Handbook of Anthropology in Business

Rita Denny, Patricia Sunderland

Decentering the Origin Story of Anthropology & Business: The British Experience Since 1950

Publication details
Simon Roberts
Published online on: 30 Jun 2014


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
3

Decentering the Origin Story of Anthropology & Business: The British Experience Since 1950

SIMON ROBERTS

A quick survey of the journalistic work that has reported on anthropology in business could lead you to believe that use of anthropology in business is a recent phenomenon. That survey might also create the impression that it is primarily an American phenomenon. The origin myths of corporate anthropology tend to locate the genesis of the practice in the United States: enter tales of Xerox PARC and the campuses of other American technology corporations such as Intel and Microsoft. This tendency towards geographical bias in the story of anthropology's application can therefore also be seen as an institutional one. And yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, the story is a little more complex and a lot more interesting than business and mainstream journalism would initially contend. This essay seeks to fill in some of the gaps in the story of anthropology's engagement with business with a particular focus on British anthropology and its development in the second half of the twentieth century.

TRANSATLANTIC INTERACTION

The long history of business anthropology, which can be traced to the early 1920s, is not a solely American affair: there was interaction between British academic institutions and anthropologists during the period when anthropology in business was starting to develop. However, the bias in the story towards American activity and individuals is somewhat legitimate in that it was in the United States, at least for the most part, where the early experimentation and interaction between industrialists and anthropologists occurred.

A definitive story of anthropology in business does not exist, but a number of accounts tell the story of engagement that involves individuals from Britain.
and the United States. For example, three essays by Baba (2006, 2009, 2012) provide a rich picture of the interwoven efforts of philanthropists, pioneering social scientists (not just anthropologists), and industrialists that are both international and interdisciplinary in nature. For example, Baba’s 2012 introductory essay to the first edition of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* emphasizes Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski’s contribution to the early application of anthropology in industrial contexts in America. More pertinent to the argument in this essay, Baba’s essays demonstrate the importance of the financial assistance provided by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial to Malinowski and the London School of Economics (Baba 2012:27).

This New York–based foundation simultaneously supported the earliest forms of business anthropology in the United States and sustained what, at the time, was one of the only UK academic departments teaching anthropology. The picture that emerges from Baba’s accounts, and from that of Mills (2002), is one of exchange: British or British-trained anthropologists were active in the United States and participated in some of the earliest efforts to define the practical ways in which anthropology could be applied to business and industrial welfare problems. For example, the contributions of Radcliffe-Brown were central to the development of the Human Relations School, a group founded in Chicago that focused on direct observation of organizations and behavioral interactions (see Baba 2012:42). On the other hand, philanthropic support flowed back across the Atlantic to support the academic and colonial research endeavors of key British departments.

However, when it comes to the very earliest practical explorations of how anthropology could engage in business the action is, without doubt, in the United States, the earliest examples being the “Hawthorne Project” at Western Electric (led by Elton Mayo and W. Lloyd Warner) and the Yankee City research project, led by Warner (see Baba 2012:38–40). A series of detailed accounts of such work has been published elsewhere (see Baba 2009, 2012); however, it is worth noting Baba’s conclusion that “without the conceptual contributions of British social anthropology” this work would not have been possible (Baba 2012:42).

Even more relevant here is that the literature records no such sustained efforts or success in Britain between 1920 and 1930, when this pioneering work was taking place in the United States. As Mills’ (2006) account suggests, the earliest efforts to foster engagement between industry and anthropology did not occur until the late 1940s, when, as in the United States, the focus was on industrial and social welfare of workers. In the United Kingdom, the overtures came from industrialists to anthropologists, not the other way around. Baba attributes this in part to a greater focus on pragmatism in the United States. It certainly seems as if British anthropologists were happy to be involved in the
United States, and British institutions happy to receive financial support from
the philanthropic funds of industrialists such as Rockefeller, but the unease
with actually applying anthropology in industrial contexts in the United King-
dom held back British anthropology longer.

The early start that anthropology in business got in the United States and
the existence of corporate environments that more obviously nurtured sus-
tained anthropological involvement in business over the course of the twen-
tieth century has resulted in a tendency for accounts such as Cefkin’s volume
Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter (2009) or Sunderland and Denny’s
Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research (2007) to be tilted, geographically
and institutionally, to the United States. But, I would suggest, there is another
absence in these stories. While they both provide very rich and complemen-
tary accounts of how an academic discipline was incorporated into a variety of
business contexts, neither of these volumes explicitly relates that story to the
discipline of anthropology itself during the same period, in the United States
or elsewhere.

This chapter will neither belabor the point about a bias in previous accounts
toward the United States, nor deny that there exist some good, if partial,
accounts of the endeavors of anthropologists in business within Europe (Pink
2006). Instead, I have two more specific aims. The first is to sketch some fea-
tures of the story of the development of business anthropology in the United
Kingdom from the late 1940s to the present day. I use the word “sketch” advis-
edly because there are gaps in the story (which are opportunities for deeper
research). The second is to demonstrate that the story of anthropology’s appli-
cation in business (or elsewhere for that matter) should not be divorced from
an understanding of the development of the discipline itself. I attempt to link
these two through telling the intertwining story of anthropology’s development
inside and outside British academic departments.

I argue that for much of the twentieth century, at least until its expansion in
the 1980s, British anthropology was a relatively niche discipline that did not
create many anthropologists. Since very few anthropologists were “produced”
overall, even fewer anthropologists existed to craft careers as anthropologists
outside academe. Further, the elite universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and the
London School of Economics (LSE) dominated the discipline. These depart-
ments were led by conservative figures who largely resisted the idea that anthro-
pology should engage with nonacademic fields of practice. In that sense, the
central concern of these departments was the establishment and reproduction
of the discipline. The fact that the discipline was small and dominated by a
small number of (conservative) departments held back the development of
a cadre of self-consciously applied anthropologists and any recognizable brand
of applied anthropology, be it in business or any other setting.
However, two environmental factors—one threatening, and the other nourishing—created the conditions in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, for anthropology’s expansion outside of British academic departments. By the 1980s the discipline had strengthened—both in terms of the numbers of students it was producing and the diversity of the departments in existence—such that the conditions for its flourishing outside of academe were in place.

The result is that in the second decade of the twenty-first century it is possible to argue that, happily, the prospects for doing things “beyond the department” with an anthropology degree in the United Kingdom look as good as they ever have. There are strong departments in many universities and a growing awareness of the career paths that are available to graduate anthropologists, evidenced by an increasing appetite to engage with and learn from those practicing anthropology in business, and to develop courses (such as design anthropology and digital ethnography) that are consciously angled towards new applied directions that have emerged in the last decade or so.

My interest in writing this story is not to provide some strictly chronological account of the relationship in the form of a “who, why, and when” history but to develop an account that accentuates the different trajectories of anthropology and anthropologists in this period and explores the attitude of different academic bodies and individuals to these developments. The account leans on my own journey from anthropology student in the 1990s to my current status as a consulting business anthropologist. My story is not unique or outstanding, but it is underpinned by two important propositions: namely, it fits into a wider narrative about British anthropology and career possibilities for those with an anthropology degree in Britain, and it is representative of a shift towards engagement with industry by the discipline.

FROM DINNERS AT CLARIDGE’S TO AN EVENING AT PIZZA EXPRESS

In 2003 three British anthropologists, Jonathan Spencer, Anne Jepson, and David Mills, explored career possibilities for postgraduates by setting out to establish the career journeys of a 10-year cohort of PhD anthropologists from UK universities between 1992 and 2002. That Spencer had taught me as an undergraduate, and subsequently supervised my PhD research, further encouraged my interest in his research when I received the survey his team had produced.

The stimulus for Spencer, Jepson, and Mills’ work was a clear sense that postgraduate career paths were changing. Their objective was to inform the development of teaching to better prepare students for their likely occupational future. If, as they suspected, more anthropology PhDs were being produced...
than ever before, and the number of jobs in anthropology departments was shrinking, what might the future hold for those embarking on postgraduate research? By charting the career journeys of a 10-year cohort of PhD students from UK universities, they intended to produce a high-fidelity picture of the opportunities or challenges presented to these students and British anthropology departments.

Their research quickly identified that a unified record of the 765 anthropology postgraduates between 1992 and 2002 did not exist, and would have to be created, and that finding those operating outside of academe would require a certain amount of sleuthing, use of personal networks, and “targeted Googling.” What they found out from the 309 of those 765 that they were able to contact was consistent with Gerald Mars’ characterization in an *Anthropology Today* editorial (2004) of anthropology as an “exploding discipline” whose members had dispersed throughout the workplace galaxy. However, many were self-consciously labeling themselves as anthropologists even if their job, in their own or others’ estimations, did not resemble something anthropological in nature. The anthropological identity was, it seems, enduring, whatever the career path that had been chosen.

The snapshot that Spencer, Jepson, and Mills were able to create was in some ways consistent with their initial expectation: the anthropology departments at Cambridge, Oxford, and LSE were most successful in producing anthropologists who went on to establish academic careers in anthropology departments. In that sense, the historical dominance of a few key departments that produce academic anthropologists continues. Elsewhere, anthropologists were found in other departments ranging from sociology, religious studies, development, and nursing studies. Overall, Spencer and Mills concluded that between 60 and 65 percent of the cohort were in academic employment somewhere in the world (Spencer et al. n.d.).

Of those in the United Kingdom working outside of academe, they found 21 percent working in national or local government and another 17 percent working within UK and international nongovernmental organizations and in the charity sector, both as managers or social researchers. Finally, they identified that 13 percent of the cohort worked in commercial organizations, such as research and consultancy firms.

I completed my PhD in anthropology in 2000. I had been in touch with Jonathan Spencer not long before he started work on the survey project, and I recall feeling somewhat sheepish about admitting that I was working in the private sector. My own hesitancy about “breaking cover” betrayed my own squeamishness about “selling out” (or being accused of having done so). Of course Spencer’s response was more gracious than I might have been expecting, and he
was more than a little intrigued by what I was up to. As his research was to
discover, my own career choice was not one pursued by many postgraduates in the
10-year cohort.

My own sense that I had transgressed an unwritten but well-understood
boundary demarcating the “pure” environs of an academic career and the im-
purity of the private sector has a long tradition in British anthropology, and
elsewhere. As David Mills (2006) has argued, there is (or at least had always
been) a “serial ambivalence” about the virtue and utility of anthropology being
applied outside of academe (Mills 2006:56). As he outlines in his entertaining
account of British anthropology’s prandial relationship with “Captains of Indus-
try” in the late 1940s and 1950s, neither party could quite decide on the value of
that relationship. As his essay makes clear, anthropologists like Edmund Leach
and Meyer Fortes were unclear about the morality of applying anthropology to
the workplace to help solve some of the issues faced by industrialists in postwar
Britain. Further, and more troubling in their mind, they questioned the suit-
ability of the subject’s methodologies to examine these questions. Leach was
particularly cautious about the scale of the claims made on behalf of anthro-
pologists, noting in a letter to Israel Sieff, a British industrialist who was lead-
ing the efforts to establish a relationship between anthropologists and British

Figure 3.1. Employment of anthropology PhDs completed in the UK between 1992
and 2002 now working outside academia (Spencer et al. n.d.).
Industrialists: “The fact is that the anthropologist really does not know whether or not his subject has any important practical applications, but when anyone holds out a financial carrot he tends to invent them” (Mills 2006:60).

And yet, on the other side of the fence, the “Captains of Industry” with whom they had a series of meetings, from companies such as Unilever, ICI, and Marks & Spencer, found the arcane language and predilection for conceptual thinking of these “anthropological mandarins” hard to penetrate. On reading a memo from Meyer Fortes, one industrialist admitted to another that having read the document several times over, he still did not understand it: “I think there is a difficulty of communication. It would seem there is considerable difference between the nomenclature in general use in anthropological circles and in the business world” (Mills 2006:63). Equally, they found these anthropologists’ unwillingness to truly consider how their discipline might be of use to industry mildly off-putting. As a result of this hesitancy, the proto-relationship between the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) and industry (as personified by the leaders of these large businesses) never blossomed despite the best efforts of its two main boosters, Israel Sieff (son of one of the founders of Marks & Spencer, a large British retail chain) and Robert Hyde, one of the founders of the Industrial Welfare Society.

During that early dalliance between industry and anthropology, industry had used dinners at Claridge’s, an iconic and expensive hotel in London’s Mayfair district, to create commensal bonds between themselves, academics and members of the RAI. More than 50 years later, Spencer and Mills bought dinner for anthropologists working outside academe, this time in the Mayfair branch of Pizza Express. The evening was designed to allow them to share the early findings of their cohort research and learn more about the careers of those, like myself, who they subsequently described as those “successfully selling their anthropological skills in more commercial settings—for example with short-term ethnographic projects for independent research institutes, often in areas like IT and communications technology” (Spencer et al. n.d.). And while it is likely that the dinners at Claridge’s would have been of higher quality than our pizzas, dough balls, and salads, those present welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences. Spencer and Mills concluded that the evening had been satisfactory and that they received “particularly rich material” from the guests, concluding that “mutually beneficial links could be usefully established between academic and non-academic anthropologists” (Spencer et al. n.d.). Gillian Tett, a journalist at The Financial Times in London, a member of the 1992–2003 cohort and one of the more widely known anthropologists attending the dinner, later wrote an article about anthropology careers beyond academe for the paper (Tett 2005).
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DISCIPLINE & ITS INTERACTIONS

The history of UK anthropology’s engagement with the world outside the department is clearly more than the sum of the interaction between individuals on each side of the fence. It is also about the history and development of anthropology as a discipline in the United Kingdom. During the years of anthropology and industry’s early courtship, as recounted here, anthropology in the United Kingdom had a very different complexion compared with today, both in terms of its size and structure. That is important to consider when thinking about the development of its relationships with the business world.

In the early period, the 1940s and 1950s, when the discipline was small and governed by a relatively homogenous (white, middle class, male) establishment with quite antipathetic views about the appropriateness and suitability of anthropology’s engagement with industry, it is unsurprising that neither the resources nor will existed to find meaningful forms of engagement.

At the time that Meyers Fortes and Edmund Leach were thinking through what a relationship with industry could or should look like, they were figureheads of an extremely small discipline extending, in the United Kingdom, to only three departments (at Cambridge, Oxford, and LSE) and numbering only 30 academics (Spencer 2000:3). The Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) had been established in 1946 as an association for professional anthropologists (i.e., those in academia) in distinction to the RAI, which was more of a society for colonial administrators and gentlemen scholars. The ASA was an outfit that would represent, it was hoped, an emergent cadre of academic anthropologists. The material point is that anthropology was a small discipline feeling its way through some of the issues created by its own development. Any history of the interaction between business and anthropology, or its absence, in the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century needs to recognize the simple fact that, notwithstanding the unwillingness of the few anthropologists that there were to engage with business, the total number of anthropologists available for any such interaction was in any case very small.

By 1963, there were 50 anthropologists working in British universities, but they were predominantly still in the same few institutions. However, British higher education expanded in the 1960s, and new universities and polytechnics, informally and derogatorily known as the “red brick” institutions, emerged (Spencer 2000:4). With that expansion came the establishment of new anthropology departments, sometimes alongside sociology departments; while the growth of anthropology in this period looks solid, when compared with that of sociology it was less impressive, with sociology finding more of a market within the bureaucracies of postwar Britain. One reason, Spencer suggests, is demo-
graphic: there were simply not enough anthropologists to drive the expansion (Spencer 2000:4).

By 1973 there were about 90 anthropologists in post, rising to nearly 120 by 1983 (with departments at St. Andrews and Goldsmiths in London added to the roster of institutions teaching the subject). And, by 1993, there were 160 anthropologists in British universities. During that period there had been a rise in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Between 1970 and 1994, 964 anthropology PhDs were awarded, 460 of them from the triumvirate of Oxford (187), Cambridge (137), and LSE (136).

Aside from the dominance of these three institutions, which managed, between 1970 and 1994, to produce 50 percent of all PhDs awarded in anthropology, the records also show that a great increase in PhD production occurred in the 1980s and has continued thereafter, running at roughly 40 a year since the mid-1980s (Spencer 2000:8).

So at one level the picture is of a steady growth in the raw number of PhDs being produced. These students were a necessary but still insufficient requirement for anthropology to engage with the world, since a steady supply of postgraduate surplus to those required to actually reproduce the discipline itself is a sine qua non of their engagement. To adopt the language of demographers, from the 1960s on anthropology as a discipline had achieved replacement fertility: it was growing, and with growth could come an expansion in terms of application. But numbers alone do not account for the increasing engagement and application. The next section discusses the other factors in play.

**NECESSITY AS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION**

Looking at the landscape of British anthropology departments in more detail helps us see why certain types of novel engagement outside of these departments took hold. During the 1980s, departments which had been founded in the 1970s (such as those at Kent and Sussex) had fallen on hard times during the lean early Thatcherite years, and under the leadership of Ralph Grillo and others they pioneered vocational courses (Spencer 2000:14). These courses prepared students for working in the field of social development. The goal at this stage in the discipline's history in Britain, if not for Oxford, Cambridge, and LSE, then at least for other departments, was merely survival in an era of harsh higher education cuts that were focused on the social sciences. As Spencer reports, the tone of the ASA Decennial in Cambridge in 1983 was one of crisis, but Edmund Leach was still keen to assert that the role of the ASA was to keep anthropologists out of colonial hands; if the only employment route for a British PhD anthropologist was social development, then the discipline best “shut itself down” (Spencer, personal communication, November 2012; see also Spencer 2000:14).
This innovation from a new breed of departments and academics, despite the resistance of some within British anthropology, can be seen with the benefit of hindsight to have revitalized the discipline. This innovation led to the development of new avenues for the application of British anthropology. Although these were largely in social development, a mold had been broken. In the past, a comparatively small number of students from a small number of institutions worked on research funded by government or its agencies, or were groomed as academics of the future. By the mid- to late 1980s this picture had evolved: there were more anthropologists, more courses that strayed from the classic mold, and clearer career options for anthropologists outside of research and teaching in anthropology departments. They might work in other departments, in social development, or in other applied settings. However, the residual ideas of impurity connected to such routes, espoused most vehemently by Leach, still continued to colonize the anthropological mind.

I started as an undergraduate at Edinburgh University in 1991. This department was a beneficiary of the development described here, able to offer its students courses taught by academics with strong regional expertise (especially in south Asian and African anthropology) and, by virtue of a strong relationship with the ODA (Overseas Development Agency), later known as DiFD (the Department for International Development), experience in applied work. The department provided evaluation of development projects on a contract basis. Looking back, the Edinburgh anthropology department seems to have displayed a healthy “mixed economy” approach to anthropological engagement. This was a department at ease with the idea of hiring anthropologists to work in a dedicated fashion on development-related contracts.

Outside of work in the field of social development and the traditional routes of university employment, the 1990s were a time when funding opportunities through research councils (for anthropology the Social Science Research Council, later the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC]) were evaluated, in part, according to their likelihood to positively affect the UK economy. But outside of those channels a welter of new funding opportunities arose, and European money and British government funding avenues increased markedly. It seems reasonable to assert that the combination of these funding trends—one to do with applicability, the other with increased funding opportunities from entities specifically focused on policy or business settings—further drove anthropology to become ever more applied in social policy and business settings.

In my PhD funding application to the ESRC I had asserted the likely benefits to the UK economy and media industry of an anthropological study of the satellite television revolution unfolding in India at the time. I did so because in 1993, the Conservative government had, as Anthony Cohen, my head of department at the time, noted, “explicitly adopted ‘wealth creation’ as the test
of acceptable scientific research and scholarship, a standard which was quickly and supinely adopted by the Economic and Social Research Council” (Cohen 1994:196).

I am not sure that any direct benefits as hoped for by the ESRC have subsequently accrued from this study, although the fact that in my estimation my PhD did establish the foundation for a career in business may retrospectively satisfy the Research Council auditors. Perhaps the fact that this area of research was funded at all suggests prescience on the part of the funding authorities that such a PhD topic might actually be a good foundation for a career consulting for technology and media companies after all? However, what was regarded by many at the time as a travesty—the introduction of criteria in funding decisions that favored research that could demonstrate some potential application—appears after the fact to be a policy that has pushed anthropology as a discipline, and individual funding applicants, to consider how their work might be useful beyond its strictly and legitimately academic concerns. There may be anecdotal (or more formal) evidence demonstrating that anthropological research applications exhibiting no aspiration toward wealth creation or application are not funded. That is difficult to judge without a large evaluative survey. However, I suspect that a mix of research topics continue to be funded, and that just as harsh environment of the 1980s produced conditions that led to innovation which has turned out to be positive for the discipline, the same may be true of this turn in policy because it forced a conversation about what might legitimately be considered applicable research.

THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE ANTHROPOLOGY

The harsh economic environment of the 1980s created a sense of necessity that led to innovation in the form of courses tailored towards a growing job market opening in development. Ralph Grillo and others had exploited an elective affinity between anthropology and development to great and enduring effect. Jobs in social development became the “obvious” choice for anthropologists seeking work outside of academe. However, the United Kingdom of the 1990s offered a different, more nourishing economic environment that coincided with the strengthening discipline and the growing number of postgraduates. One area where opportunities arose was in government.

The 1990s was the decade when “evidence-based” policymaking became the vogue and, relative to the 1970s and early 1980s, and certainly to the current period of austerity, there was financial abundance in the public sector. A growing number of research roles in government departments and agencies opened up opportunities for anthropologists. By the early 2000s there were anthropologists in the heart of Whitehall, in departments such as the Ministry of
Defence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at Cabinet Office. Anthropologists also found employment in the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (founded 2001), and in research roles at the Department of Transport. This was in addition to anthropologists working within the “home” of the discipline in government, the Department for International Development.

Social research budgets boomed with an influx of European funding into the so-called “quangos” (quasi-nongovernmental organizations) and other national bodies such as the Design Council and NESTA (the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts, founded in 1998), both of which started to advocate the use of research-led innovation in product and service design. NESTA’s Public Services Innovation Lab connected a research-focused approach with a growing commitment to investigating how public services could meet major social challenges such as aging and chronic disease. Elsewhere, a unit called RED was set up in 2004 by the Design Council to “tackle social and economic issues through design-led innovation” and led by Hilary Cottam, an Oxford-educated anthropologist who was awarded “UK Designer of the Year” in 2005 for her work on innovative approaches to public service reform. Cottam has continued to work on public service innovation through her consulting firm called Participle, where she is engaged in reconceptualizing the welfare state and “designing and developing large-scale projects that demonstrate the next generation of public services.”

Numerous other links between anthropology and public policy and public service design emerged in this period of reform-focused government. Policy entrepreneurs such as Geoff Mulgan, founder of the think tank Demos and later director of the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, began to take a strong interest in what anthropology and ethnographic approaches could add to public policy development. The Young Foundation (founded by Michael Young, author of the classic urban sociology text Family and Kinship in East London), an organization that Mulgan led between 2004 and 2011, developed a strong ethnographic research capability; its research team is currently led by Will Norman, an LSE anthropology postgraduate.

The context for the emergence of this field of employment possibilities is the tendency, still strong despite more straitened economic times, to think about public policy, social issues, and public services through a customer-centric, “user-led,” or “user-centered” lens. Arguably, this approach was given a formal blessing in October 2001 by then–Prime Minister Tony Blair, who declared that “the key to reform [of public service] is redesigning the services around the user—the patient, the pupil, the passenger, the victim of crime” (Public Administration Select Committee 2004:3–4).
In the same period, numerous private companies emerged to offer research-led strategy and design services to both private and public sectors and increasingly made a point of the fact that they had anthropologists on staff. Two examples of such companies are Live|work, a service design company founded in 2002, which refers to its “unique multi-disciplinary team of designers, technologists, social anthropologists, marketers, management consultants, operations professionals and entrepreneurs”. ESRO, a research company founded in 2004 by another LSE postgraduate, Robin Pharoah, “to bring an ethnographic approach to social and commercial research challenges” (http://www.esro.co.uk/), has developed a strong reputation in the social and market research market, a reputation cemented by winning several Market Research Society awards for their work on public sector research.

These are but two examples of what is now an increasingly crowded market where a formal training in anthropology is not always seen as a prerequisite to claiming expertise in anthropological or ethnographic approaches. Britain has a very large market research and marketing services sector, with the market research sector estimated to be worth more than £3 billion (Market Research Society 2013), and one trade directory of research companies lists a total of 53 organizations claiming an ability to provide ethnography as a research approach or “service” (Association of Qualitative Research 2013). It is interesting to reflect then on the popularity of the methods, their probable commoditization (see Suchman 2007), and the “market potential” (but also competition) for those with degrees that they regard as providing credibility to their claims to be bona fide ethnographers.

Having myself set up Ideas Bazaar in 2002 in an attempt to bridge commercial and academic research, I was fortunate enough to find myself with a role within a think tank, which had been central, in the guise of one of its founders Robert Hyde, in the early discussions between industry and anthropology that I describe in this chapter. The Industrial Society, later to become known as The Work Foundation, had established a technology think tank, iSociety. I become a part of the team, and was given the somewhat tongue-in-cheek title of “ethnographer in residence.” At iSociety we ran studies exploring the rise of networked technologies in British life, with projects on mobile phones, broadband internet, and technology in the workplace. The high premium attached to the communication of these findings (a clear benefit for the two principal funders of iSociety, Microsoft, and the professional services firm PwC), gave work using an anthropological approach significant airtime that it might not otherwise have received. This publicity did my fledgling ethnographic research consultancy no harm either, and we secured other work that allowed us to continue to document, albeit in a proprietary context, the everyday use of technology in
a period of rapid growth in the mobile phone, mobile internet, and broadband markets. We also went on to receive a large number of commissions from the BBC, an organization I had listed as a potential beneficiary of my PhD work on television in India, although that work for the British public service broadcaster more often took me to Birmingham than Banaras, India, my PhD fieldsite.

**DEVELOPMENTS, NOT GRAND DESIGNS**

One key feature in the story of corporate anthropology’s development in the United States is the predominance of the research and development labs of technology corporations as the key site of employment opportunities, with the obvious and iconic example being Xerox PARC’s Palo Alto labs. But while there are some anthropologists employed by large technology companies in the United Kingdom, for example at Microsoft in Cambridge, the UK operations of American technology corporations have not, on the whole, created research and innovation labs that have employed anthropologists or other social scientists in significant numbers or for sustained periods of time. Hewlett Packard began a multidisciplinary lab in Bristol in the mid-1990s, employing anthropologists and sociologists such as Abi Sellen, Richard Harper, and Kenton O’Hara (all now at Microsoft Research in Cambridge), but this interdisciplinarity waned in the early 2000s as the “peripheral” disciplines (i.e., anthropology) lost out in favor of a focus on engineering. Sellen, Harper, O’Hara, and others had previously worked at EuroPARC in Cambridge (founded in 1987 as European branch of the successful Xerox PARC research center). Although EuroPARC is no longer in existence, it was noteworthy for its specific focus on interdisciplinarity, and on the integration of social science into a technology research context.

With echoes of Spencer and Mills’ cohort research work with which I began this essay, Crucible, a research network at the University of Cambridge dedicated to promoting research collaboration between technologists and researchers in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AH&SS), has sought to investigate the influence of some of the alumni of EuroPARC through a series of interviews. The results of this work are not currently available, but it seems reasonable to posit that the influence of these individuals, given their profile within corporate research and academic contexts, and through their establishment of research and innovation consultancies, has been important. For example, one alumna of EuroPARC, Rachel Jones, went on to establish a successful research and innovation consultancy, Instrata, in 2001 after working at the consulting firm Sapient in the preceding years.

However, given the obvious absence of a strong tradition of industrial research and development lab employment for anthropologists in the United Kingdom, it would be unwise to privilege this relatively short-lived lab in any
account. Rather, my aim has been to chart the role of pioneers and believers, of innovation and invention, and to consider the socioeconomic forces and institutional developments that have combined to create a discernible career path for anthropologists outside of academe in the United Kingdom in the last 60 years.

The story is not one of grand designs—of a set of policies or strategies being laid out and then explicitly pursued—but instead of slow evolution. I hope to have shown how the development of anthropology in its disciplinary settings in the United Kingdom is a vital component of the story. I hope also to have shown that when this history is combined with a consideration of the wider forces at play beyond academe, it gives a better sense of what has developed, and why.

The efforts of early believers in the United Kingdom, such as Sieff and Hyde, who were working some 20 years after the early US pioneers, were designed to foster engagement between industry and anthropology. Although ultimately unsuccessful in their stated aims in the short term, they did succeed in forcing a debate about the appropriate basis for engagement. Innovators like Ralph Grillo within academe were adept at seeing the demand for anthropology in the field of social development and responded by creating appropriate courses. The result was new opportunities and the development of a “convention” within the discipline that this field of employment was one well suited to the skills of trained anthropologists. In a context of a growing discipline—both in terms of the number of departments and graduates and postgraduates being trained—Grillo’s approach was quickly replicated, and other development focused courses emerged.

The same pattern of institutions responding to changing labor markets and opportunities is repeating itself today. With the emergence of a demand for anthropologists within the sort of public and private research settings that I have described, courses have been developed to meet those demands. Notable among these are the Digital Anthropology Masters at University College, London, and the Design Anthropology Masters at Aberdeen. However, within more conventional degree programs, attempts are being made to ensure that students are aware of new forms of disciplinary practice. For example, at the University of Manchester, a course module is “Introduction to Business Anthropology: Consumers, Companies and Culture.” In these departments and elsewhere, postgraduates as well as undergraduates are exposed to alternative career trajectories. For example, an annual “retreat” for anthropology PhD students in Scottish universities makes a point of using those who have fashioned careers for themselves beyond academic departments—be it in technology companies, the Civil Service, or as independent consultants—to inform current students about the career opportunities beyond academe.
The net result of all of this activity is the emergence of a multiplier effect. The growing awareness of the demand for anthropologists in a variety of workplace settings, the increased publicity of their work in business, and the laying down of discernible patterns to employment has been matched by obvious and committed engagement within academic departments. The understanding that anthropology can lead to work in development is now being repeated in other areas of application, such as design, research, and innovation in and beyond technology companies.

Changes in the labor market and shifts in public and private sector priorities will coalesce with an increasing willingness on the part of many anthropology departments to interact with, and learn from, those pursuing new types of careers with anthropology degrees. Therefore, we can expect the conventional careers for anthropology graduates to continue to be reinvented in ways that are difficult to anticipate today. The original visions of Sieff and Hyde—that industrialists and anthropologists could work together—did come to pass. However, that relationship took longer to gel than they had anticipated, developed by an indirect route, and took different forms from those they had envisaged.

REFERENCES


NOTES

I want to thank Jonathan Spencer for an illuminating conversation about the history of British anthropology that inspired my treatment of this essay. More generally, I also thank him for his support as a teacher, PhD supervisor, and in subsequent years. I wish to thank Adam Drazin and my father Bill Roberts for close readings of the essay and to the two anonymous reviewers; all their suggestions and comments helped improve it. Any remaining errors and omissions remain, of course, my own.

1 The Industrial Welfare Society, which changed its name to The Industrial Society in 1965 (and to The Work Foundation in 2002), was established originally by Hyde to ensure the good physical working conditions of men and boys working in munitions factories, but over time widened its remit to the fostering of good human relations in industry in general.

2 See the RED website at http://www.designcouncil.info/RED/.

3 See the Participle website at http://www.participle.net/.

4 Alumni of EuroPARC include William Newman, Bill Gaver, Richard Harper, Abigail Sellen, Quentin Stafford-Fraser, Rachel Hewson, Satinder Gill, Kenton O’Hara, Rachel Jones, Mark Stringer, and Carey Young.

5 The course description can be found at http://courses.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/module.html?code=SOAN10361.