

Long Read Review: Think Like an Anthropologist by Matthew Engelke

In Think Like an Anthropologist, Matthew Engelke offers a concise history of anthropology, drawing on a variety of ethnographic works and theoretical tools to dissect nine key concepts and their changing meanings for anthropologists. While the book's perspective is limited by its focus on European and North American schools of thought, this is an engaging primer particularly suited for those newly encountering anthropology as a discipline, writes Dick Powis.

Think Like an Anthropologist. Matthew Engelke. Pelican. 2017.

Find this book: 

I am an anthropologist. As is common among my colleagues, some variation of the question 'what does that mean?' is bound to arise when I talk about my work with my family and friends. For those around the dinner table with some inkling of what anthropology means, they think back to Margaret Mead, arguably America's last public intellectual in anthropology. While it's not always obvious to those outside of anthropology (and a significant though diminishing number of scholars within), we are not limited to doing our work in so-called exotic locales with so-called exotic peoples, as Mead did. Things have changed and are changing: our topics, our perspectives, our methods and even anthropologists themselves. Pair this near-complete lack of a public face with the rise of pseudo-anthropological interlopers who, in our stead, provide fast-food analyses on hot topics and current events – Thomas Friedman, Jared Diamond, Nicholas Kristoff, Nicholas Wade and Jordan Peterson, to name a few – and we have a recipe for even more confusion around the dinner table.

Today's anthropology is a discipline that grapples with the irreducibly complex relationships between people, their histories, their experiences and structures of power relative to – like it or not – something called 'culture', whatever that means. If someone would just write a book that laid it all out in a clear and concise way, I'd have both a foundation to build on and holiday gifts for everybody. We need something a little less intimidating than David Graeber's tomes, [Debt: The First 5,000 Years](#) and [Bullshit Jobs: A Theory](#), and something a little more elementary than Agustín Fuentes's [Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature](#) and [The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional](#) – all four of which are otherwise excellent engagements in a kind of public intellectual anthropology.

Matthew Engelke's *Think Like an Anthropologist* appears to be such a book. The small, lightweight paperback is unassuming and inviting. The title is instructional, downright imperative. However, what one may mistakenly prejudice to be an easy-to-read manual is in fact more of a textbook, but with a twist. *Think Like an Anthropologist* is really a history of anthropology, in so far as 'anthropology' references a particular tradition from Western Europe and North America, or what Gustavo Lins Ribeiro calls 'North Atlantic Anthropology'. Engelke's history of anthropology is therefore a mostly White, mostly male one that begins in Victorian England. Unlike the social theory compendia of graduate-level and upper-level undergraduate courses, *Think Like an Anthropologist* is not written in a chronological format through eras, paradigms or 'turns'. Rather, Engelke approaches the discipline from another angle: conceptually. Nine chapters each dissect a different concept – culture, civilisation, values, value, blood, identity, authority, reason and nature – using a variety of ethnographic works and theoretical tools in order to guide readers through changing meanings, orientations and priorities that anthropologists have or have had with respect to these topics.

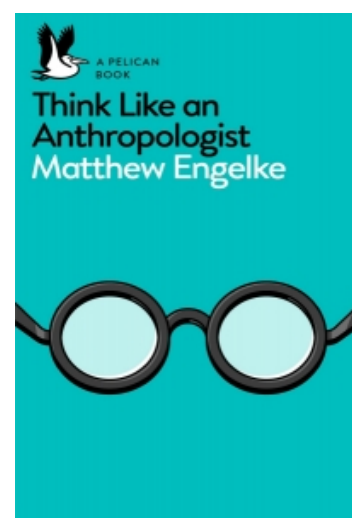




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Eleven chapters in all (the nine concepts, plus the introduction and conclusion), the book is a surprisingly quick read. Each chapter is a crash course through the historical context and development of a concept, just enough to get you interested and cover the bases without the deep and sometimes exhausting analysis that might lead a reader to never pick up the book again. Engelke uses little jargon, and that which he does is always defined, if not discussed in some way. For the seasoned anthropologist, it may be frustrating how superficially he seems to graze some ideas, but it's probably a good thing, even *merciful* as far as my hypothetical tablemates are concerned, that I was frequently left thinking: 'There's so much more to this, though!'

In the introduction, 'The Familiar Strange', Engelke starts by establishing a foundation using the timeless classic: anthropology is meant to 'make the familiar strange and the strange familiar'. In doing so, he sets some loose boundaries for what anthropology entails (from Frank Hamilton Cushing's nineteenth-century work in a pueblo to Caitlin Zaloom's twenty-first-century work in 'the pit') and what his book does not entail (notably: biological anthropology; archaeology (with some exceptions); linguistics (with some exceptions); chapters on society or power (among other things); or World Anthropologies).

In Chapter One, Culture, Engelke moves briskly through different anthropological thoughts on 'culture' (e.g. Frank Boas's *Kulturbrille* ('cultural glasses'); material culture; the relationship of culture to nature, and the mind specifically) and what it takes to understand it (e.g. ethnographic research; Clifford Geertz's emphasis on interpretation and text). He also discusses the turn away from 'culture' – as a totalising category of space and time, aloof to the violence of colonialism and global capitalism – and towards Foucauldian 'discourse' and Bourdieusian 'habitus', and then back again to 'culture' (for some anthropologists, at least). This important lesson shows readers that as a population's practices and expectations are fluid, complicated and not easily categorised, so too is our understanding of the 'culture' concept itself.

In Chapter Two, Civilization, Engelke starts with exactly what I was thinking as I turned the page: 'Who uses this word anymore?' Politicians, pundits, lobbyists, journalists and other commentators regularly evoke an idea of 'civilisation', and Engelke argues that it's important to know what they mean when they do so. 'Civilisation' is teleological, relational and it comes from a history in 'social evolutionism' – a long-dead perspective of study in anthropology which is unfortunately alive and well among everyone from policymakers to some of my dinner tablemates above. More than any other chapter, this one lives up to the book's title, in that Engelke engages with anthropology's checkered past as a handmaiden to colonial expansion and progeniture of white supremacy, and he approaches contemporary issues like the US 'War on Terror' and international development through an anthropological lens as well.

In Chapters Three and Four, Engelke cleverly divides ‘Values’ from ‘Value’ respectively. Values, of course, are those rather nebulous things that people hold dear that serve both as unifying structures of a community or nation state (like individualism in the United States) and as categories that anthropologists have historically used to essentialise populations (like honour and shame in the Mediterranean). Value, on the other hand, is that which we place on material goods: the things we keep, trade and gift away; the things we go into debt for and the debt itself. I find that the author’s uncritical reliance, in this chapter and elsewhere in the book, on the idea of *hau* – a Māori term, stolen and misused by European and North American anthropologists for close to a century – is disappointing and presents a missed opportunity to fully describe ‘entitlement’ as a mode of anthropological thinking about value.

The next two chapters, Blood (Chapter Five) and Identity (Chapter Six), are seemingly related, but Engelke is clear from the start: blood is not identity. To drive home this point, Engelke very clearly and concisely explains ‘blood quantum’ – a complicated system of quantifying Indigeneity forced upon Indigenous peoples by the US government – in what is probably one of the most valuable sections of the entire book. The chapter on Blood is, overall, a chapter about kinship and variable meanings of family, while the chapter on Identity is much more about how individuals, communities and nations are constructed through systems of shared values.

For readers who wish for chapters on ‘power’ or ‘gender’, both topics make their greatest appearances in Chapter Seven on Authority. For Engelke, authority is not just about *who* commands but *why*. Gender is just one part of the puzzle, but things get more complicated when we consider generational power, juridico-legal power and state power. Engelke also tackles *how* authorities become vested with authority, and thankfully does so without ever invoking political philosophy or Michel Foucault. The final two chapters, on Reason (Chapter Eight) and Nature (Chapter Nine), take readers into much more psychological and philosophical territory. In the former, Engelke introduces how people *think* about (as opposed to how they *see*) such things as time, ritual, witchcraft, being and citizenship. In the latter, Engelke covers myriad questions of ‘nature’, not least of which is its relationship to ‘culture’, drawing on structuralism (i.e. Claude Lévi-Strauss), modernity (i.e. Bruno Latour), and death (i.e. Margaret Lock). Perhaps the most potentially generative topics for further discussion, however, are Engelke’s allusion to the social construction of science as well as his critique of evolutionary psychologists.

At a moment when a relatively small but growing constituent of anthropologists (and academics, for that matter) are calling to decolonise ‘the canon’ and question ‘the classics’, it was nearly impossible to read Engelke’s book without a critical analysis of the sources from which he drew. To his credit, he does clearly state in the beginning that, among other limitations, he would be focusing mostly upon European and North American schools of thought. He is transparent about the collaboration between anthropologists and imperial powers, but unfortunately much too much is left unsaid and unexplored beyond a Eurocentric reproduction of anthropological history.

While Engelke’s exploration of anthropological topics is conceptually laudable and highly readable, it seemingly lacks purpose. If one surmises as I have that Engelke intends (among other things) that his audience learn to recognise and be at ease with irreducibility and the messiness of the world, it isn’t clear *why* one should want to or *what* they could accomplish with such thinking. Further, he doesn’t seem to define *what it means* to think like an anthropologist other than to take readers through the concepts from the perspectives of anthropologists. Only in the very last two pages does Engelke explore two small examples applying an anthropological perspective: Lock’s involvement with the International Forum for Transplant Ethics and Paul Richards’s nuanced understanding of the role of burial practices in Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic of 2014 – both of which were informed by each one’s long-term ethnographic research.

Anthropology can be provocative, even radical in its critique of power structures, but Engelke is restrained and inoffensive, all things considered. He discusses postmodernism, cultural relativism, ontology and critiques of capitalism, for example, but rarely (if ever, in some cases) uses those words. He never highlights the connective tissue that runs directly between blood quantum and genocide (even though he should have), nor does he name the evolutionary psychologists with whom anthropologists quarrel. In that way, I'd much rather recommend *Think Like an Anthropologist* to the more conservative members of my family over the potentially alienating *Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies* (Fuentes) or *Bullshit Jobs* (Graeber). Add to that his novel conceptual (rather than paradigmatic) approach to a discipline that my dinner table companions would find rather dry, and *Think Like an Anthropologist* is a safe and engaging primer. More than anything, this book opens doors for those who have never formally encountered anthropology, and in that way, it should be read *and discussed*. Therefore, while I do find value in using this book to teach an introductory course in the History of Anthropology (with significant decolonising supplements, lectures and recitations), so too do I feel comfortable buying several copies as gifts for those family members who keep asking: 'What is it that you do?'

Dick Powis is a National Science Foundation and Fulbright-Hays-funded PhD Candidate in Sociocultural Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. His research interests include reproductive health, gender and science and technology studies. He is currently conducting his dissertation research in collaboration with expectant fathers in Dakar, Senegal. Dick is also a co-founder of the anthropology blog, [Footnotes](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.