

A New Human History?

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The late anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow seek to synthesize archaeological evidence that has accumulated over the last 30 years, to present a new narrative on the history of human society. *The Dawn of Everything* presents a challenge to established conceptions about the nature of prehistoric humans and their societies and dominant theories about the development of human societies and the emergence of inequality and states. Graeber and Wengrow are critical of traditional approaches to the history of humanity as a linear development from primitivism to civilization. They critique what they consider to be prevailing myths and raise some interesting points. However, their analysis is flawed by serious weaknesses in their theoretical framework and approach to the question of what drives human behavior and social change; this in turn creates problems with their interpretations of the archaeological evidence, which is used to qualify their version of human history.

They begin with the premise that the foundations of all prevailing theories about the evolution of human society are based on two alternative streams of thought about human nature. One is the idea advanced by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*: that humans are inherently selfish creatures whose original state of nature involved living in tiny bands, in a constant state of war with everyone fighting everybody. Life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Therefore, the formation of hierarchical society with repressive mechanisms—top down governments, courts, bureaucracies and police—was necessary to bring about civilization through the repression of our baser instincts. All humans, according to the Hobbesian view, are better off living under rigid class societies, because they enforce law and order, without which we would naturally descend back into violent anarchy. Echoes of that dystopian view of humanity can certainly be heard in many reactionary arguments that are regurgitated by unimaginative right-wingers today.

The second stream of thought is attributed to Jean Jaques Rousseau: all humans once lived as hunter-gatherers in a prolonged state of childlike innocence. Their tiny bands were inherently egalitarian due to their size. Then came an agricultural revolution, the rise of cities, leading to civilization and the state. As these societies became more complex with the introduction of writing, science, and philosophy, they ushered in all the negative aspects: bureaucracies, patriarchy, armies, mass executions, and so on. Humanity, thinking that it was pursuing a new freedom, “rushed headlong into its chains.” Graeber and Wengrow point out that the essay in which Rousseau presented this model—*Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*—was actually a hypothetical exercise about the origins of inequality for a literary competition. His essay was not based on archaeological evidence or thorough knowledge of pre-class societies. Yet many social theorists subsequently drew from Rousseau’s essay and so the myth of innocent, inherently egalitarian hunter-gatherers unwittingly shackling themselves to the trap of complex hierarchy became established. Subsequent archaeologists also took the concepts expressed by Rousseau as a framework for formulating their own theories about prehistory.

All subsequent theories about the origins of inequality, which point to the transition from hunter-gatherers to Neolithic settlements, the rise of agriculture and metropolises, are thus heaped in by Graeber and Wengrow, as inheritors of Rousseau's legacy. Graeber and Wengrow characterize all such approaches, often unfairly, as modern versions of the Old Testament origin story of Adam and Eve: originally innocents in the Garden of Eden, before they were corrupted by the forbidden fruit. Here we see in early on, one of the recurring problems with Graeber and Wengrow's approach. Any social theory about the history of humanity that presents a model involving phases of development, is dismissed by Graeber and Wengrow as just another variation of the origin myth, without any serious engagement.

Graeber and Wengrow believe that these models of human history have their roots in a conservative backlash in eighteenth century Europe against critiques of European civilization that gained ground with the Enlightenment. Graeber and Wengrow attribute these critiques of European society not to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, but to critiques from indigenous peoples of North America. They bring particular attention to the critiques and commentary of Kandiaronk, leader of the Huron-Wendat tribe.

Their discussion of the perceptive reactions of Native Americans to the brutality and insanity they saw in the absolutist hierarchical society of Europeans, is interesting; although they are based on the writings of French philosophers, which does raise questions whose narrative they really were. It does seem that Native American' critiques of European society and the contributions this made to the debates of the Enlightenment, deserve more recognition than they receive in most histories of the period. However, Graeber and Wengrow take their argument to the level of suggesting that the indigenous critique of Kandiaronk and his ilk were responsible for the Enlightenment. They assert that before the eighteenth century, Europeans did not even consider that equality was possible. Some ancient forms of folk egalitarianism existed in Mediaeval Europe, but were limited to traditional carnivals, such as May Day and Christmas. Some educated Europeans were aware of notions of equality in classical literature, but it was only in the eighteenth century that European intellectuals suddenly formed the assumption that people once existed in a state of egalitarianism. The only explanation for Graeber and Wengrow lies in the contact with Native American cultures. In turn, the ruling establishment reacted, forming ideas to discredit the indigenous cultures as primitive and raise civilization as the highest stage of humanity. It is a very long bow to draw—and one that buckles under the strain of historical facts about the class struggles in Europe before and during that time.

There were major political upheavals in Europe, driven by internal contradictions in the unstable system of feudalism. The English Civil War of 1642-51, driven by the clash between the emerging bourgeois mode and the old feudal order, saw the execution of a king and formation of a republic. Within it were the more radical elements, including the Levellers calling for suffrage and the Diggers struggling for agrarian socialism. Preceding the English revolution was the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The existence of America and its peoples were yet to be discovered by Europeans when John Ball declared:

When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, He would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.¹

Graeber and Wengrow neglect any discussion or acknowledgement of that history.

Problems with their interpretation of the archaeological evidence start to emerge in Chapter 3, where Graeber and Wengrow begin their argument that class inequality did not originate in surplus-producing agricultural societies, but was in fact present much earlier. They refer to Paleolithic burial sites that appear extravagant from the grave goods. There is a tendency among archaeologists to draw assumptions, describing such sites as 'princely' burials. Graeber and Wengrow criticize these tendencies, pointing out physical peculiarities in many of the individuals buried and discussing the ways in which various societies in Africa revered individuals that exhibited physical or mental peculiarities that made them different—dwarfism for example, or characteristics seen in modern society as autism. In the examples they discuss, such individuals were seen as gifted by the gods and given a special religious place in their society. They were not positions of power. Yet they still go on to discuss the occurrence of many lavish burials as mounting evidence of class domination emerging in the Paleolithic. These are all isolated burials of individuals or small groups, often in striking poses and adorned with exotic ornaments. In a few cases, children were found buried in this fashion. Graeber and Wengrow are quick to believe that such child burials must imply inherited status. We cannot draw too much from the isolated occurrences of these sites given their provenance of roughly 50,000 to 15,000 years BCE. The discovery of any Paleolithic human remains are rare and almost always accidental. Nor does a lavish burial of a Paleolithic human necessarily mean inherited wealth or power. There are many other alternative explanations.

Consider the Inca practice of child sacrifice—an example Graeber and Wengrow do not consider, despite their discussion of Inca society later in the book. The children selected, often peasants, were richly clothed, groomed and fed. They were heavily drugged with alcohol and coca leaves (substances reserved for the elite) before being left high up in the mountains in rich clothing with precious metals as offerings.² The clothing and objects they were effectively buried with were in no sense a reflection of inherited wealth and status.

The other key example from recent archaeology that Graeber and Wengrow refer to as evidence for complex hierarchical societies before the emergence of farming and agriculture, are the discoveries of monumental architecture in Eurasia. The most notable is the site Göbekli Tepe in modern day Turkey. Twenty megalithic enclosures were built c.9000 years BCE and modified over subsequent centuries. The monumental structure is large and impressive and does indeed indicate a level of sophistication and complex coordination. However, the ability of the inhabitants to carry out this level of coordination does not by itself provide evidence for class hierarchies. Graeber and Wengrow assume that it does and rely on this assumption to wage an argument for turning theories about class inequality arising from large surplus-producing agricultural societies on their head. It is quite astonishing, considering how much effort they expend arguing that humans were clearly capable of organizing themselves in complex agricultural settlements without class hierarchies or the need to form states. None of these examples actually indicate the formation of class inequality in pre-farming hunter-gatherer cultures. That they reveal the complexity and sophistication of these prehistoric communities is certainly true and bringing these findings to light adds more depth and understanding of the past.

Graeber and Wengrow tend to make bold claims and sweeping generalizations, based on such limited and often selective evidence. They assert there is mounting archaeological evidence that the Neolithic Revolution "simply never happened." That is an oversimplification. What the archaeology suggests is that the transition from hunter-gathering to a reliance on agriculture was a long and uneven process—much longer and more complicated than previously thought. In areas around the fertile crescent, evidence is emerging that early communities were initially only employing small-scale, less energy intensive forms of crop cultivation, which supplemented their primary hunter-gatherer diet. There are indications that early Neolithic societies, such as in Britain, adopted agriculture only to abandon it and return to farming livestock. However, it is an oversimplification to

draw from these new insights that there was no Neolithic Revolution at all.

There are some good points that Graeber and Wengrow raise. There are tendencies among scholars towards mechanically determinist formulations. There are Neolithic sites that are suggestive of communities existing for a period without class inequality. There is also some evidence that the people in these societies did not always accept class subjugation and may have overthrown their rulers in some cases. Graeber and Wengrow cite examples from the Indus Valley, where sites, such as Harappa for a period appeared to have no palaces or obvious signs of power. From this, they conclude that people were perfectly capable of living in complex societies with surplus from agricultural production, without the need for ruling elites and state bureaucrats. It is a compelling argument, although it still leaves open the question as to why all these cities subsequently ended up being ruled by oppressive minorities. Nor does it counter the theory that the ability to produce surplus that resulted in these agricultural communities was what created the material basis for the emergence of class divisions and exploitation.

What lies at the heart of the problems and weaknesses in *The Dawn of Everything*, is the world view and theoretical framework that informs Graeber and Wengrow's analysis and the resulting weaknesses in their broader narrative of human history. The central problem is they reject the centrality of material conditions in determining human consciousness, social organization and social change. Instead, they emphasize self-conscious ideas, and above all free choice, as the determining factor in the forms of social organization in these prehistoric societies. They are so determined to reject any concession that the inhabitants of these societies may have been constrained and influenced by material forces outside their control, that they take their model of social organization consciously formed out of free thought to the extreme.

Their commitment to finding explanations rooted in freedom of choice leads them into some odd formulations to explain social organization, economic and political activity—through theories about play, experimentation, religious practices and figures rising to prominence, ball games in central America turning into political struggles, and schismogenesis—societies choosing one form of social organization or even economies as a deliberate attempt to distinguish their identity from a neighboring culture. Evidence suggests that early Neolithic societies in the Fertile Crescent initially used low energy forms of agriculture, based on tidal movements and other forms, to supplement the hunting and foraging that continued to form their primary food source. In Central America, there were societies that grew crops on a small scale, whilst inhabiting settlements on a seasonal basis—which Graeber and Wengrow liken more to horticultural gardens—before returning to hunting and gathering during other parts of the year. From these examples, Graeber and Wengrow speculate that prehistoric peoples were engaging in “play farming.” The concept is then extended to social and political organization: communities engaging in carnivals with “play kings” and play executions, which somehow became very real and entrenched. In parts of North America, apparently, a number of cultures played around with the idea of kings until they consciously decided it was a bad idea and turned to other forms of social organization. Why a social group would start playing games with ceremonial kings for a short period when they had no prior experience of them is not clear; nor why they transformed from play to reality. Others alternated between small authoritarian groups and larger egalitarian settlements according to the seasons. Somehow European and Asian communities “got stuck” in the rigid class structures. To explain why, Graeber and Wengrow turn to concepts about social care and domination in the family as the causation for the entrenchment of rigid social structures.

In pursuing their theories, Graeber and Wengrow discuss the Native American societies in northern California and the Pacific Northwest Coast—two neighboring culture areas with almost diametrically opposed societies. The Northwest Coast was populated by groups, whose economies centered primarily on intense fishing of salmon and other anadromous fish. The first bulk harvesting through

constructed fish trapping weirs is thought to have been around 1850 BCE. Archaeological evidence from the same period also shows the first signs of warfare, with defensive fortifications, along with expanding trade networks. Cemeteries also show signs of wealth disparity. The fish were processed and preserved by smoking, creating a surplus store. While the society consisted of small groups, they featured hierarchies, with “aristocratic title holders” at the top. The Northwest Coast peoples were notorious for displays of excess, especially *potlatch* festivals. These were feasts, usually held by aristocrats, designed to display grandeur and overwhelm their rivals with gallons of fish oil, berries and fatty greasy fish. They were ceremonies of gluttony and indulgence—“grease feasts.” Sometimes they culminated in sacrificial killing of slaves. Slavery was also a feature of the Northwest Coast societies.

In contrast, the foraging societies in northern California upheld ethics of self-denial, hard work, individual autonomy and moderation in eating. They had no inherited ranks or titles. Their diet centered on acorns and pine nuts. They displayed none of the features characteristic of their Northwest Coast neighbors, despite linguistic and archaeological evidence for extensive movement of people and goods. Most theorists attempting to explain the marked difference between these two societies focus on economic factors, organizational imperatives or cultural meanings. Graeber and Wengrow prefer to take a lead from Maus and raise a fourth possibility: that the societies were self-determined, built and reproduced in reference to each other. They are right to dismiss approaches which are more obviously mechanical—particularly optimal foraging theory: predictive modelling originally developed for studying non-human species, which has been applied to humans. It explains behavior purely in terms of economic rationality, seeking to identify resource-gathering strategies for obtaining maximum return in calories versus output in labor—that is, cost benefit calculations. The theory cannot explain the indigenous Californians’ reliance on pine nuts and acorns, as there is no obvious reason for it as an optimal strategy, given the environment was so bounteous in other resources. The region is therefore seen as an ecological puzzle.

They then turn to a popular theory by “ecological determinists” to explain the Californian diet as a product of food security. Fish need to be immediately processed for preservation and storage, which requires lots of energy and labor. Therefore, while highly nutritious, investing in large stores of smoked fish as a primary food source creates fragility in the face of raiding. Nuts and acorns on the other hand avoid such risk. There is less temptation for raiders to steal them. Harvesting them is simple and leisurely, plus they can be stored without processing. However, Graeber and Wengrow point out that the principle aim of raiding by the Northwest Coast fishing communities was to capture slaves, not stockpile food.

Instead, Graeber and Wengrow argue that these neighboring cultures formed their economies and traditions through conscious self-determination: they each formed through schismogenesis—each not seeking to distinguish themselves from the other. Slavery became commonplace on the Northwest Coast because an ambitious aristocracy, which viewed menial work, such as gutting and smoking fish beneath them, could not induce its subjects—who preferred to devote hours to producing art—to become a dependable workforce. As a result, they turned to capturing slaves to do the hard work. In the “shatter zone”—the area bridging northwest California and the Pacific Northwest Coast—none of the tribes practices chattel slavery. Rather, groups such as the Yurok maintained customs designed to prevent captive status from battles becoming permanent. The victors of a battle, for example, had to pay compensation for each life taken, thus removing any incentive for raiding. They also maintained Californian ethics of hard work for its own sake and sobriety. The Northwest Coast-style values that they rejected were embodied in the form of a clown at their festivals. Therefore, as Northwest Coast tribes, such as the Kwatiutl, took to slave capturing raids, the violence spread until the people of the Californian shatter zone felt obliged to create institutions to insulate themselves from it; which in turn ramified through every aspect of life. As

such, Graeber and Wengrow argue, the two cultures defined themselves against each other, forming their societies through a process of schismogenesis.

It is another way in which they attempt to find ways of presenting the case for prehistoric communities self-consciously forming their own social organizations completely out of free will. They point to other regions and periods of history in which communities were organized in ways that were the epitome of their neighbors to broaden their theory of schismogenesis. This is not particularly convincing and a bit bizarre. It becomes even less convincing when they apply it to the ancient Greeks as another example. The differences between Athens and Sparta, according to Graeber and Wengrow, was another result of schismogenesis. The Athenians maintained democracy, because they were determined not to be like those awful Spartans with their oligarchy and vice versa. The theory only works if you think about Athens and Sparta as an abstraction without any knowledge of the historical processes that led to the different political systems in those city states.

Other problematic formulations appear in their analysis of the Northwest Coast societies and their use of slavery. They assure us that these are not Neolithic, but hunter-gatherer societies. They are contemptuous of efforts to define these groups as incipient farmers or examples of emerging complexity, stating (rather simplistically) that this is just another updated way of saying the people were “rushing headlong for their chains.” Yet the fish trapping weirs they refer to can be seen as an early form of fish farming, albeit not one based on domestication. They were also producing a surplus of smoked fish and forming stratified social layers. Material conditions that may have been critical in the social evolution of these groups are even apparent in Graeber and Wengrow’s own description of the society. Yet they ignore these glaring features in their quest to emphasize free will and self-determination. Consequently, they wind up focusing on domestic relations as the basis for political organization. Domination, they assert, begins at home. While slavery arises from war, it also exists as a domestic institution. They conclude that the most brutal forms of exploitation originate in the most intimate of social relations; as perversions of nurture, love and caring. The Northwest Coast society did not have an overarching government, but was rather made up of an endless succession of great wooden houses, tiny courts centered on a title-holding family with commoners attached to them along with their personal slaves. The Kwakiutl rank system referred to divisions within households. From this Graeber and Wengrow conclude that domination first appears on the most intimate domestic level, labelling it “inequality from below.” They go on to assert that egalitarian politics then emerge to prevent these oppressive relations extending from domestic to the public sphere. They inadvertently provide a clincher for why this is a bizarre theory by projecting it onto ancient Greece: “These are the kind of dynamics that culminated in phenomena like ancient Athenian democracy. But their roots probably extend much further back in time, to well before the advent of farming and agricultural societies.”³ Contrary to Graeber and Wengrow’s ahistorical comment, Athenian democracy was not the culmination of attempts to keep domestic domination out of the public sphere. It was the culmination of a revolution and a relentless struggle between the active citizenry and propertied classes.⁴

It is in this section, that Graeber and Wengrow paradoxically write, “Perhaps Marx put it best: we make our own history, but not under conditions of our own choosing.” And yet the actual meaning of that sentence (and the analysis that comprised its context) seems to be completely lost on them, as they make no effort to apply it to their own analysis, which is in fact a rejection, among other things, of historical materialism. Graeber and Wengrow claim that we cannot really know how much difference human agency really makes in history. That is true to a limited extent. It is not true however, that “precisely where one wishes to set the dial between freedom and determinism is largely a matter of taste.”⁵ But it is not just a matter of taste. Understanding the dynamics of history and social change is central to understanding how to struggle to forge a better world. It is also a false dichotomy to present a choice between “freedom” and “determinism.”

Similar problems arise in their discussion of states. Bizarrely they discount Marxist theory on the question with barely any mention of it and no serious engagement beyond a few passing swipes. It is particularly problematic, considering how influential Marxism has been in these debates and on the work of numerous influential archaeologists. V. Gordon Childe, an influential archaeologist of the twentieth century is the most well-known. He also barely gets a mention. In fact the only three allusions to Childe are on pp. 8-9, when they mention the title of his book, *Man Makes Himself*, stating that they wish to invoke the spirit of that phrase (without any discussion of the content of his work), p.25 in which they acknowledge that Childe invented the terms Neolithic Revolution and Urban Revolution—but say nothing of his analysis, and p.171, where they indicate that Childe used the (then dominant) notion of “culture areas” to analyze patterns in Neolithic villages across central Europe with regional clusters. Had Graeber and Wengrow attempted any serious discussion of Childe’s work, they probably would have had to acknowledge that one of his key insights was that the history of humanity has not involved a *linear progression*. There are periods of progression and regression.

The most substantial reference to Marxism is within a paragraph: “Marxists ... suggested that states make their first appearance in history to protect the power of an emerging ruling class. As soon as one group of people living routinely off the labor of another, the argument ran, they will necessarily create an apparatus of rule, officially to protect their property rights, in reality to preserve their advantage (a line of thinking very much in the tradition of Rousseau). This definition brought Babylon, Athens and medieval England back into the fold, *but also introduced new conceptual problems, such as how to define exploitation*. And it is unpalatable to liberals, ruling out any possibility that the state could ever become a benevolent institution.” What conceptual problems do Graeber and Wengrow have for defining class exploitation that renders Marxism worth no more engagement than a passing reference? They do not specify; nor do they offer any argument to support their dismissive claim.

They subsequently lump the Marxist definition of the state in the same basket as an array of other opposing theories, none of which they engage with: “almost all these ‘classic’ theoretical formulations of the last century started off from exactly this assumption: that any large and complex society necessarily required a state. The real bone of contention was, why? Was it for good practical reasons? Or was it because any such society would necessarily produce a material surplus, and if there was ... like, for instance, all that smoked fish on the Pacific Northwest Coast—then there would also, necessarily, be people who managed to grab hold of a disproportionate share.”⁶ It is impossible to judge the other theories in this regard based on Graeber and Wengrow’s characterization, given that they do not actually engage with any of them, but it is not an accurate reading of Marxist theory about the rise of class exploitation or the formation of states. States are oppressive institutions of rule that emerged as a result of the internal contradictions of class societies. They arose out of conflict between opposing classes to enforce the repression of one class by another. Graeber and Wengrow seem unable to grapple with this problem. The problem with their conceptual framework is also reflected by the fact that throughout the book, they avoid employing a clear notion of class when discussing social inequality in these societies, preferring vague terms like “complex hierarchy.”

Graeber and Wengrow partly evade articulating a clear definition of states, as well as other conventionally discussed terms related to class societies, by arguing that assigning categories and labels is imposing our modern preconceptions upon people who lived under a completely different set of values. However, analyzing and understanding what was happening in past societies requires clear definitions of various forms of social and political structure. The result in terms of the state, is that their discussion of whether certain communities lived under one becomes a bit vague and confused. Regimes such as the Inca empire, are discussed by Graeber and Wengrow as lacking a

“classic state.” In fact, they conclude that Egypt was one of only two civilizations in the ancient world that actually functioned under a state. Even then, they extend their theories about playfulness and caring relationships to an attempt to explain the formation of a state in ancient Egypt. The use of beer as a ration for the laborers building the pyramids is supposed to be an example of care in a patriarchal family being extended to the king’s subjects to invoke “mass conviviality.” Thus the Egyptian state, rather than arising out of class struggle, was an accidental product of play and care: “Perhaps this is what a state actually is: a combination of exceptional violence and the creation of a complex social machine, all ostensibly devoted to acts of care and devotion.”⁷ They would have done better by examining the reality of the oppressive nature of the Egyptian dynasties, as reflected by the fact that far from being built in a spirit of mass conviviality, the pyramids were the site of the first recorded strike.⁸

The most valuable contribution of *The Dawn of Everything* is the array of archaeological studies in different regions from recent decades, which it draws together. There is value in their arguments against taking a mechanical view of history as a linear process of inevitable progression, although this is not as new or ground breaking a point as they make out. However, there are many problems with their analysis of the archaeological and anthropological evidence. Despite the book’s bold claim of presenting a new history of humanity, much of their discussion is ahistorical. Most societies are discussed as though viewed as a static entity, with no attempt to analyze changes in a region over time to identify key patterns indicating historical processes. Their resulting model of how human societies developed is not a useful one for understanding the historical emergence of class inequality or of oppressive states. Nor does it identify the driving forces of social and political change. In their quest to challenge any notion that human societies arose out of phases of technological and economic development and resulting social organization, they present a confused picture of humanity forming different social structures, religions and economic strategies completely out of conscious choices, playful experimentation and free will—until at some unknown period for unexplained reasons, we got stuck in our current predicament of rigid class inequality. As a result, the book fails to explain why societies formed under oppressive elites and class exploitation or the conflicts and contradictions associated with it.

Notes

1. “Voices of the Powerless: Readings from *the Peasants’ Revolt*”, BBC Radio, 2002.
2. Rebecca Morelle, “Inca mummies: Child sacrifice victims fed drugs and alcohol,” BBC World Service.
3. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, p. 209.
4. Ste. Croix, G.E.M. de, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.
5. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, p. 206.
6. Ibid, p. 361.
7. Ibid, p.408.
8. Mark, J. J. (2017, July 04). The First Labor Strike in History. World History Encyclopedia.