

The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity

David Graeber and David Wengrow
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'In this book we will not only be presenting a new history of humankind, but inviting the reader into a new science of history, one that restores our ancestors to their full humanity' (24). David Graeber (1961–2020) and David Wengrow (b. 1972) do not shy away from big promises. *The Dawn of Everything* is a book about the early history of humankind and how engaging with this early history speaks to the present. Contrary to ideas of determinism and stages of development—classical teleological narratives that lurk in many history books—the authors emphasise the possible (pre-)historical plurality of social organisations and the role of human choice and 'playfulness' (25) therein. Or, in other words, instead of going from cave dweller to hunter-gatherer, to farmer and then self-inflicted oppression, humans have always experimented with all kinds of ways of living together—none of these has ever been final and the present does not have to be either. For this mission, anthropologist Graeber and archaeologist Wengrow draw heavily on their respective expertise. Nevertheless, they do not only stick to their genre, but also dip into the discipline of historiography, in which neither has a background. This review, on the other hand, takes a historian's perspective and contends that the book is neither *a* nor *the* history of anything, but an informative journey through the diversity of possible prehistoric and indigenous human existences. Yet if history is to serve as a corrective to our limited imagination of possible realities, it would be all the more important to pursue it as a science.

In 1754, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his famous treatise, explored *The Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*. Graeber and Wengrow wanted to do the same. But then they realised that it would be far more effective to look for the origins of the *question* of social inequality and investigate how this question has shaped our understanding of early history (9). Making this introductory note, the authors express their analytical scope, which operates on two levels. The first concerns conventional representations of early human history. Conveniently, these still take inspiration from Rousseauian or Hobbesian thought: humans were free and equal, until they weren't; agriculture and growth made them put on the shackles of sedentary life, political hierarchy and social inequality. This idea, say the authors, is not only wrong but foundational. It has its origins in the era of European expansion and Enlightenment

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(Chapter 2: Wicked Liberty). Confronted with the diverse indigenous peoples of the Americas, through their observation and exchanges with their representatives, Europeans developed a stage-based understanding of history. This understanding was not monolithic; it was a discourse in which indigenous voices were heard as well as used (politically). In order to be able to argumentatively counter these other—at times attractively informal—ways of life, say Graeber and Wengrow, Western intellectuals began to frame them as an earlier stage in history, closer to the original egalitarianism. This myth, they claim, still informs the public today.

The second analytical level of the work builds on this observation. If our previous way of looking at early history stems from a flawed, colonial narrative, what might a new, open and mindful history of humankind look like? In reply, Graeber and Wengrow decide to highlight what they think distinguishes humankind as a species: our ability to think in complex political terms and to ponder what the consequences of this or that distribution of power and resources would be. The conscious shaping of coexistence, they argue, is not a European achievement, but a natural human characteristic. There never was an original egalitarianism, but a playing field of endless possibilities. Needless to say, their history does not follow a chronological thread. Instead, topical chapters (e.g., slavery, agriculture, early settlements) tackle the presuppositions that follow from an evolutionary scheme. Does agriculture lead to a sedentary life? Does ownership ensure social inequality? Does a large group of people need a central authority of rule and administration; do they have to turn into a proto-state? The authors give unusual, original and thoughtful answers to these questions by bringing together archaeological interpretations of prehistorical places such as Göbekli Tepe, Teotihuacan and Çatalhöyük with historical-anthropological studies on various peoples and tribes such as the Creek, Hadza and !Kung-San. And with some confidence, they draw their own conclusion: that there seems to be no inherent logic or determination in the course of prehistory. Our ancestors were flexible in their forms of political organisation; they were mobile and retained their independence when a system proved no longer tolerable. This lesson, end Graeber and Wengrow, speaks to our present by highlighting that today's nation-state capitalism is not once and for all.

As refreshing and informative as Graeber and Wengrow's anecdotal presentation of their evidence may be, for something aspiring to be the 'new science of history', it bristles with problems. The book defies a solid theoretical and methodological underpinning. By way of example, three basic principles of historical work are mentioned here: connectivity with disciplinary discourses and debates; methodologically elaborate criticism of sources; and thorough contextualisation that is in line with appropriate analytical concepts.

(1) As part of their tour de force, Graeber and Wengrow could touch on countless debates in the fields of archaeology, anthropology and history. This could be the importance of taking indigenous and non-traditional sources seriously and making them accessible; or the compelling question of what a prehistoricism without verbal sources and the modern science of history can learn from each other, and what role

anthropology should play in that. But the authors pass over most (inter-)disciplinary debates. Instead, their targets are the so-called ‘Big Histories’. The assumptions they tackle do not come from the highly differentiated academic discourse, but from the simplified takes of Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond, or Steven Pinker. There is a good reason why these takes have not found favour within the discipline. And as interesting as it is to see them deconstructed, Graeber and Wengrow too can only formulate many of their theses by foregoing precision and differentiation and shying away from determining the relationship between fragmentary evidence and the bigger picture.

(2) This is also evident in the nature of their source criticism. To make early modern indigenous voices tangible, Graeber and Wengrow explain that they have often been preserved in the curious treatises of European authors. Serving as their case in point is the French Baron de Lahontan who recorded his *Dialogues avec le sauvage Adario* (1703). The figure of Adario, they argue in line with previous research, is based on Kondiaronk from the North American Wendat Confederacy, who visited Europe in the sixteenth century. According to the authors, Kondiaronk commented on topics such as blind obedience to power and social ills in Europe, naming the organisation of private property as particularly irresponsible. Thanks to Lahontan, say the authors, these comments have been preserved. Graeber and Wengrow do, however, take Lahontan’s voice for Kondiaronk’s word. They neither contextualise Lahontan politically—his anti-Jesuit positions overlap strangely with Adario’s views—nor realise that within the field of Early Modern History a differentiated and complex debate exists not only on indigenous voices and knowledge but also on rethinking European intellectual history as a whole.¹ Unfortunately, this lack of methodological reflection is also apparent in their discussions of archaeological evidence. To give just one example, to the premodern Mesoamerican metropole of Teotihuacan, Graeber and Wengrow attribute a form of ‘dare we say republican tradition’ (332), since the usual material attributes of Mesoamerican kingship are ‘strikingly absent’ (330). To infer the existence of one thing from the non-existence of another and then call it a ‘republican tradition’ is problematic, to say the least.

(3) As the last example shows, rethinking the relationship between archaeology, anthropology and history is nearly impossible if it is not preceded by reflection on the meaning of context and the analytical language developed to access it. Political life in the past did not just happen. When people made life-changing decisions, they certainly reflected on them thoroughly. They weighed these decisions according to their political and religious thinking, they negotiated them through conceptions of social, political and material togetherness. In a critical review essay, Chris Knight gives the example of Graeber and Wengrow’s interpretation of the lavish *potlatch* banquets hosted by

¹ SAMUEL MOYN, ‘European Intellectual History after the Global Turn,’ *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales - English Edition* (2022): 1–10, doi: 10.1017/ahsse.2022.6

Kwakiutl hereditary nobles.² The authors provide a conclusive interpretation of these festivities and their role in social cohesion, seasonal changes in hierarchies, and the value (or non-value) of wealth and wastefulness. Yet, as Knight points out, *powlatch* festivities developed in the face of rising colonialism, that is, as an old elite's attempt to show off power and wealth to their disintegrating peoples. The anarchic policy, Graeber and Wengrow observe, was therefore a reaction to political pressure and not a generic idea. What context is necessary to draw big conclusions from fragmentary evidence? Can the absence of evidence of an autocracy—as is the case with Teotihuacan—prove a republican form of government? And does the 'republican tradition', as a profoundly Western concept, not cover up indigenous political conceptions, even if we cannot name them? Graeber and Wengrow mistake writing about the past for the writing of history on the one hand, and a political take on history for political history on the other.

The Dawn of Everything wants to 'restore our ancestors to their full humanity' by helping them escape from the primitive patterns within which we usually think about them. Especially from the perspective of anarchist David Graeber, this makes sense. The world looks different once we accept that humans perhaps have no inherent scheme that forces us into permanent and hierarchical political structures. However, assuming that hitherto archaeology, anthropology and history were not aware of their conceptual limitations, and therefore inaugurating a critical reflection as 'a new science of history', is a bold move. Especially since the Graeber and Wengrow narrative turns ahistorical as it leaves little space for actors to think outside the terms of practical social arrangements. That is to say, the material, ideological or paradigmatic aspects of social life and questions of class and gender vanish behind the unfolding of deliberate individual choices in social, economic and religious matters. In speaking about *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow do not give meaning to the processes they evaluate, but to the political potential of the evaluative process itself.

In the end, *The Dawn of Everything* raises once more (and more profoundly) what is for professional historians the perennial question of how we want to deal with popular Big Histories. Indeed, a core discrepancy is between the question that Graeber and Wengrow claim to raise and the answer that history as a science can give. The authors argue that we should reflect on the terms of our own historical judgment. Historians speak to the present, and do so with an analytical and conceptual toolkit dictated by the present, with a necessarily biased methodology and theory; so—Graeber and Wengrow challenge us—are we aware enough, open-minded enough, to perceive meaning that is outside our conceptual, ideological and paradigmatic framework of understanding? This critical question illustrates where pondering on history and professional discourse diverge. Especially since the development of post-colonial studies, illustrated by thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo—a field that Graeber and Wengrow do not even mention—it is safe to say that today most historians are

² CHRIS KNIGHT, 'Wrong About (Almost) Everything,' *FocaalBlog* (blog), December 22, 2021, <https://www.focaalblog.com/2021/12/22/chris-knight-wrong-about-almost-everything>.

well aware of the need to grapple with the conflict between evidence and interpretation, and between presuppositions, the subjectivity of sources (and research) and the limits of one's own interpretive capacity (languages, accessibility, contemporary bias). The writing of history is the science of exactly that. While speaking about *The Dawn of Everything*, we should not ignore Graeber and Wengrow's limited sense of history as a discipline. However, we should also ask ourselves critically whether the authors' assumption of a widespread simplified, early-modern picture of early history really is exaggerated. Big Histories are a stocktake of the changing public images of history and the political standing of history among the public. For historians, therefore, *The Dawn of Everything* can be an important reminder that the principles of our discipline are anything but familiar and self-evident, even for our disciplinary neighbours, let alone for the public, and that there might be discourses we need to engage with, despite their 'playful' ignorance of our rules.