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Pathways to the Future

Business Anthropology Matters
Greg Urban
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The business anthropology wave.

For-profit business corporations are, along with nation-states, arguably one of the most powerful institutions shaping the modern world. My interest in business anthropology developed as I tried to study them, which began in the year 2000. I had just completed a theoretical book concerned with the movement of culture through the world and the forces at work on cultural motion. I was intrigued by culture as something that enabled people to peer into the future, and guided them along different pathways. A reflexively shaped vector of futurity, indeed, seemed to define the modern landscape, with desire for the new popping up everywhere. The for-profit business corporation seemed to me the institution most central in satisfying that desire, touting as it did the "all new Jeep Grand Cherokee," or the "magical and revolutionary iPad."

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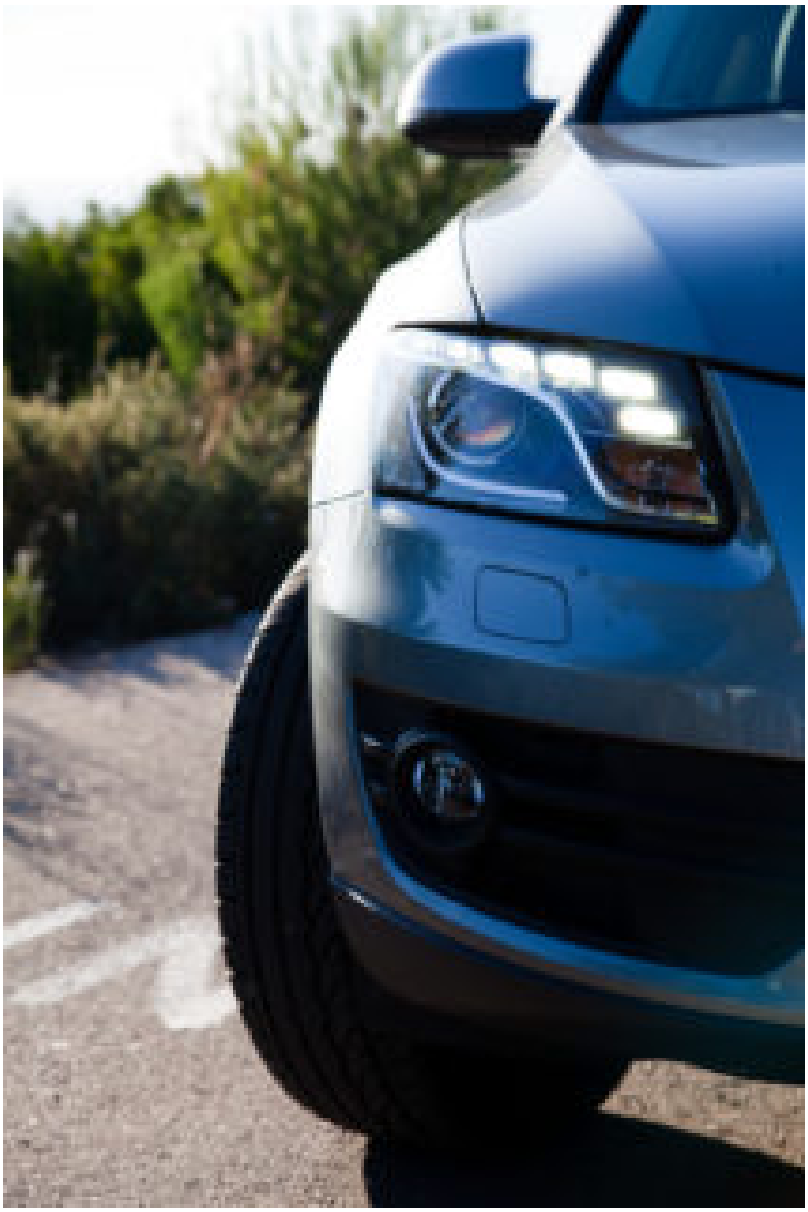
What was the corporate production of the new was all about? Just how new was the "all new"? How did those inside corporations view newness? How were they constructing the future? More abstractly, how did talk about culture give future shape to culture? I considered such talk to be metacultural, where I understand metaculture to be culture that is about other culture, the way film reviews, for example, are about films.

SUVs were popular in 2000 and their production formed my focus. I traced changes to the exterior form of the SUV as a complex sign vehicle, embodying an aesthetic sensibility and functionality. At the start of the research the SUVs all looked fairly similar to me. I noticed that some years the auto companies heralded the "all new" as opposed to the simply "new." Could people distinguish the

difference? The **survey style work I carried out** demonstrated that in fact they could, at least in most cases, whether because the distinctions made sense to them in terms of emic schemes, or because the surface differences were patent. The continuity in surface form was evident to me, but gradually I too saw the difference marketers were pointing out with the "all new" part. What were the disjunctures in form every 6 or so years all about?



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I needed to talk to people working inside the corporations, do ethnography, and study the vehicle form as a tangible embodiment of culture. Making use of contacts I had, I made some partial and limited inroads. The young engineers and designers in these companies were often eager to produce truly new vehicles from scratch, without relying on the past. But the companies had their own internal cultures and ways of doing things. They had accumulated vast quantities of knowledge and technical know-how. They understood that the new model would produce an uptick in sales, but only if it was not too new. Correspondingly, the effectiveness of the new wore off over time, and for this reason product cycles are measured in years. This has led companies to plan cycles of newness.

A bit of serendipity was involved in what nudged me further in the direction of business anthropology. The business school (Wharton) at the university where I teach (Penn) was engaged in creating a doctor of education program for Chief Learning Officers (CLOs). CLOs are individuals charged with creating training programs for new and continuing employees—that is, transmitting culture. In some ways, they are among the corporate employees most similar to anthropologists. Many of the largest companies have CLOs,

who often create and run their own “universities” inside of corporations—like **Hamburger U** for McDonalds or **Jet Blue U** for Jet Blue airlines.

I was invited to give a presentation to the first cohort of CLOs in which I was to talk generally about culture. I was also tasked with making anthropology relevant to business. Held in the Lower Egyptian Gallery of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, with dimmed lights and elegantly laid out tables, the event revolved around my interactive PowerPoint presentation. I was in a liminal space, neither inside corporate headquarters nor within my familiar academic haunts. This was a space of contact and transformation where the corporate and university worlds met.

Anthropologists are used to thinking about giving back to the communities in which we conduct research. The same is true in business anthropology. Access to for-profit organizations involves some measure of giving back, even if that giving back only consists of communicating to businesses what their internal culture is. Moreover, the “giving back” of the business anthropologist with respect to clarifying the internal culture of the business is often the result of working on company specific problems, which is more the norm.

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That same year, I began teaching a course, The Anthropology of Corporations, for which I invited some of the CLOs to be guest speakers. I let them all know that I was looking for research projects, and six or seven projects immediately materialized. The CLOs were interested in having the students and me conduct ethnographic research on cultural issues the companies were facing. How could they better cope with cultural conflicts after a merger? What factors impeded an intra-company transition from a B2B (business to business) to a B2C (business to consumer) orientation. Why wasn’t their company seen as sufficiently innovative? It was eye opening how many problems companies faced were cultural, even as understood by the executives themselves. Anthropologists who look at business enterprises exclusively through their negative external effects often regard the corporate form itself as evil. This in turn has led some to see business anthropologists as working for the enemy. In my own experience, however, business anthropologists are those whose work helps to humanize the corporation. Anthropology as a discipline would benefit from an open dialogue between those engaged in working with corporations to build a better world (business anthropologists) and those offering critical appraisals of corporations based upon external assessments of harmful corporate effects, also in an effort to build a better world.

Is anthropology best suited for the role of external critic of the corporate form? Can it also or alternatively help to steer corporations from the inside, through business anthropologists, making companies better contributors to broader social well-being? These are questions our discipline ought to take seriously.

As for me, I continue to focus on the **corporation as a cultural form, as a human construct that exists within the flow of culture**, as one that contributes to the trajectories over time of culture as we experience it. The research puts me in close touch with the corporate production of newness, and with the human life that animates the cultural form. It leads me to see the enormous potential of anthropology for reshaping popular understanding of the corporation—as I will argue at this year's Annual Meeting in the **Business Matters** session. Anthropology can help to humanize the corporate concept, rescuing it from the objectifying legal conception, as well as from exclusively rational actor approaches.

How and why for-profit corporations both shape and satisfy the desire for the "new" cries out for anthropological research. To study for-profit companies from the inside, you must, become something of a business anthropologist, working on research agendas that make sense to a company's leadership. In addition to access, however, the business anthropologist also acquires the possibility of influencing the future of a company, helping it to find — if it has not already found one — its own humane pathway into the future.

Greg Urban is the Arthur Hobson Quinn Professor of Anthropology and current Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Among his books are ***Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World***, and, as editor, ***Corporations and Citizenship***. Visit his website at **http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~gurban/**.

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