

# **‘Primitive Communism’: Did it Ever Exist?**

**A review of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of  
Humanity* by David Graeber and David Wengrow**

Conor Kostick

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The way in which we imagine the first human societies is intimately connected to our current political beliefs. Conservatives believe in repression, the need for police, prisons and legal systems. To justify this, they argue that humans are inherently warlike and exploitative. Otherwise, we'd be in some kind of Mad Max scenario of everyone fighting each other over resources. And you don't have to be an extreme conservative to still have a bleak take on humanity, based on your assumptions about the lives of hunter gatherers.

By contrast, for liberals and radicals, especially for Marxists, the idea that early humans existed in a state of primitive communism is an inspiring one. At the stage of primitive communism, it is believed, everything was shared and everyone looked after one another. Both conservatives and socialists look for evidence to support their views in anthropology and archaeology. And, as Graeber and Wengrow's new book shows, both have created images of the distant past that are little better than fictions.

In this review of a book of enormous importance, I'm going to focus on what the evidence it presents and the arguments it makes mean for socialists. Conservatives can have their own battles over it.

## From Primitive Communism to Class Societies

In 1877, Frederick Engels wrote a polemical book, *Anti-Dühring*, which presented the following influential passage about the reason primitive communism gave way to class societies:

*All historical antagonisms between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes to this very day find their explanation in this same relatively undeveloped human labour. So long as the really working population were so much occupied with their necessary labour that they had no time left for looking after the common affairs of society – the direction of labour, affairs of state, legal matters, art, science, etc. – so long was it necessary that there should constantly exist a special class, freed from actual labour, to manage these affairs; and this class never failed, for its own advantage, to impose a greater and greater burden of labour on the working masses.*

Almost all Marxists follow this idea: that for tens of thousands of years (100,000 BCE – 10,000 BCE), people lived barely above subsistence level. As Alex Callinicos puts it, 'Almost all the working day was taken up with necessary labour to meet society's basic needs.' An important conclusion that follows from this idea is that the eventual loss of egalitarianism among the small communities of hunter-gatherers was a tragic necessity. Although it brought exploitation, war, the oppression of women, and other injustices, the ending of primitive communism was a necessary step for science and art to advance.

A small surplus allowed a caste of priests, planners, builders and organisers to devote themselves full time to their duties. And over centuries, these people coalesced into a ruling elite. Despite the burden on the rest of the population, this was a necessary phase for humans to pass through, in order that these specialists could bring about the advances in the productive forces that would lead to food abundance (and widespread obesity); the discovery of the atom (and nuclear bombs); penicillin (and antimicrobial resistance); air travel (and global warming); etc.

Only now, with the enormous wealth that modern production can create, can we return to the lost spirit of sharing that existed in the era of primitive communism.

For many years I was a member of the Socialist Workers Party in the UK and Ireland. Before reading *The Dawn of Everything*, I might not have followed John Molyneux's crude generalisation that 'to the American Indian, private ownership of land was unnatural,' but I definitely did repeat the argument expressed by Chris Harman, that a phase of primitive communism, where people lived in small groups of thirty to forty people, gave way to the first class societies as a result of an agricultural revolution, around 8,000 BCE, which was followed by an urban revolution around 4,000 BCE in Mesopotamia and 1,500 years later a similar development took place in Meso-America.

Harman leaned very heavily on the work of the Australian archaeologist, V. Gordon Childe and in particular Childe's seminal works *Man Makes Himself* (1936) and *What Happened in History* (1942). Probably, most socialists and Marxists follow the schema in these books, which first formulated the idea of an agricultural and urban revolution having taken place that transformed human society and led to the first classes. No doubt those in the tradition of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and perhaps socialist republicans and anarchists too, have their own pre-history 'experts', whose talks, writings, and educational materials explain the origin of classes in these terms.

Well, they were all wrong. *We* were all wrong.

## **Primitive Communism never existed**

For some years now, the evidence has been growing for a pre-history of humanity that shows an extraordinary richness, both in terms of material production, like massive settlements of thousands of people, and in terms of cultural exchanges over immense distances. It will come as a surprise to everyone on the left who held to the 'undeveloped human labour' model for the origin of classes – just as it came as a surprise to me – to read of sites like Çatalhöyük in modern day Turkey, where perhaps 10,000 people flourished around 7,000 BCE. Or Göbekli Tepe, also in southern Anatolia, which dates from about 9,500 BCE and is another massive centre, whose stone pillars are covered in intriguing animal-dominated images. Poverty Point, in present day Louisiana, USA, is a site of massive earthen ridges distributed over 5km and constructed some time between 1700 BCE and 1100 BCE, that is, during the pre-farming period in the Americas.

With these examples and very many more, David Graeber and David Wengrow completely overthrow Childe's timeline and his conclusions about the agricultural and urban revolutions. For *millennia* before the supposed agricultural revolution of the Near East, humans were experimenting with all sorts of ways of organising themselves, including moving to sites like Stonehenge for certain times of the year, then dispersing; mixing horticulture with hunting; and in settling together in their thousands. Large settlements came first, not agriculture.

The image of small, precarious bands of hunter-gathers that is so dominant in our image of pre-class societies is a backwards projection from people like the !Kung of the western edge of the Kalahari desert or the Inuit of the arctic. Pushed by modern societies to regions in which are difficult to exploit for profit and deeply affected by interaction with the rest of the world, it perhaps should not be too surprising that these examples turn out not to be good ones for the re-creation of the distant past.

Similarly, the idea that life was desperately precarious in the 'primitive communist' era is shattered by these examples. What makes us believe that people in these societies were barely surviving? Mainly, that it fits a schema where there has to be some reason why an elite would be allowed to dominate the population. Yet there's no evidence to say that these early settlements were perpetually on the brink of starvation.

Given their stable existence for far longer periods than say New York, or Paris, or even Dublin, it might well be that the people of Teotihuacan – a Mesoamerican settlement near modern day Mexico City, whose peak was around 450 BCE when it had a population of around 200,000 spread over an area of ten square kilometres – would pity us if they could see us now. Pitied for several reasons, including the fact that we work far harder and longer than they did, just to pay rents and mortgages, let alone save up for a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Disneyland.

And yes, we have Netflix and they didn't, but by the evidence of the sophistication of the legal practices of the population of Teotihuacan they might well have had more impressive self-government, storytellers, musicians, artists, sculptors, jewellery makers, and better drug taking experiences, and better games, etc. than we do. After all, in our day we have our own god to whom almost every aspect of our lives is sacrificed: Mammon. There's no escaping the drive of the market, especially in music or art, where all sorts of anaemic production is foisted onto us.

## **Does the adoption of agriculture always lead to hierarchy?**

Engels's argument about the origin of classes is mistaken in the assumption that pre-agricultural societies required most people to be 'occupied with their necessary labour' for most of their time. And this book made me reconsider the logic of his next

step: that therefore *affairs of state, legal matters, art, science* must fall to specialists who become an elite.

Modern day socialists have no problem imagining that workers today can have valid opinions on a wide variety of matters, including politics, law, art and science. So why would it be any different for our predecessors? Indeed, they probably had a lot more time for mass participation in such affairs, including the regulation of their societies. Over the thousands of years of society presented by modern archaeology, it seems that societies with permanent elites were the exception. Graeber and Wengrow give plenty of examples, indeed, where civilisations seem to have consciously been on guard against the formation of ruling elites and even carried out revolutions against those who tried to take over.

Taking Taosi in modern day north China as a case study, archaeologists have found evidence that around 2,000 BCE, ‘the city wall was razed flat, and ... the original functional divisions destroyed, resulting in a lack of spatial regulation. Commoners’ residential areas now covered almost the entire site, even reaching beyond the boundaries of the middle-period large city wall. The size of the city became even larger, reaching a total area of 300 hectares. In addition, the ritual area in the south was abandoned. The former palace area now included a poor-quality rammed-earth foundation of about 2,000 square metres, surrounded by trash pits used by relatively low-status people. Stone tool workshops occupied what had been the lower-level elite residential area.’

Moreover, commoner graves suddenly appeared on the elite cemetery and in the palace district a mass burial with signs of torture and grotesque violations of the corpses appears to be an ‘act of political retribution.’ As Graeber and Wengrow observe, this strongly suggests a revolution against an elite and it was a probably a successful one given that the phase of commoner housing and burial on former elite grounds lasted two or three hundred years and the city grew in size. ‘At the very least,’ they conclude, ‘the case of Taosi invites us to consider the world’s earliest cities as places of self-conscious social experimentation, where very different visions of what a city could be like might clash – sometimes peacefully, sometimes erupting in bursts of extraordinary violence. Increasing the number of people living in one place may vastly increase the range of social possibilities, but in no sense does it predetermine which of those possibilities will ultimately be realised.’

## **‘Primitive Communism’ does not fit the archaeological evidence**

Another even more persuasive example of the mass participation of the population of an early city in their civic affairs is that of Teotihuacan, mentioned above. Again, the city went some way down the road of authoritarian rule, but around 300 CE reversed

course to live without elites. Around that time, a practice of building massive pyramids stopped, as did the practice of human sacrifice. From around 200 CE a new phase of housing construction had taken place, accelerating after 300 CE: these were impressive masonry apartments laid out on regular plots from one end of the city to another until most of the city's 100,000 residents had comfortable accommodation with integrated drainage and plastered floors and walls that were often painted with bright murals (reading about which will make any Irish reader living amidst a deep housing crisis envious).

Even the most modest households of Teotihuacan after 300 CE had what seems to be a comfortable lifestyle, with a varied diet and access to imported goods. When their vivid art depicts human activity, no one is of a greater size than any other (in contrast to the art of early class societies) and no one is depicted in a role of authority. One archaeologist has described the citizens as not just anti-dynastic but engaged in a utopian urban life. That this claim is more than plausible is demonstrated by a neglected text written by one of the Spanish conquerors of Mexico, Francisco Cervantes de Salazar's unfinished *Crónica de la Nueva España* (c.1558 – 63).

Salazar describes how when the Spaniards dealt with the city of governing council of city called Tlaxcala they found no royal court to deal with but an urban council of representatives. One of the eldest (and farsighted) of these representatives was Xicotencatl the Elder, who advised against an alliance with the Spaniards even if that would lead to the defeat of their hated Aztec foes. Xicontenatl pointed out that the Spanish invaders were, 'like ravenous monsters thrown up by the intemperate sea to blight us, gorging themselves on gold, silver, stones, and pearls; sleeping in their own clothes; and generally acting in the manner of those who one day would make cruel masters... There are barely enough chickens, rabbits, or corn-fields in the entire land to feed their bottomless appetites... why would we – who live without servitude, and never acknowledged a king – spill our blood only to make ourselves into slaves?'

Another Spanish account describes the procedure for becoming a representative in Tlaxcala, which is summarised by Graeber and Wengrow as follows. 'Those who aspired to a role on the council of Tlaxcala, far from being expected to demonstrate a personal charisma or the ability to outdo rivals, did so in a spirit of self-deprecation – even shame. They were required to subordinate themselves to the people of the city. To ensure that this subordination was no mere show, each was subject to trials, starting with mandatory exposure to public abuse, regarded as the proper reward of ambition, and then – with one's ego in tatters – a long period of seclusion, in which the aspiring politician suffered ordeals of fasting, sleep deprivation, bloodletting and a strict regime of moral instruction. The initiations ended with a "coming out" of the newly constituted public servant, amid feasting and celebration.'

This tradition of complex safeguards against ambitious representatives coming to the fore strengthens the idea that Teotihuacan had no royal rulers. Nor is the idea of self-government and caution against the formation of elites with real power limited to the Americas. It was, after all, a feature of democracy in Ancient Greece that

representatives were chosen by lottery, rather than vote, precisely to avoid the rich, ambitious, and charismatic politician being able to dominate proceedings. Just think how much healthier our own democracy would be if instead of having a majority of wealthy TDs who are networked into various business and property interests (25% are landlords), we chose them by lottery. Yes, we might get some duds but so too does the current Dáil: I'm thinking especially Michael and Danny Healy Rae. We'd be spectacularly unlucky if the lottery picked someone with more bizarre views than theirs.

## **Are there any weaknesses with *The Dawn of Everything*?**

All books have their strengths and weaknesses. And in discussing a few areas I found problematic in *The Dawn of Everything*, I am not at all taking away from the core arguments, which I think are irrefutable: there was no 'primitive communist' stage of human existence; massive settlements appeared *before* the widespread development of agriculture; there was no necessary connection between underdeveloped agriculture and the appearance of class societies and these societies were every bit as intellectually and artistically rich as our own (probably more so).

I have a dislike of arguments that despite acknowledging weak foundations then charge towards their conclusions as if those weaknesses aren't present. An extreme example is Donnchadh Ó Corráin's *The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion*, which is heavily dependent on a belief that a key document, *Laudabiliter*, is genuine. Yet there are strong reasons to think it a forgery. These are dismissed by Ó Corráin in a footnote and he's thus able to present his conclusions as if they are much more convincing and certain than the evidence actually allows for.

I have a concern that this type of practice is at work in *The Dawn of Everything* i.e. of a tendency to overstate the evidence in favour of their argument and under-represent caveats and doubts. What makes me say this is that for the most part, the case studies are entirely new to me and I am completely dependent on Graeber and Wengrow's presentation of them. But I have some knowledge of the reign of Ashurbanipal, ruler of the Assyrian empire 668 – 631 BCE. According to *The Dawn of Everything*, despite the brutal conquests of emperors Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, 'when dealing with loyal subjects they were strikingly hands-off, often granting near-total autonomy to citizen bodies that made decisions collectively.'

The point Graeber and Wengrow are making here is that the Mesopotamian cities had town councils that were reflective of 'participatory government' and that 'city dwellers (even under monarchies) largely governed themselves, presumably much as they had before kings appeared on the scene to begin with.' The references for these ideas are a paper by Gojko Barjamovic discussing the term 'citizens of Babylon' in



the sources and the archaeology of Mashkan-shapir from around 2,000 BCE. Now, I'm perfectly happy with the idea that the earliest Mesopotamian cities, Uruk especially, had popular government and no royal rulers. But to use evidence from 1,500 years earlier to presume self-government was intact in Ashurbanipal's day is too big a stretch. Moreover, Brajamovic's argument is not that 'citizens of Babylon' was a term implying every cook could govern (a phrase Graeber and Wengrow use for these Mesopotamian cities) but rather that the 'overlords' and 'superiors' of Babylon were local figures who would meet to discuss important matters such as whether to stay loyal to Assyria or join a revolt against the empire.

To say that in a time of civil war, a body of people coming under the term LÚ.GN.KI.MEŠ ('the citizens of the city GN') were a distinct civic institution is interesting. The examples given by Brajamovic indicate there was in Babylon c.650, some kind of assembly of elders of local inhabitants, who held executive power. This body of citizens might well point to a pre-existing tradition of non-royal government. It does not, however, provide any evidence for popular self-government, of widespread involvement of the whole of the people in how the city was run. And even if we allow popular autonomy for Babylon around this time, it is clearly a mistake to make the generalisation that across Mesopotamia collective decision making allowed cities to run pretty much as they had been before the rise of royal power. By the time of Ashurbanipal, most Mesopotamian cities were being micro-managed down to the assignments of individual workers by the central authority via their governors and officials.

You don't have to be a specialist in the field to see this. If you open up the State Archives of Assyria, and browse the letters from kings and princes to their servants, you'll see no end of detailed instructions that show an absolute authority over the military, economic and religious affairs. Taking one at random: SAA 18.006:

*A tablet of the crown prince to the deputy (governor) and Nabû-dini-a [mur]. Mar-Biti-ibni, a citizen of Der, helped thirteen men run away, and brought them where you are.*

*You (sg.) gave five of them to Šiyu, but eight (remain) in [yo]ur (pl.) presence.  
No[w], send (pl.) [...]!*

There are thousands of these types of instruction for the Neo-Babylonian period, covering every aspect of city life. My concern therefore is that if Graeber and Wengrow are exaggerating their case here, which I think they are, might they be doing so for other case studies where I have no firm ground to stand on which allows me to interrogate their examples?

## What does the collapse of the concept of Primitive Communism mean for the left?

Whether or not Graeber and Wengrow have tried a little too hard to add extra examples to their case, the evidence of cities like Taljanky, Maidenetske, Nebelivka, Çatalhöyü, Göbekli Tepe, Poverty Point, Uruk, Mohenjo-daro, Teotihuacan, Liangchengzhen, Yaowangchen, and Caral, is that cities of thousands of inhabitants existed in pre-history. Taljanky and its neighbouring Ukrainian mega-settlements had a definite surplus produce from their sustainable mix of hunting and foraging, orchard keeping, livestock and household plots for grains. Yet over centuries there is little evidence for warfare or the development of a ruling class.

Engels's idea about Primitive Communism and the transition to the first class societies turns out to be just as much a thought experiment as Rousseau's idea that there was probably an innocent state of grace for humanity in our distant past, but that this time of noble savagery gave way to the appearance of injustice with the introduction of property relations. Engels is Rousseau plus the language of surplus value. Neither of their speculations have any foundation in the actual human experience.

What this means for those who believe in the possibility of humans living as equals again in the future, without war or exploitation, is very exciting. There have been dozens, perhaps hundreds, of examples of non-hierarchical societies that didn't just exist as small foraging bands but also in communities of 10,000 – 100,000 people. Note that these were far from utopias, many of them practiced human sacrifice. But they governed themselves without a warrior aristocracy. It turns out that humans are good at creating sophisticated political systems to avoid being controlled by elites and that our predecessors were a lot better at it than us.

Graeber and Wengrow introduce their argument with the example of the Native American (Huron-Wendat) statesman Kandiaronk, who witnessed French society and provided a devastating critique of it. That his own world was superior in terms of quality of life is evident not just from the fact that no individuals died of destitution as they did in France, nor enslaved themselves for money, but that time after time, those Europeans who made the effort to learn the language and customs of the Iroquoian-speaking people chose to leave their European past behind and live out their lives with the native Americans.

Why do we assume the times we live in are superior to those of the distant past? In many important ways, including the distinct possibility we might bring about an apocalypse, ours is inferior. This book will play an important part in shifting our perception of our times and helping appreciate that we don't have to live in a class society.

So is it a book to be welcomed by the socialists and the left? It certainly should be, but there are going to be large numbers of people in the old left who will resist it. First of all, there is a kind of Marxist – typically someone inclined to look at Russia

or China through rose-tinted glasses – who has a notion that history passes through logical stages: primitive communism, agricultural revolution, urban revolution, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism. Probably, the most extreme form in which I ever encountered this argument was that of David Laibman’s *Deep History*, in which his Abstract Social Totality concept drove history through these stages.

Even parties with a less dogmatic approach to Marxism and with a more critical attitude towards nations calling themselves communist will also struggle to accept the evidence of *The Dawn of Everything*. Why? Because the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Network, RISE, etc. come from a tradition that also has ossified their thinking about history into stages driven by changes in the forces and relations of production. I should know, for years I gave educational talks on the origins of class societies, on how one type of class society was overthrown and replaced by another, until we get to capitalism when the working class will end the dialectic of history.

To be clear, I still am convinced that only a world-wide revolution of the working class can bring about a sustainable, socialist world. And Marx’s concepts around exploitation and class struggle remain essential tools in analysing a particular historical moment, but the attempt to generalise an entire system for the progress of society out of what seemed to be the logical origins of history has fallen apart. *The Dawn of Everything* shows that we were just telling ourselves a story on the flimsiest of examples.

## **The concept of Primitive Communism and the Enlightenment**

The problem many Marxists are likely to have with the book is not simply that they were mistaken about the evidence. That is easily corrected. It runs deeper. Typically, Marxism is considered a science (a ‘scientific research programme’ as Alex Callinicos puts it) by its practitioners and one that completes the Enlightenment. Where the bourgeoisie veered away from their own drive against superstition because clear-sighted rational thinking would expose the injustices of their own system, a philosophy based on the working class – who have nothing to lose by complete honesty and constant self-criticism – can implement the goals of the Enlightenment in full.

Framing Marxism in this way, as the culmination of the Enlightenment, inherits Rousseau’s belief that for all the faults of our modern world, there was no other way forward out of an ignorant past. Humans in prehistory might have been happier, possibly, and moral, perhaps, but they were unaware of the real workings of the universe. The various stages of history that we have passed through to progress to capitalism (ready to progress again to communism) were all necessary ones to reach our modern, rational world. Marxists who concentrate on structure and see the emphasis on human spirit in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as an immature work that

was surpassed by *Capital* and other later texts by Marx and Engels, are especially keen on this model. They will find it very hard to accept the findings of *The Dawn of Everything*.

And there's another reason why the old left will struggle to champion this new book. Parties like the Socialist Party and the SWP, not to mention the Communist Party, have elderly leaders who don't like to be challenged. Insofar as they are on record as having written about the origins of class society, these senior figures will have committed themselves to a position that is mistaken. And they won't be comfortable with acknowledging that.

Personally, I think this book has to join the cannon of essential reading for socialists. Because at heart it is inspiring and leaves the reader believing in human emancipation. Dozens of early civilisations speak to our ability to live rich and sophisticated lives without a ruling elite.

The Ted K Archive

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