

Why Entrepreneurs Should Be Studying Anthropology

“Anthropology is the study of humans and human behaviour and societies in the past and present.” – Wikipedia

“Everything old is new again” and “there is nothing new under the sun.” It’s hard to think that these could be the unofficial slogans of innovations in human well-being, but (increasingly) they are.

Thought leaders like Gary Vaynerchuk have observed how the open and connected nature of social media networks are bringing back the kind of direct business-consumer relationships that once only happened in small town shops. Others have pointed out that ride-sharing and other sharing economy apps are just bringing back many of the small person to person (peer to peer) social and economic ties that we’ve lost at scale. Farmer’s markets are back in vogue. Airbnb is connecting us to people and places outside of generic hotels. And paleo people all over the world are ditching industrialized carbs and sitting desks for alternative products grounded (supposedly) in the healthier lifestyles of earlier humans.

It does seem like some things we left behind are coming back around. And there’s a reason for that.

We all want human well-being. What it seems like we’re learning is that human well-being is informed (much more than we thought) by traits and adaptations we have gained from hundreds of millions of years of biological – and social – evolution. Many of the things we have given up (like local community, farm-fresh food, etc.) to achieve “scale” as a species have been good. And many things we have taken up (commuting, sitting all day, processed carbs, etc.) have been bad.

We have a lot to learn about how our biological and social evolution shapes and constrains the human good life. Some of the companies that are figuring that out (from Airbnb to the Squatty Potty) have discovered a good route to profit. The challenge and opportunity for entrepreneurs today is creating technology, goods, and services that can sustain human well-being at scale.

The raw materials for those discoveries aren’t far away from us. Understanding the clear connection between our past and our future means a lot of today’s entrepreneurs will find the seed of their idea in something that’s already been tried – just without software or scale.

Time to crack open the anthropology books.