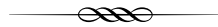


Chapter 9

**EMERGENT FORMS OF LIFE
IN CORPORATE ARENAS**



Michael M. J. Fischer

Stem Cells for the Regeneration of Ethnographic Life?

Corporate arenas form one of the key sites—along with cousin-sites in the technosciences (biological, informatic, material sciences), financial arenas, environmental understandings, and media environments—for the development of new anthropologies and ethnographic practices to reflect upon, inform, and reconstruct the changing worlds and emergent forms of life in which we live. Sometimes referred to with “tags” such as second-order modernization; reflexive social institutions; flexible labor and production forces; learning organizations; and multiple, flexible, and continually retrainable selves, macro-social theory has long been sketching large and small shifts for which corporate arenas are key ethnographic production sites.

These “production sites” of emergent, sometimes uncomfortable and bizarrely self-misrecognizing, forms of life have long been target arenas for a variety of overlapping fields of social research and intervention, including Taylorism, social architecture (such as Margarete Shütte-Lihotzky’s widely disseminated “Frankfurt kitchens” and kindergarten pavilions [Reisman 2006: 43–44, 53–55]), or the open-office formats passed back and forth between Germany and the US (Schwarz 2002), applied anthropology, work-practice studies, organizational behavior, occupational psychology, consumption studies (Sunderland and Denny 2007), and STS (science, technology, and society). Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny remind us of the interconnections between the advertising industry and many of the Uni-

versity of Chicago's famous anthropologists and sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s, beginning with the founding of SRI (Social Research, Inc.) by W. Lloyd Warner, Bill Henry, and Burleigh Gardner, and continuing into the 1980s via anthropologist Steve Barnett's role in New York, and business school anthropologists such as John F. Sherry, Jr., and Grant McCracken. Sid Levy (of symbolic analysis fame), Erving Goffman, Lee Rainwater, Anselm Strauss, Herbert Gans, Gerald Handel, Carl Rogers, David Reisman, Robert Redfield, Everett Hughes, and Herbert Blumer are some of the marquee names that float by, reminding of the ties between consumer research, popular-culture analysis, and qualitative method development.

But there is also a specific history, or lineage, of contemporary ethnographic work within and for corporations, outlined in Melissa Cefkin's invaluable overview (chapter 1), beginning in the late 1970s at Xerox PARC, first with the hiring of anthropologist Eleanor Wynn, and a few consultants such as Brigitte Jordan, and then with the famed Work Practice and Technology Group led by Lucy Suchman. The equally famed IRL (Institute for Research Learning), founded and promoted by John Seely Brown with grants from the Xerox Foundation, was a sister initiative, with some such as Brigitte Jordan having joint appointments. Others in the present volume who worked either at PARC or IRL, or as subcontractors to IRL, include Jeanette Blomberg, Melissa Cefkin, Chris Darrouzet, Helga Wild, and Susann Wilkinson.

Among the distinctive features of this lineage of ethnographic work, as it continues to evolve in the fascinating self-analyses in this volume, are the "ethnographically sensitive deliverables" rather than ethnographies per se: the idea that the consumer is buying an ongoing set of interactions (of which ethnographic feedback is a component) rather than a stand-alone deliverable; that internal "culture wars" or deeply embedded perspectival and presuppositional differences (between designers and strategists, among product teams, ethnographers, and clients) need to be made visible for negotiation; that such culture wars can become embedded in product outcomes ("artifacts have politics"); that collaboration itself is an intense field of political competition for resources, status, and power; that, in the IRL mantra, work, learning and change is social and informal rather than rule governed and requires ethnographic awareness; and, perhaps, that the dissemination of ethnographic sensibilities as general common sense might be analogous to the Web 2.0 notion of engaging distributed wisdom, rather than relying on command-and-control expertise that is inevitably narrowed and generative of indifference, resistance, and brittleness.

The corporate worlds invoked in this volume are neither generic nor insignificant: Intel, IBM, Microsoft, the VA, Yahoo, and consulting firms such as Veri-phi are major players in life today, and are fitting hosts for

culturing new forms of ethnography that are not only responsive and accountable to multiple audiences, but are productive of multiple forms of results. The calls for collaboration, polyvocality, benefit to subjects, and other “ethical” forms of anthropological practices have long been articulated within the profession, but find particularly compelling and challenging configurations in corporate arenas. Among these, sooner or later the bottom line of contribution to profitability, if not totally determining of the conditions for the possibility for research, comes into play. At the same time another competing condition for the possibility of the research requires that ethnographic research not be absorbed into the pure instrumentality of short-term cost-benefit relations subordinated to current management practices, lest it lose its distinctive ability to contribute fresh perspectives and thereby earn its keep. If accountability to business needs and to professional charges are two audiences, other audiences include the local workforces as well as the clients, customers, or users of the corporate services and products. Multiple audiences require multiple forms of production and products. The calls for experimental forms of writing within anthropology have been constant since Bronislaw Malinowski (realist translation of cultural worlds), E. E. Evans-Pritchard (structural problematics), Max Gluckman (legal case study formats), Victor Turner (social dramas revealing structural conflicts), Laura Bohanan (repetition of situations with deepening layered understandings), Gananath Obeyesekere (psychoanalytic case-study formats), Claude Levi-Strauss (hermeneutic-structuralist semiotics), and Clifford Geertz (hermeneutic-interpretive and stoic-ironic philosophical formats), to mention but a few. But corporate worlds elicit yet again new forms not just of literal writing (reports, memos, proposals, protocols, white board notes, fieldnotes), but also of performative interventions (films, videos, wikis, websites, meetings, discovery tactics, creating new channels of communication) that have both immediate effects and leave variable “half-life” traces in the social text (as Paul Ricoeur famously formulated it, and Geertz popularized it).

The popularization of ethnographic methods in a variety of fields beyond anthropology proper might be analogized, as suggested above, to the contemporary spread of the digital media and especially the so-called Web 2.0 principles of collective production (including the critical tagging of entries with their degrees and sources of verifiability, and their background notes on disputes, lacunae, and need for further input). In other words, can the spread of an ethnographic sensibility become part of a general common sense that would allow the construction, evolution, or mutation of new flexible “smart” institutions of so-called second-order modernization to replace old, brittle bureaucratic forms of command and control?

And recursively then, what can the access to corporate arenas teach us in re-theorizing how we think about the social worlds we participate in, that surround us, and that produce much of the texture of our lives, whether or not we actually work within their legal, organizational, and conventional confines? Complexity is a disciplining first feature of such theorizing, not as a vague hand-waving refusal to detail, but on the contrary as a yoga of being able to accommodate, control for, repurpose, work around, patch, leverage, retool, and coach. Indeed the executive and life-coaching industry is a small index of the mutations from earlier efficiency, psychotherapy, operations research, and management languages (Ozkan 2007). It would be interesting to speculate on the cultural possibilities latent in these worlds, both as reflected in such creative writing as by Douglas Coupland's sardonic *Microserfs*, and the engaging science fiction stories in *Infinite Loops* (Constantine 1993), written by artificial-intelligence and media-lab types. There are indeed hints at such extended possibilities in this volume's chapters.

Of Media and Retooling Genres

Each of the chapters in this volume provides a different retooled genre of reflection on the "betwixt and between position of ethnography in firms" (Nafus and Anderson, chapter 5).

Flynn provides a topological analysis of the dynamics of identification (slyly hinting at their now-you-see-it-now-you-don't Moebius-like Freudian and Lacanian possibilities) in the construction of short-hand "personas" of typical users, in the impression management (Goffman 1959) enforced by organizational insistence on an individualism belied by collaborative necessities, and in the fierce political competition for resources, status, and power that goes under the idealizing notion of collaboration. Genre-wise, Flynn's essay hints at a cross between these Lacanian topologies of displacements, hiding of things in the open, and cracks in the mirror scenes (of projecting wholeness where there are but partial understandings) on the one hand, and on the other hand experimental knowledge about interrelations of, and conflicts between, roles, gained in small group psychology and family systems therapy settings. (In such systems therapy, whether in dysfunctional families or in manipulation of task leaders or emotion leaders in small groups, one can introduce a shift in "scripts" or "functional role" for one player and watch how the scripts and roles of other players reconfigure.)

More than this, she suggests that ethnographic knowledges need to be analyzed in the plural quite as much as the products produced by Micro-

soft. Ethnographic knowledges emerge in process (not as fixed end points), shifting from perspective to perspective, from communication circuit to circuit, highlighting the frictions and unintended transductions across circuits. Microsoft, thanks to Douglas Coupland (1994) and others, is already a rich cultural arena of folklore, and Flynn also exploits this richness (Microsofties, Microsoft builds for Microsoft, mind-share, “user-experience” teams) in a way that others might well want to follow in order to build into our everyday discourse about corporations as a quite different model than that of *The Organization Man* of the 1950s (Whyte 1956), or the wacky driven nerds of Coupland’s novel, or Scott Adam’s *Dilbert* corporate-life comics. There is life here, indeed a variety of emergent forms of life in Wittgenstein’s sense of pragmatic actions leaving legacies of socialities, or Riceour’s sense of social action leaving legible traces. Flynn reminds us that it was not only Robert Moses who showed us that artifacts have politics (Winner 1986), but also more everyday objects and technologies do as well. Here Flynn reminds us that collaboration is not a fuzzy feel-good ideal, nor just something that people of good will work at, but is a highly fraught field of competitive politics.

Flynn provides a critique here on the cultural of individualism socially engineered and disciplined at Microsoft, and the self-recognition generated by management that one needs anthropologists to help with vigilance against assumptions about customer needs, technological uses and behaviors. The creation of personas to represent ideal typical customers is ambivalently a useful shortcut and a potential source of misrecognition, but behind it stands a deeper triangular conflict, and set of almost Lacanian misrecognitions among product teams who identify with customers (who they often once were), anthropologists (looked down on by the techies, but looked to by customers to help with the over-identification of the techies with their particular product and with the customer), and customers (who need to integrate non-interoperable products from Microsoft, hence the joke: Microsoft builds products for Microsoft rather than for real customers). The primary puzzle remains, on the one hand, the long corridors of identical offices, insistence on creativity from the lone mind looking at or through the screen, and only catch-as-catch-can spaces to collaborate, enforced by annual reviews with no discounting or addition for group work. On the other hand, there are the productive Microsoft groups that need to actually put products together (and of course as the innumerable jokes go, fix the bugs later).

Darrouzet, Wild, and Wilkinson provide the closest example of the case-study genre, but with great effect they retool the case study to articulate a performative function for ethnography, one that teaches people within the largest health care system in the US, the VA, how to do their own partici-

patory ethnography as well as participate in design for a reorganization of work processes. A historical trace is acknowledged as helping provide an opening: the leaders of reorganization of the VA under Kenneth Kitzer in 2005–6 had heard of, and believed in, “the IRL mantra about work learning and change being mainly social and informal.” What professional ethnographers provide is the staging, a *mise-en-scène* and safe space, for discussions that people otherwise have as corridor talk, gossip, or other means of social control and leverage, but which benefit from open acknowledgment and negotiation in non-personalized ways that open possibilities rather than reinforce barriers. “Ethnography done well is also about growing relations among people ... and from this generate a refreshed model of that con-joint ‘reality’ that can be reflected and acted upon.” These are three critical and separate notions: growing relations, periodically and regularly “refreshing” (as for a computer screen), and externalizing for not just reportage but for acting upon. Speaking *about* others, Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson remind us (nicely reformulating Johannes Fabian 1983), needs to be backed up by speaking *with* others. The case study of bed control and patient discharge is a vivid demonstration of how a flow chart would not be the same. A telling small item is that of the bed control nurse wisely not trusting the computer, where staff can hide beds or push them off to the next shift, not out of maliciousness but out of system dynamics. Even more telling, is the lovely analogy from the chief of clinical staff that the professional ethnographic process gave the organization “an opposable thumb,” the externalized *mise-en-scène* for critical reflection and making it possible to build consensus for organizational change.

A third genre tweaking: Jordan might be read as annotating a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), a kind of document that is becoming a negotiated tool of access for academic anthropology in its claims to have relevance both for analysis of, and providing return benefit to, corporate forms of life. Jordan does not invoke the legal genre of NDAs. I am drawing a parallel or comparison between the formal, prescriptive, and proscriptive NDA and the constantly renegotiated agreements and redefinitions that emerge in the course of fieldwork. I am intrigued by the internal walls and “no-go” zones within corporations as well as between corporations and potential rivals. A recent stark example: having bought an iPhone, I found not only were AT&T representatives in some places not allowed to touch them or have access to billing and accounting records, but even between a corporate office of AT&T in Cambridge, MA, and its supervisors in Texas certain information was not allowed to be directly passed in order to correct a glitch in the billing system. All the supervisor was willing to do was provide hints until his representative figured out a patch or workaround himself. At issue are various kinds of barriers,

with differential porosities, to the free flow of information, sometimes to protect profits, sometimes to protect information turf and power relations, and sometimes just unintended inefficiencies in work practices.

Non-disclosure agreements not only sit betwixt and between intellectual property (IP) requirements and academic scholarship (ideally premised on free flow of information), but also might be used as a way to open up the increasingly troubled nature of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in academic scholarship. IRBs were originally instituted in medical research to protect experimental subjects, but through “mission creep” due to fear of litigation, university lawyers and administrators have increasingly abandoned protecting First Amendment rights and freedom of research in favor of extending the term “experimental subjects” to all human beings (and animals in the case of IRBs for animal research), less to protect them than to protect the university institutions from lawsuits. Not surprisingly, this concern for the ethics of research is asymmetrically applied more to less well funded disciplines (ethnography, sociology, history) than to well-funded, high-stakes disciplines (biotechnology, human genome projects, human diversity genome projects) where researchers acknowledge ELSI (ethical, legal, and social issues) concerns in principle but argue ferociously for the right of inquiry wherever it leads. At issue are fascinating complex economic and legal, as well as cultural presuppositional pressures and counterpressures, that bear ethnographic detailing, beyond any simple abstract solutions or easy emotional indignation.

Internal pressures of corporate anthropologists might provide some insight and guidelines about the dynamics of what is truly important to corporations and what can be negotiated in innovative ways. The brief case examples here of chip manufacturing in Costa Rica and Malaysia are suggestive, both of methods (“follow the lot”), and of the often complementary need for rapid versus deep ethnography. It is fascinating how parts of the intellectual property restriction dynamics apply to Intel’s own anthropologists working within the corporation attempting to contribute to its own better management, just as they would to an outside consultant or anthropologist. One is reminded that access always has elements of serendipity, personal relations, or location in the institution, but it is also fascinating how invisible or unrecognized critical work (face to face communication between shifts, reconciling machine data and on-the-ground data, and so forth) are further screened out by these blocks to externalized reflection, and even if revealed during discovery processes, are repackaged and black boxed in management reports. Considerable sophistication, tact, and restraint is required to negotiate these constraints even in the context of desirous corporate sponsors and willing anthropologists who come with different presuppositions, and capacities to “hear.” The

case-study examples in their archive of situational experiences demonstrate the power of ethnographic detailing over abstract acknowledgment of difficulties: it is the eventual successes, not the frequent barriers, that are most enlightening about situational configurations and possibilities.

Nafus and anderson perform a welcome anthropological retooling of some tropes and moves in Science, Technology and Society (STS), as well as social memory studies, by taking white boards and other intermediate artifacts (things, material-semiotic objects, boundary objects) as indexes both of the postmodern firm's shifting assemblages, instabilities, and sudden strategy corrections; and also of the notions of complexity and of the very media of what constitutes research and feedback. What is particularly important here is again the ethnographic detailing of how material artifacts themselves become mediators in understanding heterogeneity and instability, and how "this in turn means producing, sustaining, and destroying many boundary objects, that is, things in which many have shared stakes but on radically different terms and often to different ends." Again this is, as with the performative processes described by Darrouzet, Wild, and Wilkinson, about making active a process that "invites people who did not perform the field research into the production of knowledge," and about making possible a great deal of decentering work and reconfiguration. These processual ethnographic sensibilities are important both in translations from researchers to designers, or producers to marketers, or company to customers; but also in the extended social lives that videos, notes, photographs, diagrams, and quotes can have beyond the immediate projects and contexts of their production. As they say, complexity has directionality, "knowledge does not just circulate, but is consistently made to appear as if it were new, regardless of its origins," and so this itself will call for the subsequent need for an opposable thumb of ethnographic processes to reconsider and configure anew.

Brun-Cottan provides two short case studies in which she, like Flynn, hints again at a Lacanian duality—"I understand what she said, but what did she mean by it?" ("You are trying to get rid of people")—as well as triangular misrecognitions (between music teacher, IT support, and product marketing), but she tracks us also into a sharper focus on processual dramas and choreographies (like Jordan, and Nafus and anderson), where the ephemera of intervening in "artful and principled ways" is what often counts much more than the final report. The opening anecdote about the psychic dissociation and belated recognition by the anthropologist of Dee's worry about job loss and devaluation of her work life reminds of the persistent tropes of anxiety from the early worries about automation in the 1950s to perennial worries about working for humanitarian aid or development projects, or even academic ethnographies of quasi-isolated

groups: Am I contributing to the destruction of this way of life? Just who in the end are you working for, despite your intentions and those of your employer? It is, of course, not only engineers and marketers, but also anthropologists, who are caught up in larger structures than themselves. The second anecdote about the music teacher who wanted to use a web platform to download music compositions and upload student compositions as a teaching tool and shareware with other schools is a more intricate icon of our times. He found he didn't have the rights to download, couldn't change the operating system settings to enable the uploads (fixed so that users couldn't overload and choke the system), and in general faced that hydra-headed monster of passwords, permissions, privacy protections, and code that defeated many a good educational project in the early days of the digital-media revolution, and that continues to bedevil companies, schools, and consumers. As with the large amount of necessary invisible work in paperless offices (Schwarz 2002) and in Jordan's examples, users must hire support staff to help them negotiate the interesting, changing, and maddening complexities. In Brun-Cottan's preliminary example of the document-management system for a specialty large-scale construction machine manufacturer, one of the proprietary and secrecy issues is the access to the technology of the one company by another by virtue of providing a service. One can begin to imagine the burden of licensing, NDA, and other legal instruments, as well as informal work arrangements, that both facilitate and slow our techno-scientific lives.

Like other chapters in this volume, Brun-Cottan explores the dilemmas of, on the one hand, having to mine data to fit instrumental communication, and, on the other hand, having to demonstrate that the ethnographic value is not in such formats, but in what people do as opposed to what they say they do, in cultural presuppositions that they act out even in contradiction to what they profess, in unpacking the meaning of abstract pronouncements and value statements, in showing the ramifications of small things having large impacts—all things that are quite "hard" and empirical, and thus precisely not massageable into "soft" statistical or stereotypical short cuts.

Ortlieb deploys lightning fast sound-byte "case studies" as analogies in a demonstration that not only do ethnographic knowledges need to be pluralized (as in Flynn), but so do the formation of cultures: consumer cultures, organizational cultures, working class cultures, and professional cultures are as different kinds of categories as are national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic ones. In some sense, as Cefkin points out in chapter 1, Ortlieb is in conversation with Sunderland and Denny exploring the fixed categories that businesses often fantasize of, but can never quite seize, versus the always-in-process indexical cues with which actors constantly un-

weave and reweave the variations that give cultural meaning. Sunderland and Denny's funniest case is of their struggles with ethnic consultants who think they need to discipline their market, fixing it, lest it evaporate (and, ipso facto, evaporating, if not their jobs, their fantasized comparative advantage in getting advertising contracts) into the general marketing that consumers often turn out to desire instead. Ortlieb, with super quick, light strokes, reminds that global advertising campaigns have (since Coke in the 1970s, and Lever Brothers even earlier) had to learn over and over that not all commodities translate uniformly. Lever Brothers for many years held a monopoly over many rural products in India because of its vast army of outlets providing localized feedback. What is interesting about the campaigns and their morphing forms is not so much whether cultures are relatively fixed or not, but how the marketing itself reveals the differentials and shifts in common sense and desire in different places, market niches, and status hierarchies. Used-car markets in Germany, Mexico, and Japan function differently, and used car markets in turn are quite different from the dynamics of e-services such as Yahoo. The history Ortlieb indexes is from old product acceptability to participatory design, from focus groups to usability studies, and from anthropological-designer collaboration to exploring latent user needs, product stickiness, and alternative business strategies. What next needs exploring is how the vast databases generated by Yahoo, Amazon, eBay, and other e-services are changing the landscapes of possibilities and product formation, of subjectivation, and citizen formation. All those tough ethical questions highlighted by Brun-Cottan are returning in intensified forms that Lever Brothers' information hoards could never have anticipated.

Beyond Method

Beyond the rich work on which this volume lifts a corner of the curtain, lies the question, To what extent can we in academia exploit the access of our colleagues in the corporate world to generate richer understandings of their fields of production, beyond what business school case studies or investigative journalists provide? Are the NDAs of employment too confining for this, and how could we make it otherwise? Could corporate anthropologists ever be allowed to produce the equivalent of such studies of the biotech industry as those by Barry Werth, Paul Rabinow, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, or Melinda Cooper; of the IT world such as those by Gabriella Coleman, Chris Kelty, or Hal Abelson, Ken Ledeen, and Harry Lewis; or (from the legal world) Lawrence Lessig; or of the financial world as those by Donald MacKenzie? Or is that request less in conflict just with

NDAs, and rather more in conflict with the new ethnographic products being developed, and should we rather look to more volumes like this one that can build up an archive of situated experiences, ethnographies of social context, and social dramas of collaborative politics?

The conceptual contributions of corporate ethnographers, as registered in this volume, are significant. Not only are such terms as “complexity” thematized in several of the chapters in interestingly grounded and different ways, that make them ripe for study and analysis. The varieties of ethnographies tailored to different purposes are invoked and illustrated: light and deep ethnography, rapid ethnographies, management-school ethnographies, and para-ethnographies. Ethnography as a frame of mind (not just discrete methods and tools) is transformed by its uses. While it can be instrumentalized (for good and ill, for profit, and for screening out information important to the company’s bottom line had a bit more time been invested), it also transforms the notion of epistemological encounter, making it performative: ethnography as everyday consciousness, and as making social interaction into a model for reflection and action, not just a role-playing game (as in earlier performative genres for worker motivation, family therapy, or conflict mediation).

Answers to these substantive and conceptual questions will emerge as the practice deepens and evolves. Extraordinary that in 2004 Intel should have been reported to have spent five billion dollars on ethnographic research, or that as many major corporations as listed in Melissa Cefkin’s introduction (chapter 1) should have anthropologists on staff. One way, I have suggested in my readings of these essays, is to ask the epistemological question about whether the genres of writing, presentation (could be film, slide shows, whiteboards, workshops, quotes, anime), and reflection, in their variety, can help us push our questioning further, opening up new layers of configuration and interaction, insight, and even entertainment and pleasure.

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