



Anthropology Book Forum

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Zeitlyn, David. 2022. *An Anthropological Toolkit: Sixty Useful Concepts*. New York: Berghahn Books, 150 pg., ISBN 978-1-80073-470-8

David Zeitlyn's *An Anthropological Toolkit: Sixty Useful Concepts* is the focused-yet-broad-ranging piece that is keenly needed by the discipline right now. In a tight 138 pages, Zeitlyn stays true to the title, providing a short overview of sixty concepts that define anthropological thinking and praxis. It thus begs the questions: Useful for whom? Useful for what? The opening and closing concepts discussed in the book direct our attention to why this piece is critical at this moment in time.

Zeitlyn opens with a discussion of *Agnosia*. While typically referencing the failure to recognize what is in front of you, he extends the concept to the use of social theory. As Zeitlyn notes, in every choice, analysis, decision and reflection, we embed theories of the world and how it works. As our sphere of influence now extends far beyond the college classroom, an articulate and clear recognition of how we use theory is perhaps more important. Today, 94% of US-based anthropologists [work outside academia](#), one step removed from the ongoing and intense discussions about social theory and explanatory models. Among practitioners with advanced degrees, many leave academia *precisely because of* social theory. They seek out career paths that allow them to engage deeply with methods and change-making, paths that can be increasingly difficult to pursue on increasingly rare tenure lines.

The consequence is that many (although certainly not all) applied anthropologists are well-trained in and focus on methods - the action part of our disciplines - but may have less engagement with or exposure to social theory. And that's a problem. In our inability or refusal to engage with theory, we miss opportunities to inform the critical topics shaping our world. From the structuring of AI

to the shaping of risk analyses to crafting key communications on health or politics, the theory *agnosia* that dominates applied anthropology research can have profound implications for society. Zeitlyn's book provides an easy pathway back to theory for those in applied spaces.

From a different perspective, anthropology faculty face an increasingly complicated classroom situation. With growing political oversight of and interventions into what can be taught, faculty can inadvertently find themselves on the wrong side of administrators, students, alumni and politicians by merely teaching the history of social theory. The teaching of theory on campus these days is a kind of *Wicked Problem* - Zeitlyn's final entry - "where the dynamic and behavioral complexities are high; where different groups of key decision makers hold different assumptions, values and beliefs, and where component problems cannot be solved in isolation from one another" (pg. 121). While we can and should continue to resist the efforts of non-experts to define our disciplines, we can simultaneously find new ways to cover that ground. Zeitlyn's "eclectic approach" of abstracting core concepts from the disciplinary schools that birthed and advanced them is one intriguing solution.

This eclecticism is one of the most intriguing decisions Zeitlyn made in writing the book. Eschewing the traditional "grand theory" approach, he arranged the concepts alphabetically, thus leveling the conceptual playing field and positing the equal utility of each term within the right contexts. Thus *Affordances*, *Emic* and *Mosaics* are of similar value to *Isolarion* and *Non-ergodicity*. Moreover, by divorcing the concepts from theoretical schools, he bypasses the tribalism that can mar the actual practice of our work. No single school owns the concepts of *Exaptation* or *Insaturation* or *Positioning*, and by refusing to align them to a specific master narrative, he enables practitioners to more easily play with and consume the ideas distinct from their "branding."

I suspect the book is particularly good for those who have some grounding in social theory. That said, it could pose more challenges for those unfamiliar with or long removed from the foundational questions of the discipline. Knowing that *Faithfulness* is a way of contextualizing the value of information for a given purpose is important, but knowing how to act upon that and apply that within a specific data scenario may be more difficult. Moreover, I wonder how many practitioners will recognize the similarities between *Epiphanies* and *Life Writing*, and the very

popular method of “journey mapping” that dominates so much of tech research. That final translational act could be a step too far for some, but would bring forward the full brilliance of the book.

Zeitlyn provides two broader tools beyond the concepts themselves. The first is a Hesse net that traces the relationships between terms. This is a lovely way to visualize how these concepts cluster, and how they often provide variations on a broader theme. To extend his toolkit metaphor, it is akin to an organizational framework that clusters wrenches from screwdrivers from saws and other cutting tools. In teaching the book, I would consider a map that aligns concepts that live in tension. From an applied perspective, tension can be an easier framework for assessing the boundaries of a topic. Moreover, novel interpretations of data often come from the application of concepts from disparate spaces, versus “more of the same.” Helping practitioners to understand how to mix and match these concepts would be a powerful extension of the toolkit.

Second, Zeitlyn includes a coda - a finished text example of applying these concepts to his own fieldwork. For those of us familiar with ethnographies, it is easy to dissect how his use of *Mosaics*, *Partiality*, *Exemplars*, and *Faithfulness* shaped the text. For practitioners with limited or no background in this space, I would likely break this down in three steps: first, present the collected data; second, show how different concepts apply to the data; and third, explore why a particular set of concepts yields a better interpretation. To extend Zeitlyn’s “toolkit” metaphor, this would be how to use the tools to build a particular thing.

Overall, the book is a timely offering for elevating and enhancing the value of anthropological thinking, and enabling practitioners to re-engage with the depth of the discipline. Highly recommended.

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