

Starbucks, Racism, and the Anthropological Imagination

Diversity in the Workplace

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Capitalism is generated through moral and economic negotiations.



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After a series of discrimination allegations, Starbucks announced in April that it would close to eight thousand stores on May 29 to conduct racial bias training. Many applauded the multinational corporation for taking a stance against racism, while others scoffed. Anthropologists have long kept a pulse on how corporations pollute environments, depress wages, control workers, create war, and, as a mentor recently reminded me, how they “just kill people.” Corporations were at the forefront of theoretical musings on [evil infrastructure](#) in *Cultural Anthropology's* 2017 Theorizing the Contemporary series. So, what sense can we make of a historical moment such as this, wherein one

of the largest multinational corporations hired leading experts on American racism purportedly to transform their business culture?

Overwhelmingly, social scientists agree that corporate diversity trainings are not an effective way to rectify systemic inequity. Critics have argued that these practices do not address systemic racism, historical struggle, and oppression; rather, they enable corporations to conduct business as usual, while helping them appearing to be doing social good (Mohanty 2003, Ahmed 2017).

I am not writing this piece to uncritically applaud Starbucks for the work they are doing. Rather, I want to recognize these changes and ask that we reflect on what they mean for how we think about corporations, race, and capitalism today.

But, what if we reframe the conversation, not as one that asks how these processes fail to bring us social justice, but instead as one that asks how and why corporations have become so important to American publics? Such a change in anthropological imagination might reveal to what extent American race relations are becoming embedded in everyday business.

There are many reasons why Starbucks would choose to close their doors for racial bias training, paying wages and losing revenue from unrealized sales. Certainly, this move can inoculate the company against discrimination lawsuits, as these often require proof of intent. Although compliance may be the simplest answer, through my fieldwork on diversity management I learned that consultants reject working under such logics. For consultants, compliance frameworks are limited, as they neglect the potential of diversity to generate profit. Consultants argue that managing diversity by addressing inclusion in the workplace helps improve brand image, promote employee engagement, and drive creativity and innovation.

At the same time, diversity professionals, including consultants and human resource professionals, are not empty vessels of capitalist expertise. They are advocates of historically marginalized individuals in largely white spaces, and hence they are advocates for changing organizational culture so that it also addresses institutional racism. As seen with Starbucks, by framing antiracism within managerial practice, racism becomes a product of “unconscious biases” and evolutionary adaptations that make humans fearful of differences. These are also business problems, because they create disruptions in work.

Before Trump was elected as President, we had taken for granted that we lived in a colorblind era, wherein systemic racism was reproduced despite and through disavowals of racists (Bonilla-Silva

2008). The Starbucks announcement points to how all this is changing: well intentioned white-collar professionals are turning to experts to help them understand “bias” where there may be no intention to discriminate, and what is more, these corporations are taking explicit positions against racism and creating organizational techniques to purportedly address these historical harms.

Starbucks is following diversity “best practices,” the organizational techniques that leading management experts approve as worthy of being instituted. The CEO of the company, Kevin Johnson, a white man, apologized publicly for the discrimination experienced by black customers (possibly against legal advice), announced his commitment to inclusion, and reinforced this message by making a public gesture: closing thousands of stores on the same day. Starbucks also hired prominent experts in racial discrimination who recognize that such a racial bias training needs to have **measurable outcomes** and **accountability systems in place**.

Anthropologists of capitalism, in particular, should take heed of the fact that corporations like Starbucks have the power to shape capitalist discourse. Starbucks’ representatives, for instance, said they will publish the trainings that they will **develop for public use**. Their goal is to influence the creation of new teaching tools, metrics, and workplace policies to address racial discrimination in business. Insofar as corporations have the resources and social capital to set standards for how to do business, we should listen when they claim to be creating new moral grounds for capitalism. Perhaps this allure to how business can be used to do good partially explains why diversity, while a business construct, has also become part of everyday operations in higher-education institutions and nonprofit organizations.

I am not writing this piece to uncritically applaud Starbucks for the work they are doing. Rather, I want to recognize these changes and ask that we reflect on what they mean for how we think about corporations, race, and capitalism today. In doing so, I suggest that we re-examine the complicated relationship between economics and morality, and create new analytics for understanding how we have never actually been post-racial. As Starbucks is showing, it is not only “social justice warriors” that are concerned with racial discrimination in America; it is also the concern of a large consumer public. Insofar as there is a market for antiracism practice, corporations will attempt to capitalize on it. As critics of corporations and capitalism, we know best that this is not entirely a positive development in history, and it is our duty to understand how and why this has come to be.

So, how do we begin to re-imagine the relationship between corporate capitalism and American race relations? I suggest that we begin by addressing our own anxiety over studying corporations and interrupt our assumptions of them as evil. The latter analytic does not facilitate the kind of nuanced analysis that can explain how, sometimes, capitalist humans are sincere actors trying to

“do good” in a messy world. Yet, I also caution us to keep in mind that sincerity in moral and “antiracist” concern is not about authenticity, but performance, productivity, and meaning (Jackson 2001). These contradictions are observable if we pay attention to the intersections of concerns about profit and society. An analytic of negotiation, in contrast to one of the reproduction of evil, might help us better understand how capitalism continues to be generated, purportedly as an improvement.

Luzilda Carrillo Arciniega is writing her dissertation *Diversifying Capitalism: Race, Value, and the Making of the Corporate Workplace after Affirmative Action* at the University of California Irvine. Find her on twitter: @luzildac.

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Paul Richardson says:
July 22, 2018 at 3:30 pm

Lucy, I enjoyed reading your article. Yes, Starbucks should be given some credit for taking this issue on. Up until the end of 2016 I worked as an engineer in Silicon Valley and in many ways what Starbucks has chosen to do is light years ahead and hopefully more generative than the work Silicon Valley is doing in and around “diversity”.

I wholeheartedly agree with your assertion that anthropologists should at least take heed/observe how this work affects the discourse on capitalism and how discourses on racial/gender equity are affected by capitalism.

Unfortunately the valley seems to be stuck in their implementation and tools deployed for improving racial/gender diversity. I have always believed that the tech industry needs to look outwards for examples of how to improve both racial and gender equity within.

By definition the tech “industry” already constrains approaches to improving diversity based on their belief that any time taken away from the financial mission is at some level time not efficiently used in support of their mission. Maybe by way of Starbucks’ example the tech industry might glean better approaches to solving “their” problem

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Lucy Carrillo says:
May 31, 2018 at 3:24 pm

Thank you, Jason! I also loved your piece. I am looking forward to reading the linked Starbucks articles!

[Reply](#)

Jason Antrosio says:
May 24, 2018 at 12:00 pm

Thank you for writing this and sharing your thoughts—very timely and connected to your own research! I’ve added this to my take on [Starbucks & Anthropology](#). That piece might have some helpful links to previous anthropological takes on Starbucks as well as a link to a previous corporate training on racism Starbucks conducted (but doesn’t seem to have had much effect!).

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Pingback: [Is Anthropology better than Starbucks? On calling out racism elsewhere.](#)

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