

toward the rational pursuit of their interests, “market ethics” become directed not merely by the actual participant but by the participant, the ‘person’, as potentiality. Weber contrasts this with the monopolistic community of common land ownership, low differentiation of needs, and closed membership. The encroachment of the market economy, in this view, leads necessarily toward the individuation of such communities (195).<sup>6</sup>

An increasingly vocal strand of research counters this dominant view, with some researchers challenging claims of impersonal markets and unsocial money by paying attention to the culture of the markets (see, e.g., Callon 1998; Keane 2008; Mackenzie 2006, 2007; Maurer 2005; Zelizer 1994) and others by questioning both triumphal and elegiac views of the separation of markets from their material underpinnings (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Ho 2009; Keane 2001, 2008; Maurer 2002, 2005, 2006; Miyazaki 2003, 2005; Miyazaki and Riles 2005; Zaloom 2006; Zelizer 1994, 2005). Other challenges to the narrative of abstraction arise through a questioning of the seemingly fundamental sectioning off of nature and the human (Coronil 2001).

Not necessarily intending to contribute to the conflation of market behavior and “culture loss,” but arguably implicit in it nonetheless, is the focus of much scholarship of indigenous enterprise upon “casino capitalism” (Strange 1986): the energetic edges of capitalism – said casinos, for example, or enterprises such as the sale of tobacco, the leasing of rights to mining companies, or the storage of nuclear waste – which have tended to be inhabited by outsider groups (Darian-Smith 2003; Light and Rand 2005; Ferguson 2006, Perry 2006). Even outside of the criticism indigenous groups will tend to face for engaging in casino capitalism, however, they

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Rouse has drawn my attention to the resemblance of this analysis to a sort of proto-ANT theorization of money: here, money becomes a mediator shaping the way people think, act, and relate to one another.

will begin to be challenged if they venture “too far from the reservation” – if they get too rich (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, Harmon 2010). An underlying notion of money as necessarily bleaching out culture is at work here, too. A number of researchers, however, have directly challenged the notion, adhering particularly if not exclusively to indigenous groups, that conflates economic success with assimilation or inauthenticity (See, e.g., Cattelino 2011, Harmon 2010, Colloredo-Mansfeld 2009).

Of course, the ideas that money is social, and that there is no strict division between gift and commodity, are not new ones in anthropology (see, e.g., Parry and Bloch 1989). They are, however, ideas that have tended to be weakened when anthropologists have turned their eyes upon corporations. In many cases, one can sense something akin to a re-emergence of the very gift/commodity distinction that anthropology has done so much to trouble – an idea that money will corrupt community, or the idea – persistent despite years of ethnographic evidence otherwise (see, e.g., Douglas 1979; Geertz 1978; Geertz et al 1979; Rosen 1984) – that market relations are impersonal or depersonalizing (see, e.g., Castile 1996).

Thus, much of the anthropology of indigenous interaction with corporations seems to come bundled with a set of moral assumptions regarding the corporate form. It seems that when we begin talking about indigenous peoples’ engagement with corporations those moral assumptions mix with other preconceptions about native subjects and modernity. There is a persistent idea that these things are, somehow, incommensurable with one another; there is the assumption that the corporation is necessarily an entity that kills tradition, and that money somehow bleaches ethnicity. The corporation becomes less an interesting ethnographic object

than an agent for the erosion of social richness and cultural particularity.<sup>7</sup> Thus in scholarship, as in popular culture, indigenous peoples have tended to be figured in opposition to the corporation, as its foil and its victim (see, e.g., Bodley 2008, Sawyer 2004).

John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) resolve to critique the perennially emerging notion of a commerce-culture split in *Ethnicity, Inc.* They examine the commodification of ethnic difference, taking special care to parse the paradoxes of a corporate ethnicity. They note the seeming truism that the better (or, I suppose, more legibly) a group expresses its “culture,” the more valuable it will tend to be as a commodity (because it is more “real” in the discerning eyes of consumers) – but they stress the idea that this schematization and sale of culture will not necessarily deplete it or diminish its authenticity. *Ethnicity, Inc.* therefore avoids some of the usual traps of work on indigenous peoples. When Elizabeth Povinelli looks at Australia, for instance, she necessarily focuses on the (fairly horrific) victimization of her Aboriginal informants, as the way she approaches her topic makes into the salient point the oppression of an indigenous group described as mostly powerless against the impossible demands of the state, backgrounding relations of domination internal to the group.

Comaroff and Comaroff avoid this, taking care to highlight the potential for increased internal inequality in the wake of new group-wealth from ethnic enterprise, and to highlight the risks in taking at face value the statements of those who claim the authority to represent a collective subjectivity. Nonetheless, the same notion of a culture opposed to commerce underlies Comaroff and Comaroff’s *Ethnicity, Inc.* paradigm. Where Povinelli declines to address her informants’ own exercises of power, Comaroff and Comaroff leave themselves unable to engage

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<sup>7</sup> This is especially interesting because anthropologists long linked the notions of indigenous peoples and the corporate form, using the idea of the “corporate group” in describing the structure of indigenous or tribal groups. My thanks to Lawrence Rosen for helping me to see this point.

fully with their subject; they never transcend the idea of *Ethnicity, Inc.* as amusing and vaguely dismaying oddity, hampered as they are by the ever-ironic suspicion of their critical focus. As a result, the *Ethnicity, Inc.* paradigm fails to address what I see as a full spectrum of indigenous economic behavior, encompassing both reactions to external pressures and internal manipulations and power plays, taking indigenous groups seriously as rough-and-tumble economic actors. As I trouble the implicit moral valences of scholarly engagement with the corporate form, I aim simultaneously to counter the common image of indigenous peoples as mere victims of corporate activities.

### **Anthropological Engagement with the Corporation**

Since even outside of the case of indigenous groups, anthropological views on corporations have tended to take on particular moralizing valences, perhaps the issue goes even deeper than I have described it: down, I will argue, to the very question of the nature of anthropological inquiry. In questioning the seeming thinness in anthropological theorization of the corporation, Welker, Partridge, and Hardin (2011) have conjectured that it is due perhaps to the intellectual genealogy of the discipline that anthropologists have tended towards a particular type of moralizing critique when speaking of corporations – a tendency to see our purpose as being wrapped up in critique – or, put more properly, denunciation.

Welker argues elsewhere (n.d.) that while a critical focus is necessary, the anthropology of corporations, like an earlier version of the anthropology of the state, has been burdened by an attachment to a too-simple, too-monolithic, and morally overdetermining notion of the object of its critique – to the near-exclusion of any other stories or points of view or angles of inquiry. Welker analogized the difficulties in the anthropological study of the corporation to the difficulty that Abrams noted in scholarship of the state. The difficulty of studying the state, it seemed, was

that scholars, while disaggregating the state in their theorizing, in practice found it necessary to act as if the state were a bounded agentive solid thing (Abrams 1988). Welker likens what anthropologists used to do to the state to what now we do when writing about the corporation: failing to demystify it, we tend to see it as smooth, all-powerful, and unknowable. Thus, Welker argues, unlike the anthropology of the state, the anthropology of the corporation has remained thin, homogenous, and under-theorized. Welker's work, and the work of those like her, has been a call for anthropologists to engage in more complex ways with the corporation.

The near-exclusive focus on harm within the anthropology of corporations meant that, despite the importance of corporations in society and despite their powerful presence in ethnographic explorations of the effects of global capital, there have been nonetheless very few diverse anthropological views on corporations. Despite decades of real interest of ethnographers in the effects of corporations (e.g, Rohlun 1974, Nash 1989, Allison 1994, Fortun 2001, Sawyer 2004, Kirsch 2006), Welker et al. assert,

we have yet to see the emergence of a sustained line of scholarship and inquiry that would extend to the corporation the same critical weight or significance accorded the nation-state... To date, one cannot discern a coherent set of research questions or competing schools of thought characterizing the anthropology of corporations (s5).

We have lacked, in other words, both a depth and a diversity of anthropological approaches to the question of corporations.

While acknowledging that “to many anthropologists, it feels right to be critical of corporations” (s7), Welker et al. also recognize there is more than can be said:

we must capture the more ambivalent and positive ways in which corporations make and enable, as well as curtail and destroy, life (s7).

In other words, we have a job to do: anthropologists, they argue, are particularly suited to destabilize the notion of corporations as all powerful, all encompassing, overwhelming force – a notion that Welker et al. conjecture is connected to “a parochial view that derives from the peculiar legal career of corporations in the United States” (s5). That is to say, from the naturalization of the notion of corporate personhood.

Welker et al. see one way to counter the aggrandizing effect of more abstracted impressions of corporations in work bringing “more anthropological attention to how the corporate form shapes and is shaped by daily life” (2011:s3). The idea is to “shift away from default conceptualizations of corporations as solid, unified, self-knowing, and self-present actors that relentlessly maximize profits and externalize harm” (s5) and with this, from an overemphasis on denunciation (s6).

The pieces associated with *Current Anthropology*’s Corporate Lives issue (Aiello and Brooks, eds. 2011) move away from that unified notion of the corporation by attending to entities that are not so slickly monolithic, entities whose seams show more readily than do those of your average Coca-Cola Company: entities that de-naturalize the easy brand/personality complex of large multinational companies. Hence, these researchers look at NGOs and development organizations (Merry 2011), indigenously owned corporations (Cattelino 2011), “activist capitalism” and chains of “ethical production” (Partridge 2011), and corporatization’s spread into less-typical realms (Merry 2011, Jain 2011) – to name only a few examples. In their varied ways, the pieces demonstrate ways in which “corporate forms are also being engaged to oppose the conventional ways in which large corporations are supposed to operate” (Welker et al. 2011:12).

There are other ideas regarding the root of the emphasis in the anthropology of corporations upon the denunciation of harm at the expense of a more agnostic inquiry. Benson and Kirsch discern something like an unacknowledged Marxism in supposedly Foucauldian critiques of the corporation (2010a:460).<sup>8</sup> They note that a number of researchers of corporations make their critiques by means of a rather non-Foucauldian concept of governmentality; an *actually* Foucauldian view, they argue, would be agnostic about the workings of, and the moral valences of, power. Benson and Kirsch regard as the most significant result of this tendency a stymied attention to the political machinations of corporations, an assumption that corporations may be analyzed “primarily as extended branches of governmentality” (460). I would instead emphasize the ways in which this focus assumes “power pacifies resistance” – an idea that, because of its intuitiveness and simplicity tends to limit<sup>9</sup> discourse<sup>10</sup> via preconceptions of (bad guy) elites and (good guy) subalterns.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Critical sensibilities from the Marxist tradition remain submerged within anthropology, as indicated by the assumption that power pacifies resistance, which contrasts with the Foucauldian argument that power and resistance produce each other. The result is ethnography that treats corporations primarily as extended branches of governmentality, or anti-politics machines (Ferguson 1994), and largely ignores the political processes through which corporations promote their own interests” (Benson and Kirsch 2010a:460).

<sup>9</sup> Focusing exclusively or even merely primarily upon “harm” has two main dangers. First, the work of the anthropology of corporate harm has tended mainly to focus on obvious “bads”: mining, tobacco, and oil, for example (e.g., Shever 2010, Benson 2010, Kirsch 2010, Benson and Kirsch 2010a, 2010b, Ferguson 2005, Appel 2012). This obscures the banality and ubiquity of harm in society – it hides the fact that harm is *everywhere*. Allow me an off-topic example in order to demonstrate the (forgive me) harm in this: In novels (*The Help*, to mention one) or movies (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Django Unchained*) about the bad old days of slavery or of segregation, the tendency is to imagine that it would have been only the villains of the story doing the bad acts at issue – not the ordinary people. Evil is always imagined as the other, beyond-the-pale things that *other* people, *evil* people would do. Our ordinary everyday activities (or those of ordinary, everyday corporations like Starbucks, Ben and Jerry’s, or the Gap) are not evil; they are merely what everyone does. But even those ordinary everyday things have profoundly damaging effects on the world – for instance in terms of carbon emissions and resource over-use (Kelty n.d). But those negative effects (the fact that just living our overly-resource-intensive lives actually destroys ecologies and livelihoods) do not make these everyday

Further, the important work of detailing harm, and that work which Welker et al., referencing Benson and Kirsch (2010), describe as “undermining and destabilizing... countering the ‘politics of resignation’ that treats corporate power as inevitable and inexorable” (2011:s5), are not the only purposes served by countering impressions of corporate inexorability and inevitability. Countering these impressions is also a necessary move for the project of simply understanding and theorizing the corporation. It is lucky for us, then, that, as noted by Welker et al. (2011) in regards to the work of Cook (2011) and Cattelino (2011), indigenous peoples’ work in owning and running corporations can help to show the diversity of and complicate an entity that is otherwise so easily dismissed as merely “bad.”<sup>12</sup> This work necessarily puts in tension

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actions (or corporations) “evil” in popular parlance. Evil is what the Big Bads do: tobacco companies, diamond companies in Sierra Leone. Calvin Candie. Nazis (Arendt 2006 [1973]).

<sup>10</sup> In short, focusing on Big Evil obscures the interlacing of everyday violence all through the world and the interesting things we could say about our way of living and corporations’ role in that; the ways we are implicated and intertwined in that everyday evil. All corporations are involved in “harm industries.” Secondly, focusing on Big Evil oversells said evil; it makes the corporation into a larger-than-life specter as opposed to a textured ethnographic object deserving of nuanced analysis. The orientation toward harm is thus simultaneously insufficiently generous and overly generous to the corporation. To be clear, explicating corporate harm is necessary and important work. Corporations have massive effects on the world, their reach seems to be everywhere, and – even in organizations run with the best of intentions – that type of scale will have terrible effects (and it is probably safe to say that not many corporations are run with the best intentions). But focusing only on harm renders our insights absurdly thin and blinds us to other interesting things that may be going on. Anthropology needs a diversity of takes and critical conversations regarding corporations, just as we eventually saw the diversity and complexity and nuance necessary for studying the state.

<sup>11</sup> A necessary extension of this insight, albeit one beyond the scope of this project, would be to rehabilitate governmentality for the analysis of corporations; to show how it can – indeed should – be used more agnostically. This work, already common in theorizing political ecology (see, e.g., Agrawal 2005), would provide new ways to look at corporations.

<sup>12</sup> A preliminary notion: it seems as if the particular ways in which anthropologists have historically dealt with indigenous peoples flavors the way we look at indigenously owned corporations, working from the start to complicate our view, not allowing us to start off from the easy assumptions more common to our study of corporations – forcing us to hold in abeyance the need to find an oppressive power to which to speak truth. Perhaps the situation *forces* us to broaden our inquiry, to ask different questions.



anthropology's legacy of critique and its legacy of careful (if sometimes fraught) advocacy on behalf of indigenous people.<sup>13</sup>

Dolan and Rajak, writing about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), argue that a “normative preoccupation with whether corporations are a “good” or “bad” thing for society obscures... the ambivalences, contradictions, and tensions that populate the landscape of CSR” (2011:4). Indeed, some of the most nuanced and interesting recent work in the anthropology of corporations has directly addressed this question of the moral valences of anthropological engagement with the corporate form and the inflection of the ethical with the commercial and vice versa. For example, while most anthropologies of the harms worked by corporations focus on the previously noted Big Bads – oil, mining, or cigarette companies – Dolan works with Johnstone (2011) to examine the perfume-scented world of Avon ladies. The insights gained by Dolan and Johnstone – about kinship metaphors in corporate cultures, about entrepreneurial discipline – arise from the fact of their focusing on a type of company more neutral and less amenable to caricature than companies like BP or AngloGold. From there, they attempt to further complicate the much-critiqued dichotomy between rational market and social society, arguing that Avon creates a workforce of economically rational subjects specifically by means of social

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<sup>13</sup> I first became passionate about indigenous engagements with land in law school, having become involved in human-rights-based land claims of indigenous groups. There was so much injustice, standing there so baldly, and so much could be done: I got involved in every project I could find to fight for the rights of these poor downtrodden victims of colonialism and global capitalism. Then I began to notice something odd: the indigenous peoples with whom I worked did not see themselves as victims, nor as especially downtrodden. Instead, they were tireless fighters, savvy businessmen, or pragmatists playing as shrewdly as they could the cards they were dealt. It became clear that their engagements with the issues about which I was so angry was far more nuanced than I had assumed they would be: indigenous peoples' stances on land, on the environment, the future, sustainability, and business were complex, sophisticated, and varied. The trope of the Westerner riding in to save the day for the poor downtrodden indigenous people had never been more useless: I saw that I needed to improve my record at reading the complexities in cases such as this, to get beyond my love of “speaking truth to power,” of critique for the sake of critique.

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