

MICHAEL M. MUTHUKRISHNA. *A THEORY OF EVERYONE: WHO WE ARE, HOW WE GOT HERE, AND WHERE WE'RE GOING.* CAMBRIDGE: MIT PRESS 2023. 448 P. ISBN: 9781399810630

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Muthukrishna's 'theory of everyone' outlines the importance of a science of culture. Our capacity to share and build upon knowledge in a collective brain, creating innovations that would be unattainable individually, has built the human society we see today. The book is as vast as it sounds, littered with references and analogies that make Muthukrishna's arguments clear, understandable and, most importantly, accessible. In fact, at times these inclusions go beyond necessity. However, Muthukrishna successfully draws links with other disciplines, both inside and outside of science. By integrating concepts in evolutionary anthropology, particularly the field of cultural evolution, with other disciplines, the book may be uniquely useful to anthropologists less familiar with the evolutionary sciences. This is key in regard to recognising the real-world applications of evolutionary anthropology. It was rather refreshing to see a popular science book claiming that 'no one thing explains everything'. His perspective as an economic psychologist who has seen the effects of the conflict and cooperation of humanity as a child, living during the civil war in Sri Lanka and through the Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea, is particularly insightful and helps make his argument about the importance of a 'theory of everyone' more compelling.

His core argument is that the human sciences hold the potential to help us understand and solve the most fundamental problems facing our society. He proposes that the 'laws of life', namely the laws of energy, innovation, cooperation, and evolution, hold the system-level solutions required to tackle today's biggest contemporary issues such as inequality and climate change. Muthukrishna seamlessly links these laws together, providing a holistic account of how we reached today's society of fossil-fuelled energy, technological innovation and collaboration. However, as described by the law of energy, we are now facing falling energy returns as we deplete the planet of its resources. Consequently, there is less incentive to cooperate, and innovation also falls. Instead, competition between smaller, more polarised groups is favoured and we see more war, inequality, and civil unrest. Thus, we are facing a crisis in which the very laws of life are in jeopardy and society is pulled apart as a result.

Yet Muthukrishna provides an optimistic account, that these laws of life also hold the answers that may save us; by understanding how the laws of life created our intelligence, innovation, and cooperation we can break through the energy ceiling. To do this, the human sciences, which he describes as a 'young' science, need to undergo a revolution so they may be understood as fundamentally as the core principles of physics or biology. He makes this

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argument well: one thing readers are certain to take away from this book is a newfound appreciation for the importance of the human sciences.

Particularly useful is his application of these theories to propose real and actionable changes in society. For example, he argues innovating nuclear fusion is key and will require overcoming social and psychological barriers using a ‘theory of everyone’. He expands on these real-life applications in the second half of the book, asking, ‘Where are we going?’ (211). He talks of the harm of inequality from a cultural evolution perspective, as it prevents diversity of ideas and innovation, which is becoming more important as we search for a way to tackle the falling energy ceiling. However, the book goes beyond describing the problem, making many proposals for how to use our understanding to better society.

For example, to tackle inequality he proposes a shift to land tax as the primary system. This a system-level solution which encourages productive use of land, developing or selling it to others who will better use it, disrupting the historical transfer of wealth purely on ancestry, and creating space for innovation. He argues this is a fairer capitalism. However, at times I felt Muthukrishna’s opinions needed more explanation. His argument that billionaires have a place in this fairer capitalist system as their wealth is parallel to their contribution to society, fails to acknowledge the exploitation often involved in the path to these individuals becoming so rich. The book would benefit from expanding on how this ‘fairer’ capitalism could reduce the urgent problem of inequality. However, it was an interesting perspective, and I agree with Muthukrishna that bold and actionable change is needed towards a fairer world. I also appreciated his thoughts on the importance of open and honest science, in which discussion and disagreement are vital to progress.

Overall, Muthukrishna’s ‘theory of everyone’ is an insightful look into how important it is to understand who we are. This understanding impacts where we are now and informs how we ensure a more prosperous and fair society in which cooperation and innovation are maintained, and resources are not so desperately fought over. The book reflects a growing recognition in the field of evolutionary anthropology, that key theories such as cultural evolution could have real-world applications and be informative for public policy. Thus, encouraging anthropologists to ask not just why their research is interesting but why it is important. Evolutionary anthropology now faces the challenge of overcoming its controversial past – rooted in Social Darwinism – and regaining the trust of the public. In this book, Muthukrishna shows a way forward. Though the book would have benefited from more discussion of the shortcomings of the field, it is nevertheless a useful read for anthropologists looking for insight into the applications of their work.

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