A Primitivist Critique of 'The Dawn of Everything' — Book Review

[The Long Read] — — The recent book by Graeber and Wengrow is hailed as "groundbreaking" and "radical" by critics — but do those claims hold up against scrutiny?

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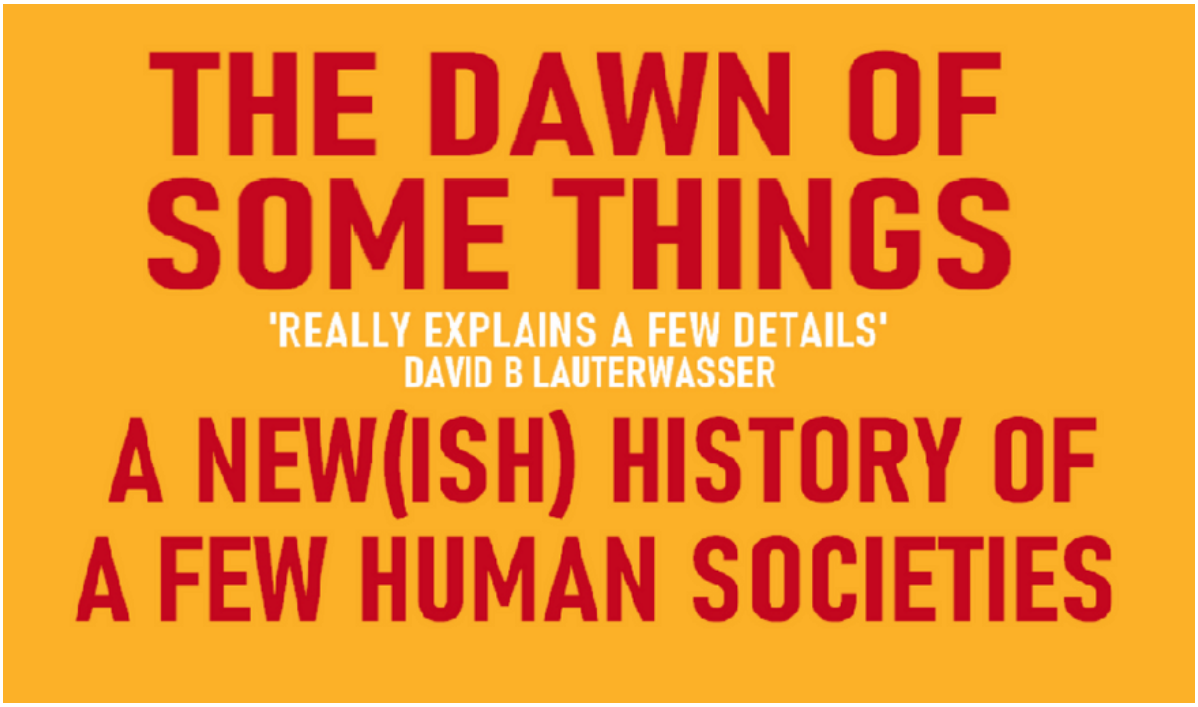

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DISCLAIMER: This article contains MAJOR SPOILERS — if you haven't read the book yet but enjoy the nerve-racking excitement of reading pop-sci literature on human history — never knowing what suspense the next chapter holds or what dirty secrets it might reveal — DON'T READ ON! Furthermore, if you're one of those smart-asses who thinks that if you simply read *a critique* of a book that roughly correlates with your opinion about the subject you are entitled to an opinion on the book itself *without having to read the entire thing* — you're mistaken. The book I'm about to critique contains arguments for (and in-depth analyses of) the theories and topics expanded on in the following that I could never reproduce as convincing and wholesome as the authors themselves do. Although you may be inclined say that my critique has some pretty good points, if you actually read the book your opinion might sway again. What I will say here is not meant to and does not in any way preempt further discussion, and is most definitely not the final say (because who am I, if not — for lack of an armchair — a simple hammock historian?). It's my interpretation, plain and simple, mixed with the arguments of other scholars and thinkers who write about the same topic from a slightly different perspective.

The Dawn of Everything — A New History of Humanity by David Graeber and David Wengrow was widely publicized as "groundbreaking" (an agricultural metaphor, tellingly) and "a game changer" in terms of our understanding of human history, and a number of favorable reviews were published in major newspapers and magazines even before the book hit the shelves. The New York Times went as far as to publish an article about it titled "What if Everything You Learned About Human History Is Wrong", which *sounded* a lot like sponsored content but apparently wasn't. I passionately loathe writers who use headlines like that — "**10 THINGS YOU DID COMPLETELY WRONG YOUR WHOLE ENTIRE LIFE**" clickbait filth — and I (mis)took the Times to be on a different plane than, say, Buzzfeed. Needless to say, the book *doesn't* prove *every single thing anyone knows* about history wrong (Adolf Hitler really *was* the leader of the German Reich during the Second World War, for instance, and there *actually* once existed an empire around a city called Rome). Articles like that, together with the slightly overdone title of the book itself, are the main reason the book had quite a reach.

We can only guess at how many New York Times readers were convinced, as a result of this clever PR strategy, that they absolutely needed to buy and read a book about a fringe topic that would have barely caught their attention only a day before, because they feared being left behind intellectually, feared that the Joneses would now have a much better understanding of history than they have, and that they would be derided and embarrassed at the next dinner part when someone who *really* understands human history now brings up "*that* new book"... No, they just *have* to read it now, if only to *not* be one of those who gets *everything wrong*.

Early civilizations, the transition from foraging to farming, the emergence of cities and the wide array of concomitant social and medical maladies that arose with them — inequality, hierarchy, famines, epidemic diseases, organized warfare, slavery, etc. — and

prehistoric as well as contemporary hunter-gatherers have all long been a major field of interest for me (I'm a vehement apologist for James C. Scott's arguments against early grain states, and an ingrained proponent of the anarcho-primitivist critique of civilization), and since all those topics are not only discussed by Graeber and Wengrow in their new book, but coincidentally happen to correlate so neatly with my personal field of interest, I was fairly excited to read *The Dawn of Everything*. And, I honestly have to admit, I was genuinely afraid of being intellectually outpaced by all the smart-asses that read every New York Times bestseller, and hence of losing my credibility as armchair, I mean, *hammock* historian and anthropologist. I just *had* to read it now — damn you, PR strategies!

I started reading it less than a week and finished it less than a month after it was published. And let me begin this critique by sincerely stating that, yes, it is indeed a noteworthy book, and yes, I've learned a great deal of new information and numerous more details about things I already knew, and I came to understand certain coherences a lot better. It is definitely worth reading, especially for anyone interested in why the hell people even started farming, how we ended up in the mess we call Global Civilization, and for anyone sharing my interest in the topics listed in the paragraph above. You definitely won't regret the time spent reading it — enough with the kind words now — but it's good to take every claim the authors make with a grain of salt (or two).

They present a few obscure theories here, play a few word games about differing definitions there, and sometimes I can't help but think that one of the reasons the authors make some of their exaggerated claims is the rather narcissistic impulse to 'go down in history' as 'visionary thinkers' who initiated a 'paradigm shift'. The closer we approach Peak Knowledge in certain fields of study — there is only so much you can possibly know about human history — the rarer it becomes for scholars to make truly new discoveries: modern historians, anthropologists and archaeologists are (more often than not) confined to reinterpreting old evidence, removing cultural biases from earlier accounts, and refining the details. This is in fact much of what this book is about, despite the grandiose claims that preceded it.

Although *The Dawn of Everything — A New History of Humanity* by no means marks the beginning of an *entirely new* understanding of human history, it is a valuable addition to the literature on the core subjects it thematizes. But the authors definitely have an underlying agenda that I as a primitivist disagree with and that sometimes contradicts the findings of other scholars, and, despite what their authoritative style of writing assumes, some of their claims are plainly wrong.

Most regrettably, *The Dawn of Everything* was supposed to be merely the first part of a trilogy, with at least two more books of the same scope following later, in which the authors would have had opportunity to respond to criticism and expand on their arguments. Due to Graeber's unfortunate and untimely death in September 2020, we will be forever left in suspense as to where they would have taken their intellectual endeavor and how they would have finished the final installment of the series.

Since I've written the following explicitly as a *primitivist* critique, this necessitates a brief definition of what primitivism is, and since I'm not known for brief summaries I hope you'll excuse me if I just quote the definition found on Wikipedia (with some details added):

> "(Anarcho-)primitivism is a political ideology and anarchist critique of civilization that advocates a return to non-civilized ways of life through deindustrialization, abolition of the division of labor and specialization, and abandonment of [grain agriculture as subsistence mode,] large-scale organization and high technology. [...] According to anarcho-primitivism, the shift from hunter-gatherer to agricultural subsistence during [what's commonly called] the Neolithic "Revolution" gave rise to coercion, social [and natural] alienation, social stratification, [as well as revealed religion, organized warfare and a sharp increase in the occurrence of slavery, epidemic disease, famine, and environmental destruction]."

Needless to say, neither of the authors of *The Dawn of Everything* would consider themselves to be anything even remotely resembling a primitivist, nor would they concede that their book supports the main premises of primitivism — it doesn't — which is the reason I am writing this. While the book is not (or at least not *directly*) a supplement to primitivism as an ideology, it is definitely required reading for every primitivist as it asks difficult questions and raises some important points that uproot ingrained primitivist dogma (such as the myopic focus on small bands of immediate-return hunter-gatherers as the optimal way of life for humans, and the occasionally observed strict rejection of all forms of farming), and it has the potential to broaden the scope of the primitivist critique and refine its applicability.

That being said, there are quite a few instances in which the authors fail to make convincing arguments, or where their reasoning is patchy. A reoccurring theme throughout the book is, first: making great claims about how what we were taught is not true at all in the beginning of a chapter; second: explaining in great detail a few exceptions to the rule; and third: quietly conceding that most of what they call the "standard narrative" is actually pretty much on point at the end of the chapter — as we will see repeatedly throughout this critique.

The Indigenous Critique of European Society

I've gained a number of fascinating insights from reading this book, for example that it is very likely that the Enlightenment, a period on which Europeans pride themselves to this very day, was in fact at least partially influenced by indigenous inhabitants of North America and their solid and reasonable critiques of European society. This theory is by no means undisputed, and I've heard expressions of disbelief as to whether European colonizers, busy with enslaving and exterminating Natives, would have sat

down with them and listened to what they have to say. Yet the authors' arguments make perfect sense because, according to them, it was mostly missionaries who did the talking, and we all know that this still happens regularly even in today's world: whenever the dominant culture stumbles upon indigenous cultures, hitherto untainted by the modern world's influence, fanatical evangelists rush to try to convert them to their version of Christian faith (at least partially motivated by the egoistic desire to gain access to heaven by "spreading the gospel" and "saving souls"). If anyone actually sits down to talk to Natives, it's usually missionaries (with the explicit purpose to learn their language, to translate the Bible and indoctrinate them with fundamentalist Christianity). Reading the authors' recount of those dialogues between missionaries and a few Native American thinkers leaves the reader convinced that those conversations actually took place, as is evident by the many travelers' accounts and missionaries' relations cited.

Yet arguing, like Graeber and Wengrow do, that "the whole story [...] — our standard historical metanarrative about the ambivalent progress of human civilization, where freedoms are lost as societies grow bigger and more complex — was invented *largely* for the purpose of neutralizing the threat of indigenous critique. [Emphasis mine, Ch.2]" seems like a bit of an overstatement, not least because the authors *themselves* admit that there is quite a lot of truth to the "standard historical metanarrative" on several occasions later in the book.

> "Once upon a time, the story goes, we were hunter-gatherers, living in a prolonged state of childlike innocence, in tiny bands. These bands were egalitarian; they could be for the very reason that they were so small. It was only after the 'Agricultural Revolution', and then still more the rise of cities, that this happy condition came to an end, ushering in 'civilization' and 'the state' — which also meant the appearance of written literature, science and philosophy, but at the same time, almost everything bad in human life: patriarchy, standing armies, mass executions and annoying bureaucrats demanding that we spend much of our lives filling in forms. [Ch.1]"

This is one version (the Rousseauian one) of this "standard metanarrative", sarcastically summarized at the beginning of Chapter 1. Graeber and Wengrow make it abundantly clear in the very next paragraph that they believe this story "simply [isn't] true" and, two pages later, that it "has almost nothing to do with the facts". Let's contrast this with the decidedly unironic conclusion nine chapters later, that "there is no doubt that, in most of the areas that saw the rise of cities, powerful kingdoms and empires also eventually emerged. [Ch.10]". The authors then go on to point out that some common features of early states were that "all of them deployed spectacular violence at the pinnacle of the system; and all to some degree modelled their centres of power — the court or palace — on the organization of patriarchal households. [Ch.10]"

Well, would you look at that. Seems like there is a lot more to this story than just the neutralization of the Indigenous Critique. As we will see again and again, oxymorons like this are commonplace throughout the book.

Social organization "before agriculture"

Particularly relevant to primitivism is the important notion that contemporary hunter-gatherers make for a biased sample when it comes to extrapolating how life "before agriculture" generally might have been. I am using scare quotes here to clarify that this way of phrasing does by no means imply that it was just a matter of time until all cultures adopted agriculture as their main subsistence (this is, as Graeber and Wengrow don't fail to point out, most often simply not the case — there is no shortage of indigenous cultures that explicitly resist(ed) agriculture, or that tried it and abandoned it afterwards). It means that there was a general trend of agriculture replacing gathering/hunting/fishing/pastoralism/horticulture as the main subsistence mode of the world's human population due to the expansionism inherent in grain agriculture. So instead of "the social organization of tribe X before the inevitable adoption of agriculture", the term *"before agriculture"* means "the social organization of tribe X before agricultural societies around them expanded into their territory, forcing them to fight (and eventually lose, agricultural surplus inevitably creates a steady surplus of people), adapt, or flee." It is only after this expansion had happened more or less uninterrupted for several *millennia* (!) that we have reliable ethnographic descriptions of the few cultures that managed to evade said expansion. Needless to say, the remaining cultures do not represent a blueprint for how *all* foraging cultures "before agriculture" organized themselves. We can't deduce how prehistoric cultures might have been like by simply looking at how the remaining foragers live like.

The reason for this (which has been pointed out here and there in anarcho-primitivist literature but is often forgotten, ignored or belittled) is the fact that all hunter-gatherer societies observed today and during the last few centuries are and were inhabiting the periphery of civilizations, "encapsulated in restricted territories, surrounded by farmers and pastoralists" and "living in places no one else wanted" like Graeber and Wengrow put it in Chapter 3.

> "The fact that these [...] societies were, in some cases at least, refugee populations living in places no one else wanted, or that many foraging societies documented in the ethnographic record (who had by this time been largely wiped out by European settler colonialism and were thus no longer available for quantitative analysis) were nothing like this, was occasionally acknowledged. But it was rarely treated as particularly relevant. The image of tiny egalitarian bands corresponded perfectly to what those weaned on the legacy of Rousseau felt hunter-gatherers *ought* to have been like. [Ch.3]"

Much of the way we *imagine* hunter-gatherers to have lived since time immemorial is based on accounts of a few scattered forager societies inhabiting dense forests, arid deserts, or similarly marginal environments during the last century or two. How hunter-gatherers might have lived like in the places that were first colonized by agriculturalists, namely the abundant river deltas that allowed for higher population densities, is not only a good question, but one whose answers are enlightening to investigate. Hunter-gatherers were (and are) well capable of living together in bigger groups, and of shifting from one mode of social organization to another, depending on the seasons or a number of other factors. In this regard, Graeber and Wengrow are correct.

But, again, this does not mean that the examples of contemporary hunter-gatherers have absolutely *nothing* to add to the discussion about prehistoric social organization. Of course there have always been people inhabiting steep mountains, bleak deserts and deep forests. Of course there have always been some cultures that organized themselves into smaller bands than others, and some that were more mobile than others. And, of course, both distinctions make it exceedingly difficult for anything other than egalitarianism to establish itself as the main mode of social organization in those circumstances, as we will see below (see **Prehistoric life *was* egalitarian)**.

Prehistoric life was egalitarian

Graeber and Wengrow assert in the first Chapter that "it is clear now that human societies before the advent of farming were not confined to small, egalitarian bands", and explicitly declare that statements such as "human beings spent most of their evolutionary history living in groups of ten or twenty people" are "simply not true".

> "On the contrary, the world of hunter-gatherers as it existed before the coming of agriculture was one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms, far more than it does the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory. [Ch.1]"

It must be emphasized here that by "humans" they mean *homo sapiens*, not any other of the many species of humans we evolved from and/or coexisted with. If they were to include all other human species, any such claim would be utterly indefensible. But even considering only our own species, it seems far-fetched to say that overall we probably never lived in small band societies because there are a few instances for which we have evidence of occasional larger gatherings, dating back to no further than 40,000 years ago (our own species is around 300,000 years old). There were a few "grand burials" during the following millennia, but who knows how the people lived in between burials?

Prehistoric humans probably always met other bands, but there is no reason to believe that large congregations like the ones at the Mammoth Houses 25,000 years ago were a *regular* feature over the entire 300,000-year existence of our species. Population

density and climate fluctuations indicate that *for most of the time* our ancestors were better off in relatively small, mobile groups. And, as anarcho-primitivism correctly deduces, small, mobile groups are inherently egalitarian, since anyone arrogating too much power and authority will soon find himself (yes, it's usually a '*him*') exiled or abandoned by the band — everybody possesses all the skills needed to survive, and nobody depends on a single member for survival. Furthermore, all contemporary small-band societies have sophisticated social mechanisms to shame or ridicule any member of the band who becomes too full of himself into submission to the greater good (such as "insulting the meat" among the !Kung). It's difficult to force people to follow your orders if they don't depend on you and can just walk away if you threaten them. That is not to say that humans never experimented with different modes of social organization, or got together to hunt big animals and party together, but this also doesn't mean that, by and large, it is wrong to say that humans evolved living in small, egalitarian bands. *We did.*

I feel compelled to point out that I am not defending the nonsensical and oversimplified theory of "stages of social evolution" that Graeber and Wengrow rightly dismantle — they are right to point out that the reality of social organization in the Pleistocene most likely involved more fluid and nonstandard arrangements, and that any narrative that seeks to simplify this is inherently flawed. There are occasional instances that show us that prehistoric humans indeed had the ability to enter different social arrangements and shift back and forth between modes of social organization, some more egalitarian and some less so. The "grand burials" from around 34,000 years ago, the "Mammoth Houses" at Yudinovo, Mezhirich and Kostenki in modern-day Russia from roughly 25,000 years ago, and Göbekli Tepe from 11,000 years ago all attest to this.

Nonetheless, Graeber and Wengrow concede that:

> "Evidence of institutional inequality in Ice Age societies, whether grand burials or monumental buildings, is sporadic. Richly costumed burials appear *centuries, and often hundreds of miles, apart.* Even if we put this down to the patchiness of the evidence, we still have to ask *why the evidence is so patchy* in the first place: after all, if any of these Ice Age 'princes' had behaved like, say, Bronze Age (let alone Renaissance Italian) princes, we'd also be finding all the *usual trappings of centralized power: fortifications, storehouses, palaces.*
>
> Instead, over tens of thousands of years, we see monuments and magnificent burials, but *little else to indicate the growth of ranked societies*, let alone anything remotely resembling 'states'. [Emphasis mine, Ch.3]"

They hereby make it very clear that none of this should be misinterpreted as evidence for some inherency of hierarchy among early humans, or even early signs for "civilization". (Side note: here they openly agree that there was a time when there

clearly weren't any states, despite claiming later on that the state has "no origin" — expanded upon below — see **On early states**)

But saying that humans *never* lived exclusively in small egalitarian bands because *occasionally* they got together in larger groups and then admitting that "evidence of inequality is sporadic" and "patchy", and there is "little [...] to indicate the growth of ranked societies" is exactly the kind of game (call it "Proclaim and Backpedal") Graeber and Wengrow play repeatedly throughout the book.

The underlying point in this particular example is one of the important takeaways of *The Dawn of Everything*: not to show that prehistoric life was hierarchical rather than egalitarian *per se*, but merely to show beyond doubt that nothing was black and white, but that there were always exceptions to the rule, always variability and fluctuation — metaphorically, things were more like Yin and Yang and less like the Quarter Moon. History never unfolds along a linear path.

The last thing I want to do is belittle this particular endeavor — it is of crucial importance that we all understand that history is decidedly non-linear, and that the world doesn't consist of diametrically opposed binaries, of good-vs-evil or egalitarian-vs-hierarchical dualisms. The very concept of good and evil needs to be transcended if we want to gain a better understanding of human history.

In the words of the authors:

> "Essentially the question is: are humans innately good or innately evil? But if you think about it, the question, framed in these terms, makes very little sense. 'Good' and 'evil' are purely human concepts. It would never occur to anyone to argue about whether a fish, or a tree, were good or evil, because 'good' and 'evil' are concepts humans made up in order to compare ourselves with one another. It follows that arguing about whether humans are fundamentally good or evil makes about as much sense as arguing about whether humans are fundamentally fat or thin. [Ch.1]"

Despite those crucial insights, the reasoning applied by the authors to support said insights is often sketchy, the formulation at times sloppy, and — considering the wider implications for human societies and their self-perception in the particular example above and a few others below — their claims are sometimes outright dangerous. One of the dangers is that many readers of this book will take some of the main arguments presented by Graeber and Wengrow for granted, partly for lack of other references, but not least because they *seem* to confirm many of the ingrained biases of the dominant culture (although the authors never *explicitly* put it like that): namely, that the "Stone Age" was a horrible time to be alive compared to later times, agriculture was an important and enabling development for humanity, hierarchies are a somewhat natural part of all human societies, cities are a reasonable and, in fact, a *great* way for humans to live, and that all that's needed to make city life perfect are a number of small adjustments as to who calls the shots.

Arguments of this sort are commonplace in any political or social discourse today, and *The Dawn of Everything* does little to dispel those notions. On the contrary, it often feeds into the narrative that humans are inherently hierarchical, *can* adapt to city life, and that city life *can* be sustainable, if we just wish it to be (a claim that I will examine in greater detail below — see **(Bad) Excuses for Urbanism**).

I confidently predict that even more people will now start reasoning that there is nothing inherently wrong with practicing agriculture, and with building cities and civilizations, since there were a handful (!) of examples that didn't *initially* create runaway inequality — and those who already made arguments of that sort before will now have another source to buttress their misconceptions with.

The same holds true for some of the claims Graeber and Wengrow make about human life in the Pleistocene: although they make it clear that they don't consider prehistoric life to be characterized by a Hobbesian war of all against all, the fact that they claim that life in the Stone Age *wasn't* based on strictly egalitarian values will surely inspire some folks to cherry-pick statements like this to mean that humans were probably Hobbesian all along, and that anyone who says otherwise perpetuates the Myth of the Noble Savage (a myth that, we have to remember, gets debunked in its entirety by the authors themselves). There is no shortage of passages from the book that can (and will) be used to support arguments that claim the exact opposite of what the authors actually meant. Of course this is true of a great many books like this (and it's not the authors' fault if people misinterpret their statements, although they could have been more mindful while formulating certain obviously controversial or provocative statements), but we already see this happening with exaggerated and baseless claims that "Civilization is older than we thought" (an article that utterly fails to even correctly define what a civilization is), which is built on some of the examples expanded upon in *The Dawn of Everything*.

Another crucial argument Graeber and Wengrow make that directly plays into the hands of the dominant culture's propaganda is claiming that there is nothing inherently wrong with agriculture, and that you can have agriculture with no strings attached (see **Subsistence mode *does* matter**).

The (long) transition to farming

Another very enlightening aspect of the book are the detailed descriptions of the origins of agriculture and the slow transition from foraging to farming, closely trailing James C. Scott's argumentation (as laid out in *Against the Grain* [2017], and therefore not as "groundbreaking" as early reviews alleged). This is a question I have heard people ask countless times: why on Earth did people even start farming if foraging was such a successful lifestyle? The answer is, they didn't. At least not right away. They *experimented*, over several thousand years (!!!), with plant cultivation, and the shift happened so gradually (and often in nonlinear fashion) that nobody would have

ever been alarmed by how the diet started to consist more and more of domesticated grains and less and less of wild foods. Farming started, as Graeber and Wengrow point out, as a side hustle to foraging (they call it "play farming"), and might have even been motivated by material needs rather than sustenance in some places — straw, a byproduct of grain agriculture, is a versatile commodity with multiple applications:

> "Today we consider straw a by-product of cereal-farming, the primary purpose being to produce food. But archaeological evidence suggests things started the other way round. Human populations in the Middle East began settling in permanent villages long before cereals became a major component of their diets. In doing so, they found new uses for the stalks of wild grasses; these included fuel for lighting fires, and the temper that transformed mud and clay from so much friable matter into a vital tectonic resource, used to build houses, ovens, storage bins and other fixed structures. Straw could also be used to make baskets, clothing, matting and thatch. As people intensified the harvesting of wild grasses for straw (either by sickle or simply uprooting), they also produced one of the key conditions for some of these grasses to lose their natural mechanisms of seed dispersal. [Ch.6]"

Furthermore, the earliest form of larger-scale crop cultivation was often "flood-retreat farming", a method so easy it is sure to make every gardener jealous. Rivers deposit nutrient-rich silt along their banks during their annual flooding, and all that's left to do for people once the water retreats is to stick a few seeds in the soft, wet sediment and wait. People started those experiments along the large rivers (and especially around their deltas) that the stable climate of the Holocene allowed to form (caused by more predictable flood regimes of major rivers together with the stabilization of global sea levels, starting around 7,000 years ago), and those river deltas were (more often than not) the cradle of large settlements that would become cities and sometimes civilizations. The unique ecological configuration of river deltas and floodplains adjacent to major rivers, as well as the sheer abundance of different foods and materials available, both wild and domesticated, and the possibility of unobstructed travel and trade along rivers, made it possible for humans to permanently settle in densities previously unimaginable (this was also the reason why those were the first places where there weren't any hunter-gatherers anymore, see **Social organization "before agriculture"**).

Agriculture would have never been possible on that scale if it wasn't for the unusually stable climate of that period and the unique ecological configuration of a handful of places said climate created. There is no civilization without agriculture, and there is no agriculture without a stable climate — two facts that the authors unfortunately never express as clearly as they should have. Human societies are always products of their environment. There were indeed settlements of sedentary foragers in the Pacific

Northwest and in what is now Florida that might be considered "kingdoms" or even "empires", but the Kwakiutl and the Calusa are, again, exceptions to the rule (and not the rule of the exception). Both of those societies wouldn't have been possible without the same stable climate that allowed agriculture, and it is highly questionable if they would have remained foragers in the long term (see **Subsistence mode *does* matter**).

As pointed out above, another crucial factor to consider is the immense amount of time it took for people to become fully dependent on agriculture. This dispels any notion of an "Agricultural *Revolution*", as Graeber and Wengrow succinctly make clear. This is well-known among primitivists, and I personally don't know anyone who still believes that one sunny day ten millennia ago some primitive genius suddenly figured out that plants grow if you bury their seeds, and consequently all people happily started planting all their food.

> "It will by now be increasingly obvious to any reader that almost nothing about this established narrative matches the available evidence. In the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, long regarded as the cradle of the 'Agricultural Revolution', there was in fact no 'switch' from Palaeolithic forager to Neolithic farmer. The transition from living mainly on wild resources to a life based on food production took something in the order of 3,000 years. [Ch.6]"

I disagree with the authors that this 20th-century myth is still part of the "established narrative", but I endorse their effort to put the final nail into the coffin of the "Agricultural Revolution" fairy tale. Every human being that ever lived understood that plants grow from seed — it's just that people didn't see why they would have to bother planting large quantities of seed before the climate became stable enough to ensure a predictable harvest over many seasons. People probably *always* planted *some* seeds, one way or another. The abnormally high density of fruit trees throughout the Amazon rainforest attests to this. Moreover, the distinction between horticulture (from Latin *hortus*, 'garden') and agriculture (from Latin *ager*, 'field') is important to consider. It's a difference of scale, and while there is no shortage of forager societies that practice some form of *horti*-culture (e.g. planting small gardens of manioc, plantain and medicinal herbs), none of their gardens are big enough for anyone to consider them a "field". The big novelty during the long transition from foraging to farming was that people slowly started planting more and more crops, until the vast majority of their food came from cultivation — and during this lengthy period of experimentation with subsistence, naturally there were different experiments with the social organization of the permanent settlements it allowed as well.

This is where the "standard narrative" explains the shift from egalitarian to hierarchical cultures happened. And, matter-of-factly, on one hand we have a colorful mishmash of *mostly* egalitarian cultures before agriculture, and on the other hand we

have a handful of brutally hierarchical, grotesquely unequal, agricultural civilizations. Nevertheless, Graeber and Wengrow explain that

> "Agriculture [...] did not mean the inception of private property, nor did it mark an irreversible step towards inequality. In fact, *many* of the *first* farming communities were *relatively* free of ranks and hierarchies. And far from setting class differences in stone, a surprising number of the world's *earliest* cities were organized on robustly egalitarian lines, with no need for authoritarian rulers, ambitious warrior-politicians, or even bossy administrators. [Emphasis mine, Ch.1]"

Yes, the shift didn't happen instantaneously, but the fact that agriculture didn't *immediately* lead to civilization doesn't mean it *never will*. It will, eventually. The authors themselves admit as much five chapters later, when they conclude that "while agriculture allowed for the *possibility* of more unequal concentrations of wealth, in most cases this only began to happen millennia after its inception. [Ch.6]"

Proclaim and Backpedal. Agriculture didn't mark an irreversible step towards inequality, except in the cases where it did. In some cases this happened immediately, "in most cases" it happened later. But it happened.

"Clearly," they continue the paragraph from chapter 1 quoted above, "it no longer makes any sense to use phrases like 'the Agricultural Revolution' when dealing with processes of such inordinate length and complexity." Definitely, I agree. "And since there was no Eden-like state from which the first farmers could take their first steps on the road to inequality, it makes even less sense to talk about agriculture as marking the origins of social rank, inequality or private property."

Wait, what? Yes, there never was an "Eden-like state" to begin with, but no sane person (and definitely no primitivist) ever said so. There was, however, a time when hierarchies and inequality were decidedly *less* pronounced than they were a few millennia of agricultural life later. "Agriculture allowed for the *possibility* of more unequal concentrations of wealth", the authors admit as much. So why do they start their book by claiming that "it makes [no] sense to talk about agriculture as marking the origin of [...] inequality"?

It certainly seems that the authors want to avoid a critique of agriculture at all costs, an avoidance which of course suits their underlying agenda well (see **Conclusion** for a full disclosure of their agenda, and **Subsistence mode *does* matter** for a discussion of the implications of agriculture).

This is partly because any serious symposium on agriculture itself will surely lead to the realization that grain agriculture always means sowing seeds of inequality, social stratification and warfare, whether this manifests itself immediately or a few centuries down the road. James C. Scott makes this exact point throughout several of his books; hell, even *Jared Diamond* was onto something when he called agriculture (*not* horticulture!) "the worst mistake in the history of the human race", but Graeber and Wengrow seem to willfully ignore it.

Subsistence mode does matter

The Dawn of Everything argues that any obsessive focus on different subsistence modes is a direct result of erroneous theories of social evolution, assertions of the superiority of "Western civilization", and a response to the Indigenous Critique of European society that allows Europeans to save face by saying that any downsides of "civilized life" are a regrettable but inevitable byproduct of "social complexity" and a "higher standard of living" in agricultural societies like their own. In their words:

> "In the mid to late eighteenth century, [...] European philosophers first came up with the idea of ranking human societies according to their means of subsistence, and therefore [concluded] that hunter-gatherers should be treated as a distinct variety of human being. [Ch.4]"

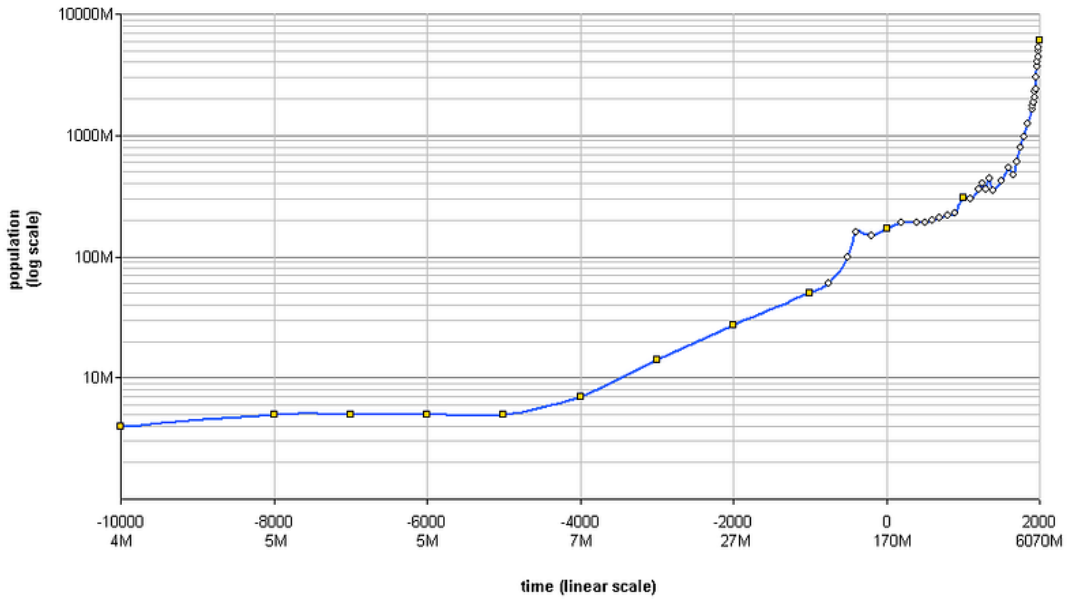
As usual, there is some truth to the authors' argument, but this doesn't mean subsistence mode is a distinction that doesn't matter. It does, very much so actually. With a different subsistence mode, you almost automatically have a different perception of your environment and how you relate to said environment. Again, this is not a black-and-white issue of farmers abusing their environment as an inert resource to be exploited and hunter-gatherers 'living in harmony' with theirs, but it simply means that there are extremes on both sides and a broad greyish zone in the middle.

What they fail to fully acknowledge (as hinted at in the last paragraphs) is the fact that agriculture and civilizations (and even virtually all cities) are two sides of the same coin. There is no civilization without agriculture, and foraging alone can't possibly sustain large settlements over prolonged periods of time — natural "resources", first and foremost food, *will be exhausted eventually*, at which point you either disperse, or start producing your food yourself through practicing agriculture.

Yes, there were a few small settlements (or congregations thereof) — some of which might be called "kingdoms" or even "empires" — that didn't rely *directly* on agriculture (although, in case of the Calusa cited by Graeber and Wengrow, they most likely received considerable tribute from agricultural settlements, a fact that the authors consciously belittle), but those "forager kingdoms" were located in unusually rich environments with abundant wild food sources, and it would be highly questionable if they would have existed in this form (in other words, *without* cultivating any additional food) a few centuries or millennia later. If the population grows steadily and a stable climate makes cultivation not only possible but, under the right circumstances, quite rewarding, it is more than likely that the Kwakiutl and the Calusa would have, at one point or another, started farming — schismogenesis notwithstanding. If they would have stubbornly resisted this development, things would have looked bleak in the long run — if they wouldn't have been exterminated by Europeans and the diseases they brought, they would have eventually lost the battle against their own agricultural neighbors eyeing up their highly productive habitat for their inevitable future expansion. That's a lot of ifs, I know, but history relentlessly shows that this is usually

the fate reserved for those who dare to resist adopting agriculture (or making way for farmers).

This doesn't imply that history progresses along a linear path and that foraging *has* to be followed by farming in all cases, it just serves to point out an obvious tendency along an admittedly strongly fluctuating trail towards agriculture's dominance over the entire planet. Agriculture is, unlike hunting and gathering (and other subsistence modes), inherently expansionist and extractionist, as is evident by the state of today's world. Furthermore, agriculture easily becomes a self-perpetuating mode of subsistence without alternative — a trap, you might even say — through the inherent environmental degradation that comes with clearing and tilling fields, and the conversion of diverse ecosystems (feeding a diverse array of species) to feed exclusively humans. As with every other species, an increase in food availability unfailingly leads to an increase in population. Agricultural surpluses (concomitant with the expansion of land under cultivation and hence agricultural output) thus lead to a steep increase in population, which in turn necessitates further increases in harvests to keep surpluses growing at the same rate as the population: a positive feedback loop leading to an ever-sharper increase in population *and* of the area under cultivation.



Logarithmic (!) graph of human population growth since the first experiments with farming. We all know how the graph on a *linear* scale looks like.

Due to this expansionist Nature of agriculture, an ever-larger area is degraded and the natural carrying capacity of the land is reduced, so that when a harvest fails there

are no wild foods to fall back on — the only way to achieve some kind of food security is to till and plant *more*. And while the soil might still be fertile in the beginning, this initial fertility is reduced with every season of weathering and erosion (leading over time to diminishing returns on energy invested), which increases the amount of work needed to keep the fields productive (either through applying manure or through further expanding the area under cultivation). The capacity of the soil to hold water is slowly reduced as well, which in turn necessitates irrigation after a while — yet more work. True, all this does not apply to flood-retreat farming of river deltas, but those few areas where farming is initially fairly easy can only feed so much people.

Agriculture begets more agriculture. *Subsistence mode matters.*

Agriculture and civilization are, generally speaking, concomitant and complementary. Agriculture might not always lead *directly* to civilization, but it is safe to say that it does so eventually, one way or another. Only this peculiar subsistence mode allows for vast surpluses, and those surpluses fuel both population growth and specialization, starting a positive feedback loop that ends eventually right where we find ourselves today.

In summary, there is no civilization without agriculture, and, we always have to remember, there is no agriculture without a stable climate.

This fact is particularly important to consider when we talk about the future of Global Civilization (which thoroughly and inescapably depends on grain agriculture), since the relatively stable climate of the Holocene is now officially over — thanks, in large part, to *agriculture*, which started us down the road of deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, and habitat destruction (all directly causing or exacerbating climate change) and allowed for specialization (and hence runaway technological progress), which in turn eventually led to industry (the main driver of climate change historically and — especially — today). Industry of any kind is absolutely and utterly impossible without agricultural surplus feeding the masses of workers that don't contribute to providing sustenance. Although it seems to us today that agriculture is the best, most efficient, and practically the *only* way to feed humanity, as a subsistence mode it is a highly unstable and, ultimately, self-eliminating evolutionary strategy. When talking about the future of humanity it is of utmost importance to remember that agriculture's (and thus civilization's) days are numbered — we'll get back to that later (see **(Bad) Excuses for Urbanism**).

Graeber and Wengrow vehemently reject the notion that agriculture inevitably leads to large cities and, if practiced uninterrupted for long enough, the rise of civilizations and thus inequality and strict hierarchies — a connection whose incontestability we've firmly established in the above.

The authors themselves argue as much in establishing what they call the "fundamental, [...] primary forms of freedom: the freedom to move; the freedom to disobey orders; the freedom to reorganize social relations." This concept is absolutely correct and I completely agree with it, but we ought not forget that you inevitably limit your first and most important freedom, the freedom to move, when you settle down and plant

crops. You now have something you can lose, something that can be stolen, destroyed or appropriated, and hence something worth defending and, more importantly, something worth suffering for. You're likely to suffer all sorts of injustices for the alleged 'privilege' of working 'your' land. Again, this is not something that happens from one day to the next — yet at a certain point down the road you will find yourself trapped, and by then it's too late to do anything about it.

The only way out of this trap is to abandon everything you've built, which is the absolute last resort and is usually only observed once the inexorable collapse of a society is already in motion (as was the case with the Maya, Teotihuacan, Cahokia and other Mississippian settlements, the Indus Valley Civilization and the Ukrainian mega-sites, all examples expanded upon in *The Dawn of Everything*). Only when there is no other way out, for instance when inequality becomes unbearable, do peasants reclaim this first basic freedom. As a consequence, they have to abandon decades and generations worth of labor and utterly doom their endeavor of building ever larger settlements and their own (slim) chances of ascending within the hierarchy — but at the same time they balance out inequalities and level out hierarchies.

My point here is, if you limit your first basic freedom you automatically create the optimal breeding ground for inequality and hierarchical social organizations. If you haven't invested years of work into building a permanent house and clearing, tilling, and sowing fields, you won't put up with any injustice like taxation or conscription and you won't abide and obey every obscure self-seeking goon, but you would simply walk away. In an agricultural society this is much less of an option because of the cumulative investment of labor, time, and effort.

Yet Graeber and Wengrow want us to believe that it makes no sense to talk about agriculture (and hence cities and civilizations) as marking the origin of inequality.

This is a major constituent of one of their main arguments, namely that humans can *decide* which way they live, irrespective of the influence and limitations that the environments they inhabit and the subsistence mode their environment allows them to practice exert on them. The authors vehemently deny that humans are subject to external forces beyond our control, but argue that by sheer force of will we can create whatever societies we want. The conclusion the reader should draw is that, although today's civilization is drowning in problems, we can just *decide* to do things different and simply abolish inequality and have all the conveniences of modern life without the unaesthetic side effects it causes. Admittedly, they never say this explicitly, but this is the message the average reader gets from their line of reasoning.

But, as I've said before, *human societies are products of their environment.*

Graeber and Wengrow, seemingly disconnected from the ecosystem they inhabit, explicitly state the opposite:

> "In fact, the ultimate causes of slavery didn't lie in environmental or demographic conditions, but in [Pacific] Northwest Coast concepts of the proper ordering of society; and these, in turn, were the result of political jockeying

> by different sectors of the population who, as everywhere, had somewhat different perspectives on what a proper society should be. [Ch.5]"

The authors dismiss solid and conclusive arguments based on behavioral ecology, according to which different staple foods can directly result in different social organizations ('fish versus acorns' is the example cited by Graeber and Wengrow), out of hand, and instead claim that the social organization of slave-holding, strictly hierarchical PNW cultures like the Kwakiutl was exclusively a product of their own subjective conception of how society should look like. Objectively, this looks like a chicken-or-egg sort of argument: what caused those cultures to create hierarchies, their environment and subsistence mode, or their own preference for hierarchies? Who's to say that their own preferences did not arise from said environmental conditions, and who in turn says that those environmental conditions were not endorsed because of their inclination to build hierarchical societies? Where does it start?

As so often with such dilemmas, the rational thing to do is to acknowledge that both factors were at play and resulted in a positive feedback loop that caused the Kwakiutl to become as hierarchical as they were. Dismissing environmental conditions and *especially subsistence mode*, as Graeber and Wengrow do, can only ever tell half of the story. Remember, one of the main arguments of their book is that humans can consciously decide what social arrangements to create, but it is at least as true (especially for any culture prior to agriculture's homogenization of entire landscapes, and most definitely all cultures to some extend before Globalization) that human cultures are a product of their environment and the subsistence mode it allows.

There are considerable cognitive and cultural differences as well, which is something Graeber and Wengrow can only easily overlook because they don't seem to have any direct experience with different modes of subsistence modes and their concomitant implications. There is, for instance, a profound difference in the way you see your environment and relate to it depending on your subsistence mode: as agriculturalist, you are 'the manager and master of the land' and 'the creator of food' who imposes 'order on chaos', whereas, as a forager, you are a mere inhabitant and (at most) steward or guardian of the land, who obtains a continuous series of gifts from it (in form of food and materials) and from the other living beings you share said habitat with. Needless to say, the perception of self and environment couldn't be more different. Again, I have to make clear that this is not a black-or-white issue, and there is a vast middle ground between the two extremes. Yet during the Paleolithic we have predominantly one extreme, and after the Neolithic we witness an increasing occurrence of the other one. Practicing agriculture certainly allows for the former point of view, while foraging strongly discourages it.

Cultivating and especially harvesting grain is a process that easily lends itself to seeing the plants that feed you as lifeless stocks of resources and the food as a homogeneous mass of inert material, since the dense rows of uniform stalks indicate consistency — whereas the harvesting of root crops (like indigenous Amazonian horticulturalists

do) means dealing with every single plant as an individual living being, and the end product consists of diverse and unique tubers, hence indicating individuality of the plants in question. The first depreciates plants and elevates the human, the second encourages seeing each plant as specific individual with whom one has personal interactions. Such differences, subtle as they may seem, can have profound consequences on one's worldview and relationship to one's environment — especially over the course of many generations.

Grain agriculture in particular is a subsistence mode that easily allows for a peculiar social organization: a state. James C. Scott has argued extensively that the social configuration we now know as 'the state' would have been utterly impossible without grains as a staple food. This is why all early civilizations and empires relied on one kind of grain or another, and why people who subsisted on the cultivation of tubers or tree crops were never able to build lasting large-scale societies. Only grains are easily assessed before harvest, easily stored for long periods, easily weighted and divided, and easily transported over longer distances. As a ruler, you can send the tax collector to survey the fields of your subjects and estimate both the amount they will harvest and when that harvest will happen (which is very difficult with crops that grow underground and can therefore also easily be hidden), collect an exact amount of tax in the form of grain right after the harvest (measurements are possible down to the smallest units, which is rather difficult with bulkier crops such as manioc), transport that grain to the capital and store it for prolonged periods of time (which is extremely difficult with other, more perishable crops like breadfruit), and use and distribute it as necessary. Grains are optimal for bureaucracies and record-keeping, and therefore make said systems possible. It follows that subsistence mode indeed dictates social organization to an extend that should not be underestimated. Yes, "cereal agriculture did not *cause* the rise of extractive states [Emphasis mine]", as the authors point out, but the extractive state is virtually impossible without it.

> "Like money, grain allows a certain form of terrifying equivalence. Whatever the reasons why it initially became a predominant crop in a given region [...], once this happened a permanent kingdom could always emerge. However, Scott also points out that for much of history this process turned out to be a trap for these newfound 'grain states' as well, limiting them to areas that favoured intensive agriculture, and leaving surrounding highlands, fenlands and marshes largely beyond their reach. What's more, even within those confines the grain-based kingdoms were fragile, always prone to collapse under the weight of over-population, ecological devastation and the kind of endemic diseases that always seemed to result when too many humans, domesticated animals and parasites accumulated in one place. [Ch.11]"

But all this leaves us with the question: what exactly is a state, and where (if not in cereal agriculture) lays its origin?

On early states

So, what is a state? There are no simple answers to this question. Graeber and Wengrow rightly point out that there are a number of difficulties with defining what (and what not) characterizes a 'state', considering that there have been societies that fit certain aspects traditionally considered hallmarks of statehood, but that no scholar would define as a state.

Yet we are sure that on both sides of the vast gray area that comprises the millennia when certain cultures first settled down and started growing all their food we have non-state people on one side, and a state on the other. Concluding, like the authors do, that the first states simply had "no origin" (the title of Chapter 10: *Why the State Has No Origin*) and that the real questions we should be asking are of another type entirely is erroneous, and dismisses the ideas of a number of brilliant scholars (such as Pierre Clastres, James C. Scott, and Fredy Perlman) summarily and without tribute to their contribution in making the subject more comprehensible.

To be fair, Graeber and Wengrow are definitely onto something with their concept of the three forms of domination — a concept that, while not necessarily replacing the quest for the origin of the state, definitely aids in locating it.

> "We would like to suggest that these three principles — call them control of violence, control of information, and individual charisma — are also the three possible bases of social power. The threat of violence tends to be the most dependable, which is why it has become the basis for uniform systems of law everywhere; charisma tends to be the most ephemeral. Usually, all three coexist to some degree. Even in societies where interpersonal violence is rare, one may well find hierarchies based on knowledge. [Ch.10]"

Mostly though, the authors seem to be playing word games throughout the chapter. This is obvious in statements like the following:

> "In other words, if these were 'states' in any sense at all, then they are probably best defined as seasonal versions of what Clifford Geertz once called 'theatre states', where organized power was realized only periodically, in grand but fleeting spectacles. Anything we might consider 'statecraft', from diplomacy to the stockpiling of resources, existed in order to facilitate the rituals, rather than the other way round. [Ch.10]"

When is a state a state? Yes, early states were not exactly the same as modern states — obviously — but we are not looking for the point at which an early facsimile of a modern nation state first arose, but for basic principles that point us to the *origin* of the state, which is basically exactly what the above quote entails, despite the authors claiming that the state has "no origin". Well, of course it has. It must have, otherwise it could not have come into existence. They go on to admit as much in the following, with refreshing honesty:

> "This chapter is not truly radical: *for the most part, we are telling the same old story*; but we are at least trying to see what happens when we drop the teleological habit of thought, which makes us scour the ancient world for embryonic versions of our modern nation states. We are considering, instead, the possibility that — when looking at those times and places usually taken to mark 'the birth of the state' — we may in fact be seeing how very different kinds of power crystallize, each with its own peculiar mix of violence, knowledge and charisma: our three elementary forms of domination. [Emphasis mine, Ch.10]"

...which amounts to pretty much something like, you guessed it, *the origins of the state*! Maybe the title of the chapter is a bit misleading then.

Luckily, Graeber and Wengrow themselves answer the question of where the origins of the state is found even more explicitly:

> "So do these 'early states' have any common features at all? Obviously, some basic generalizations can be made. All deployed spectacular violence at the pinnacle of the system; all ultimately depended on and to some degree mimicked the patriarchal organization of households. [Ch.10]"

Here we already have some general features that characterize an early state (no need for scare quotes, in my opinion), but the full answer comes two chapters later:

> "The state, as we know it today, results from a distinct combination of elements — sovereignty, bureaucracy and a competitive political field — which have entirely separate origins. [Ch.12]"

Sure, the three elementary forms of domination have separate origins — obviously — but it is their combination that marks the beginning of states. Again, it's not a black-or-white issue, but the more of the three elements you can detect, the more confident you can be with calling the society in question a state.

Proclaim and Backpedal. Hey, the state doesn't have an origin — look at our brand-new theory! Oh, well, turns out it has — this is where we think it is found.

But while this chapter is merely an annoying example for the at times desperate quest to initiate a 'paradigm shift', it is what they write about cities (not states) that really grinds my gears.

(Bad) Excuses for Urbanism

The Dawn of Everything teaches us about the social organization of a handful of massive cities, among them "mega-sites" like Nebelivka and Taljanky in Eastern Europe (that I had, I admit, never even heard of before!), Teotihuacan in Central America,

early Uruk in Mesapotamia, Mohenjo-daro in the Indus Valley and Taosi in what is now China — all of which appear to have been governed (for a certain period of time at least!) largely without the strict and uncompromising hierarchies that characterize all other or later city states and civilizations. Those, the authors say, are examples that show us that things are not preprogrammed to go sour once we settle down and start farming, that humans can have large-scale societies without injustice and inequality. But what happened to those cities in the long run? Let's look at the examples the authors provide:

The Ukrainian "mega-sites", which *do* show an extraordinary absence of inequality, were inhabited over a period of roughly 800 years, from 4100 to 3300 BCE, but were nevertheless abandoned in the middle of the fourth millennium BCE. Graeber and Wengrow admit, "we still don't know why. [Ch.8]"

The earliest Mesopotamian cities (founded in the fourth and early third millennium BCE) present no clear evidence for monarchy at all, as the authors rightly point out. The first evidence for monarchy appears around 2,900 BCE, with "evidence for local kings of rival city states battling it out for supremacy over Uruk [Ch.8]" — and half a millennium later, by 2,800 BCE, "monarchy starts popping up everywhere [Ibid.]". The utopian social arrangement lasted for about five centuries before hierarchies began to emerge.

Founded around 2,600 BCE, Mohenjo-daro on the Indus River was inhabited for about 700 years. The city shows no obvious signs of inequality, although, as the authors admit, a strictly hierarchical caste system might have been in place that would disqualify Mohenjo-daro as an example for an 'egalitarian' city. To be fair, the city had no army and no fortifications, and differences in *material* wealth were probably miniscule. Nonetheless, the city eventually collapsed and was abandoned, most likely due to climatic changes (!) in the monsoon pattern and concomitantly the flood regime of the major river system it was build alongside.

The massive city of Teotihuacan, one of the authors' favorite examples, was founded around 100 BCE. At its height, "even conservative estimates place its population at around 100,000 (perhaps as much as five times the likely population of Mohenjo-daro, Uruk or any of the other early Eurasian cities [...]) [Ch.9]". The authors explain:

> "In its early years [...] Teotihuacan had gone some way down the road to authoritarian rule, but then around AD 300 suddenly reversed course: possibly there was a revolution of sorts, followed by a more equal distribution of the city's resources and the establishment of a kind of 'collective governance'[Ch.9]"

The turnover they focus on started around 300 CE, when monumental building stopped and resources were redirected to public housing initiatives and a higher material standard of living for all inhabitants. Despite those laudable accomplishments, the city collapsed around 550 CE. Graeber and Wengrow explain:

> "Below the surface of civil society at Teotihuacan there must have been all sorts of social tensions simmering away among groups of radically different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who were constantly moving in and out [...].
>
> By around AD 550, the social fabric of the city had begun to come apart at the seams. There is no compelling evidence of foreign invasion. Things seems to have disintegrated from within. Almost as suddenly as it had once coalesced some five centuries previously, the city's population *dispersed again*, leaving their [capital city] behind them. [Emphasis mine, Ch.9]"

Similarly, the ancient city of Taosi (in what is now China), governed by strict hierarchies and with concomitant high levels of inequality, was turned upside down after a revolution around the year 2000 BCE. The following "[...] 'state of anarchy' (elsewhere described as 'collapse and chaos' [but actually just a time of self-governance without hierarchies and inequality]) lasted for a considerable period of time, between two and three centuries. [Ch.8]". The site was abandoned afterwards.

The authors then summarize:

> "So far we've been providing what are effectively a series of snapshot views of cities that, in most cases, were occupied for centuries. It seems unlikely that they did not have their own share of upheavals, transformations and constitutional crises. In some cases we can be certain they did. [...] Like the Ukrainian cities, those of the Indus were eventually abandoned entirely, to be replaced by societies of much smaller scale [...]. In Mesopotamian cities palaces eventually appear. [Ch.8]"

None of the 'egalitarian' cities Graeber and Wengrow sample existed more than a few centuries, and for some reason or another, if they didn't become governed by hierarchies, they were *ultimately all abandoned*. Does this really sound like a promising, hope-inspiring example for our modern time? Although it seems clear that egalitarian cities can exist for *some period of time*, in *favorable environments*, it is entirely unclear what this has to do with our current situation. We neither have favorable environments anymore, nor centuries worth of stable climate that would allow reliable agricultural harvests.

Why those settlements were abandoned seems like a big mystery to the authors (and probably most readers as well), yet this phenomenon is a fairly regular occurrence that James C. Scott describes repeatedly in his latest works: namely, if any such social organization doesn't work out for whatever reason, people tend to disperse, to flee said arrangement, and start a new life among 'barbarians' (non-state peoples) on the periphery of the empire or city-state in question (often with a radically different subsistence mode). This happened throughout all of history, with each early city or state we know of (even the ones that strictly penalized desertion).

Whatever happened in those cities, at one point most people collectively decided that they didn't like what they had created over the last few generations (a slow trickle of departures might have started much earlier), and their dislike for their new situation was strong enough for them to utterly abandon everything they had built. Ultimately, *none of the examples cited worked out.*

Graeber and Wengrow make it clear right at the beginning that theirs is "not a book about inequality, but about how we got stuck". They then continue to tell us at lenght about the rise of early cities, civilizations and empires, almost all *eventually* strictly hierarchical with immense levels of inequalities (if they weren't abandoned or experienced some other form of collapse subsequently), but focus only on those examples where levels of inequality were lower than average for some period of time.

This is supposed to show us beyond doubt that it might as well have been otherwise, and if history would have taken a few different turns, we would now all live in 'Communist Wonderland', a global civilization without inequality, oppression, slavery and warfare, but with social housing and free food for all, governed by popular assemblies that make decisions based on consent.

They affirm us nothing is set in stone when it comes to social organization of large settlements, and seem to suggest that large anarchist metropolises governed by said assemblies are a viable alternative to the system currently in place all over the world: a small number of elected leaders, highly structured bureaucracies backed up by executive forces that hold a monopoly on violence.

The book often seems like a frantic excuse for urbanism, as if the authors are unable (or at least *unwilling*) to see the inherent un-sustainability of this way of life (at least in the long term) and can't imagine abandoning cities and the urban lifestyle altogether — which is, as we've seen, what eventually happened with *all* the sampled cities they cite that *didn't* become hierarchies later on. None of their 'exemplary cities' lasted longer than a few centuries! Concerning this topic, it seems pretty much like it is *them* who "got stuck", unable to think beyond cities as a preferred mode of social organization (and hence agriculture as a subsistence mode) for humans.

Graeber and Wengrow casually mention the fact that "the Neolithic inhabitants of England appear to have taken the measure of cereal-farming and collectively decided that they preferred to live another way [Ch.3]", yet for the authors this doesn't seem to contain any lesson worth learning; and despite pointing out that *several* cultures willfully chose to abandon agriculture after some time (the Maya, Cahokia and other Mississippian settlements, the Indus Valley Civilization, the Ukrainian mega-sites, and the inhabitants of Neolithic Britain), *abandoning agriculture itself* is never even *considered* as a fact worth pondering as we try to figure out how we get out of the mess we collectively find ourselves in, how we free ourselves from being stuck with astronomic levels of inequality, hierarchies, warfare, and an economic system based on exploitation and destruction, and how we build a different social arrangement (that naturally necessitates a different subsistence mode!). Obviously, what worked for the Neolithic inhabitants of England won't work for all 67 million inhabitants of the UK — at least

not overnight! — but there are still a few things we can deduce, namely that slowly transitioning away from agriculture should at least be an option worth considering.

And while there might be some truth in making the case that *some forms* of agriculture do not necessarily *directly* have to lead to large, hierarchically governed settlements, the general trend is one that can't and shan't be ignored. The authors' findings explicitly show that with a subsistence mode that is *not* exclusively based on agriculture, you won't have the foundation for strict hierarchies or high levels of inequality (remember, "agriculture allowed for the possibility of more unequal concentrations of wealth"). *All* large agricultural societies *today* are hierarchically organized and have rigid class and status differences, and easy-peasy "play farming" is simply not an option anymore, not with the climate instability we're experiencing, and not even among the worlds' major river deltas (which have since been swallowed by urban sprawl and disappeared under concrete and asphalt) that once allowed for flood-retreat farming. Whatever way, large settlements will soon enough be a thing of the past.

The few extraordinarily abundant places teeming with (nonhuman) life where even a foraging lifestyle allowed for sedentism and high population densities (and hence, don't forget, surpluses large enough to enable hierarchies and inequality), such as the Pacific Northwest, have been altered beyond recognition — and not for the better. Salmon are virtually extinct in most major rivers (thanks to the construction of dams), and fish stocks around the coast are depleted almost everywhere. Same goes for the Florida Keys, where Nature will not provide anything close to the abundance once found there, not now nor anytime during the next few centuries (and, as previously pointed out, the "forager kingdom" of the Calusa would have been utterly impossible without tributes from nearby agricultural populations).

In today's world, it is not possible to 'just abandon' farming and switch to foraging. We've exhausted the living planet to the extend that it could support, at best, a few hundred million of us living as horticulturalists/pastoralists/hunters/gatherers/fisher(wo)men (or any combination thereof), and even that would require the widespread restoration of ecosystems through permacultural techniques and radical rewilding.

Yes, we got stuck, but we got stuck as much with cities and civilizations (and, concomitantly, agriculture) as we got stuck with rigid hierarchies and soaring inequality. What percentage of the population is still allowed to subside off the land through foraging or pastoralism, and how many are forced to buy agricultural products? Their attempt to disconnect the former (cities) from the latter (hierarchies) says more about their own preferred way of life than it does about what history actually shows. The authors seem to be convinced that urbanism in and of itself is a terrific idea, so they look for historical precedents that can serve as an example to support their own idea of how a city should work and look like. This 'civilization bias' (see **Conclusion**) is a common theme of the dominant culture, and even some of its best thinkers and most cherished philosophers are utterly unable to look beyond it. Civilization is always the baseline reality, the one variable that is always constant.

It is never the preferred subsistence modes of human cultures (or combinations thereof) that are shown as an alternative, but exclusively the social organization of some early cities that are cited as inspiring examples for contemporary human society.

The authors dwell extensively on the (very) few examples of cities where there is little or no evidence for hierarchical social orders, and inflate their importance. The "[...] 'exceptions' are fast beginning to outnumber the rules", they allege in Chapter 12, the *Conclusion*. Are they, though? How many examples for extremely unequal and hierarchical cities can we find throughout the last few millennia? Hundreds, maybe even thousands? And how many 'egalitarian' cities were there? Maybe a dozen?

How many 'egalitarian' civilizations? One, maybe two?

Graeber and Wengrow themselves admit, "overall, one might be forgiven for thinking that history was progressing uniformly in an authoritarian direction. *And in the very long run it was;* at least, by the time we have written histories, lords and kings and would-be world emperors have popped up almost everywhere [Emphasis mine, Ch.8]". This rather honest statement is almost immediately followed by a warning: "Still, rushing to this conclusion would be unwise."

Why? Do they actually say that history *doesn't* progress in an authoritarian direction? Have they looked out of the window lately?

Graeber and Wengrow hereby imply that it is as simple as making a choice to live in a city with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants that is *not* hierarchical in its organization. They make it seem like it is always a choice, and, if people want cities, or, in fact, entire *civilizations* based on values like freedom and egalitarianism, this is a realistic possibility.

This argument runs along the same lines as their argument about the subsistence modes of different forager cultures along the North American west coast, namely that humans are not influenced by the environment they inhabit, but are disconnected, self-conscious, rational actors that can decide every aspect of their lives for themselves, objectively and without any external influence. This (as I have shown in the paragraph about subsistence modes) is a profoundly erroneous belief, which I will elaborate on below (see **Conclusions**).

It is in this particular line of reasoning that it becomes most obvious what the authors' real agenda is: they want us to believe that even in a modern-day metropolis such as Tokyo, Bangkok, São Paulo or Bucharest, life doesn't necessarily have to be based on hierarchies and soaring inequality. If we just want to, we can smoothly switch to a less hierarchical mode of existence! Of course they are smart enough to never say it in those explicit terms, but that's pretty much what they imply in between the lines: it's all our choice!

In the beginning of Chapter 8, Graeber and Wengrow write the following:

> "It's common to assume — and is often stated as self-evident fact — that our social sensibilities, even our capacity to keep track of names and faces, are largely determined by the fact that we spent 95 per cent of our evo-

> lutionary history in tiny groups of at best a few dozen individuals. We're designed to work in small teams. As a result, large agglomerations of people are often treated as if they were by definition somewhat unnatural, and humans as psychologically ill equipped to handle life inside them. This is the reason, the argument often goes, that we require such elaborate 'scaffolding' to make larger communities work: such things as urban planners, social workers, tax auditors and police. [Ch.8]"

So far, so logical. They then try to disprove the cognitive concept of 'Dunbar's Number' by merely pointing out inconsistencies as to whether Dunbar was right about who exactly made up the innermost social circle of hunter-gatherers (kin or not), which doesn't matter the slightest bit to the validity of concept at large. While some of the details might be flawed, there is plenty of truth to the cognitive limit of meaningful personal relationship any human being can have. As they themselves point out a few pages later, even city-dwellers rarely build social groups in groups that exceed Dunbar's Number, and move about in rather small social circles. The concept in its entirety holds up against scrutiny, probably because, well, human beings *did* spend *most* of their evolutionary history living in small groups.

The paragraph quoted above continues as follows:

> If so, it would make perfect sense that the appearance of the first cities, the first truly large concentrations of people permanently settled in one place, would also correspond to the rise of states. For a long time, the archaeological evidence [...] did appear to confirm this. If you put enough people in one place, [...] they would almost inevitably develop writing or something like it, together with administrators, storage and redistribution facilities, workshops and overseers. Before long, they would also start dividing themselves into social classes. 'Civilization' came as a package. It meant misery and suffering for some (since some would inevitably be reduced to serfs, slaves or debt peons), but also allowed for the possibility of philosophy, art and the accumulation of scientific knowledge.
>
> The evidence no longer suggests anything of the sort [*sic!*]. In fact, much of what we have come to learn in the last forty or fifty years has thrown conventional wisdom into disarray. In some regions, we now know, cities governed themselves for centuries without any sign of the temples and palaces that would only emerge later; in others, temples and palaces never emerged at all. In many early cities, there is simply no evidence of either a class of administrators or any other sort of ruling stratum. In others, centralized power seems to appear and then disappear. It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any particular form of political organization, and never did. [Ch.8]"

Here we have it, crystal-clear: that's what the authors tried to tell us all along. There is nothing wrong with cities, folks, and by extension there is nothing wrong with civilization itself! It's all up to us, and what we make out of it!

Conclusion

> "Is it any wonder that in some circles [hello, fellow primitivists!] the very idea of 'civilization' has fallen into disrepute? Something very basic has gone wrong here. [Ch.10]"

Indeed, it has. Concluding their findings and musings in the final chapters, Graeber and Wengrow attempt to redefine "civilization" in exclusively positive terms, a proposition I have critiqued in great detail elsewhere, with non-factual statements that contradict all logical definitions of the term like the following:

> "One problem [*sic*] is that we've come to assume that 'civilization' refers, in origin, simply to the habit of living in cities. Cities, in turn, were thought to imply states. But as we've seen, that is not the case historically, or even etymologically. The word 'civilization' derives from Latin *civilis*, which actually refers to those qualities of political wisdom and mutual aid that permit societies to organize themselves through voluntary coalition. [Ch.10]"

Except it doesn't. *Civilis* derives from the Latin *civis*, meaning 'citizen' or 'inhabitant of a city' — from the same root that spawned the word *civitas*, 'city'. *Civilis* is merely the adjective form of *civis*, so it means something like 'city-dweller-esque' or 'having the attributes of a city-dweller'. That the Romans attributed only positive aspects to being a '*civis*' doesn't come as a surprise, given their hate of 'barbarians' and all other 'uncivilized' rabble outside the gates of their great cities. The term 'civilization' comes, etymologically *and* historically speaking, from the same word that means 'city'. We can't expect a language spoken by a people that prided themselves on being city-dwellers to have anything *but* positive meanings reserved for this term.

Graeber and Wengrow continue:

> "If mutual aid, social co-operation, civic activism, hospitality or simply caring for others are the kind of things that really go to make civilizations, then this true history of civilization is only just starting to be written.[Ch.10]"

No. Just, no. Don't attempt to give a positive meaning to the term 'civilization' *now*. That train has long since departed. Several millennia ago, to be precise. No, if we are not able to look *beyond* civilization, we will never figure out how to get out of this mess. As long as we can't do that, we're hopelessly stuck. What's needed is an approach much more radical than that of the authors. "How did we get stuck?", they

ask? Because of books like *The Dawn of Everything* and their faulty conclusions and false promises.

Their book can be considered "radical" only on a very, *very* superficial level, although many reviews made it sound like theirs might be the most radical book ever written on the subject ("THE RADICAL REVISION OF EVERYTHING", it screams from the cover) — a claim that will make every primitivist laugh out loud. The truly radical literature about the subject will surely never get serious coverage in the New York Times. No, Graeber and Wengrow actually *defend* the current system, and bend facts to suit their narrative of cities *not* being an inherently flawed way of life, civilizations *not* being inherently destructive towards the human spirit and the environment they are situated in, and globalization *not* being at odds with human mental capabilities. Graeber, who as an activist has only ever opposed *corporate* globalization, clearly belonged to the school of anarchism that believes you can have all (or at least most) modern comforts and luxuries without rigidly structured hierarchies and the concomitant tremendous inequality. Needless to say, this is the sort of pipe dream that makes any anarchist who's *not* also a primitivist seem like a dreamer chasing shadows. None of the techno-industrial infrastructure we take for granted today is possible without the current system of exploitation and destruction, both of the human and the environment. If this seems like an overstatement, try this: follow the gadget you're reading this text on all the way back to the hundreds of 'natural resources' it came from, calculate all the energy needed for each step from mining to sale, list all the chemicals needed to refine and process all materials and components needed for it (and where they come from and how they are being produced), assess the cumulative environmental impact of the last two points, and finally research the working conditions for all steps that involve the production of said gadget, from mining ores and minerals, over assembly, to retail; then repeat this process for each gadget and material you hold dear, and think hard if you'd have even half a phone if people wouldn't be forced to do certain jobs. The only way to have a truly anarchist society is a radical de-centralization, de-colonization, de-technologization and de-industrialization. A free, sustainable society of (relative) equals is only possible in low-tech, localized settlements of small to medium size, which draw on a diverse spectrum of subsistence modes *without* heavily relying on grain agriculture. Graeber and Wengrow utterly fail to understand this.

No amount of wishful thinking and no referring to historical examples of a handful of *relatively* equal cities from a few millennia ago will change that. Cities are a doomed concept, a relic of a past with a stable climate that allowed for reliable agricultural harvests. Furthermore, today's cities rely on so much more than just agricultural harvests: first and foremost electricity, and a dazzling array of different resources and materials. None of those can be obtained or produced without hierarchies and inequality, or without damaging the biosphere even more and thus exacerbating both Climate Breakdown and the Sixth Mass Extinction.

While *The Dawn of Everything* is supposed to end on a hopeful note, the real applicability of its main theses remains soberingly miniscule. Yes, small farming communities

can — environmental conditions permitted — in the right circumstances exist without hierarchies for some time, but who wants to trade their cosmopolitan big city life for the primitive existence of early low-tech communities with diversified subsistence strategies and no running water? (To be fair, *I* do, but that's beside the point.)

As should be clear from the last part (see **(Bad) Excuses for Urbanism**), I don't think agriculture has a future — not within the context of the wildly fluctuating climate we've helped creating. We can continue farming at least in *some* climates, for *some* time, but probably not all year round, and not exclusively. This is good news, though, because we can look to the examples that Graeber and Wengrow cite for other alternatives, *real* alternatives, that don't depend exclusively on agriculture as subsistence. This means decentralization, obviously, and a return to subsistence modes that arise from the land (instead of being imposed upon the land, like agriculture). But if anything, the examples of (semi-)sedentary forager or mixed-strategy societies in *The Dawn of Everything* show beyond doubt that there is nothing dull or boring about a (much) simpler life. You can still hold philosophical debates, and you can still discuss politics, and you can (unlike in today's 'democracies') actually be a part of the decision-making process. You can travel, you can trade, create art and make tools, furniture, jewelry, clothing — you name it. All this is possible *without agriculture.* All those different facets of life are intrinsically human, not luxuries that farming allowed for.

Only by realizing that humans are a part and a *product* of their environment do we have a chance to correct our mistakes and misbeliefs. There is a certain behavioral range in which we humans can decide certain details about our lifestyle and social organization independently, but this possible range of behaviors is neatly nestled in between ecological boundaries and limits that the land we inhabit imposes. All 'pre-agricultural' societies understood this, up until the point when people started cultivating more and more of their food and thus tried to see what happens if you push those boundaries wider and wider open. The human and the ecosystem she inhabits are one. This connection is the most primordial bond that ties every living being to each other. We were never separated, we never severed that bond, we just *thought* we did. Anthropocentrism (human supremacism), the idea that humans are not just different from other living beings but special, *exceptional*, created the illusion that the rules by which all other living beings live don't apply to us humans. This idea was conceived during the transition from foraging to farming, and was a direct result of people changing their relationship with the land. As it turned out, it is never up to us humans to push those boundaries. If we don't follow the rules, we *will* become extinct eventually — that is, if we don't realize the folly of our ways in time. We are now closer to extinction than probably ever before (apart from the population bottleneck possibly caused by the Toba eruption 70,000 years ago, maybe), so it should suffice to say that we absolutely have to get back in line.

Culture arises from Nature, and today's hideously alienated culture is the product of an environment that is entirely unnatural. No matter how hard we try to force a

social organization that doesn't arise from the land onto a given society, the experiment will end in abandonment and collapse. In the past, this might have taken a few centuries, but given the state of today's society, I'm less optimistic. Densely populated experimental settlements that attempt this might fall apart after mere years due to internal conflict and external pressures.

So when the authors say that "the ultimate question of human history [...] is not our equal access to material resources (land, calories, means of production) [and, I may add, all skills necessary for survival], much though these things are obviously important, but our equal capacity to contribute to decisions about how to live together [Ch.1]" they are right, in a way (the two aspects usually go hand in hand) — but they are also wrong. They've got it the wrong way round. If you have equal access to said material resources (and skills), 'egalitarianism' (or at least freedom from overly oppressive hierarchies, as well as from high levels of inequality) is part and parcel of life. From there on do we have a stable basis on which to decide how we want to live together.

Only then do you have the "basic forms of social liberty which [you] might actually put into practice: (1) the freedom to move away or relocate from [your] surroundings; (2) the freedom to ignore or disobey commands issued by others; and (3) the freedom to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones. [Ch.12]"

Only then is there hope for humanity.

David B Lauterwasser
A Primitivist Critique of 'The Dawn of Everything' — Book Review
[The Long Read] — — The recent book by Graeber and Wengrow is hailed as "groundbreaking" and "radical" by critics — but do those claims hold up against scrutiny?
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