

Anthropological District

Notes for an anthropological study of the industrial districts

Michele F. Fontefrancesco ¹

Abstract

The article discusses industrial district theory as objects of anthropological enquiry. Providing a review of the history of studies in industrial anthropology and industrial district theory, the article explores extended case method and in the multi-sited ethnography as viable methodologies to make industrial district an object of anthropological research practice and epistemology.

Introduction

This article moves from a simple consideration. In the last century, many of the main concepts originally developed in Economics were discussed and, then, included into the dictionary and the analytical apparatus of the other Social Sciences. This trend did not involve only concepts, such as money, market, commodity, etc., but also banking and finance. The works by Langley (2008), Gudeman (2008) and Hart (2001) offer an example of such tendency.

Considering this trend, the concept of “industrial district”, one of the key concepts of analysis, at profusely employed on a local and global level by economists, sociologists and geographers, appears to have been scarcely engaged by anthropologists. Although a number of ethnographies explore industrial regional conglomerations (e.g. Benton, 1989; Blim, 1990; Ghezzi, 2007; Narotzky & Smith, 2006), despite some exceptions (Narotzky, 1997, 2006), anthropologists scarcely engaged the broader on-going discussion about such conglomerations. In spite of this trend, with this article I want to indicate in the industrial district an interesting subject into which industrial anthropology can provide further insight.

After having highlighted how industry has played a relevant role in the anthropological debate, I will move to explain what an industrial district is. I will point out the potentialities of Extended-case method and multi-sited ethnography as methodologies for researching in the industrial districts. In so doing I will argue that that this

¹ Department of Anthropology, Durham University, Durham (UK)

theoretical model provides an interesting ground on which to deepen the anthropological knowledge of the link between industry and locale. I will also note that anthropology can offer a substantial contribution to improve the model itself.

Anthropology and Industry

Since the beginning of the Twentieth century, anthropologists have been interested in the study of the different forms of economy experienced in the world. Despite the common focus on non-Western societies, in the 1930s anthropologists started studying industrialism (Applebaum, 1986) and in particular factories and their activities. This new branch of research, that took the name of “Industrial Anthropology”, originated in the United States and had Harvard Business School, University of Chicago and Yale University as its main propulsive centres. Pushed by private investments (Baba, 2006; Moore, 1986, p. 8), anthropologists mainly focused on the organizational research on business and industry. In so doing, they employed ethnography as a tool to study the attitudes and the behaviours of the employees within production plants. In the USA, these studies continued during all the 1940s, but almost entirely disappeared after the WWII since the field was largely taken by social psychologists (Moore, 1988). Despite this interruption, after 1960s anthropologists have come back to study capitalism and its effects. Thus, industrialism at large has turned into one of the principal subjects of cultural anthropology (Holzberg & Giovannini, 1981; Miller, 1997; Narotzky, 1997) in the past four decades. In these years of research, scholars have investigated a vast array of themes linked to industrialization. Example are industrial management (Baba, 2006; Moore, 1986; Orr, 1996), entrepreneurship (Caulkins, 1992), work identification (Freeman, 2000), industrial architecture (Hunter Bradley, 1999), labour market (Ortiz, 2002), unionism (Durrenberger, 2007), consumption (Miller, 199 ; 2001), the connection between production and politics (Gledhill, 2004), and globalization (Appadurai, 1996; Eriksen, 2003).

Looking at this bibliography it emerges a distinguishing trend in the anthropological approach to industry. Anthropologists have worked diffusely, on the one hand, on a micro-level, investigating the social life of workshops, and their production processes and social dynamics (e.g. Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000); on the other, they have looked at the global(-ized) scale of the world’s economy (e.g. Collins, 2000). Despite studies based on a city-level or community-level are common, very few works (e.g. Blim, 1991; Cento Bull & Corner, 1993; Ghezzi, 2007; Vargas-Cetina, 2000; Yanagisako, 2002) were conducted considering an intermediate, regional scale – the scale investigated by industrial district theory.

Industrial Districts and their history.

Alfred Marshall introduced the concept of “industrial district” into Economics in the late Nineteenth century. Taking as examples the textile industries of Lancashire and Sheffield, he explored the economic relationship between a firm and the region where it is established (Marshall & Marshall, 1879; Marshall, 1920). Marshall noted that within a geographical region characterized by a high concentration of establishments specialized in the same production, firms extensively collaborate by interconnecting their cycles of productions. Moreover “what makes the industrial district so special and vibrant, in Marshall's account, is the nature and quality of the local labour

market, which is internal to the district and highly flexible. Individuals move from firm to firm, and owners as well as workers live in the same community, where they benefit from the fact that "the secrets of industry are in the air." (Markusen, 1996, p. 299)

Marshall's industrial district theory was able to point out and give a conceptual frame to the relationship between industry and its spatial geography. Moreover, it showed that high density of firms specialized in the same trade within a same, small region can result into an economic asset for local entrepreneurs.

Thus, Marshall's theory was applied outside economics. For example, it was a central concept in the urban and regional economic planning linked to the Marshal Plan after WWII (Bischof, Pelinka, & Stiefel, 2000; Dulles & Wala, 1993; Hogan & American Council of Learned Societies., 1987; Maier, 1991; Schain, 2001). However, it was only in the 1970s that the industrial district theory became the subject of an international debate in Social Sciences (Maskell & Kebir, 2005). Since then, Marshall's original theories were implemented, revisited, and redefined many times, thanks to the numerous studies carried out in industrial agglomerates all around the world (Amin, 2002). Economists, geographers and sociologists invented new names to address the economic and functional link between industry, territory, and population and often reconsidered the boundaries of Marshall's models because of local political specificities and the new media: the rich varieties of names, testifies the numerous attempts to expand further the original model.

The basis of an ethnography

In sum, the theory of the industrial districts describes networks of firms that are economically and spatially interconnected. The networks are characterized by a common trade and by a philosophy of production that is embodied in the locale. As the works by Nartozky and other scholars before mentioned show, an anthropological inquiry of an industrial district can explore deeply these peculiarities, the way they are generated and how they contribute to the definition of a coherent local reality. The example of these scholars, moreover, shows that although anthropologists did not get involved in the theoretical debate about the (re) formulation of the idea of the industrial district, the discipline has methodological and theoretical tools able to investigate these realities.

First, I am referring to the ethnographies "extended-case method". This methodology introduced by Gluckman (2000 [1940]) pushes the researcher to abandon a geographical-bounded perspective and place the social action, such as production, into the centre of the research (Burawoy, 1998). It follows that an ethnographer is requested to follow the social action, moving through different sites and observing the interactions among the various actors that perform the action. Thus, the "extension" of the method does not only refer to the geographical enlargement of the field from the limits imposed by other fieldwork theories. It is also an expansion of the time-span of the ethnographic account. In a heuristic perspective aimed at locating an industry in the time and space of a network interaction – this is the horizon of a research in industrial districts – this method appears a fundamental step for ethnography to move out from being a snapshot of a frozen Present. In fact, to follow and describe a social action in its becoming means to localize and contextualize the action in a broader scenario of a living territory. In so doing, it provides a description and insight into this social dimension. Thanks to its

features, the extended-case method has already been proved to be an interesting tool to offer a “thick description” (cf. Geertz, 1973) of the many cultural aspects of local economies – aspects that echoes the pillars of the theory of the industrial district (e.g. Ghezzi, 2007; Narotzky & Smith, 2006).

To employ the extended-case method, however, ethnographic work discloses a multi-sited dimension. The concept of “multi sited ethnography” was introduced by Marcus (Marcus, 1995, 1998) in his attempt to re-define ethnography as a tool for addressing the complex cultural and economic phenomena that are linked with globalization (Marcus, 2009). Abandoning the grand scale that the ideas of Marcus imply, this much discussed approach (Candea, 2007) is based on the assemblage through a *per sensum* juxtaposition of ethnographies carried out in different places. Moving the anthropological eye on the industrial district, to follow social and material production within a regional conglomeration of firms requires this research. In fact, the research should encompass distinct places, such as factories, private houses, offices, shops, let alone different settlements that may be part of a same district, and capture their interconnection and disjunctions so to account the district in its being. To do so, however, the field-researcher must remember that each one of these locations is at the same time one particular “site”, which requires different techniques of analysis to be approached and understood, and one part of a more complex whole, which may not be directly seen but can be understood through its many parts.

It appears the problematic definition of the boundaries of a district. Although the boundaries of a district seem to be clear and neat in their graphical representations (e.g. Gereffi, 2007; Markusen, 1996, p. 297), the consistency of such border must not be overestimated. Rather than being ontological entities, the districts expand through and are in the interaction of its actors. While geographers, economists and sociologists have mostly focused on the territorial essence of the districts, an anthropological enquiry can be a good occasion to turn the network inside out (cf. Riles, 2000). It can bring to the fore the everyday making and social dimension of a network production, openly challenging a strict graphical description of districts and making industrial districts into non-representational experiences (Thrift, 2007).

Conclusion

Concluding these notes, in this article I wanted to show a methodological, viable path through which anthropology can fruitfully contribute to the on-going debate on industrial districts. The re-definition of the boundaries/the geography of the district is an initial result that anthropological analysis can offer to the international debate. However, more can be found given. By considering and production as a subject in becoming, and documenting all these through the different phases of its manufacturing, it will be possible to unfold the social dialectics (Miller, 2010) that is involved in the production and concerns the social life of things (Appadurai, 1986) and their producers. In so doing, it can be better understood the meaning given to work and entrepreneurship in different locales, that is to find the geological window (Lévi-Strauss, 19: pp. 56-58) to explore the making of value (Graeber, 2001) in a society– the very foundation of any economy.

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