

Social responsibility through the lens of business anthropology and its contribution to it

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Abstract:

Social responsibility is facing challenges in today's world of business, capitalism and consumerism. Anthropology enables perceiving social responsibility in the contexts of modern societies' challenges. Business anthropology, applying anthropological knowledge to business, can be perceived as a bridge among consumers and clients in business. With the use of specific approach and methods business anthropology enables understanding of both, consumers and clients, their needs, values, perceptions. The article will show how business anthropology can contribute to business where the needs of consumers and clients can be met in a more collaborative ways with the goal of holism and responsibility. Special emphasis will be put to the context of consumerism and capitalism also in post socialist countries. With presenting some case studies the contribution of business anthropology to more social responsible and humane world will be shown.

Key words: business anthropology, social responsibility, capitalism, consumerism, case study, post socialism

Družbena odgovornost skozi objektiv poslovne antropologije in njen prispevek k njej

Povzetek:

Družbena odgovornost se sooča z izzivi v današnjem poslovnem svetu, kapitalizmu in potrošništvu. Antropologija omogoča zaznavanje družbene odgovornosti v kontekstu izzivov sodobnih družb. Poslovno antropologijo, ki uporablja antropološko znanje za poslovanje, lahko razumemo kot most med potrošniki in strankami v poslovanju. Z uporabo specifičnega pristopa in metod poslovna antropologija omogoča razumevanje tako potrošnikov kot strank, njihovih potreb, vrednot, dožemanja. V prispevku bomo pokazali, kako lahko poslovna antropologija prispeva k poslovanju, kjer se potrebe potrošnikov in strank dosežejo na bolj sodelovalen način s ciljem celovitosti in odgovornosti. Poseben poudarek bo namenjen kontekstu potrošništva in kapitalizma tudi v postsocialističnih državah. S predstavitvijo nekaterih študij primerov bo prikazan prispevek poslovne antropologije k bolj družbeno odgovornemu in humanemu svetu.

Ključne besede: poslovna antropologija, družbena odgovornost, kapitalizem, potrošništvo, študija primera, post socializem



Introduction

We live in times of rapid growth and development going hand in hand with consumerism. »We are all consumers now, consumers first and foremost, consumers by right and by duty.« (Bauman, 2011) When consumers are choosing a product, their purchasing decisions a lot of times go beyond the quality of a product. They are interested also in ethical concerns regarding products, from origins to work and production process etc. Now days consumers are holding corporations responsible for effects they have in society with their business practices, beliefs, standards and profits. Consumers expect corporations and their brands to meet also ethical standards regarding their products and services, corporations to have social responsibility and corporate social responsibility (CSR) – »the new social-moral-economic phenomenon«. (Freeman, 2011)¹ Now days ethical initiatives became »ubiquitous, circulating new regimes of accountability that aim to institute ethics and social responsibility in global business practice.« (Dolan and Raja, 2016)

In the context of corporate social responsibility corporations should overcome their economic goals of making profit with reaching »broader objectives« (Conley and Williams, 2008), such as social and environmental well-being and sustainable growth among others. »Stakeholders« are no longer only corporations, but also employees, residents of communities, societies.

In this context a set of questions occurs: how to achieve a win-win situation for all parties involved, how to cooperate responsibly and fair when having conflicting interests, gaining both social and commercial objectives, and ultimately, » ... (the) mystification (that) CSR performs; how the discourses and practices of empowerment, partnership, mutuality and so forth sideline issues of power and profit«. (Dolan and Raja, 2016)

Social responsibility in the context of capitalism

Social responsibility is facing challenges in today's world of business, capitalism and consumerism. The ideology of capitalism has redefined progress and success of both; an individual and a society. Totality of consumerism has trapped us. »...capital constitutes the engine that drives the capitalist system.« (Leech, 2012: 22) Capital comes in different forms: land, money, machinery, buildings, goods and expands with the generations of profit and rents that constitute capital accumulation. It is spreading all around the world and bringing basic needs deprivation and inequality, which is »a form of structural violence« to billions of people. (Leech, 2012: 5)

Nothing in capitalism is worth a-priori. Each thing gets value only after it is brought to the market and gets a price, getting »use-value" or "exchange-value" (ibid.: 23) Consequently

¹ *Salvan claims that human relationships and economic behaviour should be guided by »Cultural responsibility (CR)«. (2013) With emphasizing the cultural aspects focusing on communities and an individual »culture, in terms of anthropology, can help us rethink human and economic relationships in an ethical manner and consider development as a process of cultural growth before than economic growth... (making) possible to realize an economic and social context that is inclusive and cohesive. (ibid.)*



this means »... the commodification of virtually everything and everyone in order to generate wealth for a minority«. (ibid: 41). Exploitation and oppression that consequently result in social inequality of people, where majority posses wealth and also power is the constitutive part of capitalism.

Leech argues that the ideology of capitalism in hegemonic discourse is based on a free-market capitalism promotion, without taking into consideration the contradictions that appear in the functioning of the system. Free-market capitalism and liberal democracy with their values become legitimized and a »common sense«. (ibid: 101).

Better tomorrow, happiness, satisfaction, more hope and beliefs in better life are all connected to the idea of progress and economic growth. The sources of happiness can come from wealth, fame and physical attractiveness, satisfying relationships, serving the community and personal growth. Hamilton recognizes the first group of sources of happiness as a system that is self-centered, »... the modern myth of consumer society; we are bombarded every day with images and messages that attempt to persuade us that we can find contentment and fulfillment by acquiring this product or that one...« (1999: 1)

The goal of capitalist system is to generate capital and to be served by the people and not to serve people. »The rule of law" consequently leads to reduction of freedom of individuals. (Leech, 2012: 26). The existence of capitalism is based on the idea on making people miserable in order to serve the capital, and not making that satisfied. Marketing has one main goal; economic growth. It can be obtained with constant creation of non-satisfaction and feeling of something missing with offering a cure: consumption for reaching happiness and comfort.

To consume is to be

In capitalism consumerism has become a part of our lifes, whether we want it or not. Consumerism influences the quality of life and even more; in capitalism it also gives purpose and meaning to life. Consequently therefore capitalism ascribes to shopping also a deeper - an ontological - component. To shop, to be able to shop therefor means to exist (Bauman, 2011). Not to shop, no matter for what reasons, makes life less meaningful.

Consumerism is not only an issue of fulfillment of satisfaction and happiness. It became an issue of existing when one can't do it, can not shop, because of the »...absence of human dignity. Of life meaning. Ultimately, of humanity and any other ground for self-respect and respect of the others around.« (ibid.) The absence of- or the inability to shop, to consume can be so frustrating that can lead to riots (as in London in august 2011) in Leech's opinion, because consumers that can not consume are "defective and disqualified consumers". Žižek's claims (2011) that riots were a conflict »between those with everything, and those with nothing, to lose; between those with no stake in their community and those whose stakes are the highest.«.

This "truth" of capitalism became absolute, the one and only, and capitalism became the one and only, "the right" social system (see also Leech, 2012: 108, 109). There is only one option; to consume, to give meaning to life and living. The other option is not really an option; if chosen, one can be doomed to non-existence.



Post-socialist societies

The hegemony of capitalism set it to be »the one and right« social order not only for the »western« societies. With westernization (see also Kalb in Hann, 2002) and the logic of evolutionism from less-to more developed countries capitalism became prescribed social order also for post-socialist countries. (See also Godina, 2014)

In that context the post-socialist countries went through transition to reaching a goal of having another, more advanced social system, capitalism. (Kideckel in Hann, 2002, 115).

»(It was) ...the shock of the new... the new cosmologies: people recasting their social worlds, their most basic sense of time and space.« (Sampson in Hann, 2002: 297, 298, see also Vukovič in Bufon, 2006: 564-569).

There was too much of capitalism too quickly, the establishment of capitalism was too fast. Therefor the new social system shouldn't be named post-socialism but neo-capitalism instead, Kideckel (in Hann, 2002, 115) suggests. (See also Godina, 2014) It should be recognized and understood as a »neo-capitalist« social system, that is even more in-egalitarian than the Western model, from which it originates. Post-socialist countries, among others also Slovenia, therefor inherited the new, more »in-egalitarian« version of capitalism, neo-capitalism.

The question remains; how to break the vicious cycle of class inequalities, of consumerism being ontological for human existence, meaning of human life? Is consuming less the answer? Wartman (2011) claims that there is a need for more radical approach, on collective level. The time for radical change in thinking and in improving personal and social well-being is needed. (Hamilton, 1999). One of the possibilities to improving personal and social well-being, to limit one-sided, ignorant behavior, is social responsibility.

Path toward social responsible actions

Social responsibility became an important part of business world. One of the aspects is referring relations, values, goals, rights, responsibilities etc. of all that are involved in business practice. In order to enable the equal position, importance, of all involved, there is a need for understanding them.

Anthropology, studying people in various social and cultural environments, can contribute to their understanding. One of the environment is also business, where business anthropology applies the theories and methods to business.

When studying cultures and societies anthropologist acknowledge cultural differences. The transcription of practices, behavior patterns, construction of everyday reality etc. from one culture and society to another is not efficient nor leading to social responsible actions. The importance of the cultural context has to be recognized in order to be able to understand the characteristics and meanings in social systems, differences and also possible commonalities between them. Corporate social responsibility becoming an »orthodoxy within the arena of both development and multinational business«, has been leading anthropologist to study how



it is practiced in processes of organizations and »differentially grounded in particular social and material realities« (Dolan and Raja, 2016).

Anthropologists can also understand and explain "moral themes" of now days social systems, which are important part of establishing social responsibility. »... anthropologists are well positioned to move the moral debates to another level by showing how terms like »private property« and »market economy« connect to social realities for the citizens of today's democracies.« (Hann, Humphrey and Verdery in Hann, 2012: 10)

Holism and cooperation in business practice

I argue that business anthropology, contributing a lot to understanding consumers and companies, products and services, cultures and societies, it enables setting the ground for more responsible and equal relations among them in the context of achieving more holistic and cooperative approach.

Experts like anthropologists that are trained to be able to understand what consumers really want, what they need, how they think, how they feel etc. can consequently contribute and help consumers to make better or more suitable choices. Researching consumer behaviour with anthropological methods reveals how people use products and services to reach ideals set by them or society and also to construct self-identities, to confirm and strengthen their roles. It also shows how people influence their perception by others and it also reveals the symbolic aspects of products and services to the people. (See also Jordan, 2003, 50).

Business anthropology, applying anthropological knowledge to business, can be perceived as a bridge among consumers and clients in business. It can contribute to a win-win situation for both, leading to business where the needs of consumers and companies (producers, sellers) can be met in a more collaborative ways with the goal of holism and responsibility.²

Decision makers in business are starting to realize that without taking human factor into consideration they can't effectively communicate with consumers.³ Consumers will rarely buy things that will not bring them the expected value and satisfaction and fulfil their needs. (See also Jordan, 2003: 68)

For capitalistic logics the ideal consumer is the one that would be consuming without even thinking. The need for consuming became a constitutive part of the lives of consumers, but that doesn't mean that they are not becoming more aware regarding their needs, choices, rights and also limitations.

² *An example of such practice are research results of my business anthropology project for a client from FMCG (Fast moving consumer goods) industry. In the project I had, among others, researched eating habits in households of Slovene families. (See Vukovič, 2011: 36). The research findings were implemented into design and business strategies with making products more »user friendly« and meeting more needs of consumers (in terms of ingredients, packaging materials, introducing new tastes and products). Even more; the implementation of results made changes in Slovene society. The re-definition of healthy food was setting the new trend of communicating and building awareness for food without preservatives, chemicals etc. not only among the brand users but also nationwide in the Slovene society.*

³ *Human factor implies the power of humans and the standing of it towards the power of capital. More in Vukovič in Skalnik and Brocki, 2018).*



I argue that although if we take the power of capital and being trapped into consumerism into consideration, we, as human beings still have choices. We as consumers are or should be able to decide what, if, from whom and for what price to buy.⁴ That is, we have the choice of what kind of consumers we want to be and actually are. To put it from different perspective; companies should be able to provide consumers products and services that are fitting into consumers' needs. This is the aspect that consequently can lead also to more social responsible actions of both, consumers and producers.⁵

Conclusion

The government of capitalism is ubiquitous, and also are its constitutive parts; inequalities and consumerism among them. Also business world is recognizing the need for a more cooperative actions and the need for recognition of various stakeholders, of their rights and also responsibilities.

This article presented the context of social responsibility in capitalism, with some actions that can support establishing social responsibility in business practice. One of them is business anthropology, recognizing and understanding the needs, values, patterns actions etc. of stakeholders. With its methods and knowledge business anthropology can support perceiving and setting all of involved in the business practice at the same level of importance and validity, which is one of the key pillars to a more social responsible actions.

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⁴ See also Jordan, 2003: 56.

⁵ The implementation of research results by business anthropology lead my client to produce food that is more healthy (that was one of the needs of consumers that revealed through research), with local origins (another important aspect for consumers). The implementation of results in business practice led to a win-win situation of both; to sales growth of products and to a better, healthier and more friendly products and choices for consumers.



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