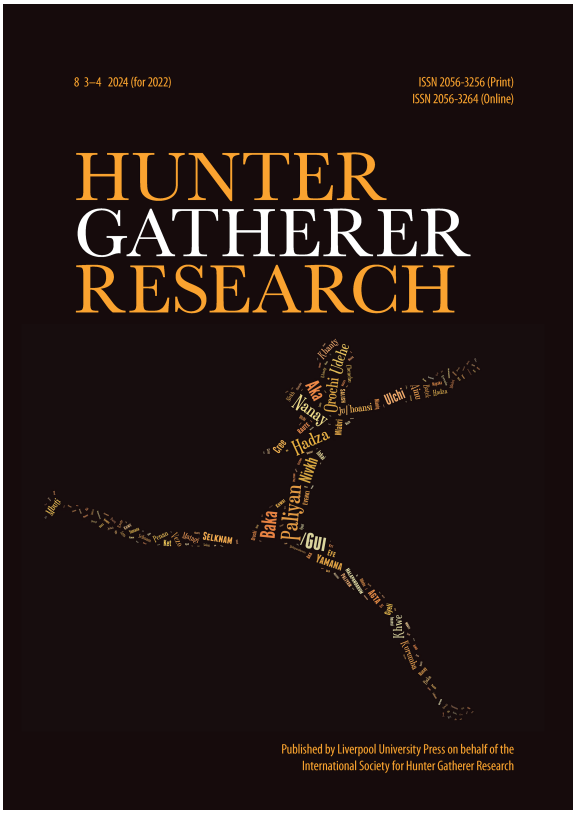
Special Issue on *The Dawn of Everything*

Various Authors



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These papers were collected from a session of the Conference of Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS13) in Dublin, 27 June–1 July 2022, focused on *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021). It was held not many months following its publication and less than two years after the tragic loss of David Graeber. By now we may be seeing a little more clearly where this book with its enticing vista of explorations in deeptime human history will settle.

David Graeber and David Wengrow's 'fun' project has had phenomenal success, topping nonfiction bestseller lists and being translated into over 30 languages. Fertile, creative, imaginative, the book is written in line with Graeber's usual principle – in a style engaging for his mum. Rambling and sprawling for almost 700 pages, there's something for everyone. Every reader, it seems, finds in it just what they seek, and each has their own opinion.

For anthropology and archaeology – disciplines usually represented by arcane texts impenetrable to outsiders – it's really refreshing. The big, old questions about what it means to be human, the wealth of possibilities, the stories we tell about how we got here are dusted off and put right back on the table again. This is big news because social anthropology has been ducking all discussion of human origins for the best part of a century now. To see these topics firmly ensconced in a social science framework is electric. That alone means this book, with all its fanfare, matters. It has carved out a space.

Yet, despite the title (referencing the anti-semitic historian of religion Mircea Eliade), the authors still evade origins except as a mythological concept: 'a vast canvas for the working out of our collective fantasies' (2021: 78). As Ian Watts (2024:235) argues, for Graeber and Wengrow, a 'single human "us" can only be inferred from ~30 ka'.

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The actual stretch of time when we became all-singing, all-dancing, language-speaking symbolic culture-bearing humans is abandoned as unknowable.

The contributions here are thoroughly interdisciplinary from social anthropology, evolutionary anthropology and archaeology as well as anarchist perspectives. Overall, responses range from highly positive to critical. Importantly, whether it is in praise or quite harsh critique (we'd better admit, one of us has written a review titled: 'Wrong about (almost) everything'!) each article has a distinct focus. This reflects the sheer range of material – cultures, time periods, continents – covered by this hugely ambitious book.

The Dawn of Everything begins with its 'indigenous critique', responsible for goading and stimulating the development of European political philosophy. Drawing on his long-term fieldwork with Hai//om people of northern Namibia, Thomas Widlok envisages an 'indigenous critique' of two key themes: oscillatory switches framed by seasonality, and 'schismogenesis', termed here 'doing seasons' and 'doing difference'. The three named seasons of the Hai//om cycle interweave continuities with discontinuities. In conversation, Hai//om people use expressive repetition to emphasise continuity and values of stability. They don't hanker for change or feel stability to be burdensome, which, Widlok hints, could be associated to 'progressive narratives' found in European and farming traditions. Doing seasons without 'unruly switching', their indigenous voice critiques the structuralist/dualist perspective of seasons underlying *The Dawn of Everything* 'coloured by agricultural folks in the high latitude zones' (Widlok 2024:312). Life histories collected from Hai//om seniors also provide the opposite of 'doing difference' – that is, 'undoing difference', when they describe living with !Xû neighbours as 'children of one woman' (2024:313).

Chris Knight uses another source of indigenous voice – Amerindian mythology – to interrogate Graeber and Wengrow's oscillatory model, addressing their key question about 'how did we get stuck?' A structuralist binary lies at the heart of these mythic discourses, beating to a lunar cyclical rhythm. Although Graeber and Wengrow pay little attention to indigenous myths, Knight discerns 'an uncanny fit' between their 'getting stuck' thesis and a motif central to myths from all over the world: a preoccupation with loss of periodicity and movement between worlds. This is taken to a high degree of elaboration in the Tucuna story 'The hunter Monmanéki and his wives' which opens *The Origin of Table Manners*, the third volume of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*. The animal wives move through an algebraic sequence of structural oppositions, more and more handicapped by the increasingly absurd demands of patrilocal marriage. The last wife literally flies apart, split into upper and lower halves. Knight views this story as an Amazonian voice explaining how we 'got stuck'.

Archaeologist Tanja Schreiber describes her personal experience of Graeber and Wengrow's book as empowering and emancipatory for her research. Their refusal to accept narratives of 'linear progression from simplicity to complexity' at once sweeps away the old evolutionist, stageist models that still haunt archaeology (Schreiber 2024:266). With a fascinating case study of Western Siberian foragers who built fortified settle-

ments over eight millenia, she is able to show long-term oscillatory changes between greater and lesser social inequality. Pushback and contestation over growing inequality may be seen in conscious manipulation of space within the settlements. As '"architects" of their own social arrangements' (2024:265), people of these Siberian communities fostered denser cohabitation, perhaps strengthening communal solidarity to resist inequalities.

Other contributors have queried the attitudes of Graeber and Wengrow to understanding egalitarian systems, which they tend to belittle and downplay, as well as their rather old-fashioned concepts of evolutionary theory. More recently, this has been expressed with extraordinary vehemence by David Wengrow (2023) as 'This idea must die: We used to be equal.' Unsurprisingly, hunter-gatherer fieldworkers with genuine (not romantic) experience of the sophisticated politics of egalitarian groups are left bewildered.

From an evolutionary perspective, Camilla Power roundly opposes the idea that just anything goes in our evolution as *Homo sapiens*. While Graeber and Wengrow say on their first page, regarding the period of our speciation, that 'we have next to no idea what was happening' (2021:1), we can be fairly confident about what *wasn't* happening. Our anatomy, psychology and cognition provide evidence for constraints. The evolution of our cooperative eyes, intersubjectivity, large brains, a ratchet effect of cultural accumulation and language itself required stable, protracted periods in sociopolitical contexts of significant egalitarianism. Power understands gender relations to be pivotal in the processes of increasing levels of social tolerance and aversion to inequity.

James Van Lanen also critiques what he sees as a gendered structure arising in *The Dawn of Everything* with counterposition of brutish, masculinist, prestige-hungry hunters opposed to more communal, matriarchal early women farmers, busy creating an 'ecology of freedom'. A whole array of lifeways of non-intensifying, egalitarian peoples, says Van Lanen, have been 'cancelled' from this 'new history of humanity' (Van Lanen 2024:361). Yet it is precisely these indigenous peoples who bear the most sustainable cultural knowledge, and are most vulnerable to ethnocide from agricultural expansion. Paradoxically, he claims, Graeber and Wengrow end up advocating statist, urban bureaucracies in creating a fallacious prehistoric 'left/right' divide.

In our coda, Doerte Weig offers a prose poem, or creative intervention, inspired in part by Graeber and Wengrow's invitation to freedom of form and experiment, in part also by the primarily sociosomatic experience of egalitarian living. As a fieldworker who has lived among Central African Forest groups, she writes poignantly about what it could mean to gift that knowledge to so many people, to educate whole generations of schoolchildren in what it means to be human.

As Ian Watts writes, *The Dawn of Everything* was clearly intended to be collectively empowering. It has been felt to be by very many readers including our contributors. Knowing that our current parlous state – being stuck in subordination to a blind and greedy minority – is not natural or normal in human history should empower us to

organise ourselves differently, to become architects of resistance. But if we bin scientific understanding of our origins – the egalitarian origins of all our shared imaginaries – how can we know our true potential, our own distinctively human resources and capacities, forged over hundreds of thousands of years? Can talking about The Dawn, the real 'dawn of everything' only ever be a myth?

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Egalitarianism made us the symbolic species[(2)]

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Abstract: 'The world of hunter-gatherers [...] was one of bold social experiments' say Graeber and Wengrow, 'a carnival parade of political forms'. But did the boldest social experiments of our ancestors – language and symbolic culture – constrain these possibilities? Aspects of our anatomy, psychology and cognition that were necessary preadaptations to language – cooperative eyes, intersubjectivity, large brains, a ratchet effect of cultural accumulation – required stable sociopolitical contexts of significant egalitarianism to evolve among our middle Pleistocene ancestors. This implies political strategies for minimising and periodically nullifying dominance relations, through dynamics of day-to-day individualistic counter-dominance with occasional displays of collective reverse dominance. Because of the very high costs for mothers who had to provide high-quality nutrition and reliable allocare for large-brained babies, the most telling aspect of this would be gender resistance, establishing gender egalitarianism. middle Pleistocene populations with more hierarchical tendencies were least likely to have become language-speaking, larger-brained ancestors of *Homo sapiens*.

Keywords: egalitarianism, human evolution, language, brain size, deep social mind, gender, *Dawn of Everything*

Introduction

In *The Dawn of Everything,* David Graeber and David Wengrow challenge the assumption that our distant ancestors before agriculture were hunter-gatherers living in tiny, egalitarian bands. That idea, they claim, consigns those ancestors to 'a prolonged state of childlike innocence' (2021:2). In their attempt to 'tell another, more hopeful and more interesting story' (2021:3), they envisage early hunter-gatherers as

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political creatives, imaginatively exploring various social systems, building up authority structures and tearing them down just for amusement. They depict 'the world of hunter-gatherers [...] before the coming of agriculture' as 'one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms' (2021:4).

In rejecting parochial horizons, Graeber and Wengrow could be on the right track. Recent archaeological evidence of early *H. sapiens* populations in Africa (Dapschauskas et al 2022; Miller & Wang 2022) is more indicative of connected and networked bands. These studies suggest reticulation and linkage of populations on Pan-African scales, with striking broad similarity of culture, rather than isolated, small-scale, parochial boundaries. Graeber and Wengrow (2021:121–125) connect the nomadic privilege of voting with one's feet to escape attempted domination with these wider horizons.

But the premise that creating and maintaining an egalitarian social order is 'simple' or 'childlike' is problematic. Graeber and Wengrow never fully consider the complex reality of maintaining an egalitarian political balance. In Morna Finnegan's words: 'complex egalitarianism cultivates individuality and autonomy through the communal labour of distribution of social power' (Power et al 2017:27). Finnegan (2008; 2013) prefigured Graeber and Wengrow's notion of oscillation of power between groups, in her case with gender dynamics at the core. She says: 'egalitarian societies do play routinely with a kind of shadow hierarchy, where intersexual conflict and the threat of collapse serve as a powerful motor for the movement of power across the social landscape' (Power et al 2017:27). Not only food is demand-shared, but power itself. Polly Wiessner cites a Ju/'hoan conversation defining the core of their culture: '"It is not trance dance, hunting techniques, apparel or songs that are the essential elements of our culture but rather relations of respect and appreciation for what others have to offer. We walk/talk softly, unlike the Bantu who are big penises" (an expression for relations of dominance)' (2022:3).

In human history there have been no social experiments bolder or more original than language and symbolic culture. In this article, I ask: what if these boldest of all social experiments by our ancestors – our African ancestors of *H. sapiens* – in fact constrained the political possibilities? What if only certain kinds of political arrangements could have enabled language and symbolism to emerge? Where would that leave Graeber and Wengrow on the 'infantilising' effects of imagining egalitarian ancestry?

This paper begins by discussing James Woodburn's usage of the term 'egalitarian' and his view on egalitarianism in social evolution. It continues with the major evolutionary models advanced for egalitarianism, and how it has been linked to increasing cognitive sophistication rather than 'infantile simplicity' (Erdal & Whiten 1996; Boehm 2001; Migliano & Vinicius 2021). I then outline universal features of *Homo sapiens* that are unlikely to have evolved without prolonged periods of relative egalitarianism among human ancestors. I consider evidence that gender relations were critical in this process, and probable timelines of such protracted tendency to egalitarianism as we evolved.

Woodburn's concept of 'egalitarianism'

Writing of her experiences with the Ju/'hoansi, Megan Biesele says:

> Egalitarianism, though it may seem casual or lackadaisical to outsiders, or even a saccharine, romantic concept, is underpinned by determined effort and by fierce and sustained attention to expectations and rules. I wondered whether, judging by its long-term success, this effective social technology had taken a lot of trial and error to perfect during prehistory. I came to think of egalitarianism as another of the great cultural achievements of humankind. (2023:154)

Graeber and Wengrow dislike the term 'egalitarianism' (see eg 2021:76, 86–87, 125–126), which has been used – and regularly interrogated – by huntergatherer researchers over a lengthy period (Fried 1967; Lee 1982; Woodburn 1982; Solway 2006; Schultziner et al 2010; Finnegan 2013; Dyble et al 2015; Bird-David 2020; Reckin et al 2020; Stibbard-Hawkes 2020; Singh and Glowacki 2022). They repeat the mantra 'it remains entirely unclear what "egalitarian" even means' (2021:75, 125), try out a negative definition of 'absence of hierarchy' (75, 125), then plump for 'living in some collective group-think' (95), that is, adhering to an ideal that 'people feel they ought to be the same' (126). Wiessner (2022:3) gives this short shrift, since nomadic bands rely on people having diverse skills, characters and abilities: 'egalitarian relations are not about sameness in small-scale societies, but rather about respect and appreciation of different skills offered by group members to build complementarity and dependency'. Striking the balance between autonomy and interdependency is what gives egalitarianism its complex, fluid dynamic.

In his classic article on the mechanisms used to maintain that balance – 'Egalitarian Societies' (1982) – James Woodburn was crystal clear:

> I have chosen to use the term 'egalitarian' to describe these societies of near-equals because the term directly suggests that the 'equality' that's present is not neutral, the mere absence of inequality of hierarchy, but is *asserted*. (1982:431)

This attitude of 'politically assertive egalitarianism' relies on deeds not words, or, we might say, direct action: 'The verbal rhetoric of equality may or may not be elaborated but actions speak loudly: equality is repeatedly acted out, publicly demonstrated, in opposition to inequality' (1982:432).

While Woodburn conceded many societies were in some sense egalitarian, he argued only 'immediate-return' hunter-gatherers were able to give this political attitude its full expression. Such societies had no storage; were vigilant in egalitarian ideology and practice; minimised specific personal dependency (but not interdependency); and ensured freedom of choice in residence and association, direct access to necessities of

life, and entitlement to share for all members. His category of immediate-return may be problematic. Wiessner has argued that 'storage' of far-flung social relations called on during lean seasons implies delayed-return (1982; 2002). And Woodburn himself recognised that the institution of bride service – a hunter's obligations to his wife's kin, his in-laws – introduced 'a delayed-return element' (1980:111). Relative to nonhuman primate hunting which really does involve consumption on the spot, any separation of a hunter from his kill can be described as delayed-return.

But the key point here is the prevalence of egalitarian immediate and more hierarchical delayed-return types of hunting societies reaching back into the past. Woodburn thought both types were likely to be ancient, prior to farming; considering Africa, in a world of hunter-gatherers, a higher proportion may have had delayed-return systems (1980:112; 1998:61; 2005:20). Immediatereturn systems 'though not simple in form, are intrinsically simpler than delayed-return systems and it seems plausible to argue that there will have been a time at which all societies had immediate-return systems' (2005:20). Remarkably stable and resistant to change through time, early forms of huntergatherer organisation were immediate-return and egalitarian. He made the 'very sweeping claim. Such immediate-return systems constitute a stable and enduring social form, internally coherent and meaningful [...] not just capable of self-replication but tending always to self-replication' (2005:21).

Evolutionary models of egalitarianism

In his tentative reconstruction of hunter-gatherer societies of the past (1980), Woodburn definitely avoided any idea of what Graeber and Wengrow call 'our modern notion of social evolution' (2021:5). By this, they in fact mean the 'stage' models advanced by nineteenth-century evolutionists such as Lewis Henry Morgan (followed by Engels) with hunter-gatherers placed in 'savagery', farmers in 'barbarism' and urban state dwellers in 'civilisation'. Even the 'neo-evolutionists' they refer to – Leslie White, Julian Steward, Morton Fried, Elman Service, early Marshall Sahlins – were working back in the 1950s–1960s prior to the development of modern evolutionary anthropology and ecology. As evolutionary anthropologist Vivek Venkataraman explains (2022): 'Scholars do not take stage models seriously today. There is little intellectual connection between stage models and modern evolutionary approaches toward studying hunter-gatherers.' This involves a whole generation and more of hunter-gatherer research since *Man the Hunter* that Graeber and Wengrow's book barely addresses.

While the *Dawn of Everything* authors identify 'egalitarian' with assumptions of 'simple' or 'primitive', in fact behavioural ecologists and evolutionary anthropologists have investigated the sophistication of cooperative, strategic and cognitive flexibility involved in egalitarian and supposed 'small-scale' societies (eg Dyble et al 2015; Dyble 2020; Boyd & Richerson 2022; Glowacki & Lew-Levy 2022; Kraft et al 2023). Migliano

and Vinicius (2021) view egalitarian social relations as a vital component of the 'foraging niche' engendering multilevel social structures and cumulative cultural evolution.

Egalitarianism appears hard to explain using Darwinian theory premised on individual competition. One of the originators of Machiavellian intelligence theory, Andrew Whiten (Byrne & Whiten 1988), and his student David Erdal saw that Machiavellian intelligence could generate the difference between primate-style dominance hierarchies and typical hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. Machiavellian intelligence is a subtle idea that sees animals in complex social groups competing in evolutionary terms by becoming more adept at cooperation, and more capable of negotiating alliances. In this theoretical perspective then, the significant increases of brain size in the primate order, from monkeys to apes, and then from apes to hominins and genus *Homo*, result from increasing political complexity and ability to exploit alliances.

Erdal and Whiten offered an evolutionary and dialectical explanation for human egalitarianism, which they termed 'counter-dominance' (Erdal & Whiten 1994; 1996; Whiten & Erdal 2012). At a certain point, the ability to operate within alliances exceeds the ability of any single individual, no matter how strong, to dominate others. If the dominant tries, he (assuming 'he' for the moment) will meet an alliance in resistance who together can deal with him. Once that point is reached, the sensible strategy becomes not to try to dominate others, but to use alliances to resist being dominated oneself. They saw counter-dominance as fundamental to the evolution of human psychology, with competing tendencies for individuals to try to get away with bigger shares where opportunity presents, but, faced with demands from others, to give in and settle for equal shares.

This model predicts much of what we find: egalitarian hunter-gatherers are vigilant in case anyone gets above themselves using techniques of demand-sharing, with an attitude of 'don't mess with me' and humour as a levelling device, rejecting any possibility of coercion since no particular individual is in charge. Erdal and Whiten (1996:143) embed their account in close reading of ethnography for counter-dominant behaviours (vigilantsharing, counteracting attempts at dominance). Whiten (1999) subsequently proposed 'deep social mind' emerging through a prolonged phase of egalitarianism coevolving with mutual mind-reading and cultural transmission, making up the human hunter-gatherer sociocognitive niche. Counter-dominant tactics and dispositions underpinned cooperative mind-reading – necessarily, no one wants their mind read by somebody dominant – and enabled cultural sharing and accumulation.

Erdal and Whiten illustrate this trajectory with their 'U-shape curve' (Erdal & Whiten 1996:141, Figure 12.1; Whiten 1999:180, Figure 10.1) originally derived from Bruce Knauft (1991). This shows pronounced reduction in hierarchy through evolutionary time bottoming out in a period of uncertain duration as hunter-gatherer ancestors maximise egalitarianism; this precedes a steep rise in inequality during the past 10–15,000 years. Of course this 'story' that farming, herding and settlement produced that jump in inequality is anathema for Graeber and Wengrow. In their book, hunter-gatherer specialists are 'romantic' if they suggest that our evolved psychologies,

emotions and cognition were shaped by selection pressures that prevailed when our ancestors led an egalitarian way of life. As fairly hard-bitten evolutionary psychologists of the St Andrews school, Erdal and Whiten are not obviously 'romantic'. From their starting point in nonhuman primate politics, the key question is not 'how did we get to be unequal?' but rather 'how did we *first* become equal'?

With Knauft and Chistopher Boehm in the 1990s, Erdal and Whiten engaged in key debates on egalitarianism, violence and resistance to dominance among hunter-gatherer ancestors. Graeber and Wengrow make evolutionary (and cultural) anthropologist Boehm their chief target, ignoring Erdal and Whiten's important contribution. Boehm's model (2001) argues for a group or collective intention rather than individualistic negotiations. Because humans descend from great apes, says Boehm, our distant ancestors must have been psychologically adapted to great ape politics of dominance, violence and resistance. But in our lineage, collective resistance culminated in everyone ganging up to prevent any would-be leader from dominating the group. Chimpanzee-style dominance was overturned by solidarity action from below, resulting in 'reverse dominance' – rule by a morally aware community, consciously determined to maintain equality.

Graeber and Wengrow are very positive about Boehm's idea that, by nature, humans resist dominance. As they put it, humans 'do appear to have begun [history] with a self-conscious aversion to being told what to do' (2021:133). They acknowledge his finding that extant hunter-gatherers display 'a whole panoply of tactics collectively employed to bring would-be braggarts and bullies down to earth – ridicule, shame, shunning [...] none of which have any parallel among other primates' (2021:86). Note, this is one of the only places in the book where they apprehend a radical shift between nonhuman primate and human politics. They recognise Boehm's recognition of hunter-gatherer 'actuarial intelligence': 'while the bullying behaviour might well be instinctual, counterbullying is not: it's a well-thought-out strategy' (2021:86). But they are mighty disappointed when Boehm still insists humans were basically egalitarian until around 12,000 years ago, 'casually tossing early humans back into the Garden of Eden once again' (2021:87).

While Graeber and Wengrow claim that Boehm 'assumes that all human beings until very recently chose instead to follow exactly the same arrangements' (2012:87), in fact Boehm correlates the process of increasingly egalitarian, reverse dominant behaviours with our speciation as *Homo sapiens* (2001:194– 196). Variation in sociopolitical traits and behaviour, between individuals and between populations, must have existed. Boehm argued from this background for selection of a successful 'group' strategy of a politically conscious, egalitarian order that would spread across groups as it became attractive to nondominant but nonsubmissive individuals, altering despotic group dynamics. Group selection prevailed when within-group competition was significantly reduced (2001:210–212).

Both models – Erdal and Whiten's 'counter-dominance' and Boehm's 'reverse dominance' – capture aspects of existing hunter-gatherer politics. While Erdal

and Whiten provide evolutionary continuity of 'Machiavellian' individualistic and autonomous strategies, Boehm's reverse dominance engages with 'revolutionary' moral and collectively determined ones. Crucially, both models also leave aside the important question of gender.

Evidence in our bodies and minds for ancestral egalitarianism

Certain universal features of *H. sapiens*, deriving from our Middle Pleistocene emergence, imply or underpin sociopolitical contexts of significant egalitarianism:

- 'cooperative' eyes
- very large brains
- the evolutionary origins of language.

Let's look at each of these indicators in turn.

Cooperative eyes

Our cooperative eyes could possibly be a primitive feature of genus *Homo.* Alone of over 200 primate species, we have evolved eyes with an elongated shape and a bright white sclera background to a dark iris (Kobayashi & Kohshima 2001). Known as 'cooperative eyes' (Tomasello et al 2007; Hare 2017), they invite anyone we interact with to see easily what we are looking at. By contrast, great apes have relatively round, dark eyes, making it more difficult to judge their gaze direction.

One study (Caspar et al 2021) found no evidence for a link of social cognition and eye pigmentation in nonhuman primates, but Kano et al (2022) used experimental methods to show both humans and chimps could discriminate eye-gaze direction better in humans than chimps. Mearing and colleagues (2022) demonstrated association of both prosociality and social tolerance measures with light sclerae across primates, while dark sclerae associated to reduced cooperation and increased lethal violence measures.

While there is variability in sclera melanin among great apes (Mayhew & Gómez 2015), *Homo sapiens* has evolved to fixation in the lack of this characteristic. Our eyes appear adapted for mutual mind-reading, also known as intersubjectivity; our closest primate relatives more or less block this off. To look into each other's eyes, asking 'can you see what I see?' and 'are you thinking what I am thinking?' is completely natural to us from an early age (Tomasello & Rakoczy 2003). Infants, children and adults all show preference for faces, toys and cartoon characters with white sclerae (Hare 2017:168–169).

'Humans', notes Grossmann (2017:3), 'compared with other great apes, possess a unique sensitivity to information from the eyes'. This capacity of looking into the eyes for information about an individual's emotional and mental state underpins our unique forms of learning, cooperation and communication, with mutual gaze crucial to forming shared intentions (Tomasello et al 2005; Grossmann 2017; Hare 2017).

The most convincing account of how, when and why intersubjectivity and cooperative eyes coevolved is given by Sarah Hrdy in her landmark book *Mothers and others* (2009). We do babysitting in all human societies, mothers being happy to hand over their offspring for others to look after temporarily. African hunter-gatherers deploy this collective form of childcare (Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Jang et al 2022; Chaudary et al 2023), indicating that it was routine in our heritage. In stark contrast, hyperpossessive great ape mothers – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans – rarely let their babies go.

As babies needed to attract and hold the attention of various carers, they developed acute sensitivity to the moods, emotions and intentions of those carers, needing to read their faces, expressions and gaze direction. At the same time, they became increasingly expressive of their own feelings and emotions to engage carers. This clears the pathway of mutuality in mind-reading – where a purely Machiavellian stance would only go one way. It fosters meshing of emotional states, grasping how you look to the other, and ultimately sharing of intentions based in mechanisms like reading eye-gaze.

Hrdy's babysitting model gives us distinctly gendered initial conditions for Whiten's 'deep social mind'. Core female kin coalitions involved in such cooperative childcare create bubbles or pockets of increasing social tolerance, egalitarian sharing and intersubjective understanding – exactly the conditions promoting cultural intelligence and transmission, curiosity and exploration (van Schaik & Burkart 2011; van Schaik et al 2019; Migliano & Vinicius 2021; Forss & Willems 2022; Boeckx 2023).

Large brains

Our very large brains, still enlarging as *H. sapiens* speciated (Will et al 2021), increased the need of mothers and children for more energy, with seasonal sustainability of nutrition (Van Schaik et al 2012). Adult humans today have upwards of three times the brain volume of a chimpanzee (Isler & Van Schaik 2012). Brain tissue is extremely expensive in terms of energy requirements (Foley & Lee 1991; Aiello & Wheeler 1995; Aiello & Key 2002; Kuzawa et al 2014) besides nutrients like fatty acids crucial to brain development. Doing the whole job by themselves, great ape mothers are constrained in the amount of energy they can provide to offspring and so apes cannot expand brains above what is known as a 'gray ceiling' at 600cc (Isler & Van Schaik 2012). Our ancestors broke through this ceiling some 1.5–2 million years ago with the emergence of *Homo erectus*, with brain volumes more than twice those of chimps today. This suggests that cooperative childcare was already important in *Homo erectus* society, entailing cooperative eyes and emergent intersubjectivity (Burkart et al 2009).

Prosociality, social tolerance, and aversion to inequity on behalf of others, not just self (Burkart et al 2009), fostered by cooperative childcare, would have enabled brain expansion and launched the human career of cumulative cultural transmission (van Schaik & Burkart 2011; van Schaik et al 2012).

Because they required reliable transfers of energy from others to mothers with offspring, increasing brain sizes could only have been favoured in social conditions of reduced tendency to dominance and greater egalitarianism. Competition for nutrient-dense foods and lack of sharing to burdened mothers would result in species with smaller, not larger brain sizes. The level of egalitarianism in *Homo* lineages can be tracked by measuring brain sizes in these early humans, using the fossil record. Brains could only expand as materially more energy was channelled to females and their offspring. This again implies gendering of the strategies that enabled this to happen. Male dominance, harassment and strategic control of females – surmised by Foley & Gamble (2009) – would have obstructed such unprecedented increases of brain size. Those populations where male dominance, sexual conflict and infanticide risks remained high were least likely to become our ancestors. Instead, our forebears solved the problem of great ape male dominance, harnessing males into routine support of these extraordinarily large-brained offspring.

Among the mechanisms by which mothers gained energy, by recruiting male help, women have evolved a sexual physiology that is levelling and time-wasting (Power et al 2013). Their reproductive signals do not favour males who want to identify fertile females, monopolise the fertile moment and then move on to the next one – a classic strategy for dominant male apes. Concealed and unpredictable ovulation combined with continuous sexual receptivity through almost the whole cycle makes it hard for males to track periods of female fertility (van Schaik et al 2004). A would-be dominant male trying to guard more than one female wastes time guessing about the possible fertility of any cycling female. Guarding her, he misses other opportunities, and other males will be attending to those other sexually receptive females. Continuous sexual receptivity spreads the reproductive opportunities around many males, and hence is levelling from an evolutionary perspective (Marlowe & Berbesque 2012). BaYaka women of the Congo forest express their resistance to male attempts to form harems with the cry: 'One woman, one penis!' (Knight and Lewis, 2017:440). These forest hunter-gatherer women demand one man each to support their energy requirements and investment in costly offspring.

African fossils suggest that the last phase of expansion coincided with our speciation (see Power et al 2013:42, Table 1; Watts 2014:212–213, Table 16.1; Hublin et al 2017; Will et al 2021, Fig 1c; Gingerich 2022; Watts in press, SOM A3). *Homo sapiens* emerged in the African late Middle Pleistocene in two phases of speciation, showing initially a modern flat facial morphology (Hublin et al 2017) followed by evolution of a globularised skull (Neubauer et al 2018; Meneganzin et al 2022). Two key pressures impacted these populations: first, the tendency for increase in brain volume, and second, possible pulses of aridity during the Marine Isotope Stages (MIS) 8 and 6 (see Watts in

press, SOM A2, A3). The second, environmental pressure acted as a brake on the first. Ancestral African *Homo sapiens* may have met another version of the 'gray ceiling', a constraint on energy available to mothers with pinchpoints in dry-season scarcity of vital nutrients. Dennell and Hurcombe (2024) point to critical impacts on maternal and infant survival during first and third trimester of pregnancy, and the first six months after birth.

Across primate species, seasonality may constrain the evolution of larger brains, as for instance the extreme dry seasons of Madagascar limit available energy for lemur species (apart from aye ayes with specialist mechanisms for extracting larvae) (van Schaik et al 2012). The energy-hungry, fast-growing brains of infants and young children must be supplied every day to avoid energy shortfall which would compromise brain development (Lukas & Campbell 2000; Skoyles 2012). During dry seasons, African game animals are typically very lean. Without fats or carbohydrates, humans cannot survive on protein alone (Speth 2010). 'Rabbit starvation' quickly ensues. A novel strategy for access to fats at these lean times could therefore release the brake on brain size.

Watts (2022) proposes a critical role was played by a novel, highly productive hunting strategy – dry-season ambush hunting close to waterholes on moonlit nights. Aligned with the development of accurate throwing weapons (Lombard & Churchill 2023), these new productive strategies could have been mobilised through reverse dominant ritual traditions. Habitual red ochre use from circa 160,000 years ago may offer evidence for such traditions (Dapschaukas et al 2022; Power et al 2024).

The evolution of language

The evolutionary emergence of language involves 'the very opposite of violence', in the words of Pierre Clastres (1977:36). Speech, he continues, 'must be interpreted [...] as the means the group provides itself with to maintain power outside coercive violence; as the guarantee repeated daily that this threat is averted'. In Graeber's terms, speech is a 'counterpower' (2004:24–25).

In *Debt*, Graeber describes 'baseline communism' (2011:98) in terms of adhering to a default principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'. This could be understood by biologists investigating the evolution of cooperation as generalised 'cooperation between strangers', a fundamental requirement for language. Graeber links this basic attitude of human sociability to language use: 'Conversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism' (2011:97). Language as the mutual exploration of each other's minds requires nonviolent safe space and time to be able to work. Even insults and put downs 'derive most of their power from the shared assumption that people do not ordinarily act this way' (2011:97). Conversation as a necessarily consensual process expresses the quintessential opposite of relations of dominance. It relies on the ultimate in intersubjective ability to look through the eyes

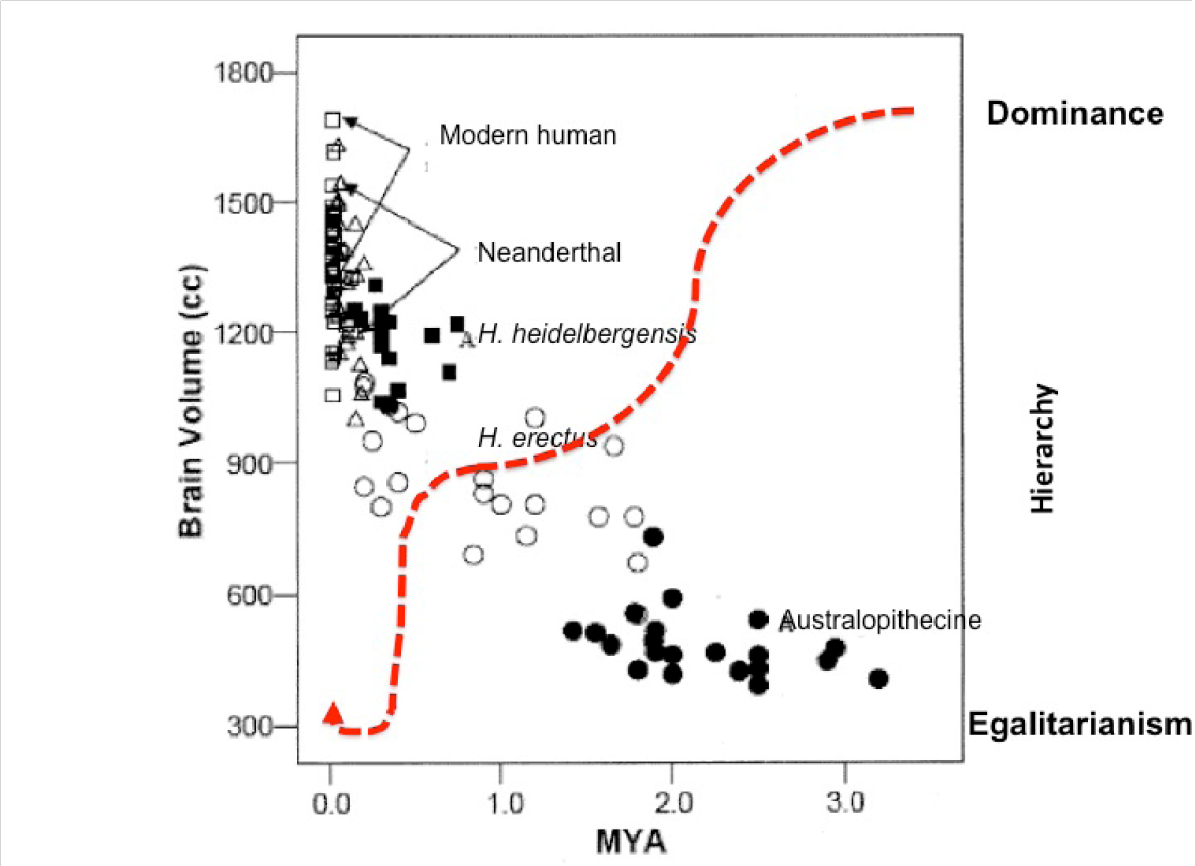

Figure 1. A hypothesised trajectory of change in 'dominance' relations reflecting change in brain size through Pleistocene *Homo* evolution. The very large brain sizes of the period of our speciation are predicted to associate with significant egalitarianism

of the other. A fundamentally egalitarian matrix is the only possible ground for the evolution of language.

Graeber and Wengrow illustrate this relationship of language and egalitarianism with their story of the Huron-Wendat chief, Kandiaronk (2021:49–51). Known as 'Le Rat', he was famed for superior sociocognitive linguistic skills. During the 1690s, he became celebrated for arguing jesuits and governorgenerals of New France under the table. If you live in a society where no one can tell anyone else what to do, then, to achieve agreement, you have to argue and persuade, hence the remarkable and well-practised oratorical skills of Native Americans. Subject to arbitrary power, Europeans, by contrast, had to follow orders – not conducive to developing reasoned consensus argument (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:39, 46).

This principle applies as much or even more to the evolutionary emergence of language itself in our ancestral past. It would require a prolonged phase of relative egalitarianism to be established. This constraint refutes the idea that egalitarian origins is 'a myth' implying 'primitive simplicity'. The evolution of each one of these human features is predicated on sophisticated strategies for undermining and periodically neutralising dominance relations. This could be achieved through dynamics of day-to-day counter-dominance in individual interactions, with dramatic or ritualised collective displays of reverse dominance on occasion (Knight & Lewis 2017).

The role of gender

There are strong grounds for seeing gendered strategies playing a central role in the evolution of these features. Babysitting and allocare would not have involved *only* females, but female strategic needs would have been critical as drivers of mutuality in mind-reading. Similarly, demands of increasing brain sizes and energy costs for mothers would lead to novel, specifically female responses, both coalitionary and cooperative, and in terms of individual female choice. Female ancestors had probably overwhelming influence in any process of 'self-domestication' (Hare 2017; Boeckx 2023) through choice of males with reduced reactive aggression. Egalitarian and cooperative childcare coalitions provided contexts for sharing intentions and emotional states. Such unprecedented levels of trust were needed to begin communicating and playing with conventional, shorthand vocalisations – speech (Knight & Lewis 2017).

Linguist Cedric Boeckx (2023), working on interdisciplinary models for the foundation of human language and cognition, argues for social and evolutionary processes of reduced reactive violence (seen as part of the domestication syndrome) with increased social tolerance enabling more exploratory learning. Critical for cumulative culture were social relationships of a certain type, establishing trust in communicative intent. The words of language require a 'special, safe ecology' (2023:6). He links their evolutionary emergence to gendered strategies of reverse dominance (2023:7). We could say that the evolution of language itself required an 'ecology of freedom'.

In the debates on the evolution of egalitarianism, Knauft (1994:182) posed the questions: 'what role do females play in dominance or counter-dominance, and what is the relationship between counter-dominance and female mate selection?' The most telling aspect of this, barely considered by Boehm (2001) or Wrangham (2019), would involve gendered resistance to male attempts at sexual coercion or exploitation. Knauft (1994:182, citing Worthman) questioned the intrinsic male bias to models of egalitarianism in evolution. This continues today, founded in Woodburn's argument (1982:436) that lethal weapons had a levelling tendency among men (eg Gintis et al 2015; Stibbard-Hawkes 2020). Yet female energetic requirements meant they needed above all to ensure newly developed throwing weaponry was put to use effectively by humans against game animals.

Boehm drew mainly on work by Richard Lee with the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi to identify reverse dominance tactics ranging from playful mockery all the way to execution squads. In support of his exclusively male version of the 'self-domestication' theory, Wrangham (2019) especially focuses on execution squads disposing of violent and obnoxious individuals. But these are rare events, perhaps seen once in a decade in hunter-gatherer populations. The much more workaday tactics of laughter, mimickry and levelling reveal the gendered dimension of reverse dominance. Women, often older women, individually and collectively, are central to bringing men down with a bump (Lewis 2014).

Jerome Lewis (2014:230) has described the key BaYaka technique of *moadjo* that involves a kind of pantomime or stand-up comedy, where an older woman begins to mime and caricature someone's stupid behaviour, drawing a crowd. This quickly becomes hilarious as onlookers join in and copy her moves, with encouraging noises and comments. No one speaks any name until, eventually, the target gets it that he (usually) is the cause of all the laughter. Then he storms off, or, seeing what an idiot he's been, laughs along, so rejoining the community. Either way, everything is forgiven and forgotten – no executions necessary. Lewis (2014:230) explains:

> Mbendjele men only tolerate such explicit criticism from women. If men do this, it easily leads to serious fights. Widows have a special place in this type of humorous but directed criticism and are expected to do this in front of the whole camp at moments of high tension or when someone has committed a grave error. A good performer will succeed in calming the atmosphere by allowing everyone to laugh at themselves. Indeed, if the person being criticized is present, the *moadjo* will only end when they laugh publicly too. However, on realizing that they are becoming the center of the camp's mirth, the wrongdoer often flees and hides in the forest until things calm down.

One of the finest ethnographies of reverse dominance comes from Daša Bombjaková. She documented and participated in *moadjo,* describing three different types or contexts (2018:214–215): i) normative, reenactments of people's stupid behaviour by one

or more women, to get the target to 'see their own silly behaviour'; ii) coalitionary, among a bunch of women, more for fun and entertainment purposes when the target is absent, but solidarising and expressing shared opinion; and iii) 'gender competition' *moadjo*, a fully ritualised response mocking men in general (especially male sexuality) or challenging any male insult to women as a group. Bombjaková sees this as a female militant, reverse dominance strategy. Examples range from the common practice of female *ngoku* forest-spirit ceremony to dynamic reassertion of 'female values' when needed (2018:234).

Some such levelling technique as *moadjo* may have deep roots in our ancestry, linked to the evolution of capacities of intersubjectivity – seeing ourselves as others see us. *Moadjo* does not rely on language but rather on mimesis (Donald 1991). It offers a stepping-stone both towards ritual and to language. In one case of normative *moadjo*, Bombjaková talks of a performance making the target (she, in this case) 'see her silly actions right in front of her eyes' (2018:224). The process of exaggerated repetition of pantomime sequences gives a potential mechanism for scaffolding language emergence. Parts of the action sequence could be shorthanded into increasingly language-like tags, with accompanying noises. In these situations, to the extent that the target individual laughs at themselves, participants move towards sharing a shorthand reference or token for a concept – a 'word' sung out as part of the action – at the same time moving together in sharing moral emotions. Shared laughter maintains the egalitarian ethos vital to the process.

In coalitionary and gender-competition versions, *moadjo* tends towards ritual, the first as a kind of coordinating rehearsal for the occasions when full-scale sex militancy is needed. While the first may appear improvised 'just for fun', it primes women's solidarity within particular coalitions. At a hint of threat or challenge from men, the entire women's community coalesces in reverse dominance ritual. Women's *ngoku* spirit ensures periodic neutralising of male dominance in any form, through hilarious re-enactment of men's sexual antics. This is women's weaponry, but it's not lethal. The test of being able to see oneself through the eyes of others, and of being able to laugh at oneself would be a major aspect of female selection for reduced reactive aggression.

Chris Knight (1998; and see Knight & Lewis 2017) argues for the necessary coevolution of ritual and speech, with ritual acting to create unprecedented levels of trust within a speech community. Such trust allows shorthand, conventional vocal signals to be heard as intentionally honest. The shared emotional experience of costly ritual (Alcorta & Sosis 2005) intensifies levels of trust within the group and generates a 'shared virtual world' (Knight & Lewis 2017) to which the cheap, tokenistic signals of speech can refer. At the same time, high-cost ritual performance is designed to impress outsiders to the group, overcoming potential conflicts of interest. A *moadjo*-like starting point of playful mimickry can evolve both the words and grammar within the ingroup, and the costly ritual action confronting an outgroup. Gender formed the likely initial boundaries to groups. African hunter-gatherer women to this day mount periodic reverse dominant displays in powerful intergenerational coalitions (Kisliuk 1998;

Finnegan 2013; Power 2015; 2017; Power et al 2024). The shared structures of these gender rituals imply considerable time-depth (Power 2017; Liebenberg 2020; Watts in press).

Leaving aside Africa

According to these arguments, no egalitarianism would emerge without a fundamental gender egalitarianism asserted in ritual performance. Far from 'simplicity', this egalitarian political process gave rise to the cutting edge of creative cultural intelligence, resulting in playful, imaginative, shared human worlds. Attempts at control and dominance would lead to evolutionary disadvantage. Simply put, Middle Pleistocene populations with more hierarchical tendencies were the least likely to have become language-speaking, larger-brained, singing, healing, dancing ancestors of *Homo sapiens*.

Graeber and Wengrow treat Africa's role in human cultural origins in a few sketchy pages (2021:80–83). They claim: 'The only thing we can reasonably infer about social organization among our earliest ancestors is that it's likely to have been extraordinarily diverse'. (2021:82) Contrary to this guesswork, I argue that the populations ancestral to everyone alive today were highly constrained to be egalitarian. Without this no language, no ritual or symbolic domain would emerge; no large brains; no humanlike kinship and morality (Power et al 2024).

Although early African *H. sapiens* populations appear morphologically diverse, they also seem remarkably similar in terms of shared cultural traditions the length and breadth of the continent. In a meta-analysis of 100 African sites, Rimtautas Dapschauskas and colleagues 'try to answer the question of when and where habitual ochre use emerged and what significance this had for the development of ritual behavior during the Middle Stone Age' (2022:234). They use methods based on time-averaging to identify three continent-wide distinct phases of ochre use: an initial phase 500–330 thousand years ago (ka); an emergent phase from 330–160 ka; and an habitual phase from 160–140 ka. At each phase, the number of sites with ochre increases; the ratio of sites with ochre compared to those with only stone artefacts shows increasing intensity of ochre use. It becomes habitual cultural practice in South, East and North Africa from 160 ka when a third of sites contain ochre.

Importantly, the authors 'view [...] habitual ochre use as a proxy for the emergence of regular collective rituals' (2022:241). While ochre definitely can have functional uses, ritualised, visual display appears primary: Middle Stone Age (MSA) ochres reflect costly and repetitive behaviours, including long-distance procurement and intentional colour selection for reds (2022:236). Red residues are found on shell beads when these appear later in sites from South to North Africa at Blombos, Taforalt and Bizmoune, now dated at older than 140,000 years (Sehaaseh et al 2021). This likely resulted from body paint on skin or deliberate colouring. In sum, Dapschauskas and colleagues 'view

a large proportion of ochre finds from the MSA as the material remains of past ritual activity' (2022:238). They take 'the emergence of habitual collective rituals' to be 'one important prerequisite for the evolution of symbolic communication' (2022:244).

Three decades ago, the authors of the Female Cosmetic Coalitions hypothesis (Knight et al 1995) took the position that regular occurrence of ochre marked ritual activity critical to the emergence of symbolic cognition. They argued that reproductive stress on mothers of increasingly large-brained offspring drove signalling strategies in female coalitions. Women simply needed more energy to meet the extra metabolic costs of those large brains, and they turned on the leisured sex, males, to provide more reliably. Their demands for increased investment from men exploited the key signal of menstruation. Why? Because when most women would be pregnant or breastfeeding, menstrual cycling implies imminent fertility and, in a Darwinian world, immediately grabs attention. Women created cosmetic rituals to 'bleed' together, resisting the advances of any male who tried to single out fertile women from the pregnant/ nursing mothers who most needed energy. This was both protosymbolic action – with a group of women sharing in imaginary 'blood' or 'fertility' – and also protomoral, establishing 'taboos' on bleeding bodies. Above all, it provided a template for reverse dominant gender ritual.

At the time, Knight and colleagues proposed: 'Reproductive stress motoring "sham menstruation" may have become most acute in the period 160–140 Kya, the height of the Penultimate Glacial cycle' (1995:81). There is now understood to be greater complexity of factors influencing the African climate (Kaboth-Bahr et al 2021). More evidence is needed to assess when and where exactly the later phase of brain expansion was impacted by dry-season scarcity stress. This can be compared with the results of Dapschauskas et al (2022:279, Figure 5, and 282, Figure 9).

Given an archaeological timeframe for the emergence of habitual ritual traditions during the second phase of our speciation as a dynamic form of reverse gender dominance, how does this perspective reflect on the key question posed by Graeber and Wengrow: 'How did we get stuck?' (2021:112). They claim this is the 'real' question rather than seeking the origin of social inequality. But their excellent question is hard to address without first grasping how we got to be equal. Leaving aside Africa, they focus on the European Upper Palaeolithic some 30,000 years ago for their earliest evidence. They advance an intriguing interpretation of elaborate burials in highly seasonal environments (2021:102–104) as relics of a seasonally flexible social structure, switching between hierarchy and egalitarianism.

This oscillation model resembles the politics of 'bodies in motion' proposed earlier by Finnegan (2008, 2013), of a 'pendulum' of power, a push–pull motion between ritual groups of women and men among Central African Forest people. Only by keeping bodies moving in dialogue can fixity of hierarchy be resisted. Women won't let power get stuck. Their coalitions are 'fizzing' and 'churning', setting rhythm, dialogue and dances going. But rather than any seasonal oscillation, this is periodic on women's terms, connecting with lunar and menstrual cycles and idioms (Power 2022). Finnegan

asks: 'what are the implications for a society when the story that is ritualized through bodily comportment *highlights* female reproductive anatomy, female bodily fluids, and female desire, and refracts these back to the community as cultural power?' (2013:702)

It seems that Graeber and Wengrow approach close but don't see that this oscillatory, periodic motion is one way that egalitarianism works – 'communism in motion' as Finnegan has called it (2008:218). The nimble lunar periodicity typical of African hunter-gatherer ritual action prevents hierarchy from taking root; slower seasonal periodic switches, by contrast, allow power to become entrenched.

Conclusion

In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow attack the idea that our hunter-gatherer ancestors were necessarily egalitarian, arguing that this is a 'myth' making them out as 'simple' and 'childlike'. By contrast, hunter-gatherer anthropologists, with evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists, argue that maintaining egalitarian relations is cognitively, emotionally and intersubjectively complex and socially sophisticated.

Egalitarianism is seen as a foundational requirement of the ratchet effect of cumulative cultural evolution (Whiten 1999; Migliano & Vinicius 2021). Human intersubjectivity evolved through gendered strategies of collective childcare (Hrdy 2009) giving rise to increased social tolerance and inequity aversion on behalf of others (Burkart et al 2009). Graeber and Wengrow (2021:129) are wary of Woodburn pointing to immediate-return hunter-gatherers as true egalitarians, saying this implies only the 'very simplest foragers' can possibly achieve equality, leaving the rest of us stuck. An alternative perspective is that it took almost a million years of forging human nature throughout the Middle Pleistocene. Egalitarian relations are far from 'simple'; they made us human, and the evolved sociocognitive skills are unlikely to disappear overnight.

This article addresses the main evolutionary models for egalitarianism, and discusses derived features of *Homo sapiens* – anatomical, psychological and cognitive – that required prolonged periods of egalitarianism to emerge in our species. Female strategies and cultural power would have been central to these processes, notably in periodic, reverse dominant ritual practice. Egalitarian relations, between genders and between generations, were crucial to making us the symbolic species we are.

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Before *The Dawn of Everything*[(3)]

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Abstract: *The Dawn of Everything* (*DoE*) holds that social organisation among our earliest ancestors is likely to have been extraordinarily diverse. Therefore, there can have been no 'original' form of human society. 'Searching for one can only be a matter of myth-making.' This does not bode well for integrating evolutionary and social anthropology, but contributions from social anthropology, with its unique perspective on what it is to be a symbolic species, are rare in modern human 'origins' research, and so deserve close attention. Following a critique of *DoE*'s framing this contribution inverts the premise of extraordinary diversity. The latest archaeological findings and their interpretation suggest pan-African habitual performance of collective ritual, with a uniform signature of red cosmetic usage, from ~160 ka, around the end of speciation, grounding symbolic culture's first shared fiction(s). *DoE* marginalised evolutionary theory, the archaeology of our speciation and African hunter-gatherer ethnography. Thereby, it resembles the decried 'sapient paradox' and leaves readers clueless as to how the tea-time 'carnival parade' of political forms of the last 30,000 years arose. By contrast, African hunter-gatherer ritual use of red substances and associated beliefs suggest an ideology of blood at origin, metaphorically linking women's reproduction to men's hunting labour.

Keywords: speciation, ochre, ritual, symbolic culture, immediate-return hunter-gatherers, sapient paradox

Introduction

The popular social science book *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, hereafter *DoE*), is a refreshing and provocative interpretative exploration of political variation over the last 30,000 years (2021:4), largely focused on what are conventionally considered non-state societies. It holds that 'the very essence of our humanity' (2021:86) is that we are a politically self-conscious

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species; it also holds that the idea that human societies were originally egalitarian is 'myth-making' (2021:82, 140, 525–526). The second of these claims is the take-home message – literally the book's last words. This was prospectively flagged before work on *DoE* began, with Graeber's pronouncement that the Morgan/Marx/Engels hypothesis of 'primitive communism' did 'enormous damage to humanity' (2011:95, see Knight 2024 this volume); it was retrospectively driven home by Wengrow: 'This idea must die! We used to be equal' (2023). In view of Graeber's anarchism, it is perplexing that they are more vehement and persistent in their critique of egalitarian narratives than of the Hobbesian view which predominates in contemporary popular social science (eg Pinker 2011; Harari 2014; Wrangham 2019; Whitehouse 2021).

The temporal focus is ostensibly because this is as far back as archaeologists can go with direct evidence bearing on social organisation, prerequisite to inferring variation in political forms. The focus on stateless societies is so that they can explore what political self-consciousness looks like before top-down power became fixed; before kinship, politics and religion could be treated as discrete analytical categories. Their argument is that the most readily discernible pattern is of alternation of political forms, an oscillatory character to what is essentially ritual play. The question arising is how did we, as a species, become stuck in seemingly permanent hierarchy? In so far as a solution is offered, it is when patriarchs confused relations of care and domination (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:514).

The book is refreshing because its authors, the late social anthropologist David Graeber, and the comparative archaeologist David Wengrow (hereafter GW), clearly intended it to be both a radical scientific and empowering political intervention. Much of *DoE*'s substance, a fascinating series of case studies, fulfils this ambition, but the reader may be left feeling disempowered by the way this substance was framed, not least by the maintenance of the silos that keep evolutionary and social or cultural anthropology apart. While deeply critical of this framing, this contribution is intended constructively, hoping to make it possible to recast the remarkable substantive content in a more productive light.

The framing concerns a range of premises, arguments and conclusions intended to justify the overall claim that a history of humanity can – and indeed should – be restricted to a history of approximately the last 30,000 years. This framework can be reduced to a sequential chain of six elements, the first two of which being premises, the first having four supporting arguments. The six elements are:

- That for most of our species' history (minimally, most of the last 200,000 years), we have no idea what was happening (2021:1)
- 'The only thing we can reasonably infer about social organization among our earliest ancestors is that it's likely to have been extraordinarily diverse' (2021:82)
- Therefore, 'there is no 'original' form of human society. Searching for one can only be a matter of myth-making' (2021:82)

- A 'relatively uniform "us"' can only be inferred quite late in the process of 'our evolutionary history' (2021:81)
- '[A] single human "us"' can only be inferred from ~30 ka – following the extinction of Neanderthals and Denisovans (2021:82)
- Coincidently, it is also only from about 30 ka that archaeology provides direct evidence bearing on political forms, 'evidence of institutional inequality', albeit rare and patchily distributed (92)

The supporting arguments for the opening premise are: that evolutionary theory is only good for drab abstractions (2021:4, 119), that the relevant archaeology tells us nothing (2021:81), that the major socio-ecological differences separating the present from our speciation make analogies 'extremely difficult' (2021:82) – by implication almost impossible, and that if hunter-gatherer societies are to provide a source of analogy (for later periods of prehistory) – no sub-category can be analytically privileged (2021:15, 539 n7).

Of the six sequential elements, note the glaring contradiction between the first two premises: how can extraordinary diversity be inferred if we have no idea what was happening? This suggests that the third element, a conclusion and admonition, may be poorly grounded. Taken together, the six elements amount to an interpretation of our species' history that closely resembles the 'sapient paradox', the view that there was a temporal discrepancy between modern bodies and modern minds or modern human behaviour. This has been prevalent in modern human origins research for almost 40 years. In its classic form, this held that symbolic culture was restricted to the last ~35,000 years, most of the evidence coming from the European Upper Palaeolithic. GW dismiss this view as a red herring and a mirage (2021:83–84), making the resemblance itself something of a paradox. Since *DoE*'s publication the sapient paradox has finally been consigned to the dustbin of history, but it had been losing ground for several decades. So a question that will have to be addressed is why *DoE*'s narrative was so similar.

This contribution refutes the first three claims of this sequence, suggests that the fourth depends on the definition of 'our evolutionary history', treats the fifth as a red herring, and the sixth as bearing on the 'teatime' of everything (Knight 2021) – how an ever-greater proportion of people got stuck in permanent subordination. It addresses the internal contradictions and paradoxes, and hopefully helps lay the foundations for a more empowering new history of humanity.

The article is in three parts. The first explores the sequential chain of the framing argument. After a brief outline of *DoE*, it addresses what is meant by a history of humanity in terms of the evolutionary paradox that is symbolic culture rather than 'direct' evidence for social organisation. It then considers the traits GW use to define humanity (other than being politically self-conscious), and their treatment of a number

of closely related topics (original affluence, African hunter-gatherers, immediate-return societies and egalitarianism).

The central part addresses the four arguments used to support *DoE*'s opening statement – that we 'have next to no idea what was happening' over most of our history. I focus primarily on the latest findings and interpretation of the archaeological record of red pigment use associated with and following our African speciation (interpreted as the residue of ritual behaviour), and whether African hunter-gatherer ritual use of red substances and associated beliefs can help constrain and possibly inform interpretation of this archaeology.

The last part briefly touches on a final paradox of *DoE*. Having devoted considerable rhetorical energy to denouncing 'origins' narratives, the coda to Chapter 10 ('Why the state has no origin') begins with Graeber and Wengrow's own such narrative, placing women's material interests at the heart of humanity, a humanity synonymous with Marcel Mauss's conception of civilisation as extended moral communities. This is followed by a brief discussion and conclusion.

A synopsis of *DoE*

GW saw their long collaboration as a challenge to the siloing of the topic of inequality across three social science disciplines – economics, philosophy and political science – all significantly predating anthropology and archaeology (Wengrow 2024). They may be judged pretty successful in this, but if they effectively maintained the most significant siloing, that between evolutionary and social anthropology, then it is a Pyrrhic victory. Power (2024 this volume) addresses the failures of *DoE* to adequately engage with evolutionary theory and findings.

Through a series of case studies, *DoE* synthesises across ethnographic, historical and archaeological data, areas where there has been little previous synthesis and where, for the archaeology of the last 12 millennia, there have been major empirical and interpretative developments in recent decades. Archaeologically, it moves fluidly from the 'grand' or 'princely' burials of the European Upper Palaeolithic to less familiar cases of what are compellingly interpreted as egalitarian urban societies. History primarily figures as the indigenous North American critique of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European values, and its impact on Enlightenment political philosophy. Ethnographies and ethnohistorical accounts of predominantly hunting and gathering societies are skilfully interwoven throughout.

Their first collaboration, an academic article titled 'Farewell to the "childhood of man": ritual, seasonality, and the origins of inequality' (Wengrow & Graeber 2015), provides a succinct preview of the arguments developed in *DoE*. Length aside, the main difference between the two lies in a reformulated question: instead of the origins of inequality, it became how did we 'end up stuck in permanent relations of dominance and subordination'? (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:140, see also 115). European Upper Palaeolithic 'grand' burials provide the starting point for both works. Despite a pro-

nounced bias to physically anomalous individuals (2021:102–103), these have typically been interpreted as evidence for social inequalities among the living. GW interpret the people accorded such special treatment as 'the ultimate individuals' (2021:103), both exalted and dangerous. They accept the inference of institutional inequality (2021:92), but with a twist, interpreting such behaviours in terms of temporary, ritual play hierarchies. They propose 'that Pleistocene hunter-gatherers alternated – consciously and deliberately – between contrasting modes of political organization' (Wengrow & Graeber 2015:3), an alternation mapping on to pronounced seasonality. In Chapter 3 of *DoE*, this interpretation of the burials, together with that of slightly younger 'grand monuments', is used to illustrate the 'protean possibilities of human politics' (2021:78), protean referring to a form-shifting quality. In contrast to some popular science presentations, which have portrayed the world before farming as inhabited exclusively by small bands of egalitarian hunter-gatherers, GW characterise that world as a 'carnival parade' of political forms (2021:4, 119). The opening pages of the chapter (2021:78–83) set out GW's grounds for believing that nothing can be inferred about social organisation – and therefore political variability – before these grand burials.

The book's originality is in showcasing our political creativity in asserting and maintaining egalitarian relations, cutting across time, different ways of making a living, and, critically, scalar differences in residential density, including urban living. This provides a powerful corrective to over-simplifications of both Rousseauian and Hobbesian varieties and a critique of the Enlightenment teleological concept of progressive social evolution. They draw upon social anthropological studies of the first half of the twentieth century (Mauss, Lowie and Lévi-Strauss) to emphasise the deliberate construction of oscillatory political forms, through symbolic group rituals pegged to natural periodicities, what Mauss called a 'double morphology'. They also insist that people in stateless societies are highly politically self-conscious (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:112), and propose that the same attribute be granted throughout our history as a symbolic species. Ritual play – our creative participation in ontological transformations – is a thread running throughout (2021:500–501), partly because, where sacred and political power are fused, ritual action is the prime site of transformative 'social experimentation' (2021:501), partly because play and indeterminacy were important to Graeber's wider philosophical outlook (2014); the word 'play' appears on about a fifth of the pages.

What is a history of humanity?

The audacious and provocative title suggested that *DoE* would address one of the most intractable problems of studying our deep past: whether a meaningful distinction can or should be made between natural history – the field of evolutionary science – and human history which, to some extent, we make ourselves, but never under conditions of our choosing. Following Marx and pioneering archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe, GW propose that humans have more collective say over their destiny than we ordinarily

assume (2021:206). Following Boehm (1999), GW define humanity's 'essence' as being 'self-conscious political actors' (2021:86, see also 93, 112, 133). This is held to differ from the political agency of primates (2021:86) because human thought is 'inherently dialogic' (2021:94), that we 'make explicit arguments' why we should take one path rather than another, and that primates never do this (2021:86). Implicitly, therefore, this Aristotelian definition of humanity's essence as a *zoon politikon* (a political animal, cf Gintis et al 2015), is premised on the more fundamental trait of symbolic culture – the basis of language as we know it. But symbolic culture – the phrase they use is 'complex symbolic human behaviour' [Graeber & Wengrow 2021:83] – is simply assumed without comment.

Matters are further confused by treating symbolic culture as synonymous with culture. This fails to acknowledge that for evolutionary anthropologists, Palaeolithic archaeologists and animal ethologists, culture has different implications, relating to cultural learning across several taxa, cultural inheritance and, in genus *Homo* at least, cultural evolution (cf Mesoudi 2011; Whiten et al 2017). In this article, symbolic culture will be treated as a domain of shared fictions treated like objective facts, but based in subjective belief. This distinction, likewise, tends to escape the attention of cultural evolution theorists, who define culture simply as 'information that is acquired from other individuals via social transmission mechanisms' (Mesoudi 2011:2), without distinguishing between information about 'brute' facts of nature and information about shared fictions (Power et al 2024).

Homo sapiens' *speciation*

DoE starts from the widely accepted premise that we had genetically diverged into 'a fairly uniform species' by half a million years ago (2021:83). They go on: 'it is almost certainly misguided to think we could ever specify a single, more recent point in time when *Homo sapiens* "emerged"' (2021:83). This might seem like common sense, but with only slightly less definitive phrasing, this 'misguided' view informs much current scientific research. For example, the palaeontologist Chris Stringer considers that morphologically and phylogenetically derived *Homo sapiens* are restricted to approximately the last 200,000 years (2022). The biolinguist Cedric Boeckx has hypothesised that the most significant derived trait, globularisation of the brain (first documented at ☒233 ± 22 ka), played a crucial role in the evolution of language as we know it (eg Boeckx & Benítez-Burraco 2014; Boeckx 2017). More recently, he has gone on to specify that a special, safe ecology, possibly along the lines proposed by Chris Knight (2010), would have been a precondition for shared fictions (Boeckx 2023). Archaeologists have recently proposed that the shared fictions of symbolic culture only stabilised across Africa ~160 ka (Dapschauskas et al 2022). The multidisciplinary team around the female cosmetic coalitions (FCC) hypothesis has argued similarly for three decades (Knight et al 1995; Power et al 2024). The earliest widely accepted evidence for sym-

bolic culture is now placed at ~142 ka (Sehasseh et al 2021). So GW's statement about misguided views might be considered an unexamined assumption (cf 2021:525).

There are actually two 'carnival parades' in *DoE*, the symbolic cultural one concerning political forms that is the book's substance, and GW's caricature of physical variability during our speciation, so diverse as to present to a modern observer something 'akin to a world inhabited by hobbits, giants, and elves' (2021:81). I initially presumed that this referred to variability across the several coeval African *Homo* lineages during our morphologically diagnosed speciation (minimum span ~315–233 ka, Hublin et al 2017, Vidal et al 2022), although probably excluding 'more ape-like' *H. naledi*. But closer reading suggests that although they misunderstood or misrepresented 'strong regional traits' (2021:81) as referring to the fossils rather than technological variation, overall they were indeed characterising the earliest fossils classified as *H sapiens*, together with a few other likely candidates (eg Florisbad, Ngaloba), as discussed by their cited source (Scerri et al 2018), although these authors would probably have been alarmed by this caricature.

Given that neither Graeber nor Wengrow were particularly familiar with palaeoanthropology, a bit of exaggeration would normally be disregarded in a critique of popular science writing. However, this cannot be done here because this carnival parade plays a foundational role in the opening premise of the book, that for the vast majority of our history, we don't have a clue what was happening. GW use the (exaggerated) morphological diversity over a critical 100,000-year period to conjecture that social differences among our earliest direct ancestors were 'presumably' even greater, far greater than today (2021:82). The kinds of presumed social differences they had in mind included mating and child-rearing practices, the presence or absence of dominance hierarchies, and whether language or proto-language was used (2021:81). This is the basis for the presumed 'extraordinary' diversity in social organisation among our earliest ancestors (2021:82), and the corollary that there was no 'original' form of human society (2021:81). 'Anyone who insists that one exists is by definition trading in myths' (2021:140). The admonition is the book's final conclusion (2021:525–526), which is pretty odd for a book about how we got stuck, suggesting that the authors were distracted by their own rhetoric.

Graeber and Wengrow's mixed bag of humanity's traits

While origins speculation is ruled out, GW assert 'as soon as we were human, we started doing human things' (2021:83). Their criteria as to what makes a recognisable 'us' (here I merge their 'relatively uniform "us"' and their 'single, human "us"') are scattered throughout the book rather than brought together. There are the obvious candidates, like basic word forms and song-and-dance (2021:80), and slightly less obvious ones – such as imperative forms of speech (2021:547–548 n15), or the creation of the sacred through collective ritual action (2021:159, 163). Then there are more contentious cases or those needing clarification.

Foremost among these is that 'most basic element of all human freedoms, the freedom to make promises and commitments' (2021:426–427). This may be an anarchist recasting of Durkheim's sociological theory of religion, but it has lost a critical component – the role of ritual in establishing contractual obligations, endowing individuals 'with compulsive concepts capable of fostering moral conduct' (Knight 2008:118; see also Gellner 1988). Without clarification, this looks like an attempt to have moral communities without moral authority, or morally authoritative intangibles. Other basic traits of humanity are said to include surplus production (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:128), but what does this look like in an immediate-return (IR) economy? Hunter-gatherer researchers never describe it in terms of giving away 'anything extra' (2021:129), like scraps off the table. Similarly, Graeber's and Sahlins's proposition that the subordination of living humans to 'gods, spirits and ancestors' is what characterises 'the original political society' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:552 n50, citing Sahlins in Graeber & Sahlins 2017) is disputed by researchers who have worked with IR societies or where immediate-return continues to play a significant role (eg Howell 2017; Rudge 2019; see also Gray 2009). Or again, few would agree that: 'More than almost any other form of human activity, painting on walls is something people in virtually any cultural setting seem inclined to do. This has been true almost since the beginnings of humanity itself' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:439). Why walls and not human bodies? Presumably because GW only consider 'direct' evidence for social organisation (Wengrow 2024:9). However, as the earliest cave paintings are ~45 ka (Brumm et al 2021), the authors apparently did not consider early *Homo sapiens*, even after cranial globularisation (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:80), to be part of humanity. I leave aside whether political variability is best considered an essential human attribute or an essential product of history, but feel uneasy about treating it as 'social experimentation' (2021:4, see also 8, 86–87, 107, 120, 501).

To these attributes of humanity can be added the plainly provocative contention that if there was an 'origin' to private property, it is in ritual's creation of the sacred, because of an assumed homology of exclusionary rights (2021:163, see also 159). Here, they draw on Woodburn's discussion of 'male cults' among *some* IR cultures, interpreted as 'attempts to build a simple gender hierarchy' (2005:26), and as the most likely route from immediate- to delayed-return (DR) systems (2005:29). The Hadzabe provided the principle illustrative material, where men's exclusionary rights concern sacred portions of meat, mythically stolen from women and consumed by men, with women supposed to believe that the *epeme* spirit comes to eat it. Such rights (crossculturally, frequently pertaining to intellectual property) are backed up with unambiguous and forceful sanctions, both punitive and supernatural (Woodburn 2005:26–27; 1979:253–254; see 1959; 1964:294–295, 297–298, 304, for original accounts). What Woodburn would not reveal to a wider public was the crucial fact that in myth, *epeme* meat was stolen from women (Woodburn 1964), but this has been in the public domain for several decades. Mythically, men surrendered esteemed cuts and organs as a collective form of bride-service. This prototype of a public good, in the interests of

those in greatest material need, provides an indigenous critique of GW's proposal that private property was inscribed into human origins. It may account for why no other literature on Hadzabe cosmology was cited (Knight et al 1995; Power & Watts 1997; 1999; Marlowe 2010; Power 2015; Skaanes 2017).

Finally, there are informative omissions. While Durkheim's insight that ritual creates the sacred is acknowledged (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:159), his more fundamental proposition that group ritual was the mechanism that established and allowed the faithful transmission of symbolic culture is strangely omitted. This probably reflects Graeber's Maussian or anarchist anthropology. Durkheim saw the efficacy of group ritual in creating morally authoritative intangibles as operating along two axes: 'collective effervescence' captured the horizontal, but he also explored the compulsive aspect of group ritual (see also Gellner 1988). Mauss wanted to develop an alternative, 'nonauthoritarian' model of human sociality (Frank 2016). Graeber identified with this approach, but it led to a one-sided view of hierarchy, as invariably meaning domination by the few over the many. Consequently, Boehm's evolutionary proposal about hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, the only time GW have something positive to say about evolutionary theory (2021:86), ends up being misrepresented. The proposal posited reverse dominance hierarchies (coalitions of the weak), but this phrase never appears; instead, his work is presented as concerning counterdominance (cf Erdal & Whiten 1994; 1996). Counter-dominance has been characterised as a day-to-day set of strategies, while reverse dominance is ritually enacted on a more periodic and dramatic basis (Power 2024 this volume; see also Lewis 2002). Boehm scarcely mentioned ritual, but GW considered 'ritual play' as the prime site of social experimentation and this to be their 'most genuine breakthrough' in researching the book (2021:501). Had they wished to undermine the division between the two wings of anthropology, ritualised reverse-dominance hierarchies and the kind of moral authority arising would have offered ideal terrain.

African hunter-gatherers, immediate-return economies and 'original affluence'

When it comes to the relevance or otherwise of African hunter-gatherers to origins 'myth-making', David Graeber's great mentor and later collaborator, Marshall Sahlins receives due credit. His landmark essay, 'Notes on the Original Affluent Society' (1968), is considered 'the last truly great example of [...] "speculative prehistory"' (2021:136), 'a brilliant morality tale':

> There is, however, one obvious flaw. The whole argument for an 'original affluent society' rested on a single fragile premise: that most prehistoric humans really did live in the specific manner of African foragers. As Sahlins was perfectly willing to admit, this was just a guess. (2021:139)

Sahlins's guess, about what came to be categorised as IR hunter-gatherer societies, has fundamentally been borne out by both social and natural sciences. Heirs to just as much history as anyone else, IR hunter-gatherers are widely considered the most appropriate baseline to help constrain speculation about early human social organisation (eg Gintis et al 2015; Power et al 2017; Lee 2018; Townsend 2018) and Africa is now known to have been the place of our speciation. GW were aware of this, so why retrospectively present original affluence as a flawed argument?

Rhetoric, rather than logic or science, may be suspected here, as the authors had no problem positing baseline forms of domination, baseline freedoms and baseline communism (2021:47, 426–427, 508; see also Graeber 2011). The selective criterion they were most concerned to exclude is Woodburn's (1980; 1982) category of IR hunter-gatherers, precisely because their most distinctive sociopolitical trait is assertive gender and age egalitarianism (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:128). According to GW, this would be cherry-picking to support a caricature of Rousseau's thought experiment (2021:15, 539 n7), no different from cherry-picking the Yanomami to support a Hobbesian view. But the Yanomami – made famous by Napoleon Chagnon's description of their internicine warfare – practise a delayed-return economy (shifting horticulture) alongside a more IR system. A case of apples and oranges rather than picking cherries.

GW mention several candidates as a minimal external criterion for an 'egalitarian' society: 'being free from the threat of domestic violence', or equal access to resources, or equal say in communal affairs (2021:74). Treating these as alternatives, rather than treating all as legitimate external criteria, simply serves the rhetorical clam that 'it remains entirely unclear what "egalitarian' means" (2021:75). As part of this rhetoric, GW claim that Leacock's (1978) emphasis on autonomy rather than egalitarianism is a more productive approach, closer to indigenous values (2021:130). But Woodburn consistently made clear that individual autonomy was a crucial part of his definition of IR systems. Again, these are entirely consistent perspectives.

The sapient paradox by any other name?

The preliminary reason given as to why nothing could be said about social organisation during our speciation was the presumption of extraordinary social diversity, based on known morphological diversity between ~315 ka and ~200 ka (now revised to ~233 ka). GW provided four additional arguments to back up this rather tenuous claim and extend it, not only to a stabilised derived morphology (2021:80), but down to around ~40 ka. These were:

- the archaeology associating with our speciation basically only provides the occasional knapped flint (2021:82)
- evolutionary theory is only good for 'drab abstractions' (2021:4, 119)

- the ecological conditions 'down to around 40,000 BC' [*sic*] were so radically different as to render any form of analogy 'extremely difficult' (2021:82)

- African hunter-gatherers and Woodburn's (1982) broader category of IR hunter-gatherers cannot be used as a baseline category for analogical arguments (2021:15, 539 n7); any analogical argument has to include the whole spectrum of hunter-gatherer societies over the last 30,000 years.

Archaeology will be considered shortly. With 'evolutionary theory', it is ambiguous whether biological theories or philosophical propositions were intended. The context implies the latter, but the reader might readily infer Darwinian evolution, particularly as 'alpha-male' leaders are slipped into the contextualising discussion of neo-Hobbesian propositions (2021:3). It is actually worse than this. Sarah Hrdy, a grand doyenne of sociobiology and evolutionary anthropology, is credited (in an endnote) with telling us 'something important about the paths that converged in modern humanity', with her proposition that distinctly human sociability may have originated in collective child-rearing practices (Graebner & Wengrow 2021:82, citing Hrdy 2009). But she is stripped of the credibility associated with science, presented instead as an exemplar of 'feminist theories' and 'the tendency to make up stories' treated as another form of myth (2021:82). While Hrdy's argument primarily concerned early *Homo*, Camilla Power's work – addressing the same issues, but in the context of evolving *Homo sapiens* – is deliberately ignored.

Regarding temporal change in socio-ecology, ~40 ka has no general significance, unlike glacial-interglacial alternations. Moreover, at a continental scale, among the most significant ecological changes were the megafaunal extinctions that followed the arrival of *Homo sapiens* in Sahul (greater Australia) and the Americas (Saltré et al 2016; van der Kaars et al 2017; Broughton & Weitzel 2018; Prates & Perez 2021). Compared to this, African stability is remarkable. Nested within GW's ecological argument for the inappropriateness of analogy beyond 30–40,000 years is the notion that a singular 'us' required the extinction of Neanderthals and Denisovans and the end of interbreeding. It is unclear whether they meant that these sister lineages may also have had symbolic culture and/or whether interbreeding made 'us' plural. In either case, it is a bizarre requirement, as Africans never came into contact with these lineages and most never acquired Neanderthal genetic introgressions. Creating such an alterity was definitely not GW's intention, suggesting the criterion was introduced for rhetorical rather than scientific reasons.

Digressing briefly, the issue of the 'singular us' has wider bearing. What GW mean by 'our evolutionary history' (2021:81) is left vague. It obviously includes the processes leading up to and including the speciation of *Homo sapiens*, but they also use 'us' and 'evolution' more casually, as overlapping if not synonymous with conventionally understood cultural histories. For example: an unspecified part of 'our' evolutionary history has been spent living outside of Africa (2021:81); 'our' ancestors tracked the

seasonal movements of mammoth, bison and deer herds (2021:85); coastal adaptations played a central role 'in the evolution of human societies' (2021:155, 551 n48). Given their well-grounded critique of 'social evolution' (eg 2021:5, 60–61, 431), why use the phrase 'evolution of human societies' at all? It is all the more anachronistic from authors reluctant to engage with evolutionary theory (Power 2024 this volume).

The four exclusionary arguments certainly make it is easier to propose that historically, 'hierarchy and equality tend to emerge together, as complements to one another' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:208). This was GW's suggested conclusion to their fascinating comparison between northern California and Pacific northwest coast culture areas (Chapter 5), which could also have been part of the book's general conclusions. Several mechanisms are proposed. There is Bateson's schismogenesis – where cultures define themselves in opposition to each other (2021:56–57), deployed quite convincingly in Chapter 5. Alternatively, making a surprising analogy with biological inter-species relationships, different 'ways of life' may develop symbiotically with each other (2021:445–446). But the most prominent process identified concerns the influence of seasonality on social aggregation and dispersal patterns, treated as typically associating with alternations between more hierarchical and more egalitarian or communal forms, not necessarily in a predictable way (2021:98–125; Wengrow & Graeber 2015:4; but see Widlok 2024 this volume; Knight 2024 this volume).

A final possibility is noted in passing, said to characterise 'many Central African forager societies': a monthly rather than seasonal periodicity to ritual action, and sex-based alternations of ritual power (2021:114–115, citing Knight 1991). This is a slightly garbled representation and more directly relevant sources are Lewis (2008), Finnegan (2013), Power (2015) and Knight & Lewis (2017). It is noteworthy that Finnegan's *Politics of Eros* (2013) overlaps with Graeber's emphasis on play and indeterminacy (see also Finnegan 2015). The important point here, not acknowledged by GW, is that in granting that these societies 'are egalitarian all year round' (2021:114), they implicitly allow for a different perspective on the oscillatory characteristics of ritual power. The most basic ritual polarity may not be the analogue scale of 'egalitarian' and 'hierarchical', but digital – ritual power 'on' or 'off' – perhaps cross-cutting a pendulum of power between sectional, sex-based interests. This would be more consistent with Mauss's original, classic formulation of dual morphology, in terms of sacred and profane phases (Mauss & Beauchat 1979), but this was presumably too Durkheimian for GW.

In its original formulation, the sapient paradox held that evidence for symbolic culture was restricted to the last 35–40,000 years, mostly in Europe. Why does 'the dawn of everything', in terms of geography, timing and diagnostics, closely resemble this? Part of the answer seems to be simply quantitative, that this is when evidence for 'complex human symbolic behaviour' starts appearing 'more widely and in greater quantities' than the earliest (African) evidence (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:83). But much of this quantitative change is explicable in fairly deterministic terms, unlikely to attract GW. A clue is provided by an account of their methods. Precisely because assertively egalitarian and hierarchical societies map well onto Woodburn's distinc-

tion between immediate and delayed-return systems, the distinction is not particularly helpful for looking at variation within the latter category (2021:522). GW felt this 'meant ditching the language of 'equality' and 'inequality', unless there was explicit evidence that ideologies of social equality were actually present on the ground' (2021:523). Archaeologically, they seem to have taken this as a requirement for evidence of the opposite, for 'institutional inequality' (2021:92), such as grand burials and/ or grand monuments.

Archaeological data

According to GW, the 'occasional piece of knapped flint' is 'basically all we have' for inferring anything about societies over the period of our speciation and long after (2021:81), up until African evidence for the 'expressive use of shell and ochre around 80,000 BC [*sic*]' and unspecified complex symbolic behaviour from ~100 ka (2021:83, citing Will et al 2019). Given the prominence of 'grand' European Upper Palaeolithic burials in their narrative, the failure to specify the early evidence of 'complex symbolic behaviour' seems like a deliberate omission, as it arguably includes the prototype of 'grand' burials, Skhul V and Qafzeh XI, respectively a mature man buried with a boar's mandible and a youth holding a deer's antler, associated with dating estimates in the range of ~92–115 ka.

Lithics are the only repeatedly encountered artefactual category for the first 2.8 of the 3.3 million years of the archaeological record (Harmand et al 2015), constituting the original and principal domain of 'cultural evolution' (Foley & Lahr 2003; Režek et al 2018), but, beginning around 500 ka, in interior southern Africa, these are occasionally joined by earth pigments (Watts et al 2016). This was not a development restricted to our lineage (de Lumley et al 2016; Bednarik 1990) but it is the African and adjacent Levantine records of early pigment use that have received considerable and sustained attention over several decades (Knight et al 1995; Barham 1998; 2002; Watts 1999; McBrearty & Brooks 2000; Hovers et al 2003; van Peer et al 2004; Marean et al 2007; d'Errico et al 2010; Salomon et al 2012; Watts 2010; 2014; Watts et al 2016; Brooks et al 2018; Dapschauskas et al 2022; Culey et al 2023 [this excludes most literature on Late Pleistocene MSA assemblages]). In the Middle Pleistocene (>130 ka), this record almost exclusively comprises materials enriched in haematite (an iron oxide with a red streak), generically referred to as red ochre (Watts 2024), which, for convenience, Dapschauskas and colleagues extended to the platey crystalline expression of haematite known as specularite (of glittery appearance, dark grey – almost black – groundmass, and very dark streak). Before ~100 ka, red ochre is the only repeatedly encountered category of evidence directly bearing on signalling behaviours in genus *Homo* (setting aside ongoing debate about some late Acheulean handaxes).

Before the 1987 announcement of African 'mitochondrial Eve', not much was at stake in Middle Stone Age (MSA) archaeology, and archaeologists routinely assumed that ochre in MSA contexts was primarily used for body painting or 'personal adorn-

ment' (eg Tobias 1949:8; Mason 1962:236; Singer & Wymer 1982:117; Volman 1984:215; Clark 1988:299). Later literature typically took this inference a stage further, drawing on Durkheim to propose that the primary context of bodypainting was likely to have been group ritual (eg Knight et al 1995; Barham 1998; 2002; Watts 1999; 2002; 2009; Deacon 2001:218; Hovers et al 2003; Kuhn 2014; Mithen 2014; Rossano 2015; Dapschauskas et al 2022). Setting aside the oxymoron of 'non-symbolic' rites of passage (Mithen 2014:14), habitual group ritual is generally considered foundational to symbolic culture.

Almost three decades ago, it was shown that in southern African rock shelter occupations, which can generally be interpreted as campsites, habitual red ochre use was established by ~100 ka (Knight et al 1995; Power & Watts 1996; Watts 1998; 1999; 2002). The limitations of dating techniques at the time meant that it was unknown whether this was a real date or whether habitual use went back further. Nevertheless, together with the Skhul and Qafzeh burials (~80–115 ka), this was enough to seriously challenge the prevailing assumption that we only became a symbolic species with the Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic. A decade ago it was suggested that habitual ochre use in southern Africa was probably established by ~170 ka (Watts 2014).

In the early years of this millennium, there were several investigations of possible utilitarian uses of red ochre (eg Wadley 2005; Lombard 2007; Rifkin 2011; 2012; 2015; Rifkin et al 2015; Zipkin et al 2014; Kozowyk et al 2016). Notwithstanding this body of work, not only does ritual bodypainting remain the main contender as the principal domain of use, but the repeated presence of glittery specularite in some of the earliest assemblages provides compelling indirect support for brilliant ritual display (eg Barham 2002; Watts et al 2016; Culey et al 2023), as do high frequencies of red ochre microagglomerates in bedding materials from ~200 ka (Wadley et al 2020). Given the role ascribed to group ritual by GW as the principal arena for the oscillatory playing out of mutable political and ontological identities, one might think that bodypaints/cosmetics and the interpretation of early ochre use would figure in *DoE*. But, as noted above, it was evidence for pictorial cave painting, rather than earlier, indirect evidence consistent with habitual, ritual painting of bodies, that was taken as a marker of our humanity (cf Durkheim 1961:149 n 150, see also Watts 2009:65–66).

In sum, GW's claim that the occasional piece of knapped stone is basically the only archaeological evidence available to try and infer anything about 'ancestral societies' during our speciation is spurious. It cannot be passed off as the kind of simplification permissible for a popular social science book. Graeber was either poorly served by Wengrow's archaeological input, or their silence on this point was deliberate.

A prediction ahead of its time

Two years ago, a team of German archaeologists and geographers from Tübingen University, with Rimtautas Dapschauskas as lead author, presented a meta-analysis of the African archaeological pigment record, from first occurrences half a million years

ago to 40,000 years ago (Dapschauskas et al 2022). Their main finding was of a shift from irregular to habitual use of 'blood-red colorants' (2022:231) at around 160 ka, interpreted as primarily the residue of marking bodies in group rituals. They concluded that with habitual use, 'full-fledged symbolism' could be assumed (2022:293). This is probably the most pronounced behavioural change identified during our speciation, albeit at the end of the process. The earliest conventionally accepted proxies of symbolic culture, shell beads – some bearing red ochre residues – appear shortly afterwards, at ~142,000 (Sehasseh et al 2021). These are followed by similar beads, geometric engravings, burials, bone points, paint palettes and painting kits, all linked together through direct associations with red ochre (Dapschauskas et al 2022:237–238). The nearest thing to an archaeological hallmark of the dispersal of *H. sapiens* out of Africa is the use of red ochre (eg Vandermeersch 1969; Clarkson et al 2015; 2020; MacDonald et al 2020). As for the ochre assemblages themselves: where analysed, the reddest, most saturated materials were preferentially processed, tending also to be more intensively ground (Watts 2009; 2010; Salomon et al 2012; Hodgskiss 2012). The consistency of the record, at a continental scale, extending to red-staining of beads of the same genera of tick-shell from Moroccan and southern Cape coasts, contradicts Graeber and Wengrow's presumption that the social organisation of early *H. sapiens* was 'extraordinarily diverse' (2021:81). The evidence is remarkably homogenous and suggests just the opposite.

Thirty years ago, Chris Knight, Camilla Power and myself predicted a shift from irregular to habitual use of ochre by 160–140 ka (1995:81). This could not be tested at the time; dating techniques appropriate to the relevant contexts were in their infancy and very few sequences were even suspected of extending into the Middle Pleistocene (>130 ka). The prediction arose from the Female Cosmetic Coalitions (FCC) hypothesis of the evolution of symbolic culture, first outlined in the same paper (see Power 2024 this volume; Power et al 2024).

Thirty years on, the FCC hypothesis remains the only model specifying why the medium of ritual signalling should be red; now, it seems to have successfully predicted the main temporal finding of a meta-analysis of the early African ochre record. Irrespective of the fate of the FCC hypothesis, Dapschauskas and colleagues' interpretation of their main result challenges a conclusion of the latest review of behavioural change in the African MSA, suggesting 'no pan-African trajectory for the cultural evolution of *Homo sapiens*' (Scerri & Will 2023:10). It may even challenge the more forceful statement 'we are left with a glaringly obvious lack of a revolution in the archaeological record' (2023:13). This might explain why, although Scerri and Will cite the Dapschauskas paper as providing 'a pan-African overview' of the ochre record, they fail to mention the findings and the interpretation placed on them (2023:8). Should the stabilisation of shared fictions at ~160 ka be treated as confirmation of FCC's prediction, then a human 'revolution' is back on the cards, no longer presenting a paradox but the hitherto elusive behavioural component to a speciation previously only diagnosed genetically and morphologically. With the possible exception of a temporal correlation

between the earliest handaxes and early *Homo ergaster* in Africa, this would be the first time archaeology has identified a behavioural correlate to a speciation. In any event, this seems to refute GW's view that 'it is almost certainly misguided to think that we could ever specify a single, more recent point in time ('than around half a million years ago') when *Homo sapiens* 'emerged' (2021:83).

Archaeology of delayed-return systems

Before leaving archaeology and GW's grounds for having nothing to say about social organisation in the world before 30 ka, a comment is needed on the archaeology of delayed-return economies. In nominally distancing themselves from the sapient paradox, GW point out that the main reason for the massive increase in evidence for ritual and symbolic behaviours from ~45 ka (2021:84–85, cf Kelly et al 2023), is that this is roughly when *H sapiens* started colonising cool-temperate, and even periglacial northern latitudes. Left implicit is that these are environments where significant delayed-return components to the economy are necessary to make it through the winter and early spring. It is generally thought that such constraints facilitate, if not encourage, more hierarchical forms of social organisation, at least on a seasonal basis (eg Testart 1982; Kelly 1995:31–32, but see Schreiber [2024 this volume] on archaeological evidence of long-term shifts between hierarchy and egalitarianism in prehistoric Siberia). Making this explicit would entail engaging more seriously with Woodburn's category of IR economies.

In lower latitudes, predictable, resource-rich patches in lacustrine, riparian and coastal environments could potentially promote similar trajectories. Marean (2016) and Singh and Glowacki (2022) have proposed that through much of the MSA, coastal populations may have been characterised by bellicose, male coalitions, defending or trying to seize prime real estate and/ or female occupants. However, the earliest African evidence for semi-sedentary occupations, which are often treated as a proxy for both delayed-return and some inequality (but see GW 2021), are lakeside locations in north and east Africa from ~25 ka onwards (Vermeersch & Van Neer 2015; Crevecoeur et al 2016; Singh & Glowacki 2022:Table 1). This becomes more prominent from ~16 ka, associating with evidence for warfare from ~14 ka (Crevecoeur et al 2021). Significant and continuous interaction between IR and DR societies in sub-Saharan Africa seems to have been largely restricted to the last six millennia (eg Dale & Ashley 2010; Prendergast et al 2019; Jones & Tibesasa 2022; Koile et al 2022). In parts of the Kalahari, direct interaction may have been largely limited to the last few hundred years (Solway & Lee 1992). These intertwining histories tell us something about the resilience of IR systems, but hardly warrant a biologically based description of different 'ways of life' – as having 'developed in symbiotic relation with each other' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:446). African delayed-return economies are primarily a terminal Pleistocene and Holocene phenomenon, while Dapschauskas and colleagues' inference about habitual collective ritual suggests that the histories of African IR hunter-gatherers stretch

back at least 160,000 years. Indexical and iconic ritual signalling with red pigments had evolved over the previous few hundred thousand years. Local symbolic traditions may have arisen during Dapschauskas and colleagues' 'emergent' phase of ochre use, between ~330 ka and ~160 ka, before pan-African stabilisation.

What Dapschauskas and colleagues have in common with Graeber and Wengrow is the conviction that, while the red ochre record can be used to diagnose symbolic culture, whether at ~80 ka or ~160 ka, we have no means to infer anything about it. The authors of the meta-analysis assume that inferences have to be about meanings, notoriously variable - cross-culturally and over time (Dapschauskas et al 2022:239). They were presumably unaware that social anthropologists routinely distinguish contextually contingent meanings from encompassing structures of symbolic relationships, within which meanings operate. GW assume that without direct evidence as to the context of display, nothing can be inferred, it is just display.

Social anthropology and the 'ideology of blood' tradition

Since Durkheim, social anthropology has generally abstained from 'origins' questions, but a small number of researchers has, intermittently, sustained such a line of inquiry, with the hypothesis that an ideology of blood – established through group ritual – was foundational to symbolic culture (Frazer's 1887 correspondence with his former supervisor [Fraser 1990:75–80]; Frazer 1900 vol. III:204, 233; Durkheim 1896–1897; 1961; Briffault 1927; Makarius & Makarius 1956; Makarius 1974; Testart 1985; 1986; Knight 1991; Power 2010). This ideology was taken to centre on menstrual blood and, since Durkheim's intervention, on a posited metaphoric relationship between this blood and the blood of hunted animals, familiar to many through menstrual taboos. But the tradition can as readily be conveyed by its historical point of departure, Frazer's finding of a formal identity between the ritual prohibitions surrounding menarcheal girls and divine kings, a finding totally missing from Graeber and Sahlin's *On Kings* (2017). In view of Dapschauskas and colleagues' interpretation as to the significance of the shift to habitual ritual use of red ochre, and that the FCC model of the evolution of symbolic culture arguably predicted this finding, it is appropriate to consider what African hunter-gatherers do with red substances in ritual contexts. Is there interesting cross-cultural patterning to such contexts and – above all – what have they said about associated beliefs?

What African hunter-gatherers do with, and say about, ritual use of red substances

Here, I can do no more than provide a flavour of the wealth of material, based on a recent comparative cross-cultural review (Watts in press). Ethnographically, ritual action – 'the basic social act' (Rappaport 1979:197) – is the most important and consistent domain of red pigment use. Marking people or things red in ritualised contexts

typically imbues them with ritual potency, transferring them from the world of brute facts to the symbolic domain of institutional facts. The processing of ochre or redwoods (primarily *Pterocarpus* sp) into powder was predominantly done by women, probably an ancient pattern. Both within the Kalahari and comparing southern African to forest hunter-gatherers, ritual use of redwood is indistinguishable from that of red ochre. Both materials are contextually considered metaphoric of blood, although 'blood', of course, is polysemic. Ritual action prevents this from becoming a dead metaphor. There is little to differentiate the use of blood from either kind of blood-like substance, except that blood associates particularly with initiations and hunting rites.

The most consistently encountered symbolic logic is a metaphoric relationship between women's blood and blood of the hunt, linking women's reproduction to men's production. This is the essence of globally distributed menstrual taboos, suggesting that this was a feature of symbolic culture before migration beyond the continent, genetically inferred at ~70 ka. In Africa, the most widespread ritualised form of the metaphor is a blood-coded forehead blessing given by women to hunters. More broadly, the consistency of the logic surrounding ritual use of red substances transcends specific contexts, pointing to a deep history and, arguably, a singular driving factor motivating such use across the reticulated mosaic of modern human origins in Africa.

What African hunter-gatherers – typically women – have to say about blood symbolism helps us appreciate this time-resistant quality. A Baka woman, Pöli, said this about pregnancy: 'Didn't God create men and animals in the same way? And that the blood of men and animals is the same? While the animals are being hunted in the forest there and the embryo is being formed here at home, the woman brings bad luck' (Boursier 1994a:112–113) so she nicked her stomach to draw blood, mixing it with saliva and redwood powder and giving it to the men as a hunting blessing. Of the same practice among the neighbouring Mbendjele, Jerome Lewis was told that certain forest spirits got jealous and interfered with men's hunting because the woman was no longer regularly depositing blood-soaked bark wads in the forest, their favourite food. A man had cut her from her moon – she could no longer 'put in the Moon (menstruate), [...] a woman's biggest husband is the moon' (Emeka to Lewis 2008:298).

When Craig Foster showed /Una Rooi, one of the last N‖n‡e speakers (Northern Cape), some powdered, glittery specularite, she had not seen it since childhood, almost 70 years earlier. She was so thrilled that she immediately took it and painted her face with the facial gemsbok design, as had been done for her at her menarcheal ritual, commenting: 'the gemsbok bull seeks the women' (Deacon and Foster 2005:75; 'seeks' replaces the original translation of 'looks out for'). Among the Ju/'hoansi, we have /Asa N!a'an's comment that 'the first meat' – a steenbok – was the transformed heart-blood of G!kon//'amdima, the archetypal Ju/'hoan New Maiden (Biesele 1993:202). This same heart's blood was the medium of her resurrection in the alternate persona of the beautiful elephant girl, flying to her granny's groin (1993:141, see also 162–163; Biesele et al 2009:69–97). In a G/wi rite for restoring hunting success, the wife applied medicine to bloody incisions between her husband's eyebrows, with the blessing: 'You

find animals every day, but you can't shoot them. I will make the animals' hearts sleep. I will make their eyes close' (Imamura 2001:137). Most elaborate was Yeye's description of the circuit of blood-coded potency underpinning continued Baka hunting success; spirit (*Jengi*) 'took his medicine, he ate it, he gave it to the women, they gave it to the hunters, then you went and killed an animal' (Higgens 1985:103).

Where some ritual power has passed from women to men, the potency of women's blood remains – as with the Baka saying that the male initiatory spirit, *Ejengi*, was attracted to women and children because 'the sweet smell of their liver [...] reminds him of *ngele* (redwood paste)' (Higgens 1985:103), or Magwasha's formulaic response to Hadza women's reverse dominance ritual of *maitoko*, which involves cutting – 'Praise *Haine* (god)! Let bad luck be dispelled when the women *maitoko* bleed a lot from their cuts!' (Magwasha in Bleek 1930:621, translation by Susan Zengu 3 April 2023).

In sum, it seems that the ethnography of African IR hunter-gatherers, particularly where beliefs have been reported, provides an important constraint on the interpretation of the red ochre record during and following our speciation. Contrary to a proposal by Dapschauskas and colleagues (2022:292), there was little to suggest that other forms of blood flow provided alternative evolutionary contexts for hijacking a pre-existing cognitive or psychological bias for redness.

A final *DoE* paradox

GW ignore their own admonition not to engage in 'origins' speculation. The first couple of pages of the coda to Chapter 10 ('Why the state has no origin') are summarised in the following four passages:

> 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 coalition. (2021:432)
>
> As we've been showing throughout this book, in all parts of the world small communities formed civilizations in that true sense of extended moral communities. (2021:433)
>
> A moment's reflection shows that women, their work, their concerns and innovations are at the core of this more accurate understanding of civilization. (2021:433)
>
> What until now has passed for 'civilization' might in fact be nothing more than a gendered appropriation – by men, etching their claims in stone – of some earlier system of knowledge that had women at its centre. (2021:433)

All quite plausible, but with scarcely a hint of why and how this form of civilisation evolved in the first place. From the examples of social institutions and technological

innovations interwoven between these passages, it is clear that GW were talking about delayed-return societies (cf Wengrow 2010). But this Maussian and etymologically derived understanding of civilisation draws us into a much deeper temporal frame, extending far beyond the 'princely' burials of the Upper Palaeolithic.

Conclusion

The true subject of *The Dawn of Everything* is teasing out some of the preliminary routes by which *Homo sapiens* got stuck in seemingly permanent relations of subordination to an infinitesimally small elite. In terms of humanity's history, the subject may be considered the 'teatime' of everything (Knight 2021). What makes it fascinating and empowering is discovering just how creative we have been in using ritual either to avoid these routes or to maintain some semblance of the principle of oscillation in symbolically constructed political power. What makes *DoE* frustrating and less empowering than it would otherwise have been, is the authors' insistence on keeping evolutionary anthropology siloed from social/cultural anthropology, obliging them to simply assume humanity's most unique trait, symbolic culture. It would have saved considerable space, have avoided DoE's resemblance to the sapient paradox and may have been more honest simply to say 'We don't feel qualified to address Darwinian evolutionary topics, and that's why we restrict ourselves to the last 30,000 years.'

Perhaps the biggest lesson to be learnt from *The Dawn of Everything* is that, precisely because human origins is the most political arena that scientists of any kind can step into, we do well to keep rhetoric to a minimum and listen carefully to other voices.

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Architects of change[4]

Inequality and resistance among Siberian foragers

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Abstract: Reassessing conventional evolutionary beliefs on the egalitarian nature of hunter-gatherer societies, this research explores overlooked dimensions of social organisation, addressing aspects such as social inequality and its contestation through the conscious manipulation of space within fortified settlements in West Siberia. Academic discourse often marginalises emerging economic imbalances in hunter-gatherer societies as mere preconditions for farming and social stratification. However, this research confronts such oversimplified narratives that typically distinguish between 'simple' and 'complex' hunter-gatherers. Drawing on Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) critique of these classifications in *The Dawn of Everything*, the study advocates for a nuanced perspective on social inequality and the diverse societal responses to it.

The case study of fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in West Siberia challenges perceptions of human history, showing foragers building fortifications for over eight millennia. Global archaeological evidence usually connects such structures in foraging communities to surplus economies and socio-political inequalities. To investigate whether the fortified sites in Siberia can also be correlated with socio-economic differentiation, I employ a standard statistical approach based on the Gini index, while critically scrutinising its application to archaeological contexts. The study assesses changing patterns of social inequality in this region over time. Its findings reveal architectural adjustments as responses to societal changes, potentially fostering denser cohabitation to strengthen communal solidarity amidst rising social inequalities. Despite Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) criticism of the Gini index, this inquiry empirically resonates with their concept of societal self-awareness and flexibility, highlighting the agency of people as 'architects' of their own social arrangements and enriching our understanding of societal dynamics in the past.

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Introduction: why I bought four copies of The Dawn of Everything

I would like to begin this essay on a personal note to provide context for the outcomes of my research on the phenomenon of fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in Western Siberia. I aim to articulate the significance of the insights presented by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) in *The Dawn of Everything* and how they profoundly contributed to my research. While I had previously engaged with some of their writings, like 'Farewell to the "Childhood of Man"' (Wengrow & Graeber 2015), the depth and quality of their latest book made a lasting impression. Unlike previous 'epics' on human history (eg Harari 2014; Diamond 1999) that champion irreversible tipping points, revolutions or 'paradigm shifts' (Kristiansen 2014), this book challenges such linear views and emphasises that societal issues like social inequality were not inherently designed to persist indefinitely (cf eg Flannery & Marcus 2014). Moreover, it refutes the notion of a linear progression from simplicity to complexity, as is still frequently implied by archaeological research.

Throughout my research on fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in West Siberia, I faced challenges in contextualising and interpreting them within the framework of Euro-American perspectives on prehistory. The European viewpoint often downplays the significance of hunter-gatherer monumentality. Moreover, the extensive chronology of the Siberian sites – spanning 8000 years without any evidence of farming – clashes with the persistent *ex-oriente lux* narrative (see Barker 2006). This perspective, asserting the superiority and greater 'complexity' of farming compared to other economic systems, continues to shape European archaeological thinking through a lens of progressivism. In contrast, the American archaeological tradition exhibits a stronger inclination towards prioritising social structure and economic dynamics of hunter-gatherer societies (eg Price & Brown 1985), highlighting 'shifts toward complexity' (Fry et al 2020:315) and focusing on the origins of warfare and social inequality. I will provide a detailed explanation of the shortcomings associated with these perspectives on hunter-gatherer societies in the next section of this paper.

In contrast to simplistic historical views, Graeber & Wengrow (2021) offer a more nuanced human past, rejecting linear narratives. They demonstrate how our understanding of history is influenced by prevailing narratives, often overlooking marginalised perspectives (see also Montgomery 2021). While grand narratives in archaeology are often criticised, I align with scholars such as Rachel Crellin, who sees them as 'our biggest strength' (Crellin 2020:5). This recognition acknowledges that narratives and interpretations of the past extend beyond academia, influencing perceptions, beliefs

and power dynamics associated with the concept of humanity (Crellin 2020). In the contemporary era, young researchers, critical of 'block time approaches' in archaeology (Crellin 2020:6), call for diverse narratives, questioning the idea that change in the past must only stem from revolutions, paradigm shifts, cultural evolutions, mass migrations and so-called complexification. While scientific methods, like the Gini index used here, are important, I stress the need for thorough methodological review. This prevents us from seeing certain scientific methods as universally flawless or immune to subjectivity, thus avoiding the perception that their results depict an entirely objective truth about the past. This paper highlights the importance of scrutinising scientific approaches to counter prevailing narratives in archaeology, influencing our understanding of the past.

So why did I buy multiple copies of *The Dawn of Everything*? I bought copies in English and German, got an e-book due to pandemic delays, and gifted one to a family member who is a history teacher. I aimed to promote a forwardthinking view of the past. I believe that a hopeful interpretation of history, one that does not solely focus on endless progress and growth, can inspire a positive future.

In a world contending with persistent crises like the global climate crisis and increasing political tensions between societies and groups, a narrative emphasising the significance of human agency in shaping their world, as I propose in the present case study, proves more meaningful than a 'dull' progressivist human history (echoing the language of *The Dawn of Everything*) – highlighting the urgency to advocate for our world. Or as Graeber & Wengrow (2021:111) state: 'With such institutional flexibility comes the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given structure and reflect; to both make and unmake the political worlds we live in.'

Hunter-gatherer pasts: between equality and complexity

> And if certain hunter-gatherers turn out not to have been living perpetually in 'bands' at all, but instead congregating to create grand landscape monuments, storing large quantities of preserved food and treating particular individuals like royalty, contemporary scholars are at best likely to place them in a new stage of development: they have moved up the scale from 'simple' to 'complex' hunter-gatherers, a step closer to agriculture and urban civilization. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:106)

In archaeology and anthropology, the equation of hunter-gatherer societies with egalitarianism emerged roughly half a century ago as researchers started weaving narratives that depicted hunter-gatherers as having minimal needs, exerting negligible physical impact on their environment, and possessing simple social structures. Hunting and gathering groups were thus characterised as inherently egalitarian – an idea

first emerging in *Man the Hunter* (Lee & DeVore 1968) and encapsulated in the notion of the 'original affluent society' (Sahlins 1998[1972]).

As Wengrow and Graeber (2015) highlighted in their earlier publication on inequality in the human past, the concept of 'egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies' has exhibited remarkable resilience over the decades. Warren and Finlayson (2010) attribute the persistence of this notion to our perception of prehistory as a 'time without change' requiring technological revolutions such as farming to initiate progress (Finlayson 2017). Present-day foraging communities have often been perceived as 'fossils' (Bettinger et al 2015:6), essentially reflections of our deep past, leading them to be marginalised as 'people without history' (Wolf 1982). This categorisation served the colonial West in constructing its own identity (Finlayson & Warren 2010). The extent of this marginalisation becomes apparent when we acknowledge that even the term 'hunter-gatherer', constructed primarily around economic subsistence, embodies a form of 'othering' – a process of viewing or treating someone as fundamentally different, associated with nineteenth-century social thought (Finlayson & Warren 2010:26). This marginalisation can be traced back to historical frameworks such as Adam Smith's (1976[1776]) progressivist sequential model of human economic evolution, which categorises societies based on their subsistence strategies and ranks them hierarchically, with hunter-gatherers considered the 'simplest' (Svizzero & Tisdell 2016). Distorted representations of our past are thus rooted in the present, being shaped and reshaped anew, reverberating into the future of archaeological research.

Some anthropologists emphasise the significance of the principle of egalitarianism, suggesting that prolonged periods of equality in hunter-gatherer pasts were crucial in shaping *Homo sapiens* into the 'symbolic species' (Power, 2024 this volume). Conversely, others argue that debating the equality or inequality of specific foraging groups imposes our contemporary concerns about economic and political fairness onto non-Western societies (Bird-David 2020). Additionally, what may appear as an egalitarian society from a materialistic or anthropocentric perspective might actually be governed by 'cosmic authorities' or (non-human) metapersons vested with the power to administer justice, as observed in certain indigenous communities (Sahlins 2017:25). Archaeologists show limited involvement in these debates, often influenced by an evolutionist language that frames a linear progression story (Schweitzer 2003) using phrases such as 'from complex hunter-gatherer to early urban societies', 'the evolution of complex hunter-gatherers', or 'pathways to social complexity' (eg Feinman 2017; Düring 2010; Fitzhugh 2003; see Moreau 2020 as counterexample).

Arnold et al (2016; see also Bender 1989) highlight the issues associated with the dominance of agriculture-based models in shaping these narratives, positioning farming as 'foundational to everything complex' (Arnold et al 2016:448), including social inequality and warfare. Agricentric perceptions of the human past identify the 'Neolithic Revolution' as the origin point for the development of inequality through the potential to accumulate wealth and the subsequent rise of hierarchies. However, when faced with conflicting archaeological and anthropological evidence in hunter-gatherer

societies, new categorisations were introduced to explain and place the societies in focus. Egalitarianism was then considered the norm, with any deviation seen as an exception (Dan-Cohen 2020; Sassaman 2004).

From hunting to hierarchy: 'complexity' in hunter-gatherer research

Terms used to describe variations within hunter-gatherer societies include least affluent or non-affluent hunter-gatherers (eg Piperno 2007; Hurst 1982), pre-adapted hunter-gatherers (eg Marean 2016), semi-egalitarian huntergatherers or transegalitarian hunter-gatherers (Hayden 2020), non-egalitarian hunter-gatherers (Kelly 2007), delayed-return societies (Woodburn 1982), nonsegmental storing societies (Burch 1994), nonagricultural chiefdoms (Arnold 1996), intermediate (scale) societies (Prentiss et al 2007; Gregg 1991) and proto-agriculturalists (eg Sorensen & Kenmore 1974; Finlayson 2010). In my opinion, the most problematic term is also the most frequently used: complex hunter-gatherer. It was first introduced by Price & Brown in their publication *Prehistoric hunter-gatherer: the emergence of cultural complexity* in 1985, following Price's paper 'Complexity in "non-complex" societies' in 1981, which challenged the affluent forager model (Dan-Cohen 2020:5). Its popularity surged as it contested conventional assumptions portraying huntergatherers as inherently egalitarian, seeking to present them with equal levels of complexity. Since then, what is called 'complexity' in hunter-gatherer societies has been identified all over the world (cf eg Perry Sampson 2023; Jeffery & Lahr 2020; Ottalagano & Loponte 2016; Costopoulos et al 2012; Marquet et al 2012; Finlayson et al 2011; Habu 2008; Roscoe 2006; Williams 1987).

In hunter-gatherer archaeology, and particularly in North America, various definitions of social complexity arose, with each researcher adding their own perspective to the discourse (Dan-Cohen 2020). Some scholars view complexity as diversity in the organisational structure of societies and opposed to inequality (see McGuire 1983), equating it with vertical and/or horizontal hierarchy (eg Fitzhugh 2003). Others consider institutionalised social inequality as a defining attribute of a complex society (eg Feinman 1995). Social complexity is frequently conflated with social inequality, and certain factors believed to signify complexity in a society often serve as catalysts or prerequisites for social inequality (Dan-Cohen 2020). In contrast, social inequality is often interpreted as either economic, reflecting imbalances in wealth distribution, or political, manifested through social stratification and dominance over others. Price & Brown (1985) break down the concept of social complexity into preconditions, consequences, characteristics and causes of the emergence of complex huntergatherer societies. However, as Harle (1999) points out, '[o]ne archaeologist's conditional factor is another's consequential factor' (Harle 1999:3), illustrating the lack of consensus regarding the definition of social complexity in foraging societies.

Kim and Grier (2006) argue for decoupling complexity from inequality, stating that 'the development of inequality need not be accompanied by a "complexification" of social or economic relations', though they do agree that both concepts correlate in a non-deterministic way (Kim & Grier 2006:196). Indeed, several studies have shown that economic inequality, for example in the form of wealth accumulation, does not necessarily go hand in hand with social stratification (Buela 2020; Souvatzi 2007; Prentiss & Kuijt 2004). Another way used to define complexity in the archaeology of hunter-gatherer societies is through a set of observable traits (eg Hrynick & Betts 2023; Hayden & Villeneuve 2011; Kelly 2007) such as sedentism, high population densities, hierarchies, territoriality and surplus economies, separating 'simple' from 'complex' hunter-gatherers (Sassaman 2004).

This results in an ambiguous conceptualisation, wherein societies are frequently perceived as fundamental and isolated entities for analytical purposes (Sassaman 2004:231). Such a complexity-bridge disconnects hunter-gatherer communities from all other modern societies and brings us back to the concept of prehistory as a 'buffer zone' (Finlayson & Warren 2010:19). Prehistory in this context is understood as a time period between 'non-history' and 'our' history (Smail 2007:37), as implied by the prefix 'pre-'. Perceived as enduring in an unchanging, primal state, hunter-gatherer societies, including their prehistory, are commonly understood as existing in a 'time before complexity' (Rowley-Conwy 2001:44; see also Crellin et al 2021:80–83), before significant societal transformations occurred. Consequently, the classification of hunter-gatherers into 'simple' and 'complex' groups arises from this problematic perspective of othering.

Such categorisation neglects the intricate social, economic, and cultural dynamics inherent in hunting and gathering communities (Moreau 2020:2; eg Finlayson & Warren 2017). It propels groups that do not conform to the typical small-scale, simple and egalitarian narrative onto an evolutionary path towards greater complexity (eg Price & Feinman 2010), without adequately defining what this complexity actually entails aside from adding more 'complexity markers' to the 'list of traits' even in the most recent publications (see eg Hrynick & Betts 2023). So rather than acknowledging the immense diversity in the political economy and social organisation of hunter-gatherer groups, researchers often develop refined versions of Adam Smith's (1976[1776]) model of human economic evolution. In the 'refined' versions of this model, huntergatherers are split into groups of progressing complexity aiming to establish a connection between so-called simple hunter-gatherers and early agrarian societies (Finlayson 2009; Svizzero 2014).

Simple or complex, evolution or history? Conceptual dualisms in the study of social inequality in forager societies

Despite numerous debates in archaeology surrounding social inequality or social complexity in hunter-gatherer societies (eg Smith et al 2023; Semple & Coelho 2022; Moreau 2020; Prentiss et al 2018; Mattison et al 2016; Wengrow & Graeber 2015; Ames 2010; Smith et al 2010), the predominant epistemological and conceptual conflict among researchers studying this phenomenon persists in the ongoing tension between historical and evolutionary perspectives (Schweitzer 2003). This tension not only highlights a broader issue with dualistic frameworks but also exemplifies the challenges of reconciling disparate conceptual models. While scholars have proposed various approaches to understanding the emergence and persistence of inequality in foraging societies (eg Moreau 2020; Smith et al 2010; Borgerhoff Mulder et al 2009), explanations for increased social complexity and inequality typically fall into two main categories: environmental factors, which highlight affluent environments and their exploitation (eg Kelly 2013; Testart 1982), and socio-historical models, which focus on organisational principles and labour control (eg Grier 2017; Roscoe, 2006; Fitzhugh 2003; Arnold 1996). Attempts have been made to reconcile these divergent models by proposing environmental changes as catalysts for societal transformations (Estévez & Prieto 2017; Hayden 2014, 1996; Harle 1999). However, despite these efforts, the fundamental duality between the two concepts persists, with each maintaining distinct properties (McGuire 2008:40; Webmoor & Witmore 2008:57). This dualism is further illustrated by various dichotomous models, significantly impacting our understanding of past social dynamics (see eg Prentiss et al 2023; Smith & Choi 2007; Blanton et al 1996; Price 1995; Boone 1992; McGuire 1983; Johnson 1982).

Aside from these concepts, a language based in dualisms is applied where archaeological data does not fit the narrative of evolutionary sciences, as exemplified by the simple vs complex hunter-gatherer division mentioned above. As Finlayson & Warren (2010) point out, we do not divide between simple and complex farmers, as complexity is already implied (Finlayson & Warren 2010:35). But we do categorise hunting and gathering societies in order to simplify the teleological ideological constructions that, according to Rowlands (1989:35), became 'enveloped in distinct empirical clothings and reified within particular methodological experience'.

Entrenched inequality? Hunter-gatherers and fortification construction

> [W]e still know precious little of the political systems lying behind a now almost globally attested phenomenon of forager monumentality, or indeed whether some of those monumental projects might have involved kings or other kinds of leaders. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:147)

Conflict and complexity

In archaeology, the relationship between conflict and social complexity is frequently viewed as intertwined (see LeBlanc 2006; Carneiro 1990). Typically, one is perceived as either the outcome or catalyst for the other. When conflict or warfare is regarded as an outcome of social complexity, it is believed to be closely linked to the rise of social segmentation. Warfare is thus considered as one of the many factors from the 'list of traits' for social complexity (Fitzhugh 2003; Kelly 2000). Consequently, numerous archaeological case studies explore the appearance of defensive architecture, particularly in the context of emerging intergroup conflict stemming from increasing social or economic inequalities (eg Dye 2009; Earle 1997; Hayden 1996). The studies touch upon questions of the origins of warfare, while there are still disputes on the definition and the appropriate use of different terms, differentiating for example between violence, aggression and warfare (see eg Fry 2006). These terms themselves are usually divided in two opposed categories, such as intra- and intergroup conflict, or interpersonal and coalitional lethal aggression (Fry et al 2020:305). The term warfare is often dichotomised when discussing the concept of 'human nature', as exemplified by the opposing perspectives of Thomas Hobbes (1996[1651]) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1984[1755]). One viewpoint, drawing from Hobbes, posits humanity's innate state as an endless conflict among everyone. In contrast, inspired by Rousseau, another perspective contends that humans are inherently peaceful, with conflict arising only when societal constructs like private property are introduced. Dolfini et al (2018:2) framed the two opposed schools of thought or narratives as 'tale of two pasts', deeply rooted in Western political philosophy. Accordingly, two different research schools exist, advocating for either a long or a short chronology of war, with the former spanning several thousand or even millions of years back and the latter confined to the Holocene, creating yet another dichotomy as Fry et al (2020:315) admit.

The proponents of a long chronology of warfare, exemplified by Allen et al (2016), outright reject any correlation between warfare and political complexity. In contrast, the proponents of a short chronology of war state that 'war arrives along with complexification' (Fry et al 2020:315), and '[o]ne feature of complexification is the loss of egalitarianism' (Fry et al 2020:303), thus seeing warfare, complexity and inequality as closely correlated. David H Dye (2009:146f.) for example argues that '[c]onstructing monumental architecture, including mounds, plazas, palisades, and shrines [...] paved the way for hierarchical chiefly organization and its legitimation'. This organisational structure, with its capacity to mobilise warrior militias, would have provided strategic advantages to societies with well-coordinated forces (Dye 2009:101). Here, 'social complexification' is viewed as a precursor to warfare. In other cases, the relationship is reversed. Polly Wiessner (2009), for instance, argues that the development of intricate institutions for peace-making and alliances plays a pivotal role, attributing an indirect influence of warfare on driving social complexity (see also Glowacki 2024).

The perceived interconnection between the two becomes apparent in the two predominant explanatory models (evolution vs culture history) for social complexity in archaeology, as discussed earlier. In these opposed models, fortifications play an important role as manifestations of conflict and the consolidation of political power (eg Roscoe 2017; Hayden 1996, 1995; Earle 1997). Proponents of the evolutionary model associate the rise of warfare and the construction of fortifications in hunter-gatherer societies with the development of resource-rich environments. These studies concentrate on surplus economies enabled by storing predictable, seasonally abundant food, like salmon runs, leading to the segmentation of social organisation (Kelly 2000). The models suggest that the necessity for economic defensibility stemmed from the control of access to areas abundant in (aquatic) resources (Binford 2001). Consequently, this dynamic would have given rise to reduced mobility patterns, heightened population density, and subsequent conflicts, primarily driven by leaders competing for resources (Dye 2009; Kelly 2007; Fitzhugh 2003).

Socio-historical models aim to elucidate the origins of defensive architecture in foraging societies by examining how these groups controlled the labour needed for example to process these seasonally abundant resources (Arnold 1996; Keeley 1996). Some authors argue that investments in community defence illustrate costly signalling by people in power, facilitating the attraction of labour forces but at the same time benefiting the community (eg Feinman 2017; Roscoe 2017). Certain perspectives posit that the development of fortifications in foraging societies is intertwined with the establishment of territoriality, serving to affirm ownership rights and ensure access to specific goods or resources. This, to some extent, involves the integration of both evolutionary and socio-historic approaches. The subsequent establishment of ownership through the transmission of material wealth contributed to intra-societal political dynamics, leading to institutionalised inequality (eg Smith & Codding 2021; Grier 2017; Grier et al 2017; Mattison et al 2016; Hayden 1996). All explanatory models of social complexity thus associate the construction of fortifications in hunter-gatherer societies with the onset of some form of social inequality.

Resistance to inequality

However, egalitarianism is also linked with social complexity, akin to social inequality, recognising the intricate nature inherent in egalitarian structures. Wiessner (2002; 1996), for instance, demonstrates that egalitarianism can be viewed as an outcome of complex institutions within a society, established and upheld through cultural mechanisms that 'empower a coalition of the weaker to curb the strong' (Wiessner 2002:235). In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow (2021:86) highlight a predominant normative framework or set of rules prevalent in hunter-gatherer societies. This framework emphasises autonomy and employs mechanisms such as ostracism, ridicule, gossip, feasting and other levelling strategies to counteract emerging political domination (eg Stibbard-Hawkes 2020; Lewis 2014; Angelbeck & Grier 2012; Scott 2009;

Sassaman 2004; Boehm 1999, 1993; Wiessner 1996). Furholt et al (2020) argue for the archaeological application of such a bottom-up perspective. They highlight the presence of resistance, evident in the autonomy of different social segments and individuals who strive to avoid, obstruct and co-opt the actions of others. The authors underscore that social power, resistance and cooperation coexist, with political dynamics reflecting dialectical relationships among diverse social agents. Additionally, shifting the focus from conquest to resistance brings forth new dimensions of materiality, place and power (Welch 2017).

In this respect, warfare is frequently considered as a means to challenge political authority, serving as a strategy to disrupt attempts at centralisation and/ or control the accumulation of wealth (Angelbeck & Grier 2012). Some authors go as far as asserting that the only way for inequality to decrease is through warfare (cf Scheidel 2017). If we delve into case studies from West Siberia, such as those concerning the reindeer-herding Nenets, a distinctive pattern emerges: military commanders were absent, yet in times of conflict, certain potential war leaders could step up as chiefs, taking charge of military affairs. However, these leaders could be replaced under specific circumstances during military operations. For instance, if they lost their bearings, if the reindeer showed signs of distress, or if an ominous event took place. Golovnev and Osherenko (1999:51f) see this strategy as 'a kind of social flexibility, of "democratic military leadership"'. Another case study from West Siberia, focusing on the Khanty of the Lower Ob region, implies the existence of a particular levelling mechanism in association with warfare and fortifications. According to folklore, the Khanty society showcased warrior-chiefs who established fortified settlements as centres of their power. The death of the chief invariably led to the destruction of his settlement and the scattering of its inhabitants (Golovnev & Kan 1997:153).

Even though fortifications are thus generally associated with warfare and socio-political inequality (cf Dye 2009), various theories and ethnographic case studies suggest different explanations for the necessity to construct fortifications in forager societies (see Schreiber et al forthcoming). For example, they could be viewed in terms of conflict mitigation, in order to prevent raids, or to balance out uneven combat tactics (eg Reymann 2018; Vehik 2018; Roscoe 2008). In response to conflict scale, certain studies have explored cooperation and social cohesion instead of political centralisation to explain the construction of fortifications, both in a general context (Nakoinz et al 2019) and particularly within hunter-gatherer societies (Angelbeck 2016). The latter show that the significance of monumental constructions extends beyond elite agency, as they can also be seen as bottom-up strategies of reverse dominance. Scholars such as Angelbeck & Grier (2012) and Dye (2018:149) highlight the connection between monumental architecture and the development of cooperative relationships, emphasising the social power embedded in the communal act of building (see Kowalewski 2013). Recent research emphasises the importance of monumental construction as a central form of resistance. This architectural focus often takes centre stage in studies on collaboration and collective action (Miller 2021), underscoring its pivotal role in navigating

political authority negotiation. Such structures can either confine the endeavours of political aggrandisers to specific collective, temporal and spatial contexts (Sanger 2022) or contest the memory of the monument's creator, as seen in the practice known as countermonumentality (Osborne 2017).

Could the construction of large-scale monuments, such as hunter-gatherer fortifications, often intricately linked with the emergence of social inequality, have also played a crucial role in addressing or negotiating that inequality? Instead of being mere symbols of social hierarchy, these structures could have served as cooperative endeavours fostering social cohesion and addressing collective interests, notably in the realm of group defence. Considering their symbolic power, as 'built manifestations *par excellence* of socio-political realities' (Ballmer et al 2017:2), changes to their appearance or structures may suggest internal societal transformations and could be seen as acts of resistance or 'counter-monumental practices' (Osborne 2017:164), potentially functioning as levelling mechanisms. Examining these structures through the lens of their transformative potential opens up new avenues for understanding their role in shaping not only the physical landscape but also the socio-political dynamics of the communities that built them.

However, fortifications in hunter-gatherer societies have so far mostly been investigated as perpetuators of socio-political inequality rather than explored as potential facilitators of resistance to it. The presented case study on fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in Siberia aims to address this gap.

Fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in West Siberia

> On the matter of hunter-gatherer history, North America isn't the only part of the world where evolutionary expectations are heading for a titanic collision with the archaeological record. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:145)

Even though the concept of social complexity in hunter-gatherer societies requires reconsideration, the recognition of the immense diversity in their lifeways has garnered growing interest in the past decade (eg Finlayson & Warren 2017). This development is dismantling persistent ideational limitations that have shaped common perceptions of hunter-gatherers. Recent research in this direction primarily centres on semi-sedentary, fisher-foragers usually engaged in ceramic production, harvesting aquatic resources (eg Dolbunova et al 2023; Hrynick & Betts 2023; Shoda et al 2017). However, noticeable gaps persist, especially of comparative studies from different regions (see eg Singh & Glowacki 2022). Inner Asia stands out as a particularly under-investigated area in this regard. Recent publications are starting to address gaps in Northeast Asian hunter-gatherer archaeology, with some progress evident (eg Schulting et al 2022; Shoda et al 2020). However, West Siberia remains conspicuously absent from international

archaeological research, largely due to the historical lack of attention from non-Russian scholars in post-Soviet regions.

Lately, this region has garnered attention through close collaboration between Russian and German archaeologists, focusing on the phenomenon of the earliest hunter-gatherer fortifications worldwide c. 6000 cal BC (Dubovtseva et al 2023; Piezonka et al 2023; Schreiber et al 2022; Чаиркина et al 2020). The tradition of constructing fortifications endured for eight millennia until the late eighteenth century, when it ceased with the Russian Imperial colonisation of Siberia. The enduring practice of constructing fortifications persisted alongside a subsistence strategy focused on exploiting wild resources, particularly aquatic ones, which continues today.

Recent research is prompting a reassessment of forager societies' ability to alter landscapes (eg Geersen et al 2024; Toohey et al 2024; Lemke 2022; Grier & Schwadron 2017). This reassessment is also evident in West Siberia, where we witness the creation of enduring built environments characterised by pit-house architecture and other architectural elements such as fortification systems around settlements. These defensive structures comprise rampartditch systems, as well as mound-like, earth-covered residential complexes designed for underground living, probably in winter. With the introduction of pottery in this region, the period around 6000 cal BC witnessed the emergence of mound-like structures with probable ritual functions and the development of a new lithic technology (Дубовцева 2021; Piezonka et al 2020a; Chairkina & Kossinskaya 2009). During this period, pit-house settlements began to form on promontories in floodplains and riverbanks (Piezonka et al 2023). Certain sites displayed segmented fortification, often dividing the pit-house settlement into a fortified and an open area, where the fortified section typically housed a relatively large structure (Борзунов 2020) (Figure 1.1).

Around 3500–2500 cal BC, larger pit-houses with wider ditches and ramparts appeared. These fortified single homesteads became a prominent architectural feature during the subsequent Bronze Age (c 2500–750 cal BC) (Figure 1.2). The large sunken-floor houses likely served as multi-family units and were covered with a single mound-like roof (see Борзунов 2015). The Iron Age (c 750 cal BC–400 cal AD) settlement plans became more diverse, and both the number of houses and settlements increased. Ditch and rampart systems continued to encircle the house architecture, but their configurations varied, including instances of multi-ditch and rampart systems (Figure 1.3). These architectural features persisted into the subsequent medieval period (c 400 cal AD-1400 cal AD) but exhibited a trend toward uniformity and increased density, characterised by a consistent arrangement of house structures, a reduction in the number of houses and an enlargement in house sizes over time (Figure 1.4). Again, mound-like earthworks probably covered some of the settlements, forming what is called 'fortified residential-complexes' by Russian researchers (Липс & Кардаш 2018). This architecture persisted into the Early Modern Age (Figure 1.5), with indigenous reindeer-herding hunter-fisher groups like the Khanty and Nenets constructing such structures until the early eighteenth century (eg Кардаш et al 2018). Ethnohistorical

accounts indicate that the establishment of these fortified sites would have been driven by conflicts over reindeer herds, women, territorial claims marked by wealth differences, and underpinned by socio-economic inequalities (eg Перевалова 2019; Golovnev 2000).

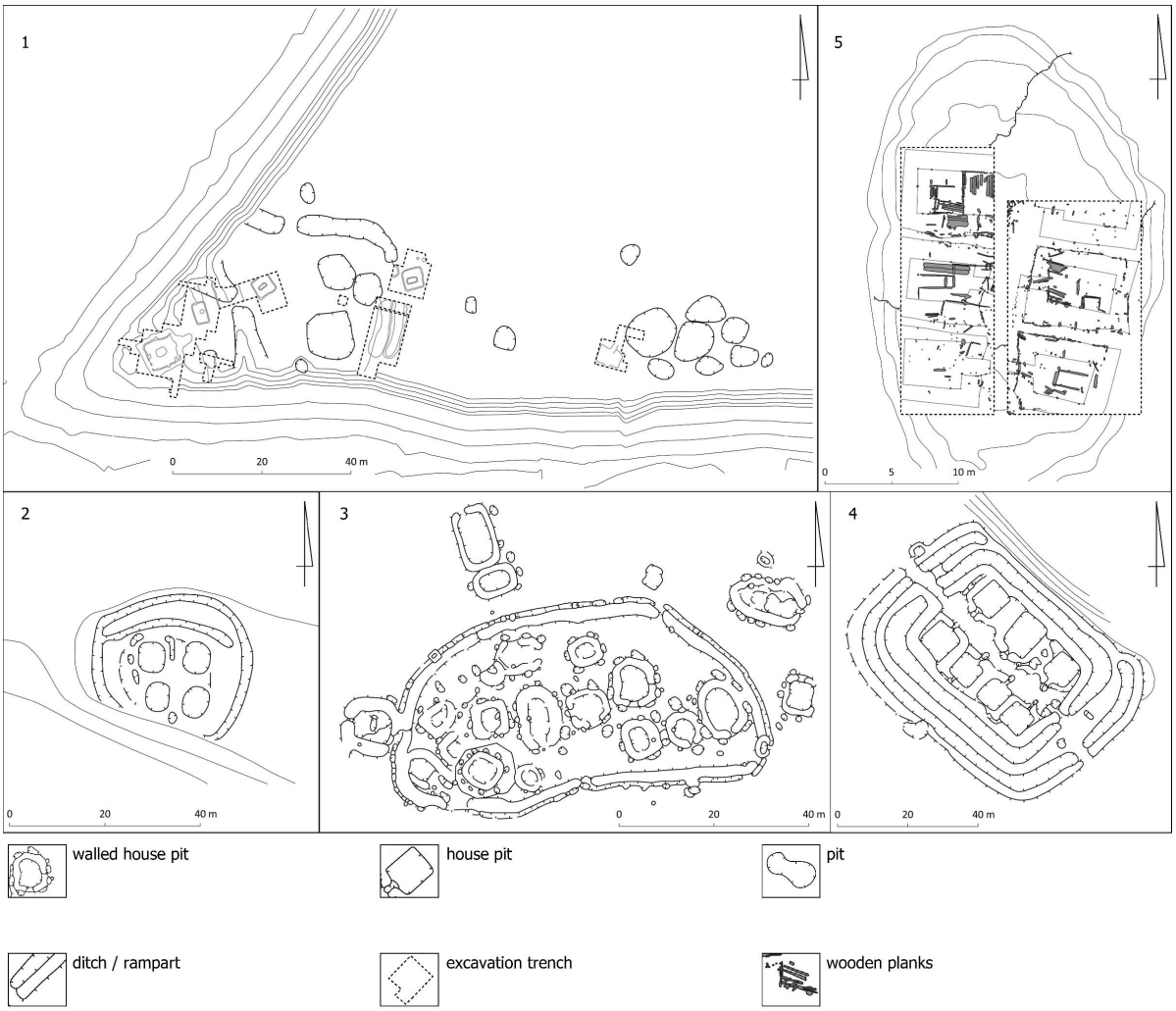

Figure 1. examples of fortified settlements in West Siberia through eight millennia

1. Amnya 1 & 2, Stone Age (c 6500–2500 cal BC), after Piezonka et al 2023
2. Barsov Gorodok II/14, Bronze Age (c 2500–750 cal BC), after Зыков 2012
3. ermakovo 4, Iron Age (c 750 cal BC- 400 cal AD), after Чемякин 2008
4. Sorovskoe 25, medieval period (c 400–1400 cal AD), after Липс & Кардаш 2018;

5. Bukhta Nakhodka, modern Age (c 1400–1800 cal AD), after Кардаш 2013 Figure layout: ernest Rappel

The Gini coefficient: measuring 'silly things'?

> It's almost as if we feel some need to come up with mathematical formulae justifying the expression, already popular in the days of Rousseau, that in such societies 'everyone was equal, because they were all equally poor'. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:7)

The increasing use of the Gini coefficient in archaeological data analysis has become a key method, facilitating the exploration of social inequality across historical contexts and facilitating quantitative comparisons among societies (eg Kohler & Smith 2018). Originally developed to quantify income inequality within market-based economies, this method was introduced to archaeology by Randal H McGuire (1983) to quantify social inequality into measurable variables. The Gini coefficient, or index, evaluates how unevenly specific observations are distributed in a particular context, such as households, populations or societies. It quantifies the extent of uneven distribution within the entity under consideration. For instance, it can be employed to compare levels of material-based inequality within a society, based on the distribution of house area sizes. The comparison scale typically ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates total equality in distribution, and 1 indicates complete inequality (Peterson & Drennan 2018). The utilisation of this inequality metric across various archaeological contexts enables comparisons of inequality levels among different sites, regions or time periods. While this data-driven approach enhances the objectivity of archaeological interpretations by grounding conclusions about societal inequality in quantifiable evidence, it is important to note that the selection of proxies or indicators of social inequality needed for the calculation of Gini values, such as house area sizes or grave goods, are inherently subjective and thus problematic (Basri & Lawrence 2020). Incomplete or biased datasets can lead to inaccurate assessments of wealth distribution and social inequality. The application of the Gini coefficient thus requires careful consideration of local factors, temporality, cultural practices, and, notably, the nuanced meanings and various forms of wealth within the society in focus (Smith et al 2014). Borgerhoff Mulder et al (2009), for instance, categorises wealth into three types: material, embodied, and relational. In hunter-gatherer societies, the latter two are considered to be more significant (Bowles et al 2010), as they centre around skills and social relations. Temporality is particularly crucial for the calculation of Gini indices. Given the challenges in establishing precise chronologies in archaeology due to uncertain contemporaneity, ensuring that structures originate from the same chronological period is essential for accurate analysis. Additionally, while the Gini coefficient focuses on economic inequality in wealth distribution, it does not fully account for other aspects

of social differentiation (Peterson & Drennan 2018; Smith et al 2018), such as political power, prestige or resource access.

Measuring inequality in West Siberia

The remarkable preservation of sunken-floor houses throughout West Siberia, alongside the absence of agricultural activities capable of disturbing subterranean structures, establishes a unique archaeological backdrop. Given the enduring visibility of house pits on the surface, even after millennia, we have opted to utilise the Gini index methodology to assess inequality levels within this region. Widely employed in archaeological research (see eg Bogaard et al 2023; Ames & Grier 2020; Kohler & Smith 2018), this approach provides a robust framework for our analysis. By integrating insights from ethnographic accounts, which have significantly informed our methodological approach, our study aims to explore the extent to which the historical nexus between fortified settlements in this region and socio-political dynamics—manifested in conflicts, territorial disputes and social disparities—may be reflected in the archaeological record spanning eight millennia of fortification construction (see eg Перевалова 2019; Golovnev 2000).

We examined 96 hunter-gatherer sites across the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district in West Siberia, Russia, mainly from the Ob' river basin and its tributaries. These areas are known for their high concentration of archaeological sites, such as the Barsova Gora archaeological complex (see Figure 2). Out of these sites, 66 are fortified settlements, while the remaining ones lack fortification architecture and are considered open settlements. As many of the sites are not fully excavated, we utilised the house pit size as a proxy. It is important to note that the remains of the semi-subterranean house structures in the form of pits may only represent the remains of winter architecture. Ethnographic studies on the house architecture of hunter-gatherers in this region reveal that winter houses were dug into the ground and remained visible for an extended period of time, whereas summer dwellings were constructed above ground using perishable materials like wood and hide. Consequently, evidence of mobile architecture may not be visible in the archaeological record (Piezonka et al 2020b). To estimate the number of house residents that is necessary for Gini calculations, we referred to ethnographic data on inhabitant density among hunter-gatherer groups with semi-subterranean winter houses, as documented by Hayden et al (1996:Table 2). We assume that the size of these winter houses can effectively indicate wealth in (semi-)sedentary hunter-gatherer societies (cf Ames 1996). This assumption is based on the enduring nature of subterranean house architecture, which maintains a relatively consistent house area size, unlike the highly adjustable and variable nature of mobile architecture (cf Anderson 2007). By reviewing similar studies from other regions (eg Ames & Grier 2020) and incorporating ethnographic data on factors influencing house sizes (Schreiber et al forthcoming), we find sufficient evidence to support the validity of this proxy in the presented case study. However, we refrain from considering house floor area size as a universal proxy applicable to all societies at all times. While the estab-

lishment of a reliable chronological framework for fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in West Siberia has only recently begun (see Dubovtseva et al 2023; Piezonka et al 2023), this effort has faced interruptions due to ongoing global political developments. Therefore, we approach our findings with caution. We acknowledge the limitations of this approach, particularly concerning the chronological uncertainty prevalent in many archaeological contexts within the study region.

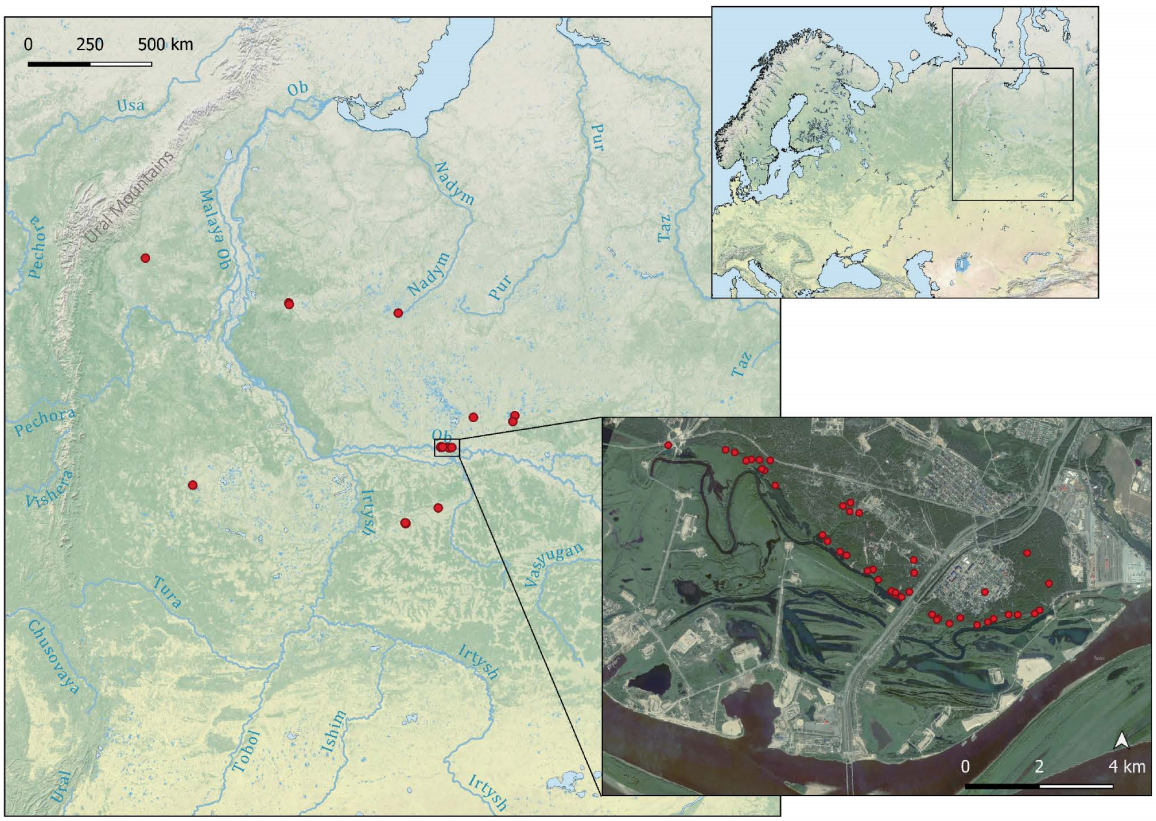

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of case study sites. The inset map in the bottom right highlights the clustering pattern observed among select sites, exemplified by the Barsova Gora archaeological complex

Base maps: Natural earth; eSRI Physical; yandex Satellite 22

For comparison and to underscore the significance of critically evaluating the methods employed, for this study the outcomes of our initial inquiry were juxtaposed with Gini calculations conducted without ethnographic data. The two approaches gained completely different results, as discussed later in the section 'Inequality, equality and the architects of change'.

Methods vs narratives

Graeber & Wengrow were well aware of the challenges associated with applying modern capitalist measurements, like the Gini coefficient, to historical, non-monetary contexts. They state 'if one reduces world history to Gini coefficients, silly things will, necessarily, follow' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:528). This clearly shows their critical outlook on such methods. Indeed, certain influential publications have employed the method with limited critical evaluation. For instance, Kohler and colleagues (2017), in a prominent study published in *Nature*, calculated Gini coefficients by analysing house-size distributions across a sample of 63 archaeological sites spanning various cultures worldwide, dating back approximately 11,000 to 300 years ago. Their results indicate that wealth disparities generally increase with the domestication of plants and animals and with increased socio-political scale. Of the 63 samples presented in this study, however, only five were associated with hunter-gatherer societies, thus clearly showing a severe sample bias. Of the five samples, two represent camp sites, one of which was a tipi ring used as the measure for house area size (see Kohler et al 2017:supplementary 1). The latter, influenced by factors such as surface, construction material, environmental conditions, or demographic needs at a given time (Anderson 2007), illustrates that house size does not consistently correlate with wealth.

The study not only neglects to address its sample bias but also fails to critically discuss the challenges associated with comparing different types of house architecture. Yet the authors justify this gap by presenting the study as a pilot, suggesting the need for further refinement. The refinement would be acceptable if there were no issues concerning the narratives constructed: the typical biased progressivist ideas of egalitarian hunter-gatherers, contrasting with the higher Gini coefficients of later periods. The ranking of societies by means of subsistence while reinforcing narratives of the evolution of social inequality is already a problem in itself, reminiscent of Adam Smith's (1976[1776]) evolutionist model. Furthermore, the authors contend that employing house sizes as a proxy encompasses all forms of wealth, including those defined as embodied and relational by Borgerhoff Mulder et al (2009) and represents a universally applicable approach.

Other researchers have also computed Gini coefficients in various huntergatherer contexts and with more extensive datasets and different proxies, also incorporating diverse forms of wealth manifestations (eg Prentiss et al 2023; Ames & Grier 2020; Prentiss 2018b). Their results do not show exceptionally low Gini values in hunter-gatherer societies. Despite their efforts, none of these studies garnered the same level of attention and success as the initial study, by Kohler et al (2017), allowing the permanent and seemingly statistically underpinned narrative of an evolution of social inequality to persist in both academic and public perception.

But it is important to know that the method in itself is not the problem here. In his review of *The Dawn of Everything*, Ian Morris (2022) criticises the 'complete absence of statistics in a book that is ultimately about inequality' (Morris 2022:12),

stating that '[m]aybe silly things follow if we reduce world history to Gini coefficients, but even sillier ones follow if we ignore them entirely' (Morris 2022:14). While *The Dawn of Everything* lacks empirical data, it's worth noting that the book was not primarily aimed at an academic audience. It effectively integrates case studies that furnish empirical data, thereby justifying its approach. But the authors' reluctance to embrace statistical methodologies in general evokes the enduring discourse between the sciences and humanities, often referred to as 'the science wars'. Their implication that inequality measurements are intrinsically biased leads them to completely dismiss such measurements. Consequently, the argument in *The Dawn of Everything* seems less credible because it lacks scientific methods. As a result, studies that utilise these methods and challenge its argument are viewed as more objective and reflective of historical reality. This scepticism, or even ridicule, of Graeber & Wengrow's (2021) argument becomes particularly evident when Morris references the study by Kohler et al (2017): '[T]he broad patterns that are now emerging seem to owe little to prehistoric peoples' will to imagine alternative possibilities. Economic inequality did, just as evolutionists have long claimed, increase with the coming of agriculture' (Morris 2022:13). So, in contrast to Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) empirical shortcomings, evolutionist archaeologists employ a straightforward analytical toolkit, emphasising reliance on hard science rather than 'storytelling' and claiming that the authors arguments 'run more on rhetoric than on logic' (Morris 2022:14).

However, archaeology is a science of storytelling. Rachel Crellin (2020:235) emphasises that '[i]t is our responsibility to show that history is not a story of progress from simple to complex, from primitive to developed'. Yet she clearly states that we need to 'tell stories about the past *and* to actively critique stories that we see as problematic and damaging' (Crellin 2020:234, emphasis added). I advocate that bias does not lie in the method itself but in the preconceptions and ideologies of its practitioner. These methods can be employed to perpetuate problematic views, as mentioned earlier, or to construct more nuanced narratives that convey a less progressivist message, considering that archaeological interpretations are not objective readings of the past but rather subjective constructions influenced by contemporary perspectives (Shanks & Tilley 1987). It is relevant to bring up Randal McGuire when discussing the dangers of interpretations influenced by biased preconceptions, given his introduction of the Gini index to archaeology. McGuire addresses hidden agendas disguising as objective science, referring to the production of 'secret writing' by supposedly 'objective' social scientists. This writing seems 'natural, given and unalterable' (McGuire 2008:21f). He asserts that these secret writings uphold the powerful and the status quo, emphasising the need to vocalise them 'in order to question what they have made unalterable, given, and natural' (McGuire 2008:33).

The key is thus to subject methods that are presumed to be objective, such as the Gini index, to critical scrutiny. So, in defence of *The Dawn of Everything*, and referring to Morris (2022), I argue that evolutionist arguments (in archaeology) run more on the unreflective application of certain methods than on logic. Or, as succinctly emphasised

by McGuire elsewhere, '[k]nowledge without critique or action is data for data's sake' (McGuire 2022:492).

Inequality, equality and the architects of change

> Humans may not have begun their history in a state of primordial innocence, but they do appear to have begun it with a self-conscious aversion to being told what to do. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:133)

How does this criticism regarding *how* we measure inequality impact the research presented here and the specific societies in West Siberia? In this study, the author applied the Gini coefficient, both with and without taking into account ethnographic data on how many people lived in each living area. As demonstrated in our previous work (Schreiber et al 2022), utilising the Gini index, we found that the observed inequality levels for fortified and open sites in this region are notably higher than those posited by other researchers for hunter-gatherer societies (eg Kohler et al 2017) and also undergo notable fluctuations over time (Figure 3a; for summary of statistics and significance test see Table 1).

Table 1 General statistics of data and significance test for equal Gini means

(E)Neolithic	**Bronze Age**	**Iron Age**	**Medieval period**
N sites	12	8	43	33
Gini min	0,1676	0,0323	0,104	0,036
Gini max	0,5968	0,3562	0,4261	0,4646
Gini mean	0,3032083			

0,18905
0,2599023
0,1697758
Std error
0,0365855
0,0387864
0,01133
0,0174002
Variance
0,016062
0,0120351
0,0055199
0,0099913
Stand dev
0,1267358
0,1097044
0,0742959
0,0999565
Median
0,29005
0,15755
0,2683
0,1455
25 prcntil
0,1859
0,1077
0,2058
0,0985
75 prcntil
0,371025
0,2862
0,297
0,2293
Skewness
1,036906
0,2354976
0,0434659
1,220314
Kurtosis
1,239148
-1,017648
-0,277756

1,201255
Geom mean
0,2811952
0,1539597
0,2485684
0,1449968
Coeff var
41,79824
58,02928
28,58606
58,8756
Test for equal means p (same)
3,10e-05

Permutation p (n=99999)
5,00e-05

The highest Gini levels were observed during the emergence of the first fortified sites, at the end of the seventh millennium BC (Piezonka et al 2023). Subsequent sites from the beginning of the Bronze Age, around 3000 cal BC until approximately the first millennium BC, showed significantly lower levels of inequality. Then, inequality levels rose again during the subsequent Iron Age (c 750 cal BC–c 400 cal AD), a period closely associated with metalworking and a 'high degree of militarism' (Chindina 2000:88). In the medieval period (c 400 cal AD–c 1400 cal AD), inequality levels dropped once again. However, this period is commonly associated with the emergence of a warrior class and the formation of private ownership (Chindina 2000). In the second approach, the 'blank' Gini values, which do not account for the number of residents per m^2, depict the evolution of house size distribution over time but fail to capture the relationship between house size and the number of inhabitants. A gradual decrease in Gini levels over time is noticeable (Figure 3b). Without a critical evaluation of the data, one might infer that the Gini levels express a gradual decrease in social inequality over time. But the 'blank' values actually only show the unevenness in the distribution of house sizes for each time period, decoupled from the number of its inhabitants, and do not cover actual inequalities reflected in the house size.

Figure 3 Gini values in West Siberia based on house floor area over time: Impact of ethnographic information (inhabitant density after Hayden et al 1996) on Gini means. Arrows highlight the temporal progression of Gini means with a) and without b) ethnographic information

SA= Stone Age; BA= Bronze Age; IA= Iron Age; mP= medieval period; N of sites= 96

In the simplistic approach to measuring inequality within the fortified huntergatherer settlements of Western Siberia, each house was treated as if it represented a separate household, which does not align with any real-world evidence (Schreiber et al forthcoming). Without considering the number of inhabitants, the calculations assumed that both big and small houses had the same number of people living in them. This oversight led to a distorted understanding of material wealth distribution, not accurately reflecting the archaeological contexts.

By integrating ethnographic data into our analysis, we achieved a more detailed understanding of how material wealth might have been distributed within each settlement, focusing on the size of house areas. In this refined approach, the Gini values correlated with the architectural developments described earlier. Initially, during the Stone Age there were higher levels of inequality and a scattered house architecture within fortified settlements. Yet a shift occurred with the emergence of large fortified single houses with mound-like rooftops in the subsequent Bronze Age and a general dense house distribution within the fortified settlement. Inequality levels dropped significantly. In the Iron Age, the architecture became dispersed again, and inequality levels rose. This rise could potentially coincide with the introduction of metalworking, as suggested by Chindina (2000), although there is currently a lack of empirical evidence to support this hypothesis. Over time, particularly during the subsequent medieval period, fortified residential complexes featuring communal mound-top roofs became widespread. This trend contributed to a more uniform architectural style and a decrease in inequality. However, it's worth noting that this phase is associated with a 'warrior-hero cult' as indicated by the frequent deposition of weapons (Chindina 2000), which contradicts the assumed correlation between inequality and a heightened potential for warfare

So, after periods marked by high inequality (Stone Age and Iron Age), we can observe architectural adaptations, such as denser cohabitation during the Bronze Age and medieval period. This adjustment may have been a response to the prior high levels of inequality. Architecture seems to be manipulated to emphasise social conformity, potentially creating communal identities through homogeneity, which could serve to mask increasing social inequalities among residents. This suggests a strong societal flexibility and self-awareness, as proposed by Graeber and Wengrow (2021). Continuing with the theme of *The Dawn of Everything*, this implies that societal arrangements in West Siberia were always dynamic, or fluid. Hunter-gatherer communities in this region were actively exploring various social possibilities, reacting to societal changes by manipulating their social environment over a period of eight millennia. It remains uncertain whether the observed imbalances correlated with political inequalities or if people rather contested growing disparities in material wealth distribution within their community. Furthermore, the absence of a coherent chronological sequence complicates the understanding of subtle variations of changes in inequality levels at a finer scale.

The architectural alterations observed in fortification layout and structure may suggest a form of resistance, indicating that communities were forging a collective identity in response to shifting dynamics of wealth distribution, especially if the observed increase in inequality levels is primarily economic in nature. In our investigation of inequality in West Siberia, we are constrained to examine only material wealth. This limitation arises from the challenge of directly measuring other forms of wealth, even though these are believed to hold greater significance in hunter-gatherer societies, as highlighted by Bowles and others (2010). We discuss elsewhere potential explanations for the emergence of fortification construction in hunter-gatherer societies, such as, for example, migration and environmental changes (Piezonka et al 2023; Schreiber et al forthcoming). However, at present, we do not have a clear understanding of the factors that cause inequality levels to fluctuate, or their potential connection to warfare in this region. Our knowledge is restricted to observing how societies react, such as by living in closer proximity and possibly developing a sense of communal identity, in response to these changes.

The study aligns with the narrative presented in *The Dawn of Everything*, where Graeber & Wengrow (2021) illustrate resistance to inequality using various ethnographic examples worldwide. Similar perspectives are echoed by other authors (eg Scott 2009; Sassamann 2001; Wiessner 1996; Boehm 1999, 1993). While archaeological case studies exploring this theme are less frequent, this scarcity may stem from a tendency to interpret data through the lens of complexity and linear progress (Schweitzer 2003), which often overlooks alterations and fluidity in social arrangements as exemplified by Graeber and Wengrow (2021).

Fortifying narratives: social and evolutionary sciences as eternal counterparts?

> The reason why these ways of thinking remain in place, no matter how many times people point out their incoherence, is precisely because we find it so difficult to imagine history that isn't teleological – that is, to organize history in a way which does not imply that current arrangements were somehow inevitable. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:449)

While Graeber and Wengrow present an alternative perspective on the deep human past through their socio-historical approach, their book's title seems contradictory to their intention of avoiding a focus on origins. It rather fits the author's 'modest' goal as being 'simply trying to lay down foundations for a new world history' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:25). This approach has garnered criticism for possibly creating another comprehensive narrative that essentially substitutes the previous one (Nakamura 2022). As Crellin (2020:241) puts it, '[g] rand narratives are the stories we tell about where we have come from'. But are grand narratives always a bad thing? Some archaeologists

argue that we must address grand narratives of human history, as neglecting to do so could result in others taking control (Robb & Pauketat 2013). However, this necessitates a shift from a singular narrative to embracing multiple narratives, as emphasised by Crellin (2020). By contesting simplistic, teleological and progressivist notions in archaeological evidence, such as the concept of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism as a fundamental organisational principle in the human past, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) resonate with a 'diverse history model' (Singh & Glowacki 2022:418) that seems to represent the current research ethos of a multivocal and future-oriented history (eg Black Trowel Collective 2023; Cipolla et al 2023). The authors provide historic evidence of persistent fluidity in societal arrangements, thereby endorsing the exploration of alternative interpretations. Yet in *how* they approached the past, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) unintentionally reinforced the long-debated dichotomy between science and history. They convey the idea that scientific methods are not required to support their argument, going so far as to proclaim that these methods ridicule history because 'silly things happen' when you apply them.

This reinforcement of binary thinking hampers our ability to recognise and appreciate the various avenues for reconstructing the 'different social possibilities' in the past, a central theme in *The Dawn of Everything* that Graeber and Wengrow (2021:107) passionately advocate for. The utilisation of statistical analysis represents one such pathway among many. Once again, the issue here is not in the methods applied, but rather with the narratives being conveyed. The belief in social complexity is hindering our ability to go beyond simplistic stories that divide the world into neat categories (Harris & Cipolla 2017:28). To quote again Crellin: 'When you start from a position where there are two clearly defined and opposed categories in the beginning, you can never truly move beyond that' (Crellin et al 2021:137). Thus, it is essential to question whether retaining the concept of complexity genuinely enhances our comprehension of the past. There is merit in Dan-Cohen's (2020:6) statement that the term 'complexity was ripe for destruction'. Categorising huntergatherer societies into 'evolutionary boxes' like egalitarian/non-egalitarian, as criticised by Graeber and Wengrow (2021:140), merely reinforces our contemporary socio-ontological assumptions (Bird-David 2020). Sassaman rightfully cautions archaeologists against clinging to this evolutionist dualism: 'The revisionist debate in hunter-gatherer ethnography underscored the folly of reducing historically connected societies into units of varying complexity for purposes of evolutionary modeling. The same pitfalls await archaeologists who treat prehistoric societies as discrete units' (Sassaman 2004:231f).

Can we potentially connect evolutionary sciences with humanities in archaeology and merge the theoretical frameworks of history and evolution to overcome these pitfalls? In the empirical study presented here, inequality is approached through the concept of resistance to it. In the lifeways of Siberian hunter-gatherers, both inequality and egalitarianism were situated on a common conceptual spectrum. They were shaped, contested and negotiated. Recognising this interpretation helps us steer clear of a simplistic view that sets them in opposition to each other. The West Siberian case

study highlights the need for caution when creating narratives exclusively reliant on statistical data. We utilised the Gini coefficient both with and without ethnographic population estimation, uncovering distinct results. This fact resonates well with Cipolla et al (2023:11), claiming that '[t]here is no singular truth we reveal about the past, but multiple stories for us to tell. Writing those stories should always involve considering the consequences of how we collect, assemble, analyse, and "become with'" our data' and that '[w]e should also consider how we construct narratives from that data, along with the consequences those narratives might have in the world'.

The findings on fortified hunter-gatherer settlements in Siberia (see also Schreiber et al 2022) prompt us to challenge the notion that evolutionary approaches are inherently more scientific and demand statistical evidence to depict an objective truth. In contrast, historical perspectives are often relegated to the status of narratives or 'stories'. This perspective is suggested by Morris (2022) in his review of *The Dawn of Everything*. Conversely, tools that could be beneficial to achieve a more comprehensive picture of our past, such as inequality measurements, are often seen as biased because of the problematic narratives that were generated with them. But it is essential to acknowledge the perspective from which we approach our scientific work and incorporate diverse viewpoints. Once we acknowledge our active role in creating and influencing narratives about the past, the subsequent step involves recognising our responsibility to consider the impact and consequences of those stories (Cipolla et al 2023:15).

Persistently projecting current ideas and concerns onto the past through the uncritical use of scientific methods and problematic labels, such as 'simple' and 'complex', for hunter-gatherers ultimately has the intention to 'other' and categorise the 'societies of the world into boxes of complexity' (Black Trowel Collective 2023:4). This hinders our ability to develop a more nuanced understanding of the past. It is crucial to make progress and overcome the conceptual limitations of our discipline. Referring to Graeber and Wengrow (2021), this is the point where we have 'got stuck'.

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Seasonality and schismogenesis[(5)]

Doing seasons and doing difference after 'dawn'
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Abstract: For a socio-cultural anthropology of contemporary hunter-gatherers, *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021) provides both good and bad news. It is good news in that it underlines the relevance of hunter-gatherer research for the here and now – beyond early humans and questions of origins. It is bad news insofar as the book proposes that the study of 'hunter-gatherer societies' is not a useful way to carve out a field of research and that we should be asking different questions. This contribution proposes that hunter-gatherer research continues to be a useful point of departure for engaging in a conversation about long-term social change.

The article emulates one of the strategies in *The Dawn of Everything*, namely using the 'indigenous critique' to generate and enhance enlightenment thinking. Based on extended conversations with ≠Noa//oab and !Gamekhas, two ≠Akhoe Hai//om from northern Namibia, I comment critically on the notions of seasonality and schismogenesis that are important threads of *The Dawn of Everything*. Going back to these conversations allows us to go beyond 'dawning' (searching for original states) but also beyond 'dooming' (searching for the point when we got 'stuck'). Practices of doing seasons and doing difference, I suggest, are ways of dealing with the sociocultural system, if in a piecemeal manner; practices that are underrated by Graeber and Wengrow who therefore fail to see important continuities beyond changes and flexibility in hunter-gatherer lifeways, and beyond.

Keywords: seasons, schismogenesis, Namibia, San, system, change

Introduction: the moment is now

Even after reading 692 pages of *The Dawn of Everything* (*DoE*) we still do not quite know where the obsession for origins comes from. Although non-anthropologists often

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assume that this longing to know origins was a human universal, there is evidence to suggest otherwise. In *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment*, the authors underline that there are people who 'share the effort to live in the present, with little thought for the future and little interest in the past' (Day et al 1998:2). These are (sub)cultures such as 'London prostitutes, Hungarian Gypsies, and Aegean Greek peasants' that are committed to the present moment and not engaged in nostalgia of a previous golden age or the utopia of millenarianism (Day et al 1998:1–2). And these groups show many parallels with hunter-gatherers, especially those who we call 'immediate-return systems' (Woodburn 1998). It is somewhat paradoxical that amongst the scholars who are particularly interested in hunter-gatherers there have been many who were nevertheless very much concerned with questions of evolutionary origins, even though many hunter-gatherers themselves put little emphasis on reconstructing the distant past. But it is not coincidental that a focus on the present moment goes together with a concern for 'freedom and autonomy' that stands in opposition to many of the social institutions that 'organize long-term social reproduction and, simultaneously, produce hierarchical relationships' (Day et al 1998:2). The question is how social reproduction may be achieved without allowing the past to be abused as a basis for domination and hierarchy. Asking for origins is, after all, not an innocent affair (if it ever was one). It is increasingly tied up with institutions that are predicated on hierarchy, descent and power. In Europe, and that includes prominently European scholarship, being able to trace one's own roots (and those of one's ideas) as far back as possible is an expression of distinction and of cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1979).

Claiming a long and distinguished social or academic pedigree continues to be a key feature of 'doing class' (see Gamper & Kupfer 2023:14), ie of creating class differences by excluding or marginalising newcomers, in this case firstgeneration academics, or those with degrees from academic institutions of lower reputation or with publications outside the Anglo publishing bubble. While scholarship may no longer be dominated by individual gentlemen who can claim 'Victorian' origins, the principle of descent is today returning with force in identity politics (see Neiman 2023), when the quality of an idea and how it may change our thinking can be trumped by where it originates from and by who utters it.

Against this background, attacking theories of origin to me has the appeal of a levelling mechanism. The idea is not altogether new, but it deserves more support. Wittgenstein (1994:131) laid the philosophical ground by insisting that an explanation based on origins was not inherently better than any other explanation. Pattern-detection based on family resemblances, Wittgenstein insisted, is at least as valuable and successful as trying to trace origins as an explanation for social facts (see also Wittgenstein 1993:32–34). Knowing origins does not necessarily mean that we would know the essence of things. Comparative hunter-gatherer studies have invested heavily in pattern-detection based on family resemblance. Woodburn's distinction between 'immediate return' and 'delayed return' systems, mentioned above, is a case in point. My own depiction of 'hunter-gatherer situations' (Widlok 2016a; 2016b) tries to turn

ethnographic attention to family resemblances into a more general approach. Not surprisingly, therefore, many scholars of hunter-gatherer studies, in particular those who are not into origin stories, may feel that the mix between mild disregard and harsh treatment that they receive in *DoE* is unfounded and the critique misdirected. Graeber and Wengrow – at least implicitly – claim that hunter-gatherer studies are a non-starter since in their view hunting and gathering could be associated with basically any socio-political order, anything from very egalitarian to very hierarchical, from high personal autonomy to very repressive systems (2021:111). In my contribution I shall be responding to this claim by underlining that the main task of hunter-gatherer studies has always been that of trying to investigate the variation amongst forager systems and to better understand how transformations occur within the foraging spectrum.

My contribution shares the critique towards origins as the master narrative of scholarly explanation. At the same time, it seeks to redirect some of this critique. It even emulates *DoE* in that it re-affirms 'the indigenous critique' as an important feature of scholarly thinking. One of the main achievements of *DoE* is that it traces in great detail the extent to which enlightened ideas are typically dialogical, if not already in their origins then in the way they evolve and mature. The book focuses on the case of the Wendat and of Kandiaronk as their prominent representative whose ideas made their way into the books of enlightenment thinkers. They see Kandiaronk, a 'Wendat philosopher statesman' (2021:48) – and his fellow representatives of North American First Nations – as commentators of Europe whose critique, captured in the writings of Jesuits and others, they eventually led to the enlightenment values so fundamental for Europe's self-image. Graeber and Wengrow focus in particular on the three great freedoms that they see at the core of the indigenous critique directed against seventeenth-century Europe: the freedom to move away, the freedom to ignore or disobey commands, and the freedom 'to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones' (2021:503). Their evidence on how exactly these ideas came to constitute the enlightenment is far from being watertight, but it is certainly suggestive and thought-provoking. The authors do their best to convince us that Wendat people such as Kandiaronk had learned their lesson experiencing oppressive regimes in pre-Columbian North America and consequently voiced their critique about the Absolutist social order of Europe at the time. The more general proposition behind this is that great cultural achievements are typically the result of culture-contact. In my contribution I take a lead from this, listening to the indigenous critique by returning to my field notes featuring long conversations that I had over the years with hunter-gatherers at my field sites in northern Namibia. Apart from my exchanges with !Gamekhas (a senior woman and my main interlocutor in the field), I shall give room to dialogues I had with ≠Noa//oab, a senior man from the same settlement, whose life history I recorded in detail but which has remained unpublished so far. Both !Gamekhas and ≠Noa//oab were key persons at the settlement of /Gomais. They are now deceased but have been my interlocutors for almost three decades. Their remarks, paired with

my ethnographic observations, in particular on seasonality and on schismogenesis, are the basis for my critique of *DoE* in this article (see also Widlok 2022a).

Seasonality: doing seasons

Talking to ǂAkhoe Hai//om like ǂNoa//oab I realised early in my field research that the Hai//om seasonal cycle has three named seasons (see Widlok 1999:78) instead of the four European or the two Arctic seasons: There is *saub* (the cold/ dry season) and then *sores* (the hot/dry season, same lexical root as 'sun') and *//haob* (the hot/ wet season, same root as 'cloud'). Each season has something good and something bad to it, hence there is no seasonal dualism. *Saub* (roughly from May to August) is when many fruits ripen and when there are fewer annoying insects around but when it takes more efforts to keep warm during nights, to have sufficient firewood, etc. *Sores* (roughly from September to December) is good for spotting game animals and for hunting but at the same time makes walking on sandy footpaths during the day rather arduous. *// Haob* (roughly January to April) starts with a plenty of termite and mushroom food but keeping things dry in the rain can be difficult, and occasional floods and active snakes can limit mobility. Hence, there is no sense here of oscillating between better and worse, an easier and a more difficult season, or between hierarchy and equality. Moreover, there is gradual change from cold and dry to hot and dry, to hot and wet, and again to cold and dry, with some aspects continuing while other aspects change.

By contrast, reading *DoE* we are given a sense that seasonality is a structuralist dualist switching between two seasons and between two states of affairs, egalitarian and hierarchical (read: good and bad), decentralised and centralised, etc. San groups, too, have a fission and fusion mobility pattern (see Widlok & Henn 2022) but as Barnard (1992) has observed, depending on where you are in the Kalahari basin either fission or fusion may be associated with 'the wet season'. There are good reasons for moving, and good reasons for staying, throughout the year (see Widlok 2015). Graeber and Wengrow do say at some point that it would not matter if there were three or four or five seasons instead of two, but I am afraid they are misled by the binary seasonality of the circumpolar regions, since it suggests that social relations and social systems can and do (firstly) 'oscillate' between two state of affairs, (secondly) shift in a flash from very egalitarian to very hierarchical and (thirdly) that this oscillation necessarily overshadows the continuities between these state of affairs.

Among Hai//om San the hot wet season usually does not start suddenly when the first rain falls. In fact, it takes experience and patience to tell when the rains may start in earnest and the termites will start to swarm (see Widlok 1999). After weeks or even months of mostly blue skies during *sores*, finally some substantial clouds appear which soften the heat somewhat as they provide some shade but which initially only may lead to rainfall here and there. When rains finally set in at full force (if you are lucky) in *// haob*, it may still be very hot at times and only slowly does the sun gets less scorching.

Eventually then, moving into the dry and cool season of *saub* could be said to begin by it by becoming drier (without immediately getting cooler) or by becoming cooler (without, in years of drought, there being a major decline in rainfall). In turn, when in *saub,* the aridness stays into *sores* but more hot days are added, which will eventually make people say something like 'Oh, *sores* has really come now.' In other words, in ecological reality and in cultural perception, the seasons shade into one another, and they may do slightly differently in different years. In fact, people may disagree as to whether one season has 'really' started yet or not. There are rarely sudden shifts, there are always continuities and certainly no sense of oscillation between two states of affairs. Hot and cold, dry and wet, do come in various combinations, and each season is really a loose and polythetic bundle of features. Neither in mind nor out there in the environment do they form clearly demarcated sets.

Maybe even more importantly, seasons are neither just happening, nor are they all-consuming states of affairs. Quite to the contrary, the other seasons always continue to be present. When talking about seasons and when dealing with the desirable or undesirable aspects of a particular season (eg the presence or absence of non-human species that are important in life), the other seasons are frequently invoked and can be made present. In a sense, seasons are even actively created. Seasons (or features associated with them) may be longed for, they are welcomed, they are seen off, they are something to look out for and something to get tired off. For instance, there used to be a first-fruit ritualisation for the new harvest of Mangetti/Mongongo nuts and people today occasionally are still arguing about when it is right to start eating the first fruits of the new season. After all, many areas have so many Mangetti trees that the old nuts from the previous season may still be available (with some extra effort of walking) when the new ones ripen. Getting the Mangetti off the tree at the beginning of the season means that the outer flesh is still unripe and has to be discarded to rot while the nut inside is already good to eat. In the main harvest season, which is both in late *//haob* and in early *saub*, Mangetti is at its best, with rich fruit flesh and the nut inside. After that, collecting Mangetti later in the season means that the outer flesh is often already rotten while the nut inside is still good, the harvest becomes a pale (or rather brown) shadow of what it was before. Hence, deciding when Mangetti is 'in season' can be subject to debate. And with such a major resource not falling into one season only, the whole idea of two utterly distinct states of affairs associated with seasonality becomes dubious. Although the state and occurrence of Mangetti differs across the year, there are almost always *some* Mangetti to be found *somewhere* and in some edible state. The same, I would hold, is also true for many hunted animals.

However, I don't think that this is just a matter of San ecology being different – or maybe exceptional – and therefore dualistic seasonality not being applicable in this case. More generally, I think, San ethnography suggests that the change of seasons is not so much structurally given, as Graeber and Wengrow suggest. Rather, it is performatively achieved. Or, to put it differently, San are not just subject to seasonality, they can also be said to be the subjects 'doing seasons'. At least the first-fruit ceremonies of

the old days (see Widlok 1999:214–215) made the start of the season publicly known and accepted. Like many rituals, it digitised what is in fact a protracted analogue shift over time (see Rappaport 1999). Apparently, Hai//om are not alone in this. In *Nagori* (2020), Ryoko Sekiguchi explicates how the Japanese seasons are similarly actively fostered, remembered, invoked and so forth. Reading her account shows considerable family resemblances with the way in which my Hai//om informants deal with seasonality. In *DoE*, by contrast, it seems that two biases are mutually reinforcing, namely the bias of the strongly seasonal setting in circumpolar regions and the bias of structuralist thinking (in Mauss and his disciples) that conceives of all differences and variation in terms of dualistic oppositions.

This is not only a matter of such dual oppositions being more clearly visible in one cultural system (eg among Inuit) than in another (eg among San or in Japan). It is also a matter of practitioners and researchers being able to keep track of continuities beyond different ways of doing seasons. This awareness of continuities despite ongoing change features large in the life histories I have collected among Hai//om. They always emphasise continuity. Repeatedly in his life history ≠Noa//oab expresses continuity in this way: tsike ke //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi, //nâba ke ûi

> [and we lived there like this, lived there like this, lived there like this, lived there like this]
>
> (≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 22)

> habe ke //nati ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ, //nâti ke hâ
>
> [but we stayed like this, stayed like this, stayed like this, stayed like this]
>
> (≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 14)

The repetition of verbs here express continuity, as it does in the following statement:

> ao da ke //nâba ra ≠û-e, ≠û-e, ≠û-e ≠û-e, ≠û-e, o da ke sida //nâba sida di /gomaisi ≠û-e
>
> [and then we ate there, ate, ate, ate, ate, and we ate there at our Mangetti place]
>
> (≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 85)

I am confident to say that in the perspective and practice of my Hai//om interlocutors, stability is considered to be of value. Even though Hai//om may also talk of the joys of coming seasons or places to be visited, etc, they certainly do not experience the change of seasons as an unruly switching between worlds (neither two nor three or more). I would argue that if one is generally happy with what is (which is true for many hunter-gatherers), stability does have a value. To see stability as a burden, as

being 'locked in', presupposes a sense that things would have to change for things to get better, which is part and parcel of progressive narratives that we find in Europe and in many other agriculturalist settings (see Brody 2000).

At the same time, the Hai//om life stories also show an awareness that things also regularly get worse so that change is not a value in itself. In their recent history they experienced colonial wars and liberation wars and many displacements. However, things for very long stretches are kept as stable as possible and that stability – it seems – can be appreciated while at the same time there is also a positive longing for what is to come (eg the fruits of the next season). People appreciate variety, not only in foodstuffs but also in other matters, but this is a far cry from desperately seeking change. Hai//om stories and their everyday narratives show that they are regularly impatient for things to start. In many ways they are always ahead of time in their thoughts. We could say that not only cities but also seasons 'begin in the mind' (see Graeber & Wengrow 2021:276), but that is true for all seasons. Transposed to European seasonality we could say that they look forward to carnival as much as they expect Lent. Again, there is family resemblance to be found in other ethnographic cases: Spittler (1999) provides a non-forager example from West Africa in which the alternation between everyday and feasting periods are culturally valued and are mutually constitutive so that the meagre season is not necessarily considered a bad season.

When transposing seasonality to the political domain one could argue that, firstly, there is always underlying continuity even when things change, since different states of affairs are not necessarily inversions of one another, they are different and similar at the same time. Secondly, there is an expectation of returning to what one has seen before (places, seasons, foodstuffs) without remorse. Latency, what was and what will be, is always present and therefore underlines continuity. Thirdly, despite the known cycles, there is a sense that the changes are made and undergone at the same time, they are neither entirely determined by outside conditions nor constructed exclusively by human expectations and endeavours. One is stuck, to some degree, not only with the current season but also with the season as it unfolds in any particular year. Being able to think about alternatives (past or future) is not necessarily liberating, since its valence could be a daunting loss or a promising gain. It is only insofar as humans, in all situations, know about the effects of both – presence and absence – that they are never entirely stuck but can put their stuckness into perspective. In sum, the indigenous voice reported on here could be said to critique a view of seasons underlying the whole argument of *DoE* that is too structuralist, and too much coloured by agricultural folks in the high latitude zones who have one hard and one sweet season, a good one and a bad one, so to speak. The case material that I have presented here does not fit into the oscillation narrative, and without there being an oscillation, the notion of having reached a stage where humans are stuck (ie of no longer being able to oscillate between states) is also undermined. I do not contest that in the face of our current zeitgeist of being constantly in the process of transforming ourselves and the world around us, a sense of being stuck may arise as a worry of not being able to move fast enough and of

lagging behind. However, I consider this to be more of an emic expression of impatience than an analytical category that holds comparatively. It seems that hunter-gatherers who may appear to be on the move all the time live with more continuities and a higher degree of stability than meets the eye – a transgenerational and trans-seasonal continuity that we find to higher or lesser degrees in many, if not all, societies.

Schismogenesis: doing (and undoing) difference

Dividing the world into oppositions in the sense of opposite camps is of course also central to the other main thread of *DoE*, namely schismogenesis (2021:57). In this case, the authors are quite clear that they consider this to be one of most destructive underlying dynamics that led to all kinds of recurring problems in the history of humankind (2021:504–505). In schismogenesis gradual differences are amplified and turned into what eventually appear to be unbridgeable gaps between groups, be they conceived of as ethnic or otherwise. Throughout the book we get the impression that the human drive to form opposing groups is the root of pretty much all evil and at the same time the book has little to offer as to how one might convince people otherwise or how to curb this destructive human trait. People just decide, it seems, that they are different and should be different and they start excluding others by putting themselves in opposition to others.

In an earlier debate I received considerable flak for suggesting that among the Hai/ /om that I have encountered in the field there is comparatively little institutional nudging towards ethnic stereotyping, for instance through proverbs and other forms of ethnic deixis (see Widlok 1999:44). I still maintain, since no better account has been provided, that San are less prone to institutionalise stereotypes and therefore less prone to indulge in ethnogenesis. My earlier suggestion that this has to do with 'the way in which social categories are established in small groups' (Widlok 1999:45) is supported by what Bird-David (2022) and others have found (see contributions in Widlok & Cruz 2022). I am not arguing that the Hai//om or any other (former) hunter-gatherers are immune to stereotyping. Rather, I suggest that they have social institutions that not only have levelling effects within their own group but also between groups. The use of proverbs and praise songs is not prevalent among Hai//om, but it is very much so among their agropastoralist neighbours. It is one of the most common tools to give expression to ethnic and other stereotypes. Above, I have replaced class with 'doing class' and seasonality with 'doing seasons' and it is tempting to do the same here, replacing schismogenesis with 'doing difference' and to turn our attention to practices of creating and entrenching differences.

The life histories that I collected when recording senior Hai//om men and women contain quotes which suggest we find the opposite of doing difference, namely undoing difference:

//nâtin ûi ku hâ habe !gâi ûi-e ui ku [...] /gui khoes oase ke //êi //aebe.

[We lived like this but we lived a good life [...], we lived as children of one woman in those days.]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 56)

/nâi da ke !Xûn /kha ke /gukuse ke hâ i ge, /nâi da ke !Xûn /kha ke / gukuse ke hâ i ge, !ama da ke sida ke //ein di !Xûn di gobab tsina ke //nâu, !Xûn tsina sida di namagobab //nâu.

[Then we were living close with the !Xûn, then we were living close with the !Xûn, that is why we can understand the !Xûn language, and the !Xûn can understand our language.]

(≠Noa//oab life history, unpublished ms, p 77)

In the context of the larger life story, ≠Noa//oab describes Hai//om relations with various surrounding groups and the sense we get is that he is very aware that they (and all of us) are born into a world of differences. For a long time, there have been different languages and looks and different subsistence pursuits within walking distance, so to speak, of any Hai//om camp. But in this world of difference, and potentially of group conflicts, there is always the opportunity to live together like 'children of one woman'. Hai//om lived with the !Xû, another group of hunter-gatherers speaking a very different language, for many generations. More recently they have lived in constant exchange with their farming neighbours, Aawambo and people of European descent. In their life stories, they insist that despite a lot of suppression, persecution and marginalisation, there were also phases and situations in which they lived with those neighbours like children of the same mother.

In other words, difference is there 'from the start' and it is not known to be going away, but it is possible to take the sting out of it: You can learn each other's languages, you can marry one another, you can cooperate and above all you can treat one another with dignity, despite known differences. My Hai//om interlocutors were very clear about this: The !Xû are very different in terms of their language, they are even said to often look different, to have different hair for instance – but they are 'one blood' with the Hai//om. And even with the agriculturalists with whom one does fight occasionally, it is possible to extend kinship ties, not only individually but systematically by translating the clan naming of the neighbours into Hai//om surnames (see Widlok 2000). These are practices of 'undoing difference' if you like. Even with people who come from the same countries that brought the bloodthirsty colonists from Germany or South Africa, it is today possible to achieve some degree of conviviality. If they are not 'children of the same mother' it is possible to learn how to live with them as 'siblings of a different mother'.

True enough, the global ethnographic record is full of cases of 'doing difference' but there are also other accounts of 'undoing difference'. Pálsson (2016) describes the life story of Hans Jonathan, who as a slave was subject to institutionalised 'doing difference'

(and intertwined with it, 'doing class') but who ended his life being integrated into Islandic society as a free person. Wilson (1979) has many examples on how individuals from outside the society were integrated by undoing differences. Across the board this may not have been the most common strategy, and the motives may not have been so much philanthropic but more strategic ways of creating larger groups and followership. But one does wonder why Graeber and Wengrow are so reluctant to include examples from hunter-gatherer studies in their account. It seems that they wanted to avoid, at all cost, to be grouped with romanticists who maintained that some things were better 'then', when we were all hunter-gatherers. It is kind of ironic that the authors of *DoE* here seem to fall into the trap of 'beginnings' themselves: As I read the relevant passages on schismogenesis they make it sound as if there was a world in the beginning where everyone was the same and had no need to amplify difference but that we were then set onto the path of schismogenesis that subsequently spoiled it all and that today makes it apparently impossible for us to escape being stuck. The voice of the indigenous critique I report on here suggests a different scenario: Everyone was kind of different all the way long, but it did not (always) matter so much, or at least it continues to be an open story, depending on institutions and practices that do or undo difference, as to whether the difference is made to matter or not: You could make it matter, yes (and thereby aggravate schismogenesis), but you could also always make it NOT matter. In the latter case, it was not a case of wiping out all differences, but rather of taking the sting out of the possible, latent or real schism.

Maybe there is an underlying similarity here between seasonality and schismogenesis: You can long for the next season (and the one after that and so forth) without attempting to get rid of seasons or seasonality as such. It seems you can also work towards living with others 'like you were of one mother' without attempting to get rid of the fact that people come from different families (and backgrounds etc). After all, there is much in the everyday life of many hunter-gatherers that proves how useful it can be to keep variation alive. As Liebenberg (1990) and others have pointed out before, hunters often appreciate that different members of a tracking group might keep alternative explanations around for considerable time so that they do not too readily dismiss other views in the interest of streamlining ideas of what the hunted animal may have done, the way it went and so forth. Similarly, when tracking our way through long-term history, it may be beneficial to encounter others who are both the same and different. And ultimately, I suggest that this also applies to our histories of humankind: I appreciate *DoE* as complementing earlier such global histories, by neither being environmentally deterministic nor reductively evolutionist like most other long-term histories, but rather as sensitive to cultural diversity and to open-ended, contingent political processes. That endeavour would clearly be enhanced by taking full account of the practices of doing and undoing difference.

Conclusion: we are all tinkers

What matters in the examples I have given in this article is not so much that Hai//om or other hunter-gatherers do not have any bad things to say about their neighbours. After all, most of their neighbours have given them plenty of reason for having misgivings about the way they have been treated. Rather, the point is that their flexibility with regard to embracing or distancing neighbours is part of their socio-cultural system. Much of *DoE* reads as if we need to 'switch systems', that other, earlier(!) humans were previously able to do so but that we have lost the skill or chance to do so in recent times. The alternative view is to consider seasonality among Inuit or conviviality among Hai//om as properties of a single system. Why does it matter beyond scholarly concern as to whether we think of this as moving between two systems or as moving between different modes within a single system? For one, it localises the source of change either outside (in the two systems view) or within the boundaries of a system (in the one system view). In Europe we are more familiar with the former which also at least in part explains why we have for long considered subsistence changes in terms of 'revolutions'. When trying to explain socio-economic shifts, we habitually search for changes in the environment, from 'outside the system', as drivers for social change (see Widlok 2022b:14). The palaeoenvironment, conceived of as outside forces impacting human society, seems to be easier to do research on and to consider an independent variable than what goes on in small-scale politics. To be sure there must have been cases where gradual or rapid environmental change produced socio-cultural changes. But things start to look slightly different when this is considered to be an integrated system (see Widlok et al 2012). One aspect of the indigenous hunter-gatherer critique, it seems to me, is to be cautious against ideas of being able, or being better off, by 'stepping outside the system'.

Many anthropologists working ethnographically with hunter-gatherers have insisted that flexibility was built into the system and not external to it. James Woodburn (1995; 1998) for instance, clearly saw hunter-gatherer flexibility in terms of a single operating system. Whatever the flexibility and dynamics that characterise hunter-gatherer social relations, he insisted that it was a single system, and a successful one at that. In contrast to Graeber and Wengrow, he would have insisted that we are dealing with *one* social system and not with two that alternate seasonally or otherwise (see Widlok 2023). According to this perspective, the Inuit, for instance, live in a single social system comprising of one adaptation for summer and one for winter. Moreover, it was not their conscious choice to alternate between two systems but their system – like that of Gumsa and Gumlao in Burma (see Leach 1954) – provided room for these changes; it was a systemic effect. Woodburn was also very keen to emphasise the continuity in hunter-gatherer social systems because there is a tendency to mistake their flexibility in many affairs as having no system at all. Consequently, he and others in hunter-gatherer studies that are somewhat side-tracked in *DoE* continued to look out for these continuities at deeper levels. As I have suggested in my own ethnography of the

Hai//om of Namibia, I am confident to say that their social relationships, too, show continuity across the year and also across changing seasons. And the same holds for their flexibility in social affairs. There is no 'exchange of system' but it is one system that can accommodate changes while keeping some things running constant in the background, which also ensures that the option to return to earlier states is possible. Change, in this view seems to be predicated on piecemeal transformations.

Graeber and Wengrow tend to dismiss the everyday contestation of social practice as merely 'tinkering' with the system (2021:493). Instead, they are searching for 'inversions' and fundamental questioning of the status quo, the great carnivalesque inversions of structure that they try to find in the evidence. They find it hard to believe that nothing has changed for long periods of human history. I agree that this is so if we put it this way. But there is often change which is based on small changes only, and considerable cultural effort can go into maintaining cultural order, efforts that may not be easily visible in historical hindsight. Keeping an 'immediate return system' going, as Woodburn (1998) has portrayed and synthesised in his descriptions, requires considerable everyday work and engagement. As a consequence, those who have done field research with hunter-gatherers are much less dismissive towards the everyday 'tinkering' since they know what a cultural feat it is to keep up egalitarian relations and social freedom and autonomy in the absence of centralised institutions. The price to be paid, it seems, is that individuals have to do that work in their everyday lives. After all, keeping up egalitarian relations is constituted by the hard work of the everyday piecemeal transformation and reproduction by the many. To have levelling mechanisms is not an on/off switch but is a continuous doing, confirming the structure and reproducing it, or in a piecemeal way modestly questioning the structure and changing it (see Widlok 2022a). This may be less spectacular than the Graeber/Wengrow narrative but I think it is backed up by more evidence. For political intellectuals of today, the life of a 'tinker' may not seem very attractive. But we need to reflect on what the alternatives are. It may not be coincidental that Graeber (with his US background) and Wengrow (with his UK background) are appalled by a schismogenetic system that, favoured by a centralised state and by non-proportional voting arrangements, brings about stalemates between Democrats/Republicans or Conservatives/Labour. Here a sense of 'being stuck' in a particular democratic system may indeed be very strong. At the same time, the popularist voices that promise to break away from this by entirely 'changing the system' are probably not the ones that Graeber and Wengrow would like to see taking over political power. The lessons we draw from the history of humanity seem to differ not only in terms of how we judge the role of ideas versus materiality. Rather, we also arrive at different conclusions in terms of seeing the developing system as requiring major disturbances and inversions from outside the system or as relying on moderate but continuous tinkering from inside the system.

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How did we get stuck?[6]

An answer from Amazonian mythology: 'The hunter Monmanéki and his wives'

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Abstract: *The Dawn of Everything* argues that human political arrangements got stuck when divine kings and other patriarchal despots began to confuse paternal care with coercive control. Drawing on insights provided by an Amazonian myth, this article argues that the decisive changes occurred much earlier than Graeber and Wengrow suppose. Gender politics got stuck when patriarchal forms of marriage and residence took over, disconnecting women from their former freedom to choose where to live – a freedom in turn linked with the periodicity of the moon.

Keywords: periodicity, menstruation, oscillation, moon, mythology

Introduction

In the beginning, according to *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021), our ancestors were forever oscillating between radically different political arrangements. Somewhere along the road, however, we got stuck in just one of the many alternatives available to us. The outcome is our present predicament, where we seem to be imprisoned in a system of corporate capitalist despotism from which there is no escape.

The authors present their argument not as science but as a myth designed to be more appropriate to our times than Darwinism, which in their view perpetuates the Victorian dogma of progress through evolutionary stages. In an earlier book, Graeber (2011a:95) denounced in particular the Morgan/Engels concept of 'primitive communism', deriding it as a baseless fairy tale which 'has done enormous damage to humanity'. *The Dawn of Everything* develops this anti-Marxist theme, the authors' declared aim being to discredit the idea that our hunter-gatherer ancestors were political egalitarians committed to a sharing way of life.

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Graeber and Wengrow propose instead that our ancestors did as they pleased. Treating life as an enjoyable game, the first humans were imaginative and creative, playfully establishing different social systems in succession, erecting structures of authority only to enjoy tearing them down. Underlying these claims is the message that Marx and Engels were wrong. The material conditions under which people live – whether hunting and gathering, herding, gardening or whatever – in no way shape or constrain political arrangements. At any time or in any place, any system can be invented and defended, dependent only on political will. It is against this background that they reject the concept of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. They concede that our ancestors may occasionally have experimented with egalitarian ideals. But once bored with egalitarianism, they would have happily embraced hierarchy or despotism, only to overthrow that choice in its turn.

The book's plentiful ethnographic references are chosen to illustrate this idea. In a chapter entitled 'Unfreezing the Ice Age', the authors cite Marcel Mauss's classic work, *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*, describing how whole communities would alternate between political extremes – patriarchal hierarchy during the short summer and communism including sexual communism throughout the dark winter months (Mauss 1979 [1904–1905]). Graeber and Wengrow (2021:106–107) remind us that

> for Lévi-Strauss, there was a clear link between seasonal variations of social structure and a certain kind of political freedom. The fact that one structure applied in the rainy season and another in the dry allowed Nambikwara chiefs to view their own social arrangements at one remove: to see them as not simply 'given', in the natural order of things, but as something at least partially open to human intervention.

They continue: 'What the existence of similar seasonal patterns in the Palaeolithic suggests is that from the very beginning, or at least as far back as we can trace such things, human beings were self-consciously experimenting with different social possibilities.'

The 'dawn of everything', for these authors, is that indeterminate period – beginning some 40,000 years ago – when archaeologists first find suggestive indications of people's social practices and beliefs. Dated in particular to the European Upper Palaeolithic, they point out, archaeologists have for many years been finding complex artefacts, cave paintings, rock art, elaborate burials, evidence for social stratification and indications of political oscillation. The two Davids go on to argue that millennia later – following the end of the Ice Age – elaborate burials and stone temples continue to suggest 'hierarchies raised to the sky, only to be swiftly torn down again' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:105).

Describing all this as 'the dawn of everything', the authors skate over the mounting evidence that all of their dates are in fact far too recent. It is now clear that we became

fully human – with all the resources of art, music, language and ritual – not in Europe during the last Ice Age but in tropical and sub-subtropical Africa during the Middle Stone Age some 100,000 years earlier (Watts 1999; 2002; 2009; 2014; Watts et al 2016; 2024). This puts a different perspective on the place of seasonality in our species' social and political evolution.

The two Davids excuse their lack of interest in hominin evolution in Africa by claiming that archaeology can tell us virtually nothing about such early periods. They mention African Middle Stone Age red ochre pigments, but without any discussion of how or why these might have been used. As they put it 'we don't have the slightest idea' about the social or political lives of our African ancestors. 'There's only so much you can reconstruct from cranial remains and the occasional piece of knapped flint' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:81).

In any event, the two Davids claim, African and other supposedly egalitarian hunter-gatherers are hardly inspiring because their social arrangements are so simple, offering little for today's political activists to celebrate or admire. For these authors, history begins with the emergence of societies sufficiently complex to produce an economic surplus. The whole issue of surplus production, they claim, in fact 'poses fundamental questions about what it means to be human'. As they go on to explain:

> One of the things that sets us apart from non-human animals is that animals produce only and exactly what they need; humans invariably produce more. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:128)

Is the message here that if your way of life does *not* foster surplus production, then you are not quite human – not human in the full sense of that term? To be fair, the authors do not say that. But their theoretical premises would seem to imply it and in many ways they come dangerously close.

According to what the two Davids describe as 'the dominant view' among anthropologists today, 'the only way to maintain a truly egalitarian society is to eliminate the possibility of accumulating any sort of surplus' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:128). The Hadza as described by James Woodburn, they report, must be counted among 'the only genuinely egalitarian societies we know of'. A 'defining feature' of such societies, they state, 'is, precisely, the lack of any material surplus' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:129). They continue:

> This might sound like the basis for something hopeful or optimistic. Actually, it's anything but. What it suggests is, again, that any equality worth the name is essentially impossible for all but the very simplest foragers. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:129)

So we must make a choice. If we want distinctively human surplus production and sociocultural complexity, then equality has to go.

Periodicity: seasonal or monthly?

In the tropics, days and nights remain of equal length throughout the year, enhancing the significance of monthly changes. Perhaps, then, we might expect in these regions a reduced emphasis on seasonal variations and correspondingly greater awareness of the moon as a marker of the passage of time. True to this expectation, the Hadza of Tanzania oscillate between ritual and social roles on a monthly basis, staging their primary ritual, known as *epeme*, every dark moon (Power 2022a). There is evidence that here – as among other African immediate-return hunter-gatherers – the moon plays a central role not only in hunting magic but also in practical life including the use of ritual action to organise the timing of hunts (Watts 2005; 2022). Analysis of African mythic traditions points to the same conclusion, indicating a source cosmology in which women's menstruation together with men's bloodshed in hunting are influenced more strongly by variations in moonlight than by the considerably slower rhythms of seasonal change (Power 2017; Liebenberg 2020a; Watts 2022).

To this day, across much of Africa, the pattern endures. A rich store of narratives, jokes and myths reveal the importance of lunar periodicity to ritual and social life. Among the Central African Bayaka, men joke that the moon is in fact their sexual rival, referring to him as a 'woman's biggest husband' (Lewis 2008). If a man's wife is menstruating, the joke is that she must be cavorting with the moon at her husband's expense (Lewis 2002). Across the Congo region as across much of the world (Liebenberg 2020b; 2023), mythology explains that during the three nights of dark moon, the lunar trickster is absent from the sky because he is down on earth getting intimate with men's wives. Behind this is a powerful ritual tradition: menstruating women do in fact abandon their husbands. They go into seclusion only to emerge later, oscillating between this world and the next as the moon waxes and wanes (Knight 1991; Power 1993; Watts 2005; Power & Watts 1997).

For Lévi-Strauss, the value of his myths is the light they shed on the nature of the human mind. In what must be one of the longest sentences in academic history, Lévi-Strauss (1981:694–695) concludes his four-volume *Mythologiques* by telling us that the 'fundamental opposition' behind all the myths is the dilemma made famous by Shakespeare's Hamlet – the contradiction between 'the reality of being' and 'the reality of non-being' (Lévi-Strauss 1981:694).

In my view, we can do better than this. Here is my alternative suggestion. The value of the myths is the light they shed on the fundamental periodicities – 'oscillations' if you like – of early hunter-gatherer social and political life. The details are all-important, and we are fortunate that Lévi-Strauss cared about these. He chooses the final myth in the final volume of *Mythologiques* – an Ojibwa story called 'the two moons' (1981:600) – to pull the threads of his argument together. The moons are rival women, an 'old hag' and her attractive young daughter-in-law. The jealous old woman gets her rival

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to tie herself to a swing, whereupon she pushes her over a precipice and then cuts the cords so that she plunges to her death in a lake. The hag steals her victim's clothing and counterfeits her appearance, causing her son to mistake her for his wife. His real wife, however, is not dead but trapped in the coils of a monster dwelling in a lodge at the bottom of the lake. She emerges from the water and is pulled down again until, one day, her husband frees her by cutting the water-monster's tail. Turning into a bird, the old hag flies out from the lodge and is never seen again.

Communism in motion

In this Ojibwa narrative as in its countless echoes and variants, life swings like a pendulum between

- waxing and waning moon
- two counterposed worlds
- two kinds of male relative
- two kinds of female.

While a woman is in 'this world' she performs her wifely duties as normal. When menstruating or giving birth, however, she becomes inaccessible to her husband. She won't be cooking, cleaning or being physically intimate with him because – as countless myths explain – she is now with her 'other husband', a trickster figure recognisable as the descended moon. All this is reflected in stories which depict human relationships as swinging perpetually to and fro in obedience to relentlessly lunar comings and goings.

To capture this periodic structure of immediate-return hunter-gatherers, Morna Finnegan (2008:218) selects and brushes up the classic term used by Lewis Henry Morgan to describe the lifestyle of the Iroquois – 'communism in living'. While conceding that any mention of 'communism' may arouse anxiety, she insists that Morgan's choice of terminology amounts to 'a serious theoretical proposition', adding that 'it encapsulates perfectly the whole spectrum of sharing practices, from material and economic to symbolic and religious'. But communism is not a fixed system; rather, it is continually being gained, relinquished and re-established once again. 'Communism in living', writes Finnegan (2008:218), 'is communism in motion'.

Graeber and Wengrow strain every muscle to convince us that our ancestors were not communists but creative individuals free to do as they pleased. They cite Lévi-Strauss in support of the idea that when immersed in myth, the mind seems free to imagine any pattern of life, any sequence of events, any beginning or end. But Lévi-Strauss's greatest insight was that despite this apparent freedom, the myth-making mind is in fact subject to rule. Its inventions vary within the bounds of a stable pattern of oscillation between contrary states, defined by Lévi-Strauss as raw versus

cooked, consanguinity versus affinity, death versus life, communal solidarity versus the personal intimacies of sex (Lévi-Strauss 1970).

In previous work (Knight 1991; 1997), I have argued that behind these mythic variations lies an astonishingly stable and resilient *ritual* structure which in turn profoundly shapes every aspect of social life. Inseparable from this lay what the French Marxist anthropologist Alain Testart (1985; 1986) described as an 'ideology of blood' common to hunter-gatherers across the world. Menstruation is a particularly feared and potent source of blood. If it were just an individual biological occurrence, it could not shape ritual and social life. But as Lévi-Strauss (1978:221–222) points out, mythology treats menstruation as collective, synchronised and for that reason cosmically powerful. The outcome is a stable mythic pattern in which women collectively 'die' – that is, withdraw from their wifely duties – for several days, returning back to life only once their period is over (Knight 1991; Knight et al 1995).

The quarrel between antagonists in Lévi-Strauss's myths is, then, of the same order as the 'quarrel' between seclusion and emergence, night and day, full moon and dark, wet season and dry. In such alternations, first one aspect 'kills' the other, then the killed aspect resurrects itself and kills its opponent – and so on. Winter reigns; summer is dead. But then summer regains the ascendancy and kills winter in turn, before the whole process repeats itself. At a deep level, the seemingly fraught, often frantic and typically bloody conflicts between rivals in these myths tell only of cosmic oscillations recognisable as the beating heart of life including human life in all its forms. Death, murder, incest, cannibalism, rape: these and similarly drastic deeds and events are memorable code-terms whose function is to help fix in the collective mind the features of a logic of cultural metamorphosis modelled on the peaceful changes of women and the moon (Knight 1987:431).

The ritual life of the Mbendjele BaYaka provides an instructive example of such oscillation as a political force. Power (2022b:134) jokingly terms it 'lunarchy in action', as women's collective spirit, known as *Ngoku,* raucously and defiantly takes over the camp before provoking the men to push back a week or so later with *Ejengi,* their own countervailing and impressively muscular spiritual force. When women ritually withdraw from marital life – refusing to cook or provide sex – it is always in some way linked with their periodicity. A 'sensual repartee between male and female ritual collectives animates the political pendulum at the heart of the community', writes Finnegan (2009:37) of the BaYaka, as – under the moon's sway – each gender group takes power in turn. If ever that pendulum should be stilled, writes Power (2022b:134) hierarchical relationships based on male dominance would be likely to flood back in.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021:115) are clearly aware of this pattern. In their own words: 'Many Central African forager societies are egalitarian all year round, but appear to alternate monthly between a ritual order dominated by men and another dominated by women.' I have argued (Knight 1991; 1997) that something like this gendered political oscillation is more than merely one possible pattern among others. Rather, it lies at the root of that 'One Myth Only' – that elementary structure – which

allowed Lévi-Strauss to dream of a genuine 'science of mythology'. The myths change, but the underlying structures do not.

How did we get stuck?

But Graeber and Wengrow do not see things this way. Having touched on this gendered case of oscillation, they switch quickly to other topics on the basis that no 'single pattern' of political life can be discerned. They appear to be saying that freedom can be preserved on condition fluidity of some kind prevents people from getting stuck. From their standpoint, it matters little whether society oscillates to a monthly, seasonal or longer-term rhythm – so long as periodicity of some kind prevails.

This leads them to the central question posed by their book:

> If human beings, through most of our history, have moved back and forth fluidly between different social arrangements, assembling and dismantling hierarchies on a regular basis, maybe the real question should be 'how did we get stuck? How did we end up in one single mode? How did we lose that political self consciousness, once so typical of our species?' (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:115)

These are profoundly important and original questions. It is here that *The Dawn of Everything* comes closest to opening an entirely new window on what it means to be human. The authors argue convincingly that in order to be consciously aware of the social system we inhabit, we must be able to escape its premises by standing right outside it. When all opportunities for escape are blocked off, we are likely to be imprisoned not only politically but psychologically as well.

What kind of evidence might help us answer the question which the two Davids ask? Hostile as they are to all strands of evolutionary science, they are not concerned with supposedly scientific modelling of 'childlike', 'early' or 'simple' hunter-gatherer societies. For them, history begins with the emergence of developed societies sufficiently stratified to produce an economic surplus, their argument being that without this, society would be culturally impoverished – robbed of specialist healers, shamans, artists and other creatives (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:128–129). Invoking new and often interesting interpretations of selected archaeological finds, they conclude that at the 'dawn of everything', the stratified societies of our species were flexible, fluid and intentionally designed to be overthrown from time to time. They argue that it was only when shamans, priest-kings or monarchs found ways to monopolise sovereignty, grip it tightly and hold onto it that the rest of us began feeling that we had got stuck.

In their Chapter 10, 'Why the state has no origin', Graeber and Wengrow recall how Sir James Frazer, in his celebrated work, *The Golden Bough,* dwells at length on a spectacular example of oscillatory politics. In a chapter entitled 'Between Heaven and Earth', Frazer (1926–1936) recorded his finding that all over the world, wherever

a priest-king reigned, he would be subjected to two rules. To be empowered as a semi-divine being – situated between heaven and earth – his feet should not touch the ground and the sun should not shine on his head. To preserve the potency of his special blood, he should be seated or borne aloft and shaded under a parasol or canopy. Then comes Frazer's (1926–1936:chapter 60) most astonishing insight: 'Now it is remarkable that the foregoing two rules – not to touch the ground and not to see the sun – are observed either separately or conjointly by girls at puberty in many parts of the world.'

From a wide range of cultures, Frazer tells us of girls whose menstrual onset triggers their seclusion in a space cut off from sunlight and from all contact with the ground. The details are interesting but what strikes Frazer is something which no-one had previously noticed. These girls, while in seclusion, possess sovereignty of a kind uncannily reminiscent of that of divine kings. I might add that it is only a small step to the conclusion that because the New Maiden's power is of finite duration – lasting only until her period ends – the rule of the Divine King must not be allowed to exceed its proper duration either. Ritual regicide surely has its origin here. Just as the Maiden must prove that she can die and come alive again, so too must any mortal needing to prove that he is divine.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021:395; see also Graeber 2011b; Graeber & Sahlins 2017:129) quote Frazer on how the Divine King needed to be shielded from sunlight or from contact with the earth – but break off just at the point when he documents how menstruating maidens were subject to precisely these same taboos. Unfortunately, the authors' indifference to menstrual traditions prevents them from explaining a central source of the oscillatory politics which they celebrate in their book. Lacking anything better, they are compelled to fall back on a catch-all substitute for an explanation – their argument that our ancestors in those days must have been imaginative and free.

World mythology: how we got stuck

When treated with appropriate care, recurrent details of indigenous mythic narratives can offer profound insight into historical processes which no other source of evidence can provide (Gow 2001; d'Huy 2016). Graeber and Wengrow sometimes mention myths, but without linking them with one another or taking them too seriously. Yet there is an uncanny fit between their overall thesis – their point about getting stuck – and a motif central to myths from all over the world.

In the beginning there were no boundaries, no fixed borders between categorically differentiated states. The two genders blended into one another: males often had breasts or other female attributes; females dressed in male clothing and hunted with spears. A man or woman might become a predatory animal – just as an animal might suddenly break into speech. Heaven and earth were so close that the dead and the living could travel easily between the two. But then came the fall. Heaven and earth drifted apart,

whereupon the dead found themselves stranded in the other world, unable to get back. Death had become permanent for the first time.

In a fascinating essay, Graeber (2011b:20; cf Lienhardt 1961:33–34) connects the periodicity of Divine Kingship with a Dinka variation on this theme:

> Originally, the sky lay just above the earth. The two were connected by a rope, so people could clamber up and down at will. Since the living could ascend to the sky for a while before returning to this world, death was merely a temporary state. God gave the first man and woman one grain of millet a day – sufficient to meet their needs. One day, however, the woman planted more than her permitted amount. As she raised her hoe, its long handle bumped into God. Offended, he moved away, sending a small bird to cut the rope between his realm and earth. Since that moment, the earth has been spoilt, compelling people to work hard for their food and often go hungry. Now, when sick people enter the land of the dead, they stay dead forever because they can no longer climb back.

Among countless variations on this theme is the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel, a manmade structure designed to connect heaven and earth. Once again, it is God who takes offence and casts humanity down to the ground.

Although lunar agency is not always explicit, the idea that death and resurrection is the moon's special trick is so pervasive that it can be taken as read. These words from a Namibian storyteller do much to convey the joy and enchantment of life under the moon's sway:

> The Moon is nearly dead. Tonight it is a bowl throwing water to the earth: a good sign for rain. Tomorrow night the Moon will start to grow again.
>
> Time, too, grows on the Moon. Fourteen days, it is fully grown and looks with a great smile down on its Kalahari people. And we smile back. Fourteen days again, and it is a thin, dark sickle in a black night full of hunting stars.
>
> We are the Moon People. After we die, the good people – those of us who are not thieves, not liars, who live in peace with their neighbours – rest a while in their graves. And then they walk to the Moon. Everyone is happy and content in the Moon Kalahari. They are never hungry there, never thirsty.
>
> Yes, truly, I am telling you, as the Moon dies for a short while and then grows and lives again, so we too will die for a short while before we go to our country of the Moon. (abridged from Greef 1996)

Numerous versions of a story known as 'the Moon and the Hare' have been recorded from across southern Africa, telling of the tragic moment when all this ended and death

became permanent for the first time. In one version – a /Xam Bushman story collected by Bleek and Lloyd (1911:56ff) – a young hare wails over his dead mother. Moon tells him his mother is only sleeping so he should stop crying. But Hare keeps on howling, provoking Moon to punch him in the mouth, splitting his lip – wherepon he punished humanity by fixing death for the first time as a permanent state. Camilla Power (1993) has drawn together a number of these stories, arguing persuasively that the 'reversibility of death' given to humanity by Moon is none other than the reversibility of menstruation. When women go into seclusion, it is as if they and all those around them simultaneously die; when they later emerge, the dead return back to life once more.

Across much of the Kalahari, traditions still tell of a time known as 'First Creation'. This was when gods and mortals, heaven and earth, people and animals shared the same language and communicated freely with one another. That freedom is not confined to the past: it may flood into present times. Through singing, dancing and entry into trance, the route back to First Creation is opened up. A critical fact which Western commentators usually find difficult – brushing it under the carpet – is that menstrual bleeding triggers this journey back into First Creation:

> The first appearance of the girl's menstrual blood is interpreted as an opening to First Creation. During this time she is regarded as existing inside First Creation. There she is capable of constantly changing her form, and this changing is what fills her with strong *n/om* [ritual potency]. (Ju/'hoan informants in Keeney & Keeney 2013:72)

Amerindian stories about getting stuck

A vivid depiction of the fraught consequences of miscommunication with the moon can be found in the opening section of one of Lévi-Strauss's most celebrated myths (Lévi-Strauss 1978:214–218; see analysis in Knight 1997). The Arapaho story of the 'Wives of the Sun and Moon' begins by depicting an initial situation in which the brothers Sun and Moon alternate monthly between life with their elderly parents and life with 'wives' (that is, partners) of two different kinds whom they visit some distance away.

Then comes catastrophe. Things go wrong when Moon deceitfully imposes a new kind of marriage. Wanting to live permanently with his parents in their camp, Moon tricks Sun into choosing the wrong kind of wife (a menstruating frog) while persuading the kind of wife he prefers (a 'resurrected' woman – meaning a human) to come up and stay with him and his parents in the sky. In former times, he would have descended to earth in order to visit his chosen bride in her own camp. But on this fateful day he tempts her up through a hole in the sky to come and stay with him in his parents' house. Once she has been tempted up, he uses a potato plant to block the hole through

which she had climbed, stopping her from returning to earth. The potato plant hints at the role of horticulture in prompting a momentous change – the transition from matrilocal residence in association with bride service to marriage rendered permanent by enforced patrilocal residence (for full discussion, see Knight 1997).

When a traditional myth seems incomprehensible to us, it is because – immersed as we are in our own cultural assumptions – we no longer understand the context assumed by the narrator and their audience. Because that is the obstacle to our understanding, any intellectual breakthrough requires familiarity with a wealth of half-forgotten rules and underlying dynamics characteristic of a time when our ancestors inhabited a quite different world.

Across the world, mythology pictures the switch between intimacy with spouse and intimacy with kin through the metaphor of a 'change of skin' from human to animal and then back again. It is at her menstrual onset that a woman turns into the 'wrong species' for human sex – that is, into some kind of animal (Knight et al 1995). She disappears in her human role as if she had died, appearing in her new skin as sister to her animal relatives. This switch between roles is visualised as a journey between opposite poles – a pendulum swinging between extremes. When a woman is menstruating and therefore in seclusion, she is as distant from 'this world' – the land of the living – as heaven is far removed from earth. Just as each woman swings between worlds in this way, each man 'dies' as a husband only to 'return to life' as the brother he once was, the entire community switching between alternative kinship roles and identities at the same time.

In picturing these predictable changes, the myths take full, detailed account of quite specific rules and prohibitions concerning sex, cooking, feasting, hunting and – most stringently of all – the shedding of blood in hunting and menstruation. When women's bleeding defines them as sisters, they traditionally follow strict rules specifying what they can and cannot do. Since they are now blood relatives, they cannot engage in marital sex, any more than they can cook animal flesh or feast on roasted meat. Until that tragic moment when everything went wrong – when, as the Arapaho narrative puts it, Moon used that potato plant to block up the hole in the sky – it would have been women's blood which triggered their periodic divorce from their spouse in order to return home to their own kin.

This and other myths shower us with clues as to how things once were. While menstruating, a woman would remain secluded in the shade and eat food appropriate to her condition. No man should even think about – let alone see or approach – his wife or any other woman at such a time. Once every husband has been redefined as a brother, he must replace thoughts about sex with a newly sharpened focus on success in the hunt. Husbands may expect to resume marital relations around full moon – by which time the hunt should have succeeded. Cooking fires are then lit, raw meat becomes cooked flesh, men and women come alive in new form. Shedding their former skins, they reveal themselves in their new guise as husbands and wives (Knight 1991; Power 1993; Watts 2005; Knight et al 1995).

Here, I have chosen to analyse one particular myth from Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* because it so clearly pictures the chaos which ensues when women 'get stuck' – that is, when they find themselves forced to stay with their husband and his relatives even when menstruating or giving birth. Like 'The Wives of the Sun and Moon', the story eloquently expresses an indigenous understanding that to lose touch with the moon is to invite social chaos and collapse.

Early on in the third volume of *Mythologiqes*, Lévi-Strauss discusses what he terms 'the lunar aspect of myths featuring a clinging woman or a frog woman'. The stories concern a woman who becomes a frog, doing so as she menstruates – a process of metamorphosis explicitly governed by the moon (1978:77, 225–242). Menstruation as a force which turns women into frogs is a motif familiar not only to Lévi-Strauss but also to his intellectual disciple Christine Hugh-Jones (1979:166). In her study of ritual and mythology among the Barasana, she writes: 'The married life of a frog wife is divided into cycles of alternation between her husband's and her own natal community... If the assumption that Frog Wife is metaphorically menstruating is correct, then the link between menstrual loss and female residence among kin is established.' Each time she bleeds, then, a woman becomes a frog to her husband and his relatives, whom she must leave in order to reside for a period with her own consanguine relatives – her own 'blood'.

The key myths of *Mythologiques* Volume 3 all display a similar logic of coming and going, of metamorphosis into an animal followed by resumption of human form. Again and again, they depict a hero, who – to quote Lévi-Strauss (1978:178) – 'finds himself between two kinds of women, and two forms of marriage' as sister and wife swap places in his life. Accompanying these oscillations, and often standing for them in the myths, are alternations between blood and fire, raw and cooked, inedible filth and nourishing food, ugliness and beauty, age and youth, noise and silence, stench and fragrance and many more – all under the sway of the waxing and waning moon.

Lévi-Strauss (1970:10–28) views all his myths as ultimately about the human mind and its role in securing our species' transition from animal to human, from nature to culture. As is well known, he had previously formulated a bold and original theory to explain how this momentous event occurred (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Men secured culture's rule when they established the incest taboo, doing so by treating their sisters and daughters as marital gifts to be exchanged among themselves. Later, he added an additional idea: we became human when we stopped eating our meat raw, as wild animals do (Lévi-Strauss 1970). In this more complex theoretical model, the incest taboo becomes established when men conceptualise the flesh of their female relatives as 'raw' – taboo on account of their blood – while that of their wives is blood-free, hence available or 'cooked'.

That was the central theme of the first volume of *Mythologiques – 'The Raw and the Cooked'.* The moon had no place in this Lévi-Straussian origins narrative, but as its author delved deeper and deeper into his myths, the role of seasonal, monthly and other inescapable rhythms and periodicities became more and more difficult to

ignore. By the time he was writing his third volume, *The Origin of Table Manners* (Lévi-Strauss 1978), periodicity had become his central theme. Menstrual periodicities became particularly striking, prompting him to shift focus throughout Volume 3 to the 'lunar aspect' of all these myths.

Although nothing can shake Lévi-Strauss's belief that 'culture is to nature as male is to female', in most other respects he now lets the myths speak for themselves. It turns out that these stories have their own ideas about the issues which matter, and they have strikingly little to do with Lévi-Strauss's previous theoretical preoccupations. Most importantly, the storytellers are in no way concerned with prehistory, evolutionary theory or human origins; neither are they concerned with the innate cognitive architecture of the distinctively human mind. Instead, their anxieties and hopes concern *contemporary* changes, *contemporary* social and political conflicts and contradictions. Above all, the myths revolve around problems caused by contemporary shifts in patterns of kinship and residence – changes perceived indigenously as undermining traditional periodicities, with catastrophic consequences for women whose periodic nature is now being denied.

'The Hunter Monmanéki and his wives' is the opening myth of the third volume of *Mythologiques.* It is an especially challenging story because its details are so puzzling and grotesque – recalling Lévi-Strauss's (1981:687) celebrated dictum that 'although the myths, considered in themselves, appear to be absurd narratives, the interconnections between the absurdities are governed by a hidden logic'. In what follows, I repeat such terms as 'marriage', 'wife', 'husband', 'mother-in-law' and so forth, even though it is important to remember that such words are likely to be crude translations at best.

The Hunter Monmanéki and his Wives: Amazonia, Tucuna

A hunter called Monmanéki goes through a succession of patrilocal marriages:

1. First, in a hole in the ground, he passes a frog who turns into an attractive young woman. Having urinated on her and got her pregnant, the hunter takes her home and feeds her on her favourite food, a diet consisting solely of black beetles. But one day, the hunter's mother sees the beetles and exclaims: 'Why does my son soil his mouth with such filth?' She throws them away, putting hot peppers in their place. When the frog wife burns her mouth on the peppers, she angrily turns back into a frog and hops off, returning later to steal back her baby from her mother-in-law's arms.

2. Having seen an arapaço bird high up in a palm tree, Monmanéki asks her for a drink of palm wine. The bird becomes a pretty girl who offers him the drink. He takes her home, where his mother objects to her feet (arapaço birds have elongated toes with curved nails). Offended, the woman leaves.

3. The hunter is out hunting when an earthworm over whom he is defecating takes a fancy to his penis. When she turns into an attractive young woman, Monmanéki takes her home where she gives birth to a child. The worm-girl works in the garden, clipping the roots of weeds just below the surface of the ground. Seeing the weeds still standing – and not realising that they will soon wilt – her mother-in-law accuses her of being idle and, with a sharp-edged shell, cuts off her lips just beneath the surface of the ground. She can no longer speak properly and disappears.

4. Monmanéki is out hunting again when he notices macaws flying overhead. He shouts to them for some maize beer, and later finds a macaw girl waiting for him. Having sipped her beer, he takes her home. His mother gives her a pile of corncobs from which to brew more beer. The girl succeeds in making large quantities using one cob alone. On seeing so many unused cobs, her mother-in-law scolds her for being lazy. Angrily, the girl changes back into a macaw and climbs to the roof of the house. Before flying away, however, she cries to her husband that if he loves her, he should follow her. She instructs him to look for a laurel whose splinters, when the trunk is axed, splash into the water to become fish. When the log has been hollowed out, he should get into the canoe which he has made and follow her down the river.

5. Monmanéki searches desperately until he finds the laurel. Each day when he returns home from working on his canoe, Monmanéki brings so many fish that his lazy brother-in-law decides to spy on him to discover his secret. But this ruins the magic: the splinters stop turning into fish. Guessing that his brother-in-law must be nearby, Monmanéki asks him for help with the canoe. Having completed it, they launch it into the river. While his brother-in-law stands in the shallows, Monmanéki tips the canoe over him. His victim spends the night underneath in the dark, singing and crying.

6. Next day, the two men drift downstream, Monmanéki at the stern and his brother-in-law seated at the prow. As they approach the macaw girl's village, the people come out to greet them; the girl hides behind the crowd. Turning into a Monan bird, Monmanéki's brother-in-law perches on his sister's shoulder. The canoe drifts away before tipping up perpendicularly, whereupon Monmanéki turns into an Aica bird and perches on the macaw girl's other shoulder. As the empty canoe drifts toward a lake, it turns into the aquatic rainbow-monster responsible for the periodic spawning of fish.

7. Finally, Monmanéki marries 'a girl belonging to the same people as himself'. Her fishing technique is to divide herself at the waist. Leaving her lower body on the riverbank, the upper part enters the water and emerges carrying large quantities

of fish. This upper part then crawls on its hands to the bank where it lowers itself onto the bottom portion, from which the spinal cord protrudes like a finger.

8. One day, Monamaneki's mother discovers her daughter-in-law's lower part on the riverbank and, not understanding its purpose, pulls off the protruding spinal cord – preventing the divided woman from fitting the two parts of herself together. Night falls and Monmanéki goes out in search of his missing wife. As he passes under a branch, the upper part springs onto his shoulders and refuses to let go. Obliged to carry her on his shoulders, Monmanéki grows thin as she snatches everything he tries to eat from his mouth, covering his back with her faeces.

9. Eventually, Monmanéki frees himself by scratching the clinging woman's face with the jaw of a piranha fish. She is so frightened that she lets go long enough for him to dive into the water and swim away. While her lower half remains on the ground, her upper portion perches on one of the posts of Monmanéki 's fish-weir. Sprouting feathers, she turns into a parrot and flies away, chattering to herself as she goes.

We have, then, a succession of altercations between the hero's wife and his mother, the two alternating in Monmanéki's life as he swings between one and the other, the contradictions building up until his final wife literally splits into two.

The contrast between each wife's human and animal form is central to the story. As is so often the case, the myth treats friends and relatives as real humans while strangers are animals. The problem is that to avoid incest, it is necessary to marry a 'stranger' (Jackson 1992). Only Monmanéki's last wife is human from the start, a fact suggested by the information that she is 'a girl belonging to the same people as himself'. However, even she – or at least her upper half – eventually sprouts feathers and becomes a chattering parrot. It is noticeable that the wives on each occasion resume their animal form *as they depart.* So human versus animal mirrors the opposition near versus far (Lévi-Strauss 1978:29). This opposition is central to episode 4, which features a relationship which stretches from the hero's home to a place far down the river.

The 'far/near' pendulum is accompanied by an alternation between 'the low' and 'the high'. The first wife is low: she is a frog in a hole. The next wife is high: a bird in a tree. The next wife is low once more, in this case a worm beneath the soil. She is followed once again by a high wife – a bird flying overhead. The final wife splits into two parts, one high, the other low, the high portion eventually perching on a vertical post before flying away as a parrot (Lévi-Strauss 1978:30, 33).

In his dealings with his wives, the hero swings to and fro between consumption and its opposite, excretion. The hero urinates on his first wife in her animal form, enjoys a drink from his next wife once she is human, defecates on his third wife while she is an animal and takes sustenance from his fourth wife while she is human. His final wife begins by feeding Monmanéki with fish but ends by starving him and excreting all over him.

A further contrast pits the hard-working wife in opposition to the lazy one. The worm and macaw wives are hard-working but mistaken for being lazy. The final wife splits into two parts, one hard-working and the other lazy. Finally, of the two male figures in the myth, Monmanéki works hard to carve out his canoe while his brother-in-law is lazy (Lévi-Strauss 1978:30–34). An interconnection between absurdities is beginning to emerge.

The above alternations between polar extremes are accompanied, finally, by a contrast between feminine beauty and ugliness. The frog wife is beautiful when human, but spoils the effect with her ugly eating habits. The arapaço wife is beautiful but she has ugly feet. The worm wife is beautiful at first but is then sadly disfigured.

The macaw wife's appearance is not touched on but her disappearance is – she hides behind the crowd on the landing stage as Monmanéki arrives in his canoe. It is Lévi-Strauss (1978:170–195) who points out that all his myths concern the comings and goings of celestial beings – most saliently Sun and Moon. He sees an eclipse in both the macaw girl's disappearance and her brother's overnight imprisonment in an upturned canoe (Lévi-Strauss 1978:42). This is one of several clues telling us that a wife's change of skin – her entry into seclusion when menstruating – should happen when the night skies go dark. Just as the earlier wives have two aspects, this one has two shoulders, perched on in turn by her brother and then her husband, each a different species of bird. The first perches on her when the canoe is horizontal; the second, when the prow shoots up into the air.

As Lévi-Strauss (1978:170–195; 1981:449–454) points out, any indigenous listener would be familiar with the idea of Sun and Moon paddling a canoe, one at the stern and the other at the prow. When both fly up to settle on the macaw wife, one on each shoulder, it is as if husband and brother were both laying claim to the same woman at the same time. What was once a periodic oscillation between counterposed relationships has got stuck, a concept strikingly conveyed through the image of a canoe tipped up on its end. From a related Tucuna myth, we know that of the two birds who settle on the macaw wife's shoulders, one – a dark plumaged species – 'was born from leaves used by an incestuous brother to wipe his face after his sister had smeared it with black genipa juice' (Lévi-Strauss 1978:42). To anyone familiar with the story of how the moon got its spots (Liebenberg 2020b), that dark fluid would inevitably suggest menstrual blood.

This myth steadily builds up a picture of mounting contradictions as the hero's wives swing between opposite states – high and low, near and far, beauty and ugliness, hard work and laziness. Each quickly finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time, faced with a mother-in-law who gets everything wrong. The story describes what happens when a married woman is stopped from returning home, echoing a theme central to Lévi-Strauss's other key myths – most notably 'The Wives of the Sun and Moon' (Knight 1997). Despite the pressure on womankind to remain at all times wifely and compliant, nothing can alter the fact that she is a periodic being. Should

her wifely identity be permanently imposed, then inevitably she will be torn apart, her rebellious higher spirit sprouting feathers and flying away.

This is the essential message of the Monmanéki myth. It opens with a succession of comings and goings rendered unworkable by the fact that since postmarital residence is now patrilocal, each wife must endure the uncomprehending interference of her mother-in-law. According to the old rules, Monmanéki's frog wife – being a woman in menstrual seclusion – should be nowhere near her husband's mother at such a time. While in seclusion, she should feel safe among her supportive kin and provided with ritually appropriate special foods. In fact, she should be given black beetles – just what frogs like! But her mother-in-law ignores this and insists on giving her the kind of food a human woman might enjoy – cooked food seasoned with hot peppers.

There is a reason why peppers are mentioned here: it is to avoid pollution. According to the Tucuna, 'bathing in water in which pimentos have been cooked is the best antidote for any pollution due to menstrual blood' (Lévi-Strauss 1973:393). In effect, then, the frog wife's mother-in-law is using hot peppers to counteract menstruation. In forcing her daughter-in-law to eat them, she demonstrates her intolerance of the young woman's identity as a frog.

Finally, we must confront two linked puzzles connected with magically effective fishing. Why should these two activities – first, using an axe to chop wood and, second, separating one's body at the waist – lead to abundant supplies of fish?

Across Amazonia, women are especially qualified to fish because they menstruate (Belaunde 2006:9). To understand the reasoning here, it helps to know that a good fishing technique is to use a kind of poison known widely as *timbo*. A popular method is to cut lengths of creeper into manageable portions and splash them about in the water, where the sap dissolves and changes the surface tension, suffocating the fish (Lévi-Strauss 1970:59). Producing *timbo* might therefore involve chopping at lengths of creeper. It may not seem clear why the splinters should turn into fish – but an indigenous audience might immediately understand. Should a man travelling in the forest hear the sound of wood being chopped, he would know that he should keep well away. This is because, among the Tucuna, 'as soon as a girl detects signs of her first period she goes off to hide in a nearby bush and replies to her mother's calls by striking two pieces of dry wood together' (Lévi-Strauss 1970:375). So the sound of wood striking against wood might well indicate the nearby presence of a menstruating girl, whose space must of course be respected. The connection with poison would be equally well understood, as Belaunde (2006) in particular has emphasised. Among the Barasana, the source of all shamanic power is a mythic figure – Romi Kumu – who menstruates copiously and whose pubic hair is the source of all fish poison (Christine Hugh-Jones 1979:138–139). Lévi-Strauss (1970:263) notes that it was 'an old Tucuna ritual to wash pubescent girls with a solution of *timbo* so as to ensure profitable fishing expeditions'. Clearly, then, *timbo* derived its efficacy from the toxic physiological potency inherent in pubescent girls. As the Monmanéki myth reaches its climax, therefore, the indigenous listener's mind might well have run through a sequence of metaphorical connections –

from the sound of wood being chopped at the water's edge to the potency of menstrual blood, from that blood to *timbo* and from there to plentiful fish.

It is worth pointing out that Lévi-Strauss had no prior motive to highlight menstruation in his analyses of Amerindian myths. After all, his initial theoretical framework had no place for the topic. Whereas Durkheim (1963) saw an intimate connection between menstrual avoidances and taboos against incest, Lévi-Strauss (1969) – as we have seen – explained the prohibition of incest in a quite different and wholly bloodless way. But when he came to analyse myths, his attention to detail made it impossible to avoid the topic of menstruation. He noted, for example, that any mention of blood spilt by a mythic heroine would inevitably suggest menstruation. Sometimes, the woman might be bleeding from her armpit (Lévi-Strauss 1978:349). Alternatively, her scalp might be cut from her head before being restored – much like 'a woman who, after a few days of menstruation, becomes whole again' (Lévi-Strauss 1978:401). As we have seen, Monmanéki's final wife splits apart at the waist, her bleeding body attracting fish. Any indigenous listener would translate her technique as a reference to menstruation, hence to *timbo* – and from there to successful fishing.

In Lévi-Strauss's recurrent structures of binary opposition, the logical counterpart of conjugal intimacy is incest – which he defines as excessive intimacy between kin. Not all myths are open and explicit about this recurrent motif – and in the Monmanéki story it is ingeniously disguised. As the narrative reaches its climax, Monmanméki's wife can no longer reconnect with her own flesh. The problem is that her mother-in-law has pulled off the finger of spine protruding from the lower part of her body, preventing her upper half from settling onto it as had been her custom. As the wife's upper portion sprouts feathers and flies away – leaving her lower half down on the ground – this act of severance echoes countless other myths in which sky and earth drift apart from one another once the rope or vine connecting them has been cut.

The severence of the final wife's spinal cord leads to the concluding episode, in which we encounter the pan-American figure of the 'clinging woman'. Disconnected from her own flesh – that is from her relatives by blood – Monmanéki's unfortunate wife has no alternative but to attach herself tenaciously to her husband. We know that indigenous tradition would insist that a man who kept his wife close to him during her periods would be subjected to the same stringent food taboos. The story expresses this difficulty by picturing the woman as covering her husband in her faeces while snatching food from his mouth.

The myth's eventual outcome is a solution of sorts. Monmanéki dislodges his clinging wife, who disappears from the scene in the time-honoured way – by turning into a parrot. And so it is that her upper part flies off while her lower body remains on the ground.[1] While this may be a relief for Monmanéki, it does nothing to diminish the myth's message of distress and despair that everything has gone so tragically wrong.

[1] Deon Liebenberg (personal correspondence 2024) detects here the suggestion that even when a man's wife is no longer present in spirit – she has flown off like a parrot – patrilocal residence keeps her

Conclusion

Graeber and Wengrow's final chapter is an attempt to answer the question from which they set out: 'How did we get stuck?' In seeking a solution, they ponder one possibility – a psychological contradiction which in their view afflicts divine kings:

> Ultimately, the house of the Bourbon monarchs – like the palace of an Egyptian pharaoh, Roman Emperor, Aztec *tlatoani* or Sapa Inca – was not merely a structure of domination but also one of care, where a small army of courtiers laboured night and day to attend to the king's every physical need and prevent him, as much as was humanly possible, from ever feeling anything but divine. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:513)

They go on to explain that this attitude of care extended downwards to the ordinary populace. By way of illustration, they quote King James I, writing that he punishes his subjects out of fatherly love. It was such a conflation of cruelty with loving care, suggest the two Davids, that put an end to the political flexibility we once enjoyed. Having detailed various techniques of torture and execution used by this king to maintain himself in power, they leave us with the following thought:

> It seems to us that this connection – or better perhaps, confusion – between care and domination is utterly critical to the larger question of how we lost the ability freely to recreate ourselves by re-creating our relations with one another. It is critical, that is, to understanding how we got stuck. (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:514)

Having offered this suggestion, their chapter wanders off into other topics before returning to the theme. When the authors do return to the problem, they simply repeat their original question, this time in slightly different words:

> Does this newly established nexus between external violence and internal care – between the most impersonal and the most intimate of human relations – mark the point where everything begins to get confused? Is this an example of how relations that were once flexible and negotiable ended up getting fixed in place: an example, in other words, of how we effectively got stuck? (Graeber & Wengrow 2021:519)

We lost our former freedoms, the two Davids seem to be saying, when despots such as King James confused torture and coercive control with fatherly tenderness and loving care.

The Dawn of Everything makes a real contribution to knowledge by familiarising today's readers with a picture of early societies as animated by periodicities. Political

life, the authors argue, beat to a pulse. In their view, however, the intervals between one social system and another were typically much longer than a month. Unlike Graeber and Wengrow, however, the myths of the Americas speak of monthly rhythms and attribute 'getting stuck' to the moment when a husband found he could take a wife, bring her home with him and manage to keep control over her despite any attempts she might make to escape (Knight 1997). It seems that the world did not need to await the invention of divine kingship for men to confuse coercive control with fatherly tenderness and care.

Indigenous myths can tell us much about how we 'got stuck' far back in what Mircea Eliade (1959) so memorably termed 'the dawn of everything'. But uncovering the roots of humanity's current predicament would require different kinds of evidence. One factor has been an intellectual one – the left's failure to recognise the possibilities of 'communism in motion' (Finnegan 2008) or what Power (2022a; 2022b) has termed 'lunarchy' or 'rule by the moon'. This failure has long been part of the problem since the absence of a tried-and-tested historical precedent has deprived revolutionaries of any real idea as to how their envisaged stateless future might actually work.

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‘Cancelling’ hunter-gatherers for the cause of twenty-first-century urbanism[7]

***The Dawn of Everything*’s left/right divide in prehistory**

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Abstract: A prominent theme of *The Dawn of Everything* is Graeber and Wengrow’s effort to knock down what they believe is the ‘edenic’ original human innocence component of ‘modern social theory’. To support this position, *The Dawn of Everything* relies on examples from numerous materially and administratively complex societies. Here I suggest that Graeber and Wengrow are motivated to associate anyone advocating for human arrangements which are less materially or administratively complex as effectively right-wing in psychological and political outlook. Although Graeber and Wengrow never directly say this, it is a theme which can be discerned throughout *The Dawn of Everything*. They promote a model that anything other than progressivist thought is not only ‘childlike’ and ‘primitive’, but also that such ‘primitivist’ tendencies are effectively politically right. Driven by this logic, *The Dawn of Everything* attempts to situate a prehistoric left/right divide, with certain hunter-gatherers representing the right and settled agriculture societies representing the left. They do this mainly through their total avoidance of ever making any distinction between two separate adaptations that were alternative to evolving urban civilisation and its politics. One of these adaptations is what Graeber and Wengrow refer to as the ‘heroic societies’. The other is that of people pursuing small-in-scale, non-resource-intensified subsistence lifeways, for the agent-based purposes of maintaining actual autonomy.

Keywords: resource intensification, subsistence, rural/urban, left/right, transegalitarian

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Introduction

In this article I argue that *The Dawn of Everything* (hereafter *DoE*) projects contemporary political divisions onto prehistory. It does so through these aspects of its story: seeing farming as 'the ecology of freedom' (2021:248–249); and claiming that early cities were not authoritarian but instead egalitarian (2021:276–327). Any disruption of this original democratic and peaceful 'urban egalitarianism' is blamed on bucolic, male-dominated 'heroic societies' persistently raiding from the hinterlands (2021:310–313). The earliest 'egalitarian cities' on the Mesopotamian plains were constantly at odds with such 'heroic' peoples who, coming from upland areas, had little dependence on agriculture and instead were hunters (2021:226–229, 248, 312–313, 367).

Compared to the agricultural urbanists developing in the lowlands, tells *DoE*, these hunting people were highly stratified, male-dominated and violent. The following can serve as a summarising quote for *DoE*'s positioning:

> In the Fertile Crescent it is – if anything – among upland groups, furthest removed from a dependence on agriculture, that we find stratification and violence becoming entrenched; while their lowland counterparts, who link the production of crops to important social rituals, come out looking decidedly more egalitarian. (2021:248)

The *DoE* story continues that, as the situation evolved across Eurasia, steppe nomads of the 'heroic' type developed into aristocratic warrior cultures who persistently attacked, both physically and politically, the supposedly 'egalitarian' urban cultures. These raiding societies were run by aristocrats foundationally against any notion of democratic politics and instead focused on competition for hereditary status and wealth. Commenting on ancient Mesopotamia, for example, Graeber and Wengrow (hereafter GW) (2021:312) state that 'heroic burials [...] feasting, drinking, the beauty and fame of the individual male warrior [...] appear time and time again around the fringes of urban life'.

For GW, dominance hierarchies are not influenced by broader historic patterns of expanding economic intensification and sociopolitical complexity. Rather, hierarchy is rooted merely in the ancient male hunter's drive for status. In promoting this narrative, they note that the 'heroic societies' of early civilisational Eurasia showed very similar traits to the various complex hunter-gatherers (Ames 2003; Fitzhugh 2003; Hayden 2014; Sassaman 2004) given mention in *DoE*, for example, the Pacific Northwest Coast Nootka, Haida and Tlingit. According to GW, 'egalitarian cities' initially rise in rebellion against such stratified hunter-gatherers. Although GW don't say this verbatim, they appear to place the fundamental responsibility for an evolving turmoil between rural and urban ultimately onto the politics and ethos of complex hunter-gatherers. GW's brute hunter-gatherer heroes are those who will not cede their elite warrior status, characterised as wild-animal worshipping, trophy head-taking, entrepreneurial

libertarians. This cultural ethos is diametrically opposed to the peacefully organised, social justice-oriented, collectivist, democratic, female-inspired political formations of the agricultural cities. This latter trajectory, GW say (2021:248–249), represents an 'ecology of freedom' in which the development of large-scale agricultural settlements 'actually set humanity [...] on a course *away* from violent domination' by, one can infer, wayward hunter-gatherers.

As part of this story, GW adopt a position that governmental administration is a necessary safeguard. Bureaucracies are meant to rein in these dangerous hunter 'heroes'. Referring to an ideology of the power of kings being held by 'the people', it follows that 'bureaucracies exist for the benefit of said "people"' (2021:431). This theme emerges as the reader travels through *DoE*. Crucially, GW (2021:312) are keen to emphasise that 'hero' cultures are largely 'without any centralized authority'. 'State bureaucracy', suggest GW (2021:427), promises a 'principle of care' but ends up corrupting 'one of the most fundamental building blocks of social life'. For GW, while administrative rule must save us from the 'savage' country-loving, hunter-gatherer rebels, it has been 'corrupted by a confluence of maths and violence'.

A vital thing to notice within this narrative is GW's problematic attempt to substitute the idea of egalitarian hunter-gatherers with predominantly male-controlled and violent complex hunter-gatherer forms. The *DoE* authors never discuss any alternative lifeway with less economic intensification. When GW argue 'farming is the ecology of freedom', beginning largely in Chapter 8 of *DoE*, small-band non-intensifying and immediate-return hunter-gatherers have been removed from GW's 'New History', as if these lifeways have been inconsequential to the human story and should be ignored.

Complex hunter-gatherers as a root of elite-driven economic intensification

In making this argument, GW's main attention is Southwest Asia and the eventual development of Mesopotamian cities. GW's thesis is that farming – first as a component of mixed-foraging economies and then leading into development of full-blown agriculture and agriculturally dependent cities – originally appeared as a downriver, lowlander rebellion against upland-residing hunting lifeways. These are modelled after the general cultural patterns of Göbekli Tepe and other early Neolithic hunter-gatherer megalithic sites in the region.

Göbekli Tepe is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic A site (PPNA 12,000–10,300 BP), but it contains occupation levels that extend into the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB 10,300–8700 BP). PPNA-PPNB megalithic sites are noteworthy because they are associated with hunter-gatherers not reliant to any significant degree on food cultivation. However, food cultivation was surely emerging in the region during this time. The PPNB eventually becomes a marker for settled communities, intensified cultivation

and animal domestication (Byrd 2005; College et al 2018; Edwards 2016; Frangipane 2007).

PPNA-PPNB megalithic sites are representative of large-game hunting and wild cereal grain-based religious centres where ritual feasting, mortuary activities, and perhaps human sacrifice occurred in order to appease ranked ancestor deities and animal spirits (Dietrich et al 2019; Gresky et al 2017; Mithen 2022; Mithen et al 2023; Rollefson 2005; Schmidt 2012; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW (2021:242) emphasise that the stone pillars at Göbekli Tepe are carved with 'an imagery dominated by wild and venomous animals; scavengers and predators, almost exclusively sexed to male'. They highlight reliefs depicting raptors taking human heads, totem pole-like pillars with depictions of 'victims and predators: disembodied souls and sharp-eyed birds of prey [...] flesh eating birds and other carnivores are shown grasping, tossing about or otherwise playing with their catch of human crania', on one pillar there is 'a headless man with an erect penis'.

GW also highlight the 'house of skulls' at the PPNB site of Çayönü Tepesi with over 450 human remains, 90 of which are headless. Çayönü seems to have contained a sacrifice altar, located in a public square. GW desire to establish a connection between decapitation rituals and what they think are simultaneous rituals of butchering wild game. GW (2021:244) link this to a type of patriarchal hunting ideology, connecting human trophy-taking and decapitation with 'hunting as predation, shifting suddenly from a mode of subsistence to a way of modelling and enacting dominance over other human beings'. They imply that sacrificial victims at these hunter-gatherer sites were female victims of an established male dominance. For example, they emphasise one Göbekli Tepe burial consisting of a 'splayed skeleton (again a woman) still lying inside a burned down building prone and missing her head' (2021:243).

GW's purpose is to promote a perspective that, as a method of rebellion against these obstinate, male-dominant hunting cultures, it was women who piloted the way towards incipient grain cultivation and then ultimately to agriculture. In making this contrast, GW's agenda is to promote that it was hunter-gatherers who were pursuing the more hierarchical sociopolitical pathway, not early farmers.

DoE provides very little detailed information about Southwest Asia's 23,000– 12,000 BP Epipaleolithic, the period of large-scale climactic and socioeconomic change critically important to understanding the transition from huntergatherer to settled agricultural life in the region. *DoE* provides no assessment of this epoch's cultural formations, which would require an overview of the PPNA and PPNB evolutionary trajectories and the preceding Natufian complex (14,900–11,750 BP) to explain the deeper processes of social and ideological change occurring (Bar-Yosef 1998; Byrd 2005; Finlayson 2020a; Grosman & Munro 2017; Hayden 2004; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020).

A review of this material shows that much of the sociopolitically problematic ethos GW assign to Southwest Asian hunter-gatherers had been arising among these populations starting at least from the Epipaleolithic Natufian and then further throughout this era of change (Byrd 2005; Clark & Wasse 2019; Finlayson 2020a; Hayden 2004; Vil-

leneuve & Hayden 2020). The socioecological changes we are concerned with originate with the emergence of complex hunter-gatherers specialising in the intensified procurement of large-game and wild cereals. Subsequent overexploitation of these resources arose for the purposes of a sociopolitically stratified adaptation and its economic expansion (Byrd 2005; Snir et al 2015; Starkovich & Stiner 2009; Villanueve & Hayden 2020; Weiss et al 2004).

While the Natufian originated in the Mediterranean Levant, by the PPNA its features had extended into the upper Tigris and Euphrates watersheds, representing an expansion of the sociopolitical, ideological and economic complexity which had arisen among Southwest Asian hunter-gatherers (Byrd 2005; Mithen et al 2023). The Natufian correlates with the first evidence for granaries and food storage by hunter-gatherers in the Jordan Valley starting around 11,000 years BP (Grosman & Munro 2017; Kuijit & Finalyson 2009). Although remaining small-scale (Finlayson 2020b), this escalates in the PPNA, where, compared to the Natufian, 'sites are much larger [...] With storage bins for grains, ceremonial structures, and a rich lithic industry' (Gowdy 2021:69; Finlayson et al 2011; Wilcox & Stordeur 2012). Both a Holocene climate and the eventual widespread emergence of settled villages with plant cultivation were critical features of the PPNB (Clark & Wasse 2019; Edwards 2016; Finlayson 2020a; Richerson & Boyd 2001).

From the broad view, archaeological interpretations of the PPN align with ethnographically known traits of economically and politically complex groups around the world, both complex hunter-gatherers and cultivators. These traits include being sedentary or semi-sedentary; mound, megalith and/or longhouse construction; elaborate elite burials, food storage, property, ritual feasts, trophy head-taking, shamanic-led sacrifice ritual, intensifying trade and commodification of procured goods (Ames 2003; 2007; Feinman 2013; Frangipane 2007; Hayden 2004; 2011; 2014; Mithen et al 2023; Sassaman 2004; Testart 1982; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). While there was diversity (Finlayson 2020a), it was ultimately these types of cultural arrangements which evolved during the 6000-year-plus timeframe represented by the Natufian and the succeeding PPNA-PPNB.

In Hayden's (2004:265) assessment, Natufian sites 'exhibit a range of strategies commonly used by aggrandizers'. While Finlayson (2020a) argues that this social stratification was not repeated during a more 'egalitarian' PPNA, Hayden (2004:280; 2020) contends that the subsequent occurrence of great tombs at Göbekli Tepe and other PPNA-PPNB sites 'indicate powerful competitive dynamics and struggles for domination between different communities and different corporate groups'. He assigns 'heterarchy' – 'a number of independent groups living together, some being more powerful than others' (Hayden 2004:280) – as the operating political arrangement among these complex hunter-gatherers. Note that GW's (2021:610) characterisation of the operating politic of initial farming communities, as well as 'many of the societies [...] focused on [in *DoE*]', is 'heterarchy'. Like Finalyson (2020a), GW attempt to frame the heterarchical systems of early farmers as 'egalitarian'.

Hayden (2004:298) summarises the evolutionary relationship between the enhancement of these ritual sites and the ongoing trajectory towards sedentary agricultural societies:

> Given the strong dynamic forces present in the more complex transegalitarian societies to increase production, especially for feasts, it seems inevitable that these societies would eventually develop domesticated food production at least in locations where the environment and species were suitable. Thus, complex hunter/gatherers tended to be short lived, 'unstable', phenomena in most of the world, lasting only a few thousand years.

The generalised pattern is one where sedentary hunter-gatherer lifeways based on resource intensification emerge, and, over the course of 3500 years evolve into village life organised around food production (Byrd 2005; Finlayson 2020a; Frangipane 2007; Grosman & Munro 2017; Hayden 2004; Hodder 2018; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). This occurred particularly in areas with the most favourable environmental conditions for cereal cultivation, such as the floodplains of the lower Tigris and Euphrates (Scott 2017). However, the critical role and socioevolutionary outcome of intensified uses of wild cereals among PPNA-PPNB complex hunter-gatherers receives no attention in *DoE*.

What really seems to have happened is that in response to more favourable Holocene environmental conditions specific hunting societies of Southwest Asia intensified and expanded, leading not only to overhunting and resource depletion but to enhanced sociopolitical complexity and population growth (Legge & Rowley-Conwy 2000; Mithen 1997; Munro 2004; Richerson & Boyd 2001). While resource stress does not seem to have been present during the Natufian, it emerges among complex hunter-gatherers during the PPNA, escalating into the PPNB (Clarke & Wasse 2019; Frangipane 2007; Hayden 2004). As the Holocene continued, game populations were increasingly depleted as their habitats concomitantly declined in quality.

An important part of the story not mentioned by GW is that with the onset of a Holocene environment and related pressure on resources, particularly the overhunting of large game, farming begins to rise while complex hunter-gatherer adaptations begin to collapse. As Tainter (1988:191) points out, peripheral populations often 'rise to prominence' after the older societies collapse. This elucidates why the original Fertile Crescent farming adaptations were 'revolutionary' and perhaps incipiently more 'egalitarian' and thus that these changes cannot be explained merely by a rebellion of women against male hunting prestige, as GW claim.

The situation was more complicated than GW attest, and the generalised changes were not uniform. Considerable regional variation was present in respect to changing subsistence adaptations and political organisation (Clark & Wasse 2019). Both Byrd (2005) and Hayden (2004) point out that, perhaps even in the PPNB, but certainly during the Natufian and PPNA, some huntergatherer communities continued to rely on older non-intensified band-level strategies. Hayden (2004:291) writes that:

> Environmental stress [for complex hunter-gatherers] may have been very different from generalized hunter/gatherers [...] who reduced populations or moved away [...] transegalitarian communities tended to struggle to maintain resource production levels through increased intensification of labor, technology and transport.

GW (2021:226) claim that 'in the uplands, there was a striking turn towards hierarchy among settled hunter-foragers, most dramatically attested at the megalithic center of Göbekli Tepe and at nearby sites like [...] Karahan Tepe'. GW try to frame this occurrence as a 'striking turn', but fail to acknowledge what I've now described – that this was instead a slowly evolving process rooted in the pathways of intensified economic and political development.

Instead of dealing with these material evolutionary realities, GW (2021:410) attempt to let resource intensification and progressive development off the hook and blame the problem on what they call schismogenesis: 'a dynamic tension between two principles [...] in opposition to one another: the administrative order of the river valleys and the heroic, individualistic politics of the surrounding highlands'.

Rather than invoking cultural relativism, we should consider trade and the role of expanding trade networks among complex hunter-gatherers and early cultivators during the early Neolithic (Byrd 2005; Frangipane 2007; Mithen et al 2023; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW (2021:227) describe how Southwest Asia lowland cultivators and upland complex hunter-gatherers were 'well acquainted [...] because they traded durable materials with each other over long distances'. Thus, vitally, we have the evolving development of trade as a cultural focus, a critical precedent for the emergence of an increasingly extractive globalised civilisation to come.

Evolved dependency on trade, especially for elite prestige goods rather than for communal basic needs, is a core factor in the initial development of a warrior-raider ethos among both complex hunter-gatherers and later 'heroic societies'. It can thus be ascertained that 'the heroic, individualistic politics' GW are concerned with originate first materially with the commodification of wild resources by stratified hunter-gatherers to support symbolic and political complexity (Hayden 2004; 2011; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020).

The imperative story here is of specific hunter-gatherers that travelled down the pathway of resource intensification. Yet vitally, this is not what non-intensifying band-level hunter-gatherers ever created, and GW fail to mention this essential piece of information. Rather, most of the indigenous cultures *DoE* idolises, for example, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Osage, are mixed farming-foraging cultures which share many similar sociopolitical traits with complex hunter-gatherers (Knight 2024).

Paralleling their story describing the emergence of agriculture in Southwest Asia, GW (2021:487) emphasise that, in North America, Haudenosaunee culture experienced a phase during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries where women developed more sedentary agricultural and matriarchal organisation as rebellion 'against defenders of

an older male-dominated order where prestige was entirely based in war and hunting'. This provides another example of where GW attempt to situate hunting as a driver of male dominance and the 'hero culture' ideology.

In sum, rather than reveal resource intensification as the underlying issue, GW seem to argue that our sociopolitical problems ultimately originate with life organised around what they view as male-dominated big-game hunting, that it is 'here we have the very beginnings of an aristocratic ethos'. Yet in respect to indigenous hunting cultures, this narrative only fits what we know about complex hunter-gatherers and horticulturalist-hunters and does not align with evidence we have for non-intensifying hunter-gatherers (Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW's omission of this variation is, in my view, intentional.

The prehistoric-to-contemporary left/right divide: summarising *DoE*'s political agenda

Why does *DoE* refuse to discuss in detail band-level hunter-gatherers? The reality is that GW cannot talk about this aspect of human history in tandem with the 'alternative' history they wish to present. Instead of dealing adequately with hunter-gatherer variability, GW situate hunting culture itself as effectively the baseline origin of the political right. Band-level hunter-gatherers get relegated to myth in *DoE* – written off as 'Edenic narrative' – and the only thing important about human history for GW becomes the very recent progressively complex societies of all types, where anything that is rural and subsistencebased is not sophisticated or progressive enough to be representative of a proper contemporary left politic.

For GW, reflecting how this political division is framed geographically today, at least in the USA, it is the prehistoric trajectory of a clash between rural and urban which frames the prestige-focused 'heroic' rebellion against urban democratic socialism. Under GW's framing, no ideological resistance to socioeconomic equality ever occurs among the urban political or administrative elite class. Rather, resistance to equality originates only from one source–the violent big-game hunters of the rural hinterlands.

GW (2021:445) admit that the 'hero societies' they are so apt to situate as the problem 'existed in a largely symbiotic relation with' the urban political economy. Most certainly, both the early Neolithic urbanites and complex hunter-gatherers were societies engaged in competition between aggrandisers (Feinman 2013; Hayden 2020), a dynamic resembling the economic stratification associated with modern commercial free-market capitalism (Kulchyski 2023). For Hayden (2004), the operating ethos among complex hunter-gatherers is 'entrepreneurialism', which is, essentially, the right-wing libertarian commercialist ideal. The foundational tenet of this politic is a belief in liberty for the individual to become personally affluent, and hostility toward any attempts by centralised or collectivist politics towards levelling the individual entrepreneur.

Hayden (2004:298) argues that early agricultural development was an outcome of the positive feedback mechanisms ultimately spawned by an initial 'scramble after enhanced power and wealth'. This 'scramble' was occurring among certain complex hunter-gatherers via the entrepreneurialism described by Hayden, well before any existence of established centralised government. As such, GW's (2021:426) proposal that the fundamental elements of authoritarian constraint can simply reduce to a lack of 'freedom to move [...] to disobey and [...] to create or transform social relationships' is misdirected. Primary is a need to accentuate how an ethos of aggrandisement tends to evolve in the first place. This requires that we start with hunter-gatherer studies and the conceptual distinction between immediate and delayed-return hunter-gatherer societies (Woodburn 1982; Finlayson 2020a; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020), a metric GW (2021:128–130) say should be discarded.

As delayed-return aggrandisers, GW's 'heroes' would naturally take full advantage of the broad-reaching social and material power building up within the evolving larger settlements and rebel against any notion of 'democracy' or 'equality' arising therein. As civilisations evolve, GW's 'heroes' are simply competitors for the unprecedented economic and political power amassing among the expanding urban elite (Frangipane 2007). Cities, by their nature, are large-scale systems of resource extraction, accumulation and control. In this material reality, it is naïve to claim, as GW do throughout Chapter 8 of *DoE*, that cities were ever exclusively egalitarian. Even if elite leveraging of human basic needs wasn't apparent from the start, it all led to the conditions of land circumscription and material dependencies with which we are familiar today (Algaze 2001; Hayden 2020; Kulchyski 2023).

Despite GW's claims, cities have never been innocent. Just as aristocratic 'barbarian' raiders and 'heroic' males have always terrorised urban populations and their satellites, city economics have always simultaneously destabilised egalitarian structure for smaller-in-scale rural communities near urban peripheries, and beyond.

DoE calls for social justice, yet it fails to see that the political purposes of their so-called 'heroes' are not only status-seeking, but also resisting resource appropriation from the rural hinterlands by cities – the hijacking of formerly small-scale rural trading markets by monopolising urban economic powers. The 'heroes' rebellion is to attack the extractive empire-building commercialism of the cities and sift off their own portions of wealth from it.

Cities generate environments that are opportune for aggrandising agents to grow their power, just as economic intensification by complex hunter-gatherers had done, but at much larger scales. Disruption of peripheral small-scale self-reliant communities and appropriation of the natural resources they depend on for obtaining their basic material needs is an ongoing result of urban political economies. This extraction has resulted in the phenomena of globalised urbandriven resource extraction that continually harms existing non-economically intensifying hunter-gatherers (Lewis 2016) and which propels our planetary crises at large.

Rather than deal with material reality, GW situate prehistoric huntergatherers as the initiators of processes leading to the global emergence of powerful aristocracies, monarchies and overall centralised authoritarian control. They describe the 'barbarian' raider situation in Eurasia as it had evolved several thousand years *after* the PPNB, well into both agricultural states and the Bronze Age, continuing to compare this to hunter-gatherers. GW do this without ever adequately qualifying the 'sharp contrast [between] nomadic hunter-gatherers' and the Pacific Northwest Coast groups they cite, which are 'the type-case for "warlike" complex hunter-gatherers' and thus 'cannot be taken as typifying hunter-gatherers throughout prehistory' (Ferguson 2009:119, 121). GW write (2021:310–311 [my emphasis]):

> From 3100 BC, across the hilly country of what's now Eastern Turkey, and then in other places on the edge of urban civilization, we see evidence for the rise of a warrior aristocracy, heavily armed with metal spears and swords, living in what appeared to be hill forts and small palaces. All traces of bureaucracy disappear. In their place we find [...] aristocratic households – *reminiscent of* [...] *the Pacific Northwest Coast* in the nineteenth century... And then:
>
> [W]hen top-down rule does emerge [...] it's not in the 'complex' metropolises [...] but among the small, 'heroic' societies of the surrounding foothills [...] If there is a good ethnographic parallel for these latter groups it might be *the societies of the Northwest Coast*, since there too political leadership lay in the hands of a boastful and vainglorious warrior aristocracy, competing in extravagant contests over titles, treasurers, the allegiance of commoners and the ownership of slaves. Recall here that *Haida, Tlingit and the rest* not only lacked anything that could be called the state apparatus: they lack any kind of formal governmental institutions. (2021:361[my emphasis])

Early in *DoE* (2021:190) we see GW subtly formulating their narrative that to be against 'progress' (and agricultural civilisation, and consequent bureaucratic governance, and managed commerce), means to be both a believer and promoter of 'the myth of the Noble Savage' and a right-winger. GW (2021:69) say 'right-wing thought has from the beginning been suspicious not just about ideas of progress, but also the entire tradition that emerges from the indigenous critique'.

If one reads carefully between the lines, we can see that in the final analysis GW appear to blame our current problems on aggrandising hunter-gathererlike individual thinkers identified in their minds with contemporary right-wing libertarians. *DoE*'s counter to this is the celebration of the collectivist-minded urban left who have, according to GW's framing of 'the indigenous critique', from the Upper Palaeolithic forward been evolving to become increasingly 'enlightened' and thereby have ushered in utopian social progress; arts, writing, specialisation, labour guilds, domestication, agriculture, government, technology, mass-society – essentially, the 'civilised' value system.

The subsistence-based alternative

Omitted from *DoE*'s framing of 'indigenous critique' are actual egalitarians. At one point GW briefly mention Scott's (2009) highly important analysis of numerous South-east Asian hill tribes, who are considered 'barbarians' by neighbouring civilisers in agricultural valleys, and who have effectively created and maintained non-intensifying, anti-authoritarian, anarchist lifeways. But Scott's insightful work on this topic receives no significant emphasis in *DoE* as a viable historical alternative to either 'heroic' aristocratic warlordism or progressivist technocratic social-democratic-capitalist urbanism. Instead, Scott's anarchists are reduced to 'another example of cultural schismogenesis – [which] could also give rise to "heroic societies"'(GW 2021:445), continuing *DoE*'s tale that egalitarianism has only ever occurred in progressively advanced formations.

Many contemporary urbanites would like to see things this way, which is why *DoE* is such a marketable book – it tells the urban bourgeoisie what it wants to hear: egalitarianism and women's liberation can exist only in economically and administratively complex settled societies, and lesser-developed rural people have commonly lived under the aristocracy of powerful individualistic male patriarchs. Today's status-quo Left already views rural men who are hunters and who are antagonistic towards urban bureaucracy as the same type of wannabe 'heroic' alpha-male types described by GW as agents of 8000-plus years of human political divisions. Through a revisionist anthropological and archaeological lens, the amended message becomes: if you're one of these resistant, rurally minded men who is against assimilationist mass-formation governmental bureaucracy then you are an anti-social-progress 'warrior hero'.

Yet, as Scott (2009) makes clear, not all rural and upland people are representative of GW's described 'heroic societies'. Many such societies on the fringes of civilisation are not driven by desire for economic growth and the opportunity to increase elite status, but instead are guided by an ethos of rejecting the destruction of human social, physical and mental well-being imposed by civilisational progress, its authoritarian governance and its socioecologically alienating growth-oriented economics at large (Van Lanen 2024). The rural people described by Scott (2009; 2017) are humans who have a sustained history of rejecting the despotism of elite-driven economic growth-based societies. Gowdy (2021:105–106) provides an apt summary:

> [M]ost of the world's population prior to 1500 to 1600 CE did not live in state societies. Most of the Earth's population were what [Scott 2017] calls 'free barbarians', people living in the periphery of the state but not within it. They typically lived in areas hard to penetrate and hard to cultivate – dense forest swamps and marshes. They could be shifting cultivators, hunter-gatherers, or anything in between. Barbarians were the original 'deplorables', eating meat instead of grains, living in the hills, forests, and swamps instead of within city walls [...] To be a barbarian was a viable alternative to being a peasant.

This represents Scott's main characterisation of actual anarchists in history, not the fake 'anarchy' on offer from Graeber in *DoE*.

Among anarchists a long tradition exists of rejecting bureaucracy, and unlike both the status-quo Left and Right, anarchists maintain longstanding aversions to commodification, mass-production, commerce and industrialism, instead promoting local gift economies reminiscent of immediate-return hunter-gatherer practices. Meanwhile, Graeber, spent his career snubbing known egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Instead, his pattern was to frequently cite as 'egalitarian' societies that are far more hierarchical (Bitton 2021a). *DoE* is a culmination of that pattern.

DoE provides no mention that African and Asian immediate-return huntergatherers (Lye 2005; Woodburn 1982), and forager-horticulturalists such as 'voluntarily isolated' Amazonians (Ricardo & Gongora 2019) and Scott's (2009) Zomians – all non-progressive rural peoples – provide legitimate examples of cultures which have avoided creating authoritarianism, monarchy, war and socioecological destruction. GW ignore their existence.

Just as some Southwest Asia specialists reframe the heterarchical conditions of early settled societies as 'egalitarianism' (Finlayson 2020a; Frangipane 2007), GW hijack the term 'egalitarian' as used traditionally by hunter-gatherer ethnographers for their own political ends, thereby generating among their popular audience ambiguity and confusion about what egalitarian societies are.

Above I discussed GW's claim that both Native American and Fertile Crescent farming was initiated by women rejecting hunting. The *DoE* story says that women were the main holders of plant knowledge and thus they were easily able to transform that knowledge into cultivation practices as an insurrectionary food alternative to male obtained, and supposedly controlled, game meat. GW avoid documentation of significant gender egalitarianism among band-level hunter-gatherers and instead choose to assign agricultural civilisation as the sole producer of gender equality. Once this argument is introduced in Chapter 6 of *DoE*, GW continue to use it to imply that any resistance to agricultural development is primarily a patriarchal, violent alpha-male phenomena. Essentially, since women created agriculture, if one is opposed to agriculture, if one is critical of agriculture's ultimate impacts on planetary ecology and its usurpation of billions of hectares of land from indigenous societies and wildlife, then such a critic is effectively undermining women.

To be deemed accurate, GW would need to provide a comprehensive, crosscultural comparison among hunter-gatherers, mixed-economy and agricultural societies to demonstrate that farming is the consistent marker for women's liberation. In their claims about 'farming' being 'the ecology of freedom', I ask GW to contemplate the many thousands of hunter-gatherer women and their children that have been blocked from continuing hunter-gatherer lifeways, driven into poverty, dispossession and discrimination because of agricultural expansionism. This is a serious issue for GW.

GW (2021:487) lump war and hunting into an 'older' prestige-driven system/ ideology. But hunter's social prestige should not be conjoined imprudently with a politics of

war. Certainly, hunting prestige is a sociopolitic that is 'older' than patriarchally driven war (Ferguson 2009). I surmise that hunting prestige is likely as old as *H. sapiens*, and possibly *Homo*. It is undoubtedly as old as human arrival in Europe, Asia, and the New World, and, with some exceptions, most hunting cultures likely channelled this prestige into highly social, legitimately egalitarian, communally beneficial formats, not as a mechanism for the enhancement of warring ideologies. Yet apparently, according to GW's logic, for tens of thousands of years humans were supposedly despotically subjugated by this supposed 'male-dominated order' and then suddenly, with agriculture, an ongoing hunter's tyranny was finally put in check.

If, for example, GW had done the important work of providing an in-depth account of the African hunter-gatherer record as a component of their so-called 'new history of humanity', they would have been forced to write about the immensely important relationship between men's hunting and women's solidarity and cooperative childcare. Among African hunter-gatherers it is women's political organisation that has traditionally encouraged men to hunt cooperatively and bring meat back to camp so to provide the most calorically dense foods for nourishing babies, children, elders and pregnant women, all of whom do the bulk of childcare (Biesele 1993; Chaudary et al 2023; Jang et al 2022). In fact, it is likely that a key driver of our evolution was women's formation of coalitions to motivate men to cooperate in big-game hunting so to become providers at both the group and sex-partner levels (Hrdy 2009; Power 2017; 2019; 2024; Boyd & Richerson 2022; Watts 2022). *DoE* (2021:82) barely mentions this. Instead, by the end of the book GW have made hunting the scapegoat for our contemporary pathologies and claim that the Neolithic revolution was a women's rebellion against it. Meanwhile, successful male hunters among egalitarian hunter-gatherers are well-known for their modesty and lack of boastfulness (Lee 2013; Lewis 2021; Sellato 1994). They don't at all fit the alpha-male mould described by GW.

DoE never analyses the emergence of aggrandising agents in the form of hereditary elites that arise when hunting cultures evolve away from a subsistence-focused immediate-return ethos and develop resource intensified delayed-return political economies. I suspect that GW avoided developing any balanced analysis of hunter-gatherer diversity in the anthropological record because it would lead them to admit that hierarchy is usually associated with progressive socioeconomic complexity. Hunting is not to blame. *Homo sapiens* could not have evolved without a massive input of animal foods, and particularly animal foods that were harvested by direction of a specific egalitarian sociopolitical context generating fundamental positive feedback between social cooperation and encephalisation (Power 2024).

It is vital that this story about our speciation as cooperative hunters be told, and crucial for understanding human sociopolitical history. Representative of peoples who purposefully stayed out of the prehistoric war between cities and 'heroes' that *DoE* describes, immediate-return and other non-intensifying indigenous peoples never participated in GW's battle between left and right. As socially conservative peoples (Marlowe 2010; Scott 2009), they instead chose to maintain subsistence-based cultures intention-

ally removed from progressive development. As peoples who emphasise both individual autonomy and group interdependence, they cooperatively provisioned their members a generally equal share of basic human needs, and they successfully struck down anyone who tried to manipulate the situation to have more. It is these cultures that GW attempt to delegitimise in their so-called 'new history of humanity' (Kulchyski 2023).

We are reminded here of Wolfe's (1982) classic articulation that the small-scale and marginalised indigenous peoples of the world are 'the people without history'. Likewise, for GW, our most proven sustainable human societies, who are the most 'undeveloped', non-progressive, and, in respect to material conditions, temporally stable – both hunter-gatherer and forager-horticulturalist – are not worthy of history. For GW, if one is to look towards such marginal and 'unsophisticated' lifeways as a model for what sustainable human arrangements look like then one is engaging in 'Edenic' mythology. In peddling this narrative and writing only about the history of cultures which align with it, GW are repeating the same logic of privileging 'high' culture that colonialist adherents of 'manifest destiny' have promoted over the last 500 years.

In this view, *DoE* advocates a twenty-first-century urban politic, which is – irrespective of class – one that cares little for non-progressive, nonindustrial ways of life. It effectively promotes a globally extractive way of life as the only human path forward, one that depends ultimately on continued elite-driven resource extraction from rural peripheries to support an unskilled (in respect to land-based physical skill), ecologically alienated urban populace. Tainter (1988:198) offers a good explanation for such 'civilised' motivations towards upholding the dominant system and disliking the more independent rural people who stand in opposition to it: 'It may only be among those members of a society who have neither the opportunity nor the ability to produce primary food resources that the collapse of administrative hierarchies is a clear disaster'.

DoE's underlying messages are clear; contemporary people who remain the most independent and free, such as the Amazonian isolates (Ricardo & Gongora 2019), are, in the postmodernist bourgeois subconscious, still 'savages'. Such 'savages', and any legitimately autonomous rural people, are in the way of progress. Westerners who have an interest in pursuing more self-reliant, and thus earthly, ways of life, can now be labelled as uneducated, unsophisticated wannabe 'warrior heroes' who are against women because they resist mass industrial agriculture and control by governmental bureaucracy. Essentially, implies *DoE*, if you oppose sophisticated, high-minded civilisation and its institutions you must be part of the extreme right.

Bitton's (2021b) remark that the 'powers that be' are very good at 'taking Left-wing sentiment, egalitarian sentiment, and poison pilling it with ideas that turn those sentiments into hierarchical practice' is apt for assessing *DoE*'s advancement of this type of political propaganda. What we see in *DoE* is an overt example of how a cadre of elite bourgeois intellectuals attempts to use identity politics and political correctness to divide and distract ordinary people from dealing adequately with their twenty-first-

century material conditions and the socioecological crises being perpetuated by them (Van Lanen 2024).

Socioecological sanity means not continually ramping up scale, and not furthering economic intensification and extractivism. GW (2021:148) want to discredit and denounce any idea of simplicity (see Knight 2024, this volume), but socioeconomic simplicity – life within simple, subsistence-based communities – has always been the antithesis of the conditions that have generated the tragic situation we and the planet are in now, including our divisive left and right politics. Instead of helping to increase global awareness of humanity's best examples of long-range sustainable culture and economies, *DoE* eliminates these cultures from world history, and by doing this I assert that not only is *DoE* 'scholarly malpractice' (Bell 2021), it risks being both ethnocidal and ecocidal.

Conclusion

In contemporary America at least, the majority, both politically left and right, thoroughly occupies the trap of globalisation-dependent, extractive economic growth. The exception however is among some rural populations that attempt to uphold much more local self-reliance and far less dependency on globalised corporate techno-industrialism. Small-scale community self-sufficiency and thus liberty from governmental and corporate control is a core part of the rural identity and politic among many indigenous and settler populations. Left-leaning people who elect to abandon the dominant economy and become back-to-the-land, rural folk – organic growers, goat tenders, foragers, permaculturalists, fishers and hunters – inevitably take on a more conservative politic as part of the process, because they quickly learn that governmental bureaucracy and globalised supplychain dependency is actual dominance hierarchy. This rural politic recognises that it is the resource extraction and market demands of the urban masses and their corporate overlords which perpetuate colonialism and obliterate the capacity for actualised human autonomy (Van Lanen 2024). As such, this contemporary politic of rural resistance, which is neither strictly left or right, should be considered the politic of today that is most effectively attempting to put into practice the ethos of the 'indigenous critique' put forward in *DoE* (2021:5).

It's time to do away with the dead ends that both left and right politics have become and turn towards deep anthropological learning about economically and politically non-intensifying human lifeways with proven track records of enduring social and ecological sustainability and human well-being. While *DoE* offers humanity little productive in this regard, hunter-gatherer studies continue to offer us possibilities.

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What if ...[8]

The future-shaping potentials of knowing egalitarian societies
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What if ...

... we all knew more about what it means to live as a member of an egalitarian society?

... we realised creating egalitarian living is not some kind of nonchalant activity but active work, an ongoing process of making the social organisation work well for all those concerned?

... power is continuously churned, in ways where power is never fixed with one person, group or entity, and where leadership is situational and temporary?

... nobody ever tells you what to do, and nevertheless you would organise yourself in active relation to others, always making sure your actions resonate with the most coherent energy in that situation?

... you would always be sensing, attuning, aligning with how humans and non-humans are moving, bringing together your individual bodying with the group bodying and surroundings, in a mode we call *socio-somatic?*

... your gender is a non-binary power potential, expressing itself as part of coalitions, as *eros*, as something much bigger than physical human sexuality, as both playful and political, intertwining the erotic, power and sharing?

... singing and dancing are part of generating and maintaining social cohesion and the hum of coherence, and can happen at any time to balance out tensions and defuse conflicts, while aligning humans with a bigger picture, for example, seasonal or lunar cycles?

... sharing on demand goes without saying?

... *independence within interdependence* is at the heart of things, individual presence always embedded in the collective, with a deep sensitivity to human and more-than-human?

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What if ...

... you had explored in school about egalitarian societies, not as the primitive past, but as an ongoing, contemporary mode of social organisation?

... egalitarian socio-somatics and relational intelligence were also influential in the futures-making of today's societies – one of the potential ways of organising our human futures?

How would making this knowledge more publicly present impact our current debates?

Asking 'What if' in this way, is a response to Graeber & Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything.* The book offers a fountain of examples highlighting the many different and non-linear changes in modes of human social organisation. As the contributors to this special issue show, *The Dawn of Everything* leaves out key details on egalitarian societies in an alarming and regrettable way. It misses the opportunity of providing information on what has been the core way of humans relating and successfully organising themselves, over time.

What if ...

... Graeber & Wengrow had included more material on how egalitarian societies work in the *The Dawn of Everything*, and the many readers of this *New York Times* bestseller had now also gained a deeper understanding of their ancestors' egalitarian pasts?

... we woke up every morning, with a deeper appreciation of how our ancestors sharing laughter, touch, dance, song and radical joy, sharing socio-somatic co-presencing, is part of the success story of where we are today?

... we cherished how people and power can only ever be continuously moved towards coherence but not controlled?

... we applied this generative dynamic to enrich political dialogue, educational spaces and our workplaces?

... we learn to tell non-violent stories, where human authority is built on and balanced by lunar ebbs and flows, by seasons and qualities of soil, by global more-than-human perspectives?

Can we afford to ignore this creative potential, when we address our human futures on Earth?

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