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ETHICS IN BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

LAURA HAMMERSHØY
THOMAS ULRIK MADSEN
ReD Associates

Solely protecting research subjects undermines ethical business anthropology practice. In this paper, we argue that a negative definition of ethics, manifest in the primary focus of "doing no harm" to research subjects, undermines a concern for the potential of business anthropology to do good in a broader sense. Alain Badiou's concept of truth procedure gives, we argue, an actively responsible and necessary direction to ethical business anthropology in its complicity with constructing new subjectivities within contemporary society.

PREAMBLE

Central to the AAA Code of Ethics sits the concepts of respect and rights. These respects and rights are designed to protect the subjects encountered and studied in applied anthropology. Indeed, a paragraph in the AAA Code of Ethics states that, *"[…] anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities"* (AAA 2012). As such the authority that these ethical 'codes' convey, rests in the apparent self-evidence of being logical and universally agreeable.

However, we insist that this statement is too easily escaped from, and that it demands further unpacking and more serious scrutinizing. The central problem rests not in its intentions but in the meaning that it conveys. What, for example, do concepts like harm, safety, dignity, and so forth really mean? Our question is this: When we know that business anthropology unfolds contingent to the contexts and objectives of the businesses that drive them, can these codes of ethics be anything but relative? Subsequently, to say that 'rights' and 'respects' mean something universally agreeable / decipherable implies that a contingent state can somehow found a stable principle.

In this paper we will argue, following French philosopher Alain Badiou, that the meaning of the ethical aspirations in anthropological practice is entirely ambiguous. When anthropology is applied within any context, we will argue that a principal question ought to be emphasized over general codes of conduct: Is ethics really derived from a *universal* set of "humanitarian," moral principles because they somehow seem intuitively uncontroversial to us – Or are we obliged to retain moral integrity singularly confined to a situation? That is, paying no heed to *method*, should the *practice* itself conform to a universality of ethics or not? And if it should, how does it situate itself toward such an ethics? In other words, what is the meaning of the content and how does it unfold beyond relative statements such as "do no harm?"

Whilst a great deal of attention is directed towards methodology in anthropology, the discipline's overall *project* and its understanding of ethics, both as an academic discipline and as in its history of being applied - that is to say in its representation of the Other and the capitalization hereof, is more complex. The reason why this is so, is not confined to this discipline alone. It reflects what ethics have come to mean in a larger populist sense, through what appears to us as innately universally agreeable principles that manifest in, above all, humanitarian concern and human rights.

If social sciences continue to follow this model of implied natural, universal morality, we will argue that it leaves them in the dark, even indifferent, toward how ethics and morality are being advanced, problematized and understood for example in some recent philosophical thinking. Crucially, it prevents it from engaging in ethical questions critically and systematically to inform praxis. We therefore in the following attempt to shed light on ethics in business anthropology in an attempt to further clarify the project of business anthropology, instead of uncritically assuming a demarcation between anthropologists and their subjects, or a contradictory positioning of anthropology and business.

Ethics in the field of business anthropology

In recent discussions of ethics in the still emerging field of business anthropology, where the quest to represent the Noble Savage has been replaced by an exploration of the effects of the organization of contemporary capitalist societies, the distinction between 'pure' academic anthropology and anthropology in its applied version, continue. Batteau and Psenka (2012), in the first issue of Journal of Business Anthropology 1(1) from 2012, set forth the idea of a collective clarification of the ethics of this new field among its practitioners:

> "We need to negotiate just what is business anthropology, what are its conceptual and ethical boundaries and within those boundaries what constitutes good work. We should also examine both "what is business" and what should its anthropology look like."

They furthermore suggest that the distinction between the pure, theoretical version of anthropology versus an applied, practicing version is correlated to a social hierachization of these two sub-disciplines, and therefore merely an academic convention we ought to examine. They discuss the contradictory interests between the anthropological and capitalist projects, and oppose more genuine business anthropology with simple 'opportunistic ethnographies'. They propose that business anthropology should take as its primary concern, *"the commercialization of numerous experiences and institutions uniquely human"* (Batteau and Psenka (2012). It is in other words suggested that we, as business anthropologists, study both how these uniquely human experiences are commercialized, and what consequences this has, instead of implicitly contributing to this commercialization.

Batteau and Psenka go on to suggest that the ethical challenges around this kind of work often lie in the conflicting interest between the hired business anthropologist and his employer, but that the gain of anthropological knowledge derived from venturing into business as an anthropologist, is greater than the risks associated with the practice: *"Our challenge and invitation to anthropology is to get your hands dirty, to transgress the boundary between Academia and Business, to understand better this Brave New World of flexible rationalization"* (Batteau and Psenka (2012). This invitation is however set forth without having established in their entirety, the criteria for what constitutes good work within business anthropology, according to Batteau and Psenka's initial proposal to clarify the ethical boundaries of this field.

Much more reassurance do we get, if we look to the International Journal of Business Anthropology and its first issue dating back to 2010. Ann Jordan puts forth, for a social scientist, an enviable amount of trust in the AAA's Code of Ethics within business anthropology and doesn't question the ethical issues of the field: *"By following these guidelines as outlined by the American Anthropological Association, we are able to ethically conduct business anthropological work."* (A. Jordan 2012). Jordan specifies

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how the code of ethics from the AAA focus on protecting the individuals studied from harm, and goes through the practical implications of the code of ethics, and how the ethical business anthropologist and Jordan herself should comply with the code:

> "If it appears that the individuals they will be studying can be harmed by the work, they do not undertake the study. For example, if it appears the corporate bosses are only interested in increasing profit for the shareholders at the expense of the employees or the community, then I do not undertake the work. This is also the reason anthropologists do not work in competitive intelligence. No work should be illegal and no work should be done under false pretenses. I should always be able to tell those I am studying that I am an anthropologist conducting a study and I should always be able to tell them why I am conducting the study and what it is about. It is unethical for me to misrepresent my interests'' (A. Jordan 2010).

However, the trust and implied straightforwardness of following the code of ethics doesn't seem to question things like; *Will the work I do be used to better the situation in general for the subjects studied, as opposed to not doing harm?* In other words, avoiding harm (evil) is imagined to be of greater concern to us, than is contributing to a good project. Also assumed in this statement is that striving for maximum profit for shareholders is an exception rather than the rule. But most critically, this statement on the uncomplicatedness of conducting ethical business anthropology only takes responsibility for the anthropological work of capturing and representing data truthfully. By avoiding the larger ethical implications of business anthropology when discussing ethics in this field, it assumes a disassociation of business anthropology from the larger project of business.

If we look for guidance in the Final Report from the "Commission of Ethics to Review the AAA Statements on Ethics" how to ethically do business anthropology, we firstly learn about who should be concerned with the ethical dilemmas of anthropology, disregarding its setting and location. The Commission agrees that, as an educational document, the AAA Code of Ethics:

- Should become an integral part of the overall anthropological enterprise, from teaching through research, training and application.
- Should apply across the intellectual breadth of the discipline.
- Should apply to the conduct of all anthropological research, and not make distinctions based on funder, site, or purpose, and should not distinguish between basic, applied, academic-based, or proprietary research. (AAA 2012)

In other words, the AAA states clearly that the Code of Ethics applies to all anthropological research, also that of business anthropology. The report even mentions that:

> The Code should be relevant to persons with anthropological training who are applying anthropological knowledge in their work, regardless of the setting (that is, for example, those hired by a for-profit firm because of their anthropological training). (AAA 2012)

In this way we cannot be left uncertain as business anthropologists as to whether the general AAA Code of Ethics applies to us. According to AAA we should simply follow the code and strive to protect the people we study. But the Review Commission also acknowledges the problems with the focus on protecting the individuals studied, as the statement in the Principles of Professional

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Responsibilities on 'Anthropologists must respect, protect and promote the rights and the welfare of all those affected by their work'. Because as the Commission rhetorically asks in their final report: *"Who determines what is in the best interests of the people studied?"* (AAA 2012). And even though the question is raised, but left unanswered, the Commission goes on to say:

> The anthropological researcher, however, does have duties to the people studied, including doing no harm or wrong, full disclosure and informed consent, warnings of possible outcomes (good and bad) of the research for the people involved, and a careful weighing of the risks and benefits of the study for the people being studied" (AAA 2012).

In other words, it is made clear to us as business anthropologists that we first and foremost must protect the subjects we study; however we are quite left to our own devices in regards to figuring out how we position ourselves towards the larger project and aim of business anthropology.

Why do we need a philosophical discussion of ethics in business anthropology?

This paper addresses ethics from a philosophical standpoint. The reason for this is simply that the ethics that social sciences aspire to and express as an ideal is built on a proclaimed universal humanitarian concern. Whereas the philosophical understanding of ethics we wish to push forth, address and explode this concern. We propose that in a field mainly concerned with praxis, application and outcome of anthropological methods, an introductory philosophical discussion of ethical issues can contribute to the evolution of the field. Even though Batteau & Psenka suggest an immediate diving in and *'getting our hands dirty'* and Melissa Cefkin in her "Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter" suggest a disregard of *"angst-ridden hand wringing about practitioners' moral and political complicity"* (Cefkin 2010:1), we believe it might be productive to explore the ethical issues in business anthropology further.

In short, these statements outline the tensions between anthropology, ethics, and capital that we hope to address:

1. Anthropology is understood as a discipline that aims to uncover and represent particularities, contexts and subjectivities as they are, in a scientific and value free way.
2. Corporate culture and business is understood to have other goals, namely appropriating these particularities, contexts and subjects in order to support stakeholders; ultimately through capital growth.
3. Ethics are generally something, which 'guides' anthropologists in the choices, they have to make within this presumed conflictual relationship and which helps them protect their research subjects or material against the evil of business.

Already we can identify problematic assumptions within these statements. Firstly neutrality (and even sometimes truth) as the basis for a discipline become increasingly unsteady, once we unravel the concept as it is, in-itself, and its dialectic relationship to the concepts of interpretation, analysis and, crucially, representation. It is, as we know, an emptive referent that can never be understood in absolutes. In political and philosophical terms, there is simply no such thing as neutrality and to assume such a position could be construed as passively accepting the conditions presented.

Secondly, assuming that there is a conflict between business and the 'academic' discipline of anthropology, identifies the practitioner of social science within this relationship as somehow more

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'free' and 'pure' than the venture capitalist for which her skills are employed. Ethics then comes to mean the set of principles from which we navigate questionable tensions in which we find ourselves stretched between academic ideals and client obligations.

The sorts of questions we can draw from such a schema are for example: Is it more ethical to categorically refuse projects for clients we find morally distasteful in order to escape this dilemma? Within this logic we could deduce that:

1. Ethics comes to mean a set of principles that guide actions for humans, in this case the business anthropologist or the subjects she encounters, in order not to become 'corrupted' by external conditions.
2. Moral choice presumably unfolds before a given situation - it is assumed to be founded on universal principles for what is Good and what is Evil, for how else can we know what is morally distasteful?
3. This universal principle takes good to be derived from evil and not the other way round, which is to say that evil, is that which we must protect the subjects we encounter from befalling.

The problem with ethics

In the literature on business anthropology we can identify an articulation of ethics to take as its primary concern the presumed demarcation between academic and corporate praxis. In these discussions, there seem to be a demand to securitize academic/scientific rigor and its assumed opposition to corporate barbarism and careless utilization. Another strand of discussions, as we have seen with The Ethics Commission for revising the AAA code of ethics, emphasizes the responsibilities to protect human subjects that are part of the ethnographies produced within a corporate context against this same evil. As such, this discourse scrutinizes and asks to the implications for the *integrity* of an academic discipline when it is taken up in a corporate context.

Within both these positions, ethics comes to mean a principle for protection against evil — what is considered the Good is quite simply the principles that protect against Evil. The former position emphasizes the structural protection of academic rigor, the latter with the protection of innocent human subjects. But with this emphasis on *protection* of universally identifiable and stable categories, instead of constant critical self-reflexion and affirmation of contingency, *responsibility* is removed from the singular concrete situations in which the social scientist is inscribed. Instead, belief is put in a universal schema of ethical conduct. In a nutshell: The ethics we encounter in this discourse is non-contingent, and it deals with the subject through abstract notions of security and order alone.

At the heart of this discourse sits the problem that ethics of business anthropology risk becoming an oxymoron, and an impossibility. According to Alain Badiou, what we have come to understand by ethics are nothing more than blind belief in universal humanitarian rights, namely those that we invoke to fight the evil that befall on those less fortunate. Badiou aims with his philosophy to work against this idea. He wants to shows us that ethics, understood as a universal principle, is nothing but ideology. In opposition to a general consensus of humanitarian rights at the crux of ethical concerns, Badiou suggests a radically different meaning:

> "[...] Rather than link [ethics] to abstract categories (Man or Human, Right or Law, the Other...), it should be referred back to individual situations. Rather than reduce it to an aspect of pity for victims, it should become the enduring maxim of singular processes.

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Rather than make of it merely the province of conservatism with a good conscience, it should concern the destiny of truths, in the plural." (Badiou 2002:3)

For Badiou, an ethics founded on principles of humanitarian concern, protection and security, is fundamentally a nihilism of thought, and more crucially it signifies a submission to animality and a rejection of our uniquely human capabilities to resist subjectification to roles of victim, and to push and work *against* sedimented possibilities.

For Badiou the understanding of ethics that we have come to accept as natural is suspended between a kind of Kantian ethics of reason (a universalism based on the idea of human rights) and Levinasian relativism ('difference' oriented concern for the Other). However, for Badiou, neither of these positions is sufficient in any way if we are to properly understand and guide actions in singular situations that demand it. In fact they demand very little of us outside the normative demand of 'good citizenry' which we judge from the position of security and order.

With Kant, we can understand that there are universal regimes of good and bad and that these are to be chosen through some general schema, which neglects individual situations. As for concern for the Other, then Badiou's point is that we are of course all different from another, but what does respect and rights for the Other mean when we are confronted with real radical alterity? *"Respect for the Other has nothing to do with any serious definition of Good and Evil. What does 'respect for the Other' mean when one is at war against an enemy, when one is brutally left by a woman for someone else, when one must judge the works of a mediocre 'artist,' when science is faced with obscurantist sects, etc.?"* (Cox, Whalen and Badiou 2001) For Badiou, the rhetoric of ethics fundamentally only serves to distract us from dealing with the concept critically and singularly in situations, obstructed by the two positions that form the consensual basis for ethics (universal human rights and the ethics of difference).

Why this is so, primarily hinges firstly on the conception of the human. In order to construct an idea of universally applicable human rights, the concept of Man must necessarily be constructed from a weak position i.e. the ability to identify himself as a victim, and ethics in turn becomes the thing that obscures the procedure, which instigated this position in the first instance. Ethics thus refuses to identify Man as something other than an animal. This is to be understood in opposition to our actual human capabilities to rise above both the roles of victim and protector – in our unique ability to emancipate ourselves from our animal backdrop. If Man as a victim exists for Badiou, then it is only because we already put ourselves in this situation. So, we can see why this universal principle for human rights, really introduces an inequality in the divide between the victim and the protector. For Badiou, however, this cripples and sediments our human capacity to act: *"Since the barbarity of the situation is considered only in terms of 'human rights' - whereas in fact we are always dealing with a political situation, one that calls for a political thought-practice, one that is peopled by its own authentic actors"* (Badiou 2002: 13)

For Badiou, politics and ethics are not about securitizing and managing differences and rights, but about an active will to engage in projects that transcend these positions. A belief in difference is for Badiou just as contingent and no less conservative than the idea of human rights. As we see with the way these 'respects' play out in international politics for example, it can be even more detrimental, since the advancement of the fact of difference into solid principles can be seen to even sanction inequalities:

"As for the love of the Other, or, worse, the 'recognition of the Other,' these are nothing but Christian confections. There is never 'the Other' as such. There are projects of thought, or

> of actions, on the basis of which we distinguish between those who are friends, those who are enemies, and those who can be considered neutral. The question of knowing how to treat enemies or neutrals depends entirely on the project concerned, the thought that constitutes it, and the concrete circumstances (is the project in an escalating phase? is it very dangerous? etc.)." (Cox, Whalen and Badiou 2001)

As we have outlined above, the consensual ethical schema built on humanitarian universalism assumes an *a priori* evil. Within its logic, ethics are mere defensive principles that ward off supposedly universally recognizable and permanent evils. We have shown that this effectively amounts to an implicit solidification and justification of the imbalances and inequalities at place in what Badiou calls 'the state' of things, or the status quo. Which is to say that ethics are intrinsically conservative from the perspective that it operates from a consensual realm alone and refuses the possibility that things might be otherwise. This is why, for Badiou, it *"amounts to a genuine nihilism, a threatening denial of thought as such"* (Badiou 2002:3).

Then, what is to be done?

Ethical concerns for business anthropology are seen to be the management of rights and securitizing those rights for subjects studied. However, we must acknowledge that business anthropology does not live in isolation from the political and monetary networks that use ethnography in a production of subjectivities that become the basis for new forms of commercialization. As we know in the conditions of neoliberal capitalism we find ourselves entangled in processes which no longer produce services or tangible products in order to fulfill actual market demands, but instead conditions the criteria for new and previously unidentified desires, and takes as its primary operation the production of new markets as well as the conditions for the constructed desires to take root. In order to produce these conditions, the processes must necessarily reconfigure and actively introduce new forms of subjectivity in order to mold the possibilities that in term create demand. In other words, these operations conflate distinctions between consumption and production in order to produce the conditions for production.

Rather than being somehow isolated, business anthropology is indeed constituent to precipitating this milieu and, more crucially, it is immediately amalgamated to the appropriation of real world research in the production of new forms of subjectivity. In other words, business anthropology is not only a sidekick in the world of business, but we could argue that it fills a much more profound role. This is because in order to create demands that are fulfillable with previously non-existing products and services whether material or not, businesses need to mold these from situations and subjectivities that are very real to feed in and justify internally the creation of these new products and services.

Within these situations where real world data is transferred into business opportunities, anthropologists are rarely simply performing pure representational mechanisms. Anthropologists are hired to work in these milieus, not only to simply rapport reality, but very often also to make-up the lubricant that makes business goals and real world situations fit together seamlessly. In other words, the demand from business anthropologists is not only to report that people are content with their fitness practices, if they are, it is also to help the fitness industry target unmet needs. As a consequence, an 'ethics' which works from a general assumption that the composite material of applied anthropology

is value-free from its context, and therefore directs attention only to a general idea of security and respect, become impotent when we talk about the processes through which this material is used.

As we have just said, anthropology is a crucial and, by now, deeply integrated component of many contemporary businesses, and to exhibit an attitude of demarcation between these two spheres is simply not realistic. To assume such a divisive position could even be seen as negative in the sense that it demands securitized borders between 'pure' anthropology and business, which means that it removes the anthropologists' ethical responsibilities of engaging critically in the processes whereby ethnographies are disseminated and appropriated in order to forcefully assure that these processes don't betray the 'truth' of data.

Instead, it would be more interesting to talk to an ethics of business anthropology that is anchored to processes themselves, one that doesn't restrict itself to security and protection of the discipline or research subjects, but one that asks; is this a fundamentally good project, and am I being as truthful toward it as humanly possible? This sketches an ethics that asks of, even demands, a continuous assessment of rights and wrongs anchored to particular situations, as opposed to general schemas, which in effect potentially obscures critical judgment. This would be an ethics which seeks not just to resist universal and humanist modalities and the instrumentalization of the concepts of neutrality and science in the idea of a value-free anthropology, but one that actively works toward destabilizing these sedimented conditions, in order to understand and take a real position on the particularity of the singular situations in which the anthropologists finds herself.

As a response to general humanist ethics, we hope to sketch out a different 'activist' meaning, which we could call an ethic of truth, following Badiou. For Badiou, rather than understanding protection and security (of life, subjectivities, stakeholders etc.) as the essence that creates *a priori* principles for action, the challenge for ethics are to work toward new forms and projects of commonality. Ethics in this schema aims to transgress and redefine all sedimented conditions in order to uncover and partake in the work toward a collective *project*.

This necessarily requires us to understand ethics as a positive and affirmative possibility of realizing what is centrally human. Only by submitting to this idea can we, in Badiou's terms, rise above the asymmetric roles of victim and liberator implicit in general rights, and inactive defensive identities and become something else, something that is above our animal backdrop - a contemplating, acting, creating, co-operative human being.

What, then, does this really mean? For Badiou, ethics are essentially linked to the notion of truth-processes. Ethics, to put it rather reductionally, are for Badiou simply to stay honest and true to a path of truth. This is a decisively active commitment, in that it refuses neutral or passive positions. Ethics are neither a constant principle nor general moral schema, which we can use to steer from. Truths only become aware to us and unfold from situations and processes that precipitate from events.

For Badiou, an event is a complex concept, that essentially is an unexpected rupture in what he terms 'the state' - that is to say, the existing practices, politics, knowledge and identities that make up our understanding of the world. Events are the unexpected that breaks with prior understandings of the world around us. It is the 'thing' that opens up for the possibility of imagining new ways of thinking and acting upon a situation. Through its rupture with the existing, it potentially inspires radically new ways of imagining the world - these are what Badiou terms 'truths'.

Truths are not to be understood in imperial terms as absolutes, but rather in a sense of a becoming, as in the idea of a truth of art or of love. Truths make us simply to become something else due to the awareness brought about through a new situation and, crucially, they also come with a

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demand attached; that we uphold an honesty to this awareness. Ethics, for Badiou, mean to ruthlessly follow this new way of seeing the world. But, because a truth comes from a rupture and marks something that is fundamentally new, we can understand why ethics can never proceed from a general schema, *"[…] there is no ethics in general. There are only eventually ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of situations"* (Badiou 2002:40).

Our reading of the implications for such an understanding for business anthropology, would mean to understand ethics as not tied to overall ideas of rights, but the ability to stay honest to the situations that we bring about through anthropological research. The knowledges and subjectivities that we, as business anthropologists, are part of making appear and unfold, in many cases 'break' with existing knowledges and situations. Ethics here become the signifier for being able to stay honest and true to this new way of seeing the world. That is, in a ruthless refusal of devaluing or opposing this knowledge. In Badiou we see this most clearly in the romantic idea of love. In a situation of love, a truth unfolds that have the potential of making a truly new subject, the two that become one. But this possibility, the possibility of love, entirely hinges on whether we behave ethically in the process. That is, in hinges on whether we are brave enough to stay true to the path toward the possibility of becoming something other than two autonomous beings, after the proclamation of love.

So, ethics in Badiou fundamentally progresses from a rupture and a singular situation. As such, it is decisively anti-consensus oriented and its realization rests on hard work, and a being-honest to the truth. As we can see, ethics, then, are not about preventing securitizing against evils, but rather about working toward realizing the good. Evil in this understanding only appears under conditions of the unethical, when we betray this path.

How can we know an event, and in terms, how do we know what ethics means since it means to be honest toward the truths opened by the event? A truth, in Badiou, is qualified by being available and valid for everyone. In this sense it is universal. Furthermore, we can be sure that it takes effort and, courage and endurance to follow. Since even when something is purportedly out of our control, it doesn't change the fact that it still remains our responsibility:

> "A Truth is the subjective development of that which is at once both new and universal. New: that which is unforeseen by the order of creation. Universal: that which can interest, rightly, every human individual, according to his pure humanity (which I call his generic humanity). [Following a truth] requires effort, endurance, [and] sometimes self-denial. I often say it's necessary to be the 'activist' of a Truth" (Cox, Whalen and Badiou 2001).

CONCLUSION

Considering our discussion of ethics, to simply rely upon a code of ethics that takes protection as its guiding principle, can be understood to be a passive position. This is because it works from the hypothesis that ethics are simply performing the work of dodging the evils we meet. But following Badiou, ethics in the practice of business anthropology should instead be an active principle for engagement in defining our role and contribution as business anthropologists in the larger contexts of our work.

This demands of us that we consider every research situation as a singular situation, where our ethics form the ability to work through it in a way that stays honest to that situation alone. It means to

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take a rigorous responsibility for at every step of every process that we find ourselves within, in a procedure of constant evaluation of rights and wrongs.

This active engagement sits in stark opposition to the idea that once we have represented things as they are and protected our research subjects, our ethical implications and responsibilities end. Instead we must actively consider our ethical responsibility also in the application and employment of the data and insights we provide. This active ethics, albeit more demanding, we feel, would not only guide us but also hopefully inspire and give meaning to us as practitioners of business anthropology.

In conclusion, we find that discussing the ethics of business anthropology brings light to the opportunities for this praxis to flourish as a responsible professional field and an important pillar of the organization of contemporary society.

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