved the interface to the 8200 might be (and there was certainly room for improvement), it would never eliminate the need for active sense-making on the part of the user, and that this is the case for any unfamiliar artifact, however technologically sophisticated the user might be. (I demonstrated this latter claim through case studies of several of my colleagues at PARC, eminent computer scientists, struggling unsuccessfully to use the machine for the first time.) [SLIDE] So my proposal was that the green button actually masked the labor that was needed to become familiar with the machine and incorporate it effectively into use. And that more generally the imperative to market new technologies as if they can be incorporated into working practices without any upfront investment in resources for learning is a false economy, one for which front line workers usually bear the cost. I hope this is clear.

Spencer: Thanks Lucy. It is clear indeed but begs the question: Did any of your work at PARC lead to any new products or product improvements that made things easier to use or more useful? I'm wondering if there is one clear example you can offer. It's funny

how legends grow over time. At least I won't perpetuate the false myth of the green button! [BLACK SLIDE]

I'd like to reflect on how we might make sense of this exchange's erasure of (what I at least took to be) my labors and contribution with respect to the question of machine usability, and how that could be related to these curiously reiterative media discoveries of anthropology beginning in the early 1990s. In the end Ante's article was published, in 2006, under the title 'The Science of Desire' [SLIDE], and drew the following account of anthropology's popularity: "closely observing people where they live and work, say executives, allows companies to zero in on their customers' unarticulated desires ... This makes anthropology far more valuable." Most obviously, then, these articles announce the emergence of anthropology itself as commercially valuable. Or rather, not anthropology – if by that we mean all of the contested modes of theorizing and practice that characterize the discipline – but anthropology figured, as it is in these representations of it, as a novel form of market research. The characterisation of anthropology's value to industry common to all of these media reports suggests we locate industrial anthropology within more widespread developments in consumer capitalism during the decade of the 1990s; a time, as Naomi Klein (2000) and others have pointed out, of tremendously intensified investments not only in advertising, but in advertising of a very particular kind.

Contemporary theorizing regarding relations of consumption emphasizes the contingent, appropriative processes by which commodities simultaneously inflect the lives of their purchasers and are remade within the particular practices of their use (see for example Appadurai 1988, Cronin 2003, Lury 1996, 2004, Miller 1998, Slater 1996). In this case it is the consumption of anthropology itself that I'd like to explore further. I do this through three propositions. First, the interest that professional anthropology holds for commercial enterprise

can be seen as a continuation of the longstanding promise of anthropology as a discipline that provides uniquely intimate access to relevant Others: access gained by going out to territories beyond the boundaries of the familiar in order to bring back news of the exotic. It is this promise that most obviously dominates the media reports mentioned earlier. *The NY Times* article of 1991 quotes John Seely Brown, then director of Xerox PARC, explaining that “[a]nthropologists let you view behavior through a new set of eyeglasses.” Anthropology in this context stands for a discipline other than those that identified the majority of researchers at PARC, namely computer science and cognitive psychology. The *Times* translates this difference into that between behavioural sciences of the individual versus the group, asserting that “[u]ntil recently, anthropologists – people trained to analyze group behavior – were spurned by corporations, which preferred to stress individuality and entrepreneurship.” Along with the somewhat peculiar characterization of the discipline on offer here, the proposition that anthropologists were actively spurned by the corporate world, rather than simply being invisible to it, is tied somehow to the suggestion that anthropology’s embrace is indicative of some new-found interest in the social, even some newly emergent sociality, in corporate affairs. Five years later, in 1996, the *Fast Company* article titled ‘Anthropologists Go Native in the Corporate Village’ reports (again) the enthusiasm of increasing numbers of major corporations for consultants with anthropological credentials. And as we’ve seen a decade later, in 2006, the commercial market for anthropology is still news.

As told in these stories, anthropology is taken by business as emblematic of the capacity of the social sciences, specifically new methods of observation, to aid in the expansion and deeper penetration of cultures of capitalism. Even more than the social it is the cultural – what anthropologist Charles Darrah has named ‘the unexplained variable’ – that enters the picture, as

the residual category left over after the psychologists and industrial sociologists are done with their work, the mysteries of which it is now the anthropologists' job to make accessible. The *Times* article explains that "most anthropologists study exotic cultures in faraway places," and accounts for the interest in anthropologists on the part of management as a desire of those who want to expand their operations overseas – "and nowadays, that's just about everybody" – to understand other cultures, while "at home, the same companies want help dealing with work forces that are increasingly polyglots of cultures and behaviors." Globalization, in sum, brings the exotic Other into one's line of sight wherever it falls, whether far away or close to home, and the anthropologist is the logical choice to aid in the process of learning to deal with these new multicultural challenges.

Which brings me to my second proposition. While the promise of her unique expertise may provide the rationale for the anthropologists' employ, the fascination of that employment for the media lies in the unlikely juxtaposition of anthropologist as *investigator* of exotic Other, with anthropologist *as* exotic Other in the mundane, familiar halls of the corporate workplace. The interest in corporate anthropology involves the anthropologist herself in an identity marked as exotic Other, in other words, within the context of familiar commercial and technological worlds: an Other brought home to live inside and become part of the enterprise. My colleagues and I experienced this quite directly as we found ourselves, even after many years, being hailed by some of our computer science colleagues at Xerox PARC, if we happened to walk down the hall together, with the (only semi-ironic) warning, "Here come the anthropologists!" (We ultimately took this thinly veiled reference to the Jets to heart, donning satin gang jackets with our group name emblazoned on them.) As we've seen this warning – half promise, half portent – is reflected clearly in the texts of the media reports, as well as in their titles.

With this said, I want to suggest that the anthropologist's interest for the media derives not only from her promise of special access to the user/consumer, or even from her own unlikely appearance in the halls of corporate office buildings, but perhaps most importantly from the ways in which through her traditional associations she transforms her objects of study from banal to exotic, through her interests in them. That is to say, the anthropological gaze, insofar as it is defined by its traditional attention to the Other, vicariously renders exotic those on whom it is turned. Factory floors, corporate offices and 'middle class' homes, assumed to be so transparently familiar as to not warrant anthropological attention, are turned into sites as mysterious as the colonies once were by the mere fact of the anthropologist's presence: in her making of the familiar strange, the presence of the anthropologist in the 'tribal office' transforms what goes on there – the banal and ordinary activities of the working day – into the mysterious and correspondingly interesting. The anthropologist, in short, renders 'us', the reader addressed by these media stories, as exotic Other. It is this I think, perhaps more than any of the other dimensions, which explains the 'human interest' ascribed by the media to these sightings of anthropologists in one's own back yard.

As a figure in these stories I find myself haunted by all of the myriad contingencies and specificities that they erase, and the other stories that they seem unable to tell. But the appearance of these accounts in the nineties makes clear that, however specific in their details, our peculiar histories were also part of some general trends, shifts in rhetorics and practices of multinational corporate enterprise at the close of the twentieth century.¹ Which brings me back to the question of the brand. Naomi Klein suggests one way of understanding these shifts and

their relevance to our experience when she proposes that:

The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, not products (2000: 3).

It is this basic premise as well, Klein argues, that underwrites the rapid rise of the ‘virtual’ corporation, aimed at outsourcing production to various export processing zones around the globe, then attaching an image to the resulting assemblage of parts. Unlike their industrial ancestors, the in-house work of these companies is not manufacturing, but marketing. As Klein puts it:

This formula, needless to say, has proven enormously profitable, and its success has companies competing in a race toward weightlessness: whoever owns the least, has the fewest employees on the payroll and produces the most powerful images, as opposed to products, wins the race ... Since many of today’s best known manufacturers no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and ‘brand’ them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images (2000: 4-5).

A crucial element of brand building in an age of mass production and competitive marketing is the manufacture of difference, based less in products than in the packaging of products and their association with recognizable images. As Klein recounts it, the first versions of this practice emerged in the late 19th century, with the advent of mass produced, packaged products. This change called in turn for the creation of familiar, reassuring stand-ins for the local shopkeeper, who until that time would scoop generic dry goods for individual customers out of a large bin – thus the figures of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben and their kin (Lupton and Miller, cited in Klein 2000: 6). Starting in the 1940s, brand evolved from a mascot or catchphrase on a label to the

¹ See Reardon’s discussion (2005: 91-2) of the enrollment of anthropologists in the Human Genome Diversity Project around this same time.

identity of the corporation itself. A watershed is said to have occurred in 1988, when Philip Morris purchased Kraft for \$12.6 billion, or six times the latter's equity value on paper. The price difference was explained as the value of the word "Kraft," now the greatest contributor to the company's worth. By 1998, a UN Report found that the growth in spending on global advertising outpaced the growth of the world economy by one-third (cited in Klein 2000: 9). In exploring the grounds for this intensification Klein cites David Lubars, a senior ad executive with the Omnicom Group, who "describes the industry's guiding principle with more candor than most. Consumers, he says, 'are like roaches – you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while'" (2000: 9).

According to Klein investment in brand actually hit a small stumbling block in 1991, with the advent of the un-hip bargain basement alternative to branded products. But those companies most invested in brand-building simply redoubled their efforts – Nike, Apple, the Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Disney, the Gap, Starbuck's and their ilk. It is here as well, in the early nineties, that we find the rise of 'lifestyle' marketing, increasingly abstract 'high-concept' advertising, and the first initiatives in the design of shopping 'experiences'. The search for "brand essence," Klein proposes, moved companies progressively away from individual products and their attributes "toward a psychological/ anthropological examination of what brands mean to culture and to people's lives" (2000: 7). Klein quotes Scott Bedbuy, Starbuck's vice president of marketing (previously at Nike), who explains that "'consumers don't truly believe there's a huge difference between products,' which is why brands must 'establish emotional ties' with their customers" (2000: 20). Hence "the Starbuck's experience." As Celia Lury sums these developments, the market exchange is now a matter "not merely of ... calculation, but also of affect, intensity, and the reintroduction of qualities" (2004: 7). And the performativity of the

brand, Lury observes, depends on the compulsory inclusion of consumers as information sources, insofar as "information about consumers is used as a basis for multiplying the qualities or attributes of the product and managing relations between these multi-dimensional variables in time" (ibid.: 9). The brand under the sign of relationship marketing works to entangle the consumer in an exchange that extends beyond any specific object, or any given transaction.

It is surely no coincidence, then, that it is around this same time that the media begin to proclaim the discovery by industry of the discipline of anthropology. The reinvention of the consumer as a social/cultural – rather than strictly rational – actor in contemporary economic and marketing imaginaries is both a condition of possibility, and the central charge, for the anthropologist figured as the medium through which the consumer can be known within, or translated into, sites of production. As at least a minor player in these developments, anthropology had a role both as brand (offering human interest and public relations caché to corporate employers via the media), and as social science (promising new and appropriable insights into worker and customer ‘culture’ and ‘experience’.)

In her discussion of the significance of brand as an object of sociological analysis, Lury proposes that the brand is "a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space" (2004: 2). The modes of organising involved at once promote and inhibit, or at least attempt to manage, relations between producers and consumers. The anthropologist as brand, similarly performs a kind of interface, at once connecting producer and consumer, and through her mediatory role helping to limit and make manageable their interaction. A full analysis of the set of relations that comprise the anthropological brand, and the ways in which the corporate anthropologist is called upon to enact those relations over time, is work for a more extended analysis. For the moment I simply note the reflexive character of the

anthropologist's relations to the making of brands, insofar as her own brand efficacy operates through the promise of its contributions to this same process. Through its performativity the brand becomes a figure, an assemblage, that operates in these ways through repetition, and through accretions of agency over time and within specific cultural imaginaries. While announced each time as an innovation, the sightings of the anthropologist in industry that I've cited here work as well to fix the anthropologist's position as envoy of a discipline that, in Lury's words, if not a matter of certainty is at least an object of possibility (ibid). As a disciplinary identification that carries its own caché, the identity of anthropologist in turn doubles back to work as a novel contributor to what Lury identifies as the "feedback processes in which information about competitors and the consumer is fed back into production," making the brand itself dynamic (2004: 3).

Like any brand, the task of the anthropologist is to differentiate (helping to constitute her discipline as unique, and the enterprise in which she works as innovative), while at the same time to integrate the brand (both her own and that which she represents) as singular and coherent (see Lury 2004:8). The discipline as brand promises to sustain the abstract equivalence of persons in time, while serving as a resource for the differentiation of products as well as of producers and consumers. As with the branding of the product the aim is to achieve both an assurance of sameness, in the sense of a guarantor of consistent quality, and of difference, in the form of novelty with respect to previously available offerings. It was in this respect that media citations operated as a kind of imperative for us as Xerox PARC's anthropologists. And while there is no trademark on the disciplinary name, there are at least contests over what kinds of credentials warrant the claim, and over the shifting sense of 'ethnography' as a practice inextricably

embedded in the colonial and intellectual history of anthropology, or as a free-floating signifier for a method, albeit one that is itself contested.

So what does this mean for those of us concerned about these appropriative translations of anthropology, but at the same time not wishing to be drawn into exercises of purification or policing of disciplinary boundaries? Klein herself points to one direction for action, tracing out lines of global production and commensurate practices of exploitation, and aligning with the efforts of growing network of activists and resisters: Adbusters involved in sabotaging corporate billboards, activists campaigning against Shell Oil's murderous practices in Nigeria, British environmentalists who have turned McDonald's libel suit against them into a global platform for critical cyberactivism. Klein keys off the name "Spiders," adopted by student activists working to pressure multinationals not to engage in business with Burma, to suggest that the web of what she calls the "logo-linked globe" might actually afford the threads through which a new wave of activism and re-spinning is emerging (2000 p. xx).

But is there also a position from which to work that remains inside "the engine rooms" of early 21st century capitalism (Wacjman 1991: 164)? Do these analyses, however crucial, encompass all that we need to address for a critical anthropology of consumption? This shift in our own positioning turns our attention toward industry, science, technology, and commerce and provides us with new fields of study. At the same time, in 'going native', we are incorporated into those fields, working within the very same conditions and metaphors that are our subject matter. Our work as anthropologists sits uncomfortably inside the close-knit interweaving of consumer experience understood as something prior, discovered through anthropological investigation and then addressed by design and marketing, and consumer experience understood

as constituted *through* activities of design and marketing, in their contributions to the creation of desire and the crafting of cultural imaginaries. I do not believe that we can resolve this tension. But in a critique with some relevance to Klein's treatment of brand, Daniel Miller reminds us that, in his word, "things matter." He cautions against the danger that in taking up the cultural analysis of consumable things we find ourselves contributing to, rather than refiguring, dominant forms of commodity fetishism (1998: 9). As antidote he proposes that we attend to the "mundane sensual and material qualities" of the object, and through those qualities find the connections to lives and the cultural imaginaries that animate them. Rather than exploit the juxtapositions of Western goods in exotic contexts that globalization affords the cultural theorist, for example, he urges that we aim for "a nuanced sense of just how these encounters are experienced and how what have been represented as grand clashes of meta-symbols become the mundane reality of everyday life" (1998: 19).

Closer to home, in his essay *A Theory of Shopping* (1998), Miller looks at everyday consumption in North London, at the routine provisioning of the household, and offers a compelling demonstration of what an anthropology of consumption could be that attends not to shopping as a thing in itself, but as an expression of contemporary social relationships. Commodities in this sense, he argues, are "the material culture of love," through which we, not simply the corporate marketers, constitute desiring subjects not only of ourselves but also of those for whom our purchases are made (1998: 8). This shift in orientation leads to a recognition that, in addition to being one of the icons of brand and experience marketing, companies like Starbucks have created actual places, with particular qualities, in which – if one has the necessary resources – one can find real, material stuff: an almost decent cup of coffee and a comfortable place to drink it, for example. Amazon.com, in addition to its virtual,

worldwide front-stage façade, is an extraordinarily complex worksite and logistical achievement, involving a very real back-stage of labor and the movement of things, that delivers sensually tangible objects to our doorsteps – a frontstage/backstage, virtual/material hybrid that, in my view, is ripe for ethnographic investigation.

Typically applied to an association of images and things, an interweaving of signs and commodity objects, I've proposed in this paper that we consider the brand as taking persons, or more accurately disciplines, as its object. Along with the increasing virtuality of consumer capitalism go the persistent threads of materiality and desire that comprise our everyday lives, as consumers *and* as participants in a multiplicity of other life projects. Image and substance, marketing and design are inextricably interwoven in these places and in the things they offer us, which is part of what makes them both insidious, and powerfully seductive. Unless our stories of consumption can come to grips with these specific materialities, we will have missed something substantial about the place of stuff and its power to enroll us, however unwittingly, in the increasingly asymmetrical and inequitable flows of labor, goods and capital around the globe. As anthropologists and as consumers, our problem is to find the spaces that allow us to refigure the projects of those who purchase our services and from whom we buy, rather than merely to be incorporated passively within them.

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