

EDITORIAL COMMENTARY
FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY: PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS
ANTHROPOLOGY IN FRANCE

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European professional anthropology developed in the second half of the twentieth century by designing its distinct work style and requirements, which originated in real practical needs on the one hand and under the influence of European philosophical ideas and scientific thought on the other. While American business anthropology was expanding already at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on areas of organizational theories, improvement of social welfare, work conditions, and boosting productivity, the European profession was seen as an academic tool invested in understanding rural communities, distant tribes, and unusual urban environments such as religious groups or poverty suburbs. A breakthrough in the image of anthropology as a useful tool for business and analysis developed in the early eighties, with increased awareness of the need for better and more useful organizational theories, and with the emerging value of “culture” as a core value within the corporation structure. In addition, there was deeper knowledge of new forms of research and psychological analysis of consumer behavior, and as a result, both psychology and sociology were emerging disciplines in the fields of marketing and the study of consumption habits.

However, social sciences and their professional consultants and analysts were not part of industries and businesses, therefore research in the new field was conducted within the domain of business schools, and was centered mostly on developing and analyzing theories of organizations. Only in the nineties, anthropology surfaced above other academic disciplines as an important practical tool for a variety of different businesses, long after it had already established its value as a business specialty. New publications about the importance of cultural understanding, the meaning of corporate culture, and the growth of urban environments, led to creative ways of looking at urban spaces of cities as modern “tribes” and as small “cultures” that are separated and unified simultaneously. Thus, the place of social sciences as a business tool was established with the modern city becoming a new anthropological sight of social research, and ethnography spread and flourished throughout Europe. By the beginning of the twentieth century, each European country developed its unique forms of analysis and of business anthropology and research.

French practicing anthropology has been one of the important pioneers of professional anthropology, and it became a leader in the field with the establishment of a major academic doctoral program in social sciences that offers research and training for professional practitioners. The program was founded by Dominique Desjeux and Sophie Alami at the beginning of the millennium, and so far it has supported numerous practitioners that include both

academics and practicing anthropologists working in a variety of businesses and industries. However, the program is the outcome of the distinctive historical development of the field in France and it is a result of the unique way social sciences are perceived in the culture. Scientists and academics were recruited by the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) already in the 1960s, and academics were working for both private and governmental companies. Developments in social psychology emphasized the importance of understanding the psychology and the hidden desires of consumers and yet, academic anthropology was kept separated from the business work and the corporate consultancy until anthropology expanded and developed a whole new way of looking at social interaction.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO COMPLEX SYSTEMS:

In 1979, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar published a book presenting a remarkable and unusual ethnography on the daily life and scientific work conducted in a science laboratory. The book, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, became one of the most influential research publications not only in the studies of science and technology but also in anthropology and in a variety of research methodologies, and it quickly led to a major breakthrough in academic thinking¹. Latour and Woolgar were aiming to conduct ethnography of the actual process of scientific work and the way scientific knowledge is discovered, formed, and turned from knowledge into known and acceptable scientific facts. From a traditional ethnography and observations of the “tribe” of scientists at work, the ethnography developed into a complex description detailing complicated interrelationships between many of the participants that were engaged in the work process and in the writing process, as well as the internal competition between the individuals and the questions of institutional competition and professional prestige. All became part of the complex system that formed the lab work and daily activities. Even inanimate objects, such as the laboratory tools, turned out to be an integral part of the ethnography and valuable social agents in the construction of the scientific tribal system. The book and the research were the foundation and the basis of the ANT (Actor-Network Theory) that Latour developed later, and the concepts of “network” and “culture” gained new meanings that were more complex than before. Anthropology and its traditional goals became more flexible and new forms of research in the modern society were growing following the footsteps of previous social sciences disciplines, like psychology and sociology that were by then well-established and conducted with official associations and sponsored research groups.

¹ Latour, B., S. Woolgar. 1979. *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton University Press.

By the mid-nineties, French anthropologists were shifting to discussions on various aspects of French anthropology and the unique aspects of organizational theories, which support the idea that different cultures have developed different organizations and corporation styles and therefore anthropologies of organization culture should differ from each other. Business anthropology was growing and it was still focusing on organizations and on adding knowledge to theories of culture and structure, but the theories were no longer useful for understanding the individual people they were studying and for developing a better business with good human relationships at work and satisfied clients and customers that keep steady profits and market value. The time and need for new ideas had arrived.

RESEARCH-ON-DEMAND (ROD) AND THE MOVEMENT FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY:

“Anthropology is effective not because it is a better science but because it allows actors, customers, activists, journalists, and everyone who uses it to shift the way in which they inquire about their problem when a situation seems blocked,” explains Desjeux, one of the important main leaders of professional business anthropology². The work starts from a request of the industry or the business and not from the academic research or from a search seeking to form a theory. This is an opposite view of the traditional way in which many business anthropologists still work in the world. In most fields, a thesis, a question, or a planned ethnography precede the request, unless the business agency approached directly a professional consultant or a market research company. The academia and the businesses are still separated in most countries. The road to blend academic practical theory with creative and striking ANT ways of looking at the world is still ongoing and has a long way ahead. But it has already taken its first steps and more and more practices adopt new ways of thinking and acting.

The Professional Doctoral Program in Social Sciences set a goal to provide students a new direction for the future, to enhance inter-disciplinary interaction in the studies and in the work spaces, and to create better connection between academic analysis and the business world. This is the first step towards training professional academic students to actual work outside of the university in the hope to spread anthropology in different industries. The articles published in the journal present several important ideas of the new directions, ethnographies, and researches conducted by practicing socio-anthropologists in different fields of work, and they reflect the development of the profession and its current status. Hopefully, it will provide new insights to academics and business people and will encourage engagement in the new way of looking at business and society as one interconnected unit rather than units that seek connection.

² Desjeux, D. 2014. “Professional Anthropology and training in France”, In Denny, Ritta and Patricia Sunderland (eds.), *Handbook of Anthropology in Business*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, page 102.