

Book Review

David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, London: Allen Lane, 2021

Since its release, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) by the late David Graeber and David Wengrow has been heralded as an ‘instant classic’ in both laudatory and more reticent reviews.¹ The book’s central assertion takes aim at the theory that humanity lived in small, egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands prior to 12,000 BP (Before Present i.e., 1950-01-01) and only developed stratified hierarchies following the advent of agriculture. The authors claim this is a myth, and a dull one at that. Graeber has long held that a pre-agricultural period of egalitarian “primitive communism” is a fairy tale: thus, humanity establishing a similarly non-hierarchical utopia at some future point is equally fatuous.² Building on this premise, they contend that before and after agriculture, humanity generated vibrantly dynamic social formations that shifted periodically between egalitarian and authoritarian modes before becoming ‘stuck’ in the rut of dominating hierarchical structures due to the loss of three fundamental freedoms (see below).

My analysis begins with an overview of responses to *The Dawn of Everything* that have circulated in public media and academic journals. As we shall see, *The Dawn of Everything* has received wide-ranging praise for confronting antiquated concepts of social evolutionism, for popularizing archeology amongst the public, and for expanding our political horizons. At the same time, reviewers have raised concerns about the book’s theses and the authors’ use of sources. Specialists have pointed to gaps in the treatment of primary material as well as Graeber and Wengrow’s selective engagement with the relevant scholarship. There are also serious questions concerning various case studies and the underlying logic and methodologies being deployed (or calculatedly ignored) in the course of argumentation.

Then there is Graeber and Wengrow’s rejection of received definitions of societal equality and egalitarianism. Having questioned the usefulness of these foundational conceptions for our understanding

of a free society,³ they offer a new model based on three “substantive” freedoms: to disobey; to leave; and to transform societal relationships. I will be teasing out the problematic aspects of these “freedoms,” which are multiple and cumulative.

Finally, I am engaging with *The Dawn of Everything’s* generalized understanding of medieval and early modern European thought. Graeber and Wengrow assert a ‘maximalist’ argument that notions of social equality were incommensurable with European societies and must, therefore, have been imported, and a concomitant ‘minimalist’ argument that Europeans never broached the origins of social inequality as an issue before exposure to non-European ideas. While the authors recognize a strain of “folk egalitarianism” informing period festivals, popular uprisings, and peasant communes, they are adamant that the theorizing and historicizing of “equality” could not have been developed in Europe without non-European input.

They rest their case on an essay competition held by the Academy of Dijon, France in 1754 addressing the origin of inequality. This is the event that famously prompted Jean-Jacques Rousseau (c. 1712–1778) to write the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), in which he speculated that humanity had lived in a natural state of equality before private property was institutionalized. Graeber and Wengrow attribute the competition’s topic—“what is the origin of inequality among men and is it justified by natural law?”—to Indigenous critiques of European society then circulating in the form of published dialogues between European colonizers and charismatic Indigenous chiefs. In particular, they single out commentaries recorded by Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce, Baron de Lahontan (1666–c. 1716), in his two-volume memoir, *New Voyages to North America* (1703), which focuses on extended encounters with Algonquian peoples, whose territories fell within the Canada colony of “New France” (Quebec and northern Ontario). As we shall see, contra Graeber and Wengrow, there is plenty of evidence that Europeans were deeply engaged with issues of equality and inequality well before Indigenous perspectives from North America came into play.

Critical Responses

The Dawn of Everything has received much praise for how it reorients public conversations about global history, introducing popular readership to a wide array of societies, cultures, and histories. Crawford Kilian, writing for the leftist online publication *The Tye*, captures the spirit of excitement that ensues, as he marvels at details such as how the builders of Stonehenge rejected agriculture in favour of gathering hazelnuts or evidence of equitable housing in Teotihuacán.⁴ There is certainly value in broadening awareness, and I have recommended *The Dawn of Everything* to friends and family on these grounds. Graeber and Wengrow are imparting a spark of wonder concerning the diversity of human societies, and reviewers rightly call attention to this feature as well as the book's sheer breadth and scope.⁵

The authors effectively challenge conventional notions of linear progress and social evolutionism, particularly those proffered by popular authors of 'Big History' such as Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond, Steven Pinker, and Francis Fukuyama. There is a need to debunk the popularized narrative that global humanity has evolved in stages from "primitive" egalitarian foragers to complex "civilized" agrarian states, and that sovereign-centric or state-centric societies are more 'advanced' than non-state and less-stratified societies. However, several reviews have argued Graeber and Wengrow's attempt to forge their own thesis to counter these grand metanarratives falls short,⁶ and some anthropologists have gone so far as to question whether *The Dawn of Everything* has anything important to say about human origins at all.⁷ Cautionary reviews note this 'new history of everything' has been said to misrepresent evidence and the scholarly studies it references.⁸ As one critic puts it, a blizzard of examples delivered at a quick pace while shirking sustained engagement with the state of the literature leaves much to be desired.⁹ Most glaringly, for authors identified with anarchism, *The Dawn of Everything* fails to consider counterparts who have pondered the very issues they raise, such as Murray Bookchin in *Ecology of Freedom* (1982), Pyotr Kropotkin in *Mutual Aid* (1902), or Elié Reclus in *Les Primitifs* (1885). Additionally, Fredrick Engels' *On the Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and Karl Marx's unpublished *Ethnological Notebooks*

are never addressed.¹⁰ Even more troublingly, Graeber and Wengrow neglect much contemporary Indigenous-authored scholarship.¹¹

A few examples will illustrate how rapid-fire delivery brings reprehensible features into sharp relief. Take the evolving role of women: this is a recurring topic in *The Dawn of Everything*, but the authors never broach the construction of gender, how gendered relations develop, nor how gender intersects with inequality.¹² Similarly, political scientist Ian Morris observes that *The Dawn of Everything's* assertion that contemporary evolutionary accounts of humanity's progress fail to address fluid movements toward or away from agriculture is unconvincing.¹³ Historian Walter Scheidel likewise disputes Graeber and Wengrow's "black-and-white reasoning" when they posit evolutionary approaches cannot account for seasonal variability or gradual processes of transition between foraging and farming.¹⁴ Renowned anthropologist Chris Knight attributes such faulty reasoning to the authors' conflation of modern evolutionary theory with historical models of social Darwinism ('survival of the fittest'): bluntly, they lack "any real understanding of human evolution."¹⁵ Curiously, *The Dawn of Everything* omits any discussion of humanity's development prior to 30,000 years ago, a glaring lacuna, given current research.¹⁶ In this regard, *The Dawn of Everything's* deployment of antiquated typologies related to Indigenous peoples of the coastal Pacific Northwest and California also reflects a lack of scholarly rigor.¹⁷

Emily Kern expresses a sentiment I often had with *The Dawn of Everything*: "As a reader, I found myself wanting Graeber and Wengrow to name some names, to tell us exactly who came up with these tidbits of civilizational thinking and evolutionary theory that have so permeated contemporary thought and brought us so many restrictive conclusions."¹⁸ The authors present their insights as novel and at odds with the academic consensus,¹⁹ but do so without much dialogue with the research they contest. Additionally, selective presentation of evidence runs rife in *The Dawn of Everything*.²⁰ As Brian Fagan and Nadia Durrani observe, "Such revisionism is all very well, but the evidence is often thin—and to dismiss rival, often long proposed theories without serious discussion, as the authors regularly do, is questionable."²¹ Anticipating such objections, Graeber and Wengrow

argue the comprehensiveness of their study necessarily limits their ability to fully contextualize *The Dawn of Everything*, stating that had they explored the state of the literature on this or that issue, it “would have left the reader with a sense that the authors are engaged in a constant battle with demons who were in fact two inches tall.”²² Their characterization of problematizing viewpoints speaks for itself.

The Dawn of Everything’s account of early state formation is not dissimilar from existing scholarship,²³ however the choice to delineate the features of pre-modern states in accordance with the conception of the state as a ‘sovereign’ entity by virtue of its monopoly of violence within a territory is at odds with the norm, since scholars routinely date the advent of this conception to the European Treaty of Westphalia (1648).²⁴ Such slippages carry over to the central question of the book: when did we become ‘stuck’ in hierarchical societal structures?²⁵

As we have seen, *The Dawn of Everything* rejects the so-called agricultural trap, wherein once humanity innovated the practice of agriculture, this created the conditions for emergent social hierarchies, state-formation, and ever-increasing violence, but there is plenty of evidence that agriculture did play a pivotal role. Developmental trajectories merging agriculture, domestication, social stratification, urbanization, and state formation may have been gradual, but, as Scheidel puts it, “even a trap that was slow in closing was, in the end, a trap.”²⁶ Graeber and Wengrow do concede that farming lead to “ever larger and more settled populations, ever more powerful forces of production, ever larger material surpluses, and people spending ever more of their time under someone else’s command,” and yet they assert these casual connections have “very little explanatory power.”²⁷ This prompts the question: does their model of “three freedoms” provide a convincing explanation regarding the societal conditions that might enable humanity to be relatively free from oppression, or to gage when we are being dominated?

“Three Freedoms”

Early in *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow discard the

analytical usefulness of “equality” or “inequality” because they cannot decide on a means to judge inegalitarian disparities within a given society or attribute equality with a qualitative sameness.²⁸ According to them, any metric one applies to determine the extent of equality within a society is useless because cultures have different notions of what is to be shared amongst its members.²⁹ The authors are not concerned with wealth inequality or social stratification, flippantly remarking that if a society achieves equality ‘on earth,’ then dominance hierarchies and private property are derived from ‘the divine.’³⁰ Since they are opposed to comparatively measuring degrees of equality or inequality as a factor when discussing societal freedom, unlike so many of their contemporaries,³¹ the onus is on them to proffer some alternative measurement to judge free societies. Enter the freedom to move, to disobey, and to reorganize social relationships.³² These are the three key “substantive freedoms” that unlock liberation: they are “substantive” because they can be realized, and have been in the past.³³

Let us consider the freedom to “move away and relocate” or “to abandon one’s community, knowing one will be welcomed in faraway lands.”³⁴ Are such maneuvers always exercises in freedom? Graeber and Wengrow discuss incidents in ancient Egypt, Mesoamerica, and Mesopotamia when cities were abandoned by the populace to escape or undermine overlords.³⁵ Here moving was not an exercise in substantive freedom in the celebratory *Dawn of Everything* sense: it was a drastic reaction to coercion that destroyed existing social arrangements. Where the substantive freedom to move elsewhere and be welcomed does apply is when egalitarian hunter-gatherers relocate to a different group that they shared relationships with to diffuse tension,³⁶ or when movement is facilitated by extended networks represented by different clan, phratry (a descent or kinship-based group) or moiety (a descent group that coexists with one other descent group).³⁷ Amongst the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples of the North American Great Lakes region, for example, clans played a fundamental role in governance³⁸ that was place-based and tied to seasonal migrations within a territory.³⁹ According to Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) historian Deborah Doxtator, prior to disruption due to colonization, matrilineal Haudenosaunee clans enacted patterns of

movement within shared territories in which the number of village occupants would shift throughout the year as activities required.⁴⁰ The Algonquian Anishinaabek people, on the other hand, had patrilineal clans that converged or scattered seasonally within their territories: people concentrated together in the spring and autumn, and dispersed in the winter following their established foodways.⁴¹ Heidi Bohaker has characterized clan identity as a kind of ‘traveler’s aid society’: one bore the emblems of a clan to indicate who was a relative during migrations.⁴² Marriage was especially important for building relationships between clans, both for purposes of reciprocal hospitality and for gathering allies for raids and warfare. Bands and clans had distinct resource and hunting grounds: sharing access to territories within a nation was negotiated through clan relationships, while inter-national or confederacy-based agreements involved treaties, with associated law and protocols.⁴³ Graeber and Wengrow rightly point to the clan systems of the Great Lakes region as a case study in the “substantive freedom” to move. That said, their discussion is woefully outdated, because they draw almost exclusively on a speculative history presented in Elizabeth Tooker’s “Clans and Moieties in North America” (1971), a study that is long since surpassed, as sources I cite indicate.⁴⁴

The authors expound on the freedom to move elsewhere referencing recourse to “uninhabited” regions, as in the case of the Osage people,⁴⁵ who migrated from the Middle Ohio River valley to the Great Plains over the course of the eighteenth century. Indigenous sovereignty and territoriality in their original homeland centered on dense clusters of agricultural towns along rivers that were surrounded by an inner ring of designated hunting grounds. Beyond this zone was an outer-ring of claimed hunting grounds which overlapped with those of other nations, forming shared buffer zones.⁴⁶ Seasonal dispersals for hunting and the migration of villages within a nation’s territory rendered geographic boundaries more fluid, but they were still enforced,⁴⁷ and emptying space of inhabitants to expand claimed hunting grounds was a common outcome of Indigenous warfare.⁴⁸ Osage historian Louis F. Burns relates that when his people began migrating to the Great Plains, they were compelled by continuous warfare with Iroquoian peoples, and that constitutional reforms among the Osage

(which Graeber and Wengrow cite)⁴⁹ included innovations in military organization so smaller groups of warriors could be organized into war parties to quickly respond to threats, without large preliminary ceremonies.⁵⁰ We should note expansion west on the part of the Osage also came at the expense of the Caddoan people, who were in turn driven south of the Red River.⁵¹ In short, the Osage may have chosen territorial migration over submission to a rival nation, but this hardly qualifies as an exercise in “substantive freedom” for the Osage (or for that matter, the Caddoans), as the authors suggest.

The second freedom is the freedom to “disobey authorities without consequences”; “disobey orders”; or “ignore or disobey commands issued by others.”⁵² Here, Graeber and Wengrow conflate disagreement, the limits of sovereignty, and distance from power with the “substantive freedom” to disobey a command. For example, the authors argue that among the Shilluk people, whose Kingdom was in Southern Sudan, subjects ignored the sovereignty of the *reth* (monarch) when they were not in the capital. Similarly, the North American Natchez Nation of the lower Mississippi region ignored their “Great Sun” (supreme chief) when out of his presence.⁵³ However neither of these instances constitute a substantive freedom to disobey on the part of the people themselves, as they reference an obligation to obey the sovereign, rather than a social arrangement wherein a subject might disregard a direct order when in the monarch or supreme chief’s presence.

As Graeber and Wengrow note, the *reth*’s authority was circumscribed: “there was also nothing remotely resembling an administrative apparatus to translate his sovereign power,” no taxation system to “enforce royal orders,” or any mechanism for reporting if the *reth*’s order had been “obeyed.”⁵⁴ Rather than reflecting a substantive capacity to disobey, the relationship between the *reth* and his subjects simply demonstrates an absence of coercive capacity. Similarly, the Natchez Nation was made up of semi-autonomous village districts, and the further these villages were from the Grand Village and the “Great Sun,” the more diminished the supreme chief’s power over the populace became, because these villages had their own “Sun” chiefs and War chiefs whom the villagers “feared and obeyed.”⁵⁵ When the

“Great Sun” issued orders, the “Suns” in outlying villages often flaunted them, and the Natchez people were far more under their sway than that of the central authority.⁵⁶ The “Great Sun” is better understood as ‘first amongst political equals’ within a loose confederation of independent “Suns” that formed a landscape of shifting alliances and factions, all of which were competing for predominance. The sovereignty of the “Great Sun” was not limited by “freedom to disobey” being exercised by commoners: competing authority exerted by other “Suns” is what kept the “Great Sun” in check.

Indeed, their understanding of the concept of “command” when considering acts of disobedience is also contestable. The authors link the “power to command” to sovereignty and have a broad conception of what it means to “command,” referring to pervasive imperative verb forms in language as evidence that even egalitarian hunter-gatherers like the Tanzanian Hadza tribe give commands and orders.⁵⁷ Critiquing this conflation of the imperative form with sovereignty, Knight deftly observes that Hadza children and women make demands of adults and men with imperatives as a form of counter-dominance, an observation which throws the linguistic foundations of Graeber and Wengrow’s thesis into disarray.⁵⁸ A second example is Graeber and Wengrow’s discussion of the North American Wendat Nation, whose traditional territories encompassed the Saint Lawrence River valley and estuary in the Great Lakes region. The Wendat practiced consensus governance amongst their clans.⁵⁹ One always had the option to exit from a relationship, and families that disagreed with a clan command or experienced inter-relational strife could move away to establish their own village or join another village within the larger nation.⁶⁰

The Dawn of Everything couches this freedom as an act of disobedience in defiance of commands, but this lacks nuance. According to Canadian scholar and Wendat speaker John Steckley, the closest equivalent expression in the Wendat language to “command” is to “request, ask.” To “obey” is a conditional – one is “being with someone’s word” (the condition of being in agreement) with another person.⁶¹ In sum, the Wendat peoples’ societal capacity to refuse requests or demands is better understood as a freedom to *disagree* (with the

possibility to exit a relationship), rather than *disobey*.

The third substantive freedom, the freedom to reorganize social relationships, permeates *The Dawn of Everything's* story about our collective evolution toward the present reign of hierarchical domination. However, the prescriptive power of this “third freedom” is undermined by its slippery amorphism. The authors interchangeably reference freedom to “create new and different forms of social reality”; “shift back and forth between social structures, depending on the time of year”; “rearrange social ties”; “reorganize social relations”; “shift and renegotiate social relations”; “create or transform social relationships”; “build new social worlds”; “imagine and enact other forms of social existence”; and “shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones.”⁶²

Profiling examples, they discuss various Indigenous peoples engaging in societal governance ‘switchback’ exercises through the year.⁶³ The Cheyenne people of the Great Plains in North America, who congregated in the summer and autumn to hunt bison, are said to be a case in point. Every summer, we are told, the Cheyenne appointed a police force to order their affairs which disbanded at the end of the hunting season, when they again split into smaller bands and went their separate ways.⁶⁴ The authors would have it that the Cheyenne dramatically switched arrangements back and forth seasonally,⁶⁵ when, as we shall see, there was an underlying continuity informing their governance structures.

The Cheyenne Nation had forty-four chiefs (Véhoó), in their traditional governance system.⁶⁶ These chiefs periodically congregated the entire nation from late spring to late autumn in large camps to perform ceremonies and hold political meetings.⁶⁷ Aggregations of bison amassing smaller sex-segregated herds into seasonal breeding herds⁶⁸ created the preconditions for congregating.⁶⁹ “Warrior Societies” (Nótáxeó), were appointed to facilitate ceremonies and great hunts for a set period and rotated policing power between them.⁷⁰ When the bison migrated, the large camps dispersed. Within each band, Véhoó continued to act as peacemakers while Nótáxeó members ensured the decisions of the band’s Véhoó were followed.

In addition, throughout the year the Nótâxeo’o shared responsibility for four sacred tasks: facilitating travel; protecting the village; organizing hunts; and policing ceremonies.⁷¹ In this manner Nótâxeo’o and Véhoo’o shared and exchanged power, an arrangement which Cheyenne scholar Leo K. Killsback describes as “a delicate balance between two highly organized institutions, its foundations built on the Cheyenne principle of brotherhood. [...] The temporary shifts in governance of original Cheyenne national government, in which warrior societies would take charge, are part of the system.”⁷² Graeber and Wengrow belittle the intentionality and complexity of traditional Cheyenne governance, which they describe as a “play chiefs” and “play police” arrangement.⁷³ Furthermore, Cheyenne society did not oscillate between two discrete governance structures, as *Dawn of Everything* claims: this structure was contiguous all year.

Evoking Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) and Henri Beuchat’s (1878–1914) long outdated “Essay on the seasonal variations of Eskimo societies” (1904–5), the authors also assert that the Arctic Inuit peoples shifted their mode of governance seasonally, thus exercising the “third freedom.” In the summers, when small, closed member bands fished or hunted caribou, patriarchal authority was exercised. In winter months, the Inuit gathered in meeting houses and this mode of authority dissolved, and with it, hierarchy, property and sexual propriety.⁷⁴ However, subsequent research has upended the thesis of Mauss and Beuchat.⁷⁵ In fact, the societal organization of Inuit groups has substantive regional differences.⁷⁶ For example, in the case of the Copper Inuit, who lived in the north western Kitikmeot region of the Arctic, “egalitarianism and individual autonomy” prevailed, whereas in the eastern Arctic, “deference to leaders” was the norm, “a deference that, although voluntary, was equated with loyalty and was an ever-present feature of social life.”⁷⁷ Again, the authors’ switchback paradigm proves false.

We can take this further. Mutual aid, which Graeber and Wengrow refer to synonymously with communism,⁷⁸ was actually practiced year round by the Inuit, who developed institutions of reciprocity and generosity to redistribute food in times of scarcity enacted through the practice of *Qaujimaqatuqangit* (Inuit Ecological Knowledge).⁷⁹

Voluntary gift-giving and communal eating in the autumn and meat-sharing during the winter maintained relationships in the absence of strong family ties in Inuit society.⁸⁰ During times of scarcity in the summer,⁸¹ well-off Inuit would help nearby camps in need by sending them food or allowing access to meat caches.⁸² Food sharing was seen as an obligation and *turlulaujaq*—calling everyone in the camp to eat—was customary when returning with food.⁸³ Institutions for sharing food changed in accord with cycles of seasonal subsistence. The Inuit practiced what I regard as a “substantive” freedom, the freedom not to go hungry, and this was thanks to mutual aid, rather than seasonal-driven shifts between authoritarianism and communism, as *The Dawn of Everything* posits.

Reappraising Europe

I noted at the beginning of this review that *The Dawn of Everything* frames Europe as the globe’s regressive epicentre, burdened by a culture which could not conceive of social equality before this value was introduced to the social discourse from North American Indigenous cultures.⁸⁴ As previously mentioned, the key event was an essay competition in 1774 challenging participants to debate the origin of social inequality and if it is justified. Graeber and Wengrow attribute the debate’s origins to emerging knowledge of Indigenous perspectives conveyed to Europe via the Baron de Lahontan’s *New Voyages to America* and to a lesser extent *The Jesuit Relations*.⁸⁵ In response, reviewers have questioned the credulity of their claim that *New Voyages* in particular is primarily responsible for discourses on the origins of inequality in Europe.⁸⁶ Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, argues the writings of medieval Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604) and Renaissance humanist Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), in addition to social movements such as the sixteenth century “School of Salamanca” and reformation-era Anabaptists, provide ample evidence that Europeans grappled with social inequality long before the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ In response, Wengrow contests that these figures and movements were concerned with inequality’s origins, and qualifies *The Dawn of Everything’s* thesis: “The question we ask is more specific: How did a consensus form among European intellectuals that human beings—innocent of civilization—lived in ‘societies of

equals,' such that it made sense to inquire as to 'the origins of inequality'?"⁸⁸

Responding to Wengrow, there is plenty of documentation that medieval Europeans developed political narratives concerning originating "societies of equals," with explanatory accounts of how equitable sociality was undermined. For example, during the 1381 Peasant Revolt in England, the priest-rebel John Ball (c. 1338–1381) delivered a sermon, paraphrased by the chronicler Thomas Walsingham (died, c. 1422), in which he condemned the feudal system of serfdom, arguing "that from the beginning all men were created equal by nature, and that servitude had been introduced by the unjust and evil oppression of men, against the will of God, who if it had pleased Him to create serfs, surely in the beginning of the world would have appointed who should be a serf and who a lord."⁸⁹ The provocations of Ball were a shock to those in power, and he was executed when the rebellion was crushed.

Inequality's origins also fired up the parliamentary "Leveller" faction during the First and Second English Civil Wars (1642–1648) which culminated with the execution of King Charles I (1600–1649) and the establishment of the English Commonwealth, with power invested in the parliament. Early Leveller leaders such as parliamentarian John Lilburne (c. 1614–1657) and pamphleteer Richard Overton (1640–1664) both emphasized original states of equality and the absence of domination. In *The Free-mans Freedom Vindicated* (1646), Lilburne asserted all men and women were "by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority, and majesty, none of them having (by nature) any authority dominion or magisterial power, one over or above another."⁹⁰ Similarly, Overton's *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny* (1646) attributed natural freedom to the entirety of humanity: "For by natural birth, all men are equally and alike borne to like propriety, liberty and freedom, and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world, every one equally and alike to enjoy his Birthright and privilege; even all whereof God by nature hath made him free."⁹¹ The Levellers forcefully insisted that the natural equality of humanity, granted by God, should be the basis of governance. The right to rule was to be contingent on the consent

of the governed, rather than imposed through domination. Leveller's knew who equality's enemies were. The equitable nature of humanity was a God-given foundation of society that could only be renewed by dismantling aristocratic tyranny and its governing institutions.

The even more radical "True Levellers", also known as the "Diggers," circulated broadsides such as *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England* (1649) that mobilized a state of natural equality to attack the institution of property: "We say, while we are made to hinder no man of his Privileges given him in his Creation, equal to one as to another; what Law then can you make, to take hold upon us, but Laws of Oppression and Tyranny, that shall enslave or spill the blood of the innocent?"⁹² Speaking to England's ruling aristocrats, the Diggers opposed inherited structures of domination that enclosed common land and likened the violence of the nobility when seizing the commons and declaring it their property to the Biblical 'first murder' of Abel by his brother, Cain. Like Ball, the Diggers argued political and economic hierarchies imposed by force were the progenitors of inequality.

In sum, a century before Rousseau began writing his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* and over fifty years before Lahontan published his memoirs – key events in *The Dawn of Everything's* 'origin story' concerning Europeans considering equality—we have full scale equality-driven social upheavals erupting in England: so much for Graeber and Wengrow's passing reference to "folk egalitarianism" by way of dismissing the existence of such currents.⁹³

Well before *New Voyages to North America* was circulating, continental European intellectuals were also considering societal equality, the origins of inequality, and if inequality is justified. Prior to his death French judge Étienne de La Boétie (c. 1530–1563) wrote *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (1574) wherein he argues that freedom and equality are humanity's natural states.⁹⁴ La Boétie identified the tyranny of conquest and political deception as originating causes of inequality.⁹⁵ Tyranny, he wrote, is maintained thanks to hierarchies of property secured by elites, and it is perpetuated by those who "accept servility to acquire wealth."⁹⁶ How humanity lost any desire to reinsti-

tute our natural state of equality and freedom through social reordering, was a pressing issue for La Boétie.⁹⁷ In other words, he conceived of natural freedom and its corollary, equality, as an historical condition that might be realized, pointing, in particular, to the founding and evolution of the city state of Venice.

Venice amalgamated from a collection of hamlets founded by waves of migrants escaping to the mudflats of the Venetian lagoon during the fifth century, as Rome's empire fell into terminal decline. Early Venetians governed themselves through open-air people's assemblies (a style of governance not uncommon in medieval Europe),⁹⁸ called *arengo*.⁹⁹ Periodically, the *arengo* elected a leader, or *doge*, for life: each year two "tribunes" were also elected and empowered to prevent any abuses of power on the part of the *doge*.¹⁰⁰ When *doges* attempted to consolidate political power to themselves through dynasty building or coups, they were quickly replaced.¹⁰¹ Power grabbing was a dangerous venture: during the first century of Venetian self-rule, all but one doge was assassinated, blinded, or exiled. The early Venetian Republic enforced radical democracy punctuated by violent catharsis, and it makes for a telling contrast with *The Dawn of Everything's* conjecture that the sole manifestations of populist 'turn over' in medieval Europe were the crowning and dethroning of 'Carnival Kings' during folk festivals.

Democratic Venice flourished for some time, but reforms gradually restricted enfranchisement to a growing aristocracy and circumscribed the powers of the *arengo* until this institution was abolished in 1421.¹⁰² By the sixteenth century, when La Boétie was writing, Venice's ruling elite held deliberative councils and debates behind closed doors presided over by the "Great Doge," with *fait accompli* decisions proclaimed to the general public.¹⁰³ Lamenting the decline of equitable democracy in his *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, La Boétie imagined a meeting between Venice's freedom-loving founders and their sixteenth century counterparts, wondering how both could have originated from the same place.¹⁰⁴

Given centralizing power and inequality in cities is discussed extensively in *The Dawn of Everything*, the case of Venice is clearly

important. Graeber and Wengrow cite the Spanish sixteenth century conquistador, Hernán Cortés (c. 1485–1547), leader of the expedition that caused the fall of the Aztec Empire, who compares the Indigenous City State of Tlaxcala (which allied with Cortés) to Italian Republics such as Genoa, Pisa, and Venice, in that the Tlaxcala people had “no supreme overlord.”¹⁰⁵ Cortés himself described the Tlaxcalan political system as a Venetian-style oligarchy: “There are many lords all living in this city, and the people who are tillers of the soil are their vassals, though each one has his lands to himself, some more than others. In undertaking wars, they all gather together, and thus assembled they decide and plan them.”¹⁰⁶ Tlaxcala’s aristocracy formed a council of 50 to 100 nobles and four principal leaders deliberated over the decision-making.¹⁰⁷ Graeber and Wengrow equate this with a “popular urban council,”¹⁰⁸ suggesting debate and speeches are indicators of direct democracy, when this is far from the case.¹⁰⁹ In any event, they never discuss the radically democratic features of Venice’s initial republic, or its degeneration to the point where Cortés would draw comparisons between Venice’s oligarchy and that of Tlaxcala.

Disingenuous engagement with European egalitarianism is on full display in the authors’ discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is type-cast as a young French courtier who never encountered equitable values being enacted in society, and lived off the patronage of aristocrats.¹¹⁰ In fact, as historian David A. Bell points out, the author of *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755) was a middle-aged philosopher born in Geneva, who lived for years in poverty as a domestic servant.¹¹¹ His father was a poor watchmaker who nonetheless had citizenship in the General Council of the Republic of Geneva and could thus vote.¹¹² However by 1712, when Rousseau was born, a patrician-dominated Small Council and larger Council of Two Hundred had supplanted the General Council in importance and sought to monopolize power. During his youth, the “Anonymous Letters” (1718) agitated for Genevans to reclaim their status as a republic of “free people,” whose liberty was a natural right, from the Small Council.¹¹³ Stratification of citizenship was excluding many Genevans from political participation,¹¹⁴ which caused factions seeking to expand enfranchisement in the name of equality to periodically protest, riot, strike, and even take up arms against the city’s

oligarchy.¹¹⁵

Rousseau, future theorist of equality, was caught up in these politics, and his circle of friends in Paris included a number of Genevan agitators and democracy-oriented politicians, such the exiled radical Toussaint-Pierre Lenieps (c. 1697–1774).¹¹⁶ Historian Helena Rosenblatt has researched how the example of Geneva figures in the development of Rousseau’s theory of human nature.¹¹⁷ Referencing the city of his birth, Rousseau argued “man was by nature good,” and that “economic development and commerce corrupted him.”¹¹⁸ In his words:

[Genevan] municipal administration was as democratic as possible. The people acknowledge neither classes nor privileges nor any inequality amongst its members; it acted either by itself in general council, or by its procurators called Syndics whom it elected annually, and who accounted to it for their administration; no intermediary order interposed itself between them and it, and that is the true characteristic of Democracy.¹¹⁹

Thus, when Graeber and Wengrow attribute the inspiration for Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Basis to Inequality Among Men* (1755) to Indigenous critiques recorded in *New Voyages to North America*, they betray a bias that permeates their entire tome.

Conclusion

There is much to be admired in *The Dawn of Everything’s* integration of global perspectives and hitherto marginalized histories in a bid to expand the boundaries of our political imagination. Given our present predicament, it is unsurprising that so many readers have found value in this timely response to pressing questions. That being said, Graeber and Wengrow never specify what went so terribly wrong with the three freedoms: and, when we subject their book to critical examination, it seems their own sweeping metanarrative on the origins of inequality (and avenues for freedom) is just one more example

of ‘Big History’ mythmaking.

A final observation: while much has been made of this book’s anarchist politics,¹²⁰ one could question what type of anarchism they promote. Taking stock of human history, Graeber and Wengrow conclude that societal forces of hierarchy and equality have been oscillating in perpetuity, and that the problematic issue for us is hierarchy’s development into a hegemonic force.¹²¹ Dislodging us from this hegemony, Graeber and Wengrow would have us empowered by the “three freedoms” to return to an endlessly recurring cycle of constructing and then dismantling hierarchical inequalities.¹²² In the end, anarchic “freedom” is always destined to falter.¹²³

Wil Sahar Patrick

PhD candidate, Department of Geography, University of Victoria

Notes

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² Chris Knight, “Did Communism Make Us Human? On the anthropology of David Graeber,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2021, <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/06/field-notes/Did-communism-make-us-human>.

³ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, (Toronto: Signal, 2021), 6–8, 73–75; Lauren Harding, “The Dawn of Everything,” *Human Ecology* 50 (2022): 393.

⁴ Crawford Kilian, “The Hopeful Message of ‘*The Dawn of Everything*,’” *The Tye*, November 11, 2021, <https://thetye.ca/Culture/2021/11/12/Hopeful-Message-Dawn-Everything/>.

⁵ See, for example, Jared Spears, “A Bigger Picture Gives Our Ancestors Their Full Humanity,” *Yes Magazine*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/a-new-social-justice/2021/11/15/book-human-history-ancestors>; and Brian Fagan and Nadia Durrani, “The Dawn of Everything: A new history?” *Reviews in Anthropology* 50, no. 3–4 (2021): 81.

⁶ Daniel Immerwahr, “Beyond the State,” *The Nation*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/graeber-wengrow-dawn-of-everything/>; Chris Knight, “Wrong About (Almost) Everything,” *focaal blog*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.focaalblog.com/2021/12/22/chris-knight-wrong-about-almost-everything/>; Polly Wiessner, “Hunter-gatherers: Perspective from the starting point,” *Cliodynamics*, SI: Leading Scholars of the Past Comment on the Dawn of Every-

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⁸ See John Zerzan, "The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity by David Graeber and David Wengrow (review)," *World Literature Today* 96, no. 1 (2022): 73; Charles Edwards, "Upending Civilization: A review essay on *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by David Graeber and David Wengrow," *Skeptical Magazine* 27, no. 1 (2022): 74.

⁹ Harding, "The Dawn of Everything," 394.

¹⁰ Misha Falk, "Looking to the Past to Imagine the Future: A Review of Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*," *Upping the Anti*, March 3, 2022, <https://uppingtheanti.org/blog/entry/looking-to-the-past-to-imagine-the-future-a-review-of-graeber-and-wengrows-the-dawn-of-everything>.

¹¹ Ben Fitzhugh, "Comment," *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 2 (2018): 253; Harding, "The Dawn of Everything," 394; Rachael Kiddy, "Review," *Antiquity* 96 no. 386 (2022): 501.

¹² Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neal, "All Things Being Equal," *The Ecologist*, December 17, 2021, <https://theecologist.org/2021/dec/17/all-things-being-equal>.

¹³ Morris, "Against Method," 68–9.

¹⁴ Walter Scheidel, "Resetting History's Dial? A critique of David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*," *Cliodynamics*, SI: Leading Scholars of the Past Comment on the Dawn of Everything, (2022): 3–4.

¹⁵ Knight, "Wrong About (Almost) Everything."

¹⁶ Jane Bassett, "Not the dawn of everything," *International Socialism*, no. 178 (2023), <http://isj.org.uk/not-dawn-of-everything/>; Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 17, 81; Power, "Gender egalitarianism made us human."

¹⁷ Colin Grier, "Comment," *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 2 (2018): 254.

¹⁸ Emily Kern, "The Radical Promise of Human History," *Boston Review*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-radical-promise-of-human-history/>.

¹⁹ Scheidel, "Resetting History's Dial?," 1–17.

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Digging to Utopia," *The New York Review*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/12/16/david-graeber-digging-for-utopia/>; Arjun Appurda, "The dawn of everything?" *Anthropology Today* 38, no. 1 (2022): 1–2; Zerzan " (Review)," 73.

²¹ Fagan and Durrani, "The Dawn of Everything?," 94.

²² Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 514–5.

²³ Scheidel, "Resetting History's Dial?," 15–16.

²⁴ Scheidel, "Resetting History's Dial?," 11.

- ²⁵ Bassett, “Not the dawn of everything?”; Scheidel, “Resetting History’s Dial?” 2.
- ²⁶ Scheidel, “Resetting History’s Dial?” 6.
- ²⁷ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 127, 133.
- ²⁸ Wiessner, “Hunter-gatherers,” 3; Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 126.
- ²⁹ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 73–4.
- ³⁰ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 158–163; 552, note 50.
- ³¹ Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveller* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Ian Morris, *Forages, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve*, Stephen Macedo, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015); Michael Smith and Timothy A. Kohler, eds., *Ten Thousand Years of Inequality: The Archaeology of Wealth Differences* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); David Stasavage, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
- ³² Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 133, 262, 426, 482, 503; there are other definitions of these freedoms which will be explored.
- ³³ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 130–1.
- ³⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 132.
- ³⁵ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 379–80.
- ³⁶ Wiessner, “Hunter-gatherers,” 2.
- ³⁷ Phratries comprise groups of related clans and occur in sets of three or more; moieties may, but need not, comprise groups of clans but always occur in pairs.
- ³⁸ John L. Steckley, *The Eighteenth Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2014), 28–50.
- ³⁹ Deborah Doxtator, “What Happened to the Iroquois Clans? A Study of Clans in Three Nineteenth-Century Rotinonhsyonni Communities,” PhD diss., (University of Western Ontario, 1996), 54–6.
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- ⁴² Bohaker, “Anishinaabe Toodaims,” 93–118.
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⁴⁶ Wayne E. Lee, *The Cutting-Off Way: Indigenous Warfare in Eastern North America, 1500–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 7, 189.

⁴⁷ Jeffers Lennox, *Homelands and Empires: Indigenous Space, Imperial Fictions, and Competition for Territory in Northeastern North America, 1690–1763* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 10, 17.

⁴⁸ Lee, *The Cutting-Off Way*, 186, 195–201.

⁴⁹ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 500.

⁵⁰ Louis F. Burns, *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 15.

⁵¹ Burns, *A History of the Osage People*, 28.

⁵² Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 133, 362, 503.

⁵³ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 392–8.

⁵⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 368.

⁵⁵ Karl G. Lorenz, “A Re-examination of Natchez Sociopolitical Complexity: A View from the Grand Village and Beyond,” *Southeastern Archeology* 16, no. 2 (1997): 98, 100; George Edward Milne, *Natchez Country: Indians, Colonists, and the Landscape of Louisiana* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 34.

⁵⁶ Milne, *Natchez Country*, 36, 70; Graeber, “Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship,” 393.

⁵⁷ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 547–8, note 15; Graeber has also raised this idea of imperatives before in David Graeber, “Notes on the politics of divine kingship,” *On Kings*, David Graeber and Michael Sahlins, eds. (Chicago: Hau Books, 2018), 456–7.

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⁵⁹ Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of the Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 54–9.

⁶⁰ Stasavage, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy*, 70–1; Trigger, *The Children of the Aataentsic*, 56.

⁶¹ Steckley, *The Eighteenth Century Wyandot*, 54.

⁶² Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 132–3, 362, 398, 426, 469, 482, 502, 503, 525.

⁶³ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 131

⁶⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 108–10.

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- ⁷² Killback, *A Sacred People*, 205.
- ⁷³ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 131, 503.
- ⁷⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 107–8, 114, 115–6.
- ⁷⁵ Jarich Oosten, “‘A privileged field of study’: Marcel Mauss and structural anthropology in Leiden,” *Études/Inuit/Studies* 30, no. 2 (2006): 63.
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- ⁷⁸ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 131.
- ⁷⁹ See Joe Karetak, Frank Tester, and Shirley Tagalik eds., *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: What Inuit Have Always Known to Be True* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).
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- ⁸⁴ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 34, note 16, 548.
- ⁸⁵ Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 25–6, 28, 58, 61, 441, 482.

- ⁸⁶ Scheidel, “Resetting History’s Dial?” 19, note 13.
- ⁸⁷ Appiah, “Digging for Utopia.”
- ⁸⁸ David Wengrow, “The Roots of Inequality: An Exchange,” *The New York Review*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/01/13/the-roots-inequality-an-exchange/>.
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