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David Graeber and David Wengrow, 2021, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (750 pp., hardcover, $35).

In *The Dawn of Everything*, the late anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow reexamine societies of the deep past and revisit unjustly neglected theories of feminist scholars to produce a riveting account of human societies from the Paleolithic to the Enlightenment.

The book's main contentions are that "human societies before the advent of farming were not confined to small, egalitarian bands" and that agriculture didn't "mark an irreversible step towards inequality" (4). The authors remind us that it's only been within the last two percent or so of our existence as homo sapiens that we became stuck in year-round hierarchy. The implication, of course, is that we can become unstuck. Graeber and Wengrow revel in examples of part-time, seasonal, and temporary leveling of social relations.

However, they infuse the volume with needless pessimism regarding the possibility of a truly egalitarian future. Although Graeber used to defend horizontal organizing as a way of treating each other as responsible adults, this volume conflates egalitarianism with childishness. While Graeber previously emphasized the necessity of human mobility for freedom, he and Wengrow now make this linkage unnecessarily vague.

By not delving deep enough into the past, *The Dawn of Everything* unnecessarily dismisses anthropological understandings of humanity's egalitarian origins, and portrays ancient cities and civilizations as more hierarchical than they may have actually been. Despite their intentions to write a "new history of humanity," the authors disappointingly gloss over humanity's African origins in order to center foragers who lived in Europe well after humanity's dawn.

Graeber used to describe his politics as a logical outcome of hearing his father recount serving in the International Brigades in Anarchist-run Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War:

> "[A]lmost anyone who believes that anarchism is a viable political philosophy—that it would actually be possible to have a society without states or classes, based on principles of voluntary association, self-organization, and mutual aid—is likely to feel that wouldn't be a bad idea. If most people have a problem with anarchism (That is, those who actually have a clear idea what anarchism is) it's not because they don't think it is an appealing vision, but because they have been taught to assume that such a society would not be possible" (Graeber 2007, 6).

The trajectory from believing egalitarian anarchy is possible to believing it's desirable is central to prevailing accounts of humanity's origins. Consider the explanation given by Christopher Boehm, in a study cited by Graeber and Wengrow:

> "Once one band, somewhere, invented an egalitarian order, this radical change in social ways of doing things would have become visible to its neighbors […] One would expect a gradual cultural diffusion to take place, with attractive egalitarian traditions replacing despotic ones locally" (1999, 195).

The Dawn of Everything's bibliography is rife with references to works that theorize Paleolithic egalitarianism by writers including Chris Knight, Sarah Hrdy, and Pierre Clastres. Hrdy notes that "[v]irtually all African peoples who were living by gathering and hunting when first encountered by Europeans stand out for how hard they strive to maintain the egalitarian character of their group" (2009, 204). Furthermore, the archaeological record shows a

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Mary Stiner and Steven Kuhn, 2009, "Paleolithic Diet and the Division of Labor in Mediterranean Eurasia". In Jean-Jacques

decreasing size difference between male and female hominids and a decreased sharpness of teeth, suggesting a turn from domination to persuasion as we became human (Shultziner et al 2010).

The latest evidence for a transition toward equality includes early red ochre traces corroborating a "female cosmetics coalitions" hypothesis, in which women collectively used mock menstrual blood to conceal ovulation patterns and therefore thwart male attempts to maintain chimpanzee-like harems and dominance hierarchies. Anthropologist Camilla Power explains that it was women who spearheaded the "revolutionary" transformation to egalitarianism that "made us human" (2019).

One might expect Graeber and Wengrow to welcome the understanding that most of our species's history involved treating each other like equals. Instead, they assert that egalitarian-origins theorists believe in a "childhood of man" (118).

It's not clear why they equate egalitarianism with childhood, since warding off hierarchy requires significant political sophistication. In his earlier work, Graeber described horizontal relations as the antithesis of immaturity."Insisting on treating everyone like responsible adults may not always guarantee mature behavior, but in my own experience it does prove surprisingly effective," Graeber wrote of New York City's horizontally-structured organizing (2009, 331).

In constructing their argument against an egalitarian Paleolithic, Graeber and Wengrow make two contradictory claims in a single page. They state they'll only focus on the last 40,000 years because "for the most part, we don't have the slightest idea" what earlier humans were like, adding "[t]here's only so much you can reconstruct from cranial remains and the occasional piece of knapped flint" (81). From there, they point to different skeleton sizes between communities and make the sweeping assertion that the "presence or absence of social hierarchies […] must have varied at least as much as physical types and probably far more" (81).

It's unclear why the authors think physical differences *between* regions, which they describe as resembling a world of "hobbits, giants and elves," would have affected social structure within a given region. Even when size disparities were stark in a given area, the larger individuals' ability to dominate would have been mitigated by the leveling effect of wooden spears going back at least half a million years (Boehm 1999, 181).

The Dawn of Everything pays special attention to North America's hierarchical coastal forager societies such as the semi-sedentary Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw and Calusa people. Although the authors speculate that vertical social structures were typical throughout human existence, it's commonly understood that humans were entirely nomadic in the Middle Paleolithic, and the Upper Paleolithic's unstable climate would have made sedentism a rarity (Shultziner et al. 2010).

In contrast to the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw and Calusa, who launched raids with war canoes (151, 174), the overwhelming majority of Paleolithic foragers seem to have been peaceful (506). A survey of skeletons and cave art at 400 Paleolithic sites across Africa, Asia and Europe found only one site had evidence of warfare and 395 had no signs of violence at all (Haas and Piscitelli 2013).

The Dawn of Everything also brings up certain peoples' seasonal transitions between egalitarianism and hierarchy, arguing that these fluctuations were likely typical throughout human existence. The authors cite accounts of the Inuit living as equals during winter and dispersing into patriarchal families during summer to follow migrating animals (106-114). Although they describe such variation as "playing" with hierarchy, they fail to consider how their notion of play contrasts with the lived experiences of Inuit women who reported being subjugated for months at a time (Bitton 2022).

The authors' other examples of seasonal transitions—including Great Plains warriors' comparatively benign enforcement of buffalo meat sharing and a contested account of Nambikwara transi-

As in the past, women and egalitarians are at the forefront of social transformation. A longtime Wobbly, Graeber would have recognized the future being built in the old world's shell.[6]

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[6] In their constitution's preamble, the Industrial Workers of the World, "the Wobblies," famously declared themselves to be "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."

wanted, the entire system would collapse" (Graeber 2004, 61). Graeber employed similar logic to critique so-called "anarcho-capitalism." He imagined an island with an anarcho-capitalist society on one side and an egalitarian society on the other: "What possible reason would those slated to be the night watchmen, nurses, and bauxite miners on the anarcho-capitalist side of the island have to stay there? The capitalists would be bereft of their labor force in a matter of weeks" (Graeber 2013, 297).

In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow's pessimism tarnishes their monumental effort to show that other worlds are (and were) possible. Dismissing hopeful implications of accounts of foragers' egalitarianism they lament, "At best, we could perhaps imagine (with the invention of Star Trek replicators or other immediate-gratification devices) that it might be possible, at some point in the distant future, to create something like a society of equals once more" (129).

We don't need to wait for Star Trek technology to replicate the mobility and abundance of immediate-return societies. The technology for decentralized production of needs has been available for some time. As Graeber famously pointed out, today's machines are so obscenely productive that more than half of our workweeks are devoted to "bullshit" work (2018).

Getting unstuck involves the creation of alternatives for those who wish to leave an exploitative relationship, be it with a boss, a landlord, a husband, or whomever else. Grassroots institutions—from MakerSpaces and community gardens to communal living arrangements and worker cooperatives, through such projects as the Global Ecovillage Network, and Right to the City Alliance—provide paths for people seeking to live, as Paleolithic humans did for millennia, outside exploitative relations of (re)production.[5]

[5] For an overview of such projects in theory and practice, see Kevin Carson, *Exodus: General Idea of the Revolution in the XXI Century* (Tulsa: Center for a Stateless Society, 2021).

tions in the Amazon—involve farming societies which are of limited relevance to theorizing humanity's forager origins. The Paleolithic's most common social fluctuations probably involved alternating men's and women's rituals. This alternation can still be observed in African foraging societies which remain "egalitarian all year around" (114-5).[1]

Graeber and Wengrow don't remark on the fact that seasonal hierarchies are related to hunting patterns, nor that their evidence of lavish burials in western Eurasia (87) come from the Upper Paleolithic when, aided by the spread of spear-throwers and bows, humans expanded hunting and largely abandoned scavenging (Knight, 320). Mary Stiner and Steven Kuhn (2009) argue the Upper Paleolithic first occasioned a division of labor by gender, when men became specialized handlers of hunting weaponry. This would help explain humanity's population rise, since it became easier for a woman to carry and raise a baby when she's not stalking mammoths or warding off hyenas. This period's costly practice of raising hunting dogs suggests another association between increased hunting and incipient hierarchy (Mietje Germonpré et al. 2020). What was likely going on was men's gradual transformation of hunting weapons into weapons of domination, corroborated by the fact that societies mostly reliant on hunting (or animal husbandry) are far more likely to be male-dominated than societies mostly reliant on gathering (Sanday 1981, 170).

In a different context, that of Anatolia's Çayönü Tepesi region, Graeber and Wengrow mention this trend: "hunting as predation, shifting subtly from a mode of subsistence to a way of modelling and enacting dominance over other human beings" (244). As Power (2019) spoke of humanity's "revolutionary" emergence, the rise of

[1] Although Graeber and Wengrow cite Chris Knight, the correct attribution should have been to his former student: Morna Finnegan's "The politics of Eros: ritual dialogue and egalitarianism in three Central African hunter-gatherer societies," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 697-715.

patriarchy could be considered a counter-revolutionary corollary, one unfortunately largely overlooked by the authors.

Pointing to the near universality of women's gathering among forager societies, Graeber and Wengrow argue that women should almost certainly be credited with inventing farming (237). The authors clarify that farming developed through a millennia-long process of playful experimentation often involving relaxed flood-retreat techniques and avoiding easy-to-tax cereal crops. Such "play farming," they posit, explains the 3,000 year gap between the domestication of plants and the adoption of full-time agriculture (242-8).

While *The Dawn of Everything* does not characterize this prolonged experimentation as a Neolithic "revolution," I do think it's appropriate to describe women's creation of farming as revolutionary. Several of the book's middle chapters introduce readers to egalitarian cultures throughout Eurasia during Neolithic and ancient times, but the survey is not comprehensive. For example, China's ancient Peiligang culture is omitted. An endnote clarifies that the authors intended in a future volume to discuss Africa's egalitarian cities such as Jenne-Jenno (571; McIntosh 2009).

Signs of egalitarianism in the Neolithic include a rough equality in burial goods, house sizes, and skeletal conditions, as well as an absence of palaces and grand temples. Graeber and Wengrow point to such indications of equality throughout the Southern Levant, Anatolia's Çatalhöyük, and, moving into the Bronze Age, the Indus Valley's cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, and the pre-state Sumerians.

I do not agree with all of the authors' interpretations, least of all their flimsy evidence that Mohenjo-daro's Great Bath was used by a "priestly caste" (317). Given that there was no concentration of wealth or aristocratic burials in Mohenjo-daro, it seems odd for the authors to postulate the existence of caste, a term that didn't enter the region's written record until 1,000 years later (316-7). Nor am I convinced that Minoan Crete was as hierarchical as they suggest.

point about imperfections persisting in egalitarian societies, they could have done so without expressing extreme pessimism about the possibility of equality, by citing Le Guin's nuanced anarchistic utopias of Anarres and the Kesh, or the matriarchal Athshe.[3]

It's odd that Graeber and Wengrow position "How did we get stuck?" as the "real question" (112) but go on to provide only a highly impressionistic answer. They argue the origins of domination involved the "connection–or better perhaps, confusion–between care and domination" (514). As evidence of the transformation from care into control, they point to Sumerian temples offering a home to orphans and widows while demanding their subservience and labor (308). Though their hypothesis is intriguing, the authors might have offered a simpler answer involving mobility.

The anthropology of egalitarian foragers emphasizes that becoming and remaining unstuck requires, perhaps above all else, the ability to leave a hierarchical relationship.[4] Leaving—even just threatening to leave—is the greatest protection people have against would-be rulers. The fact that sizable segments of the population could pack up and become foragers again ensured the first millennia of farmers remained stateless. It also explains how some farmers in pre-colonial North America, who in many regions had a low population density and higher mobility, were able to get unstuck from hierarchical relations.

In his earlier writings, Graeber often emphasized the importance of mobility for combating hierarchy. Describing border control as part of capitalism's long sequence of attacks on worker mobility, he predicted in 2004 that "if the system ever really came close to its own fantasy version of itself, in which workers were free to hire on and quit their work wherever and whenever they

[3] See Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, *Always Coming Home*, and *The Word for World is Forest*.

[4] James Woodburn, "Egalitarian Societies," *Man* 17, no. 3 (1982): 435. Boehm, *Hierarchy*, 74. Power, "Gender Egalitarianism."

can squander what we produce" (Cohn 1970, 199). I'm also curious what they'd make of Cosmas of Prague's portrayal of egalitarian Taborites: "Nor did anyone know how to say 'Mine' […] there existed neither thief nor robber nor poor man" (Cohn 1970, 214).

Moreover, unless an elitist definition of "thinker" is used, medieval thought surely includes common Europeans articulating "folk egalitarianism" through carnivals, festivals and rebellions (34). Since Graeber repeatedly cited and recommended Silvia Federici's Caliban and the Witch, including in *Dawn of Everything*, he was surely familiar with her assessment that from the thirteenth century onward, "vast communalistic social movements and rebellions against feudalism had offered the promise of a new egalitarian society built on social equality and cooperation" (Federici 2004, 61). From the thirteenth century onward these movements articulating radical alternatives to religious and economic hierarchy, were disproportionately led by women, not unlike previous transformations of human society.

World-transforming events, each advancing egalitarian ideals and initiated at least equally if not disproportionately by women, were what made us human, farmers, and Enlightened. Each revolution was followed by a counter-revolution: the Paleolithic counter-revolution transformed hunting weapons into weapons of domination, the Neolithic counter-revolution turned agricultural surpluses into the tools of statecraft, and the radical Enlightenment was largely superseded by a conservative tendency that my friend Laura Schleifer calls the "En-white-man-ment."

Disappointingly, *The Dawn of Everything* has its own conservative tendencies. For instance, there's the bizarre claim that private property is as old as "humanity itself" (163). There's also a strange comparison of history's egalitarian cities to Ursula Le Guin's highly dystopian city of Omelas (290). Given the horror revealed at the end of Le Guin's story, I can only read this comparison as a suggestion that Graeber watered down his anarchist aspirations in his final years. Had Graeber and Wengrow wished to make their

In fact, the decentralized economy and rapid circulation of luxury goods convinced some scholars that Minoan Crete was "an egalitarian matriarchal society based on consensus" (Mann and Goettner-Abendroth 2019).

Graeber and Wengrow courageously defend the scholarship of Marija Gimbutas, a prominent archaeologist who taught at Harvard and UCLA, and fell out of favor among fellow academics for her writing about the egalitarian and goddess-worshiping culture of Old Europe. To the delight of ecofeminists and matriarchalists everywhere, recent DNA studies have validated core parts of Gimbutas's analysis (216-220).

The Dawn of Everything further supports Gimbutas' assertions by providing evidence of egalitarianism among Old Europe's Cucuteni–Trypillia cities by the Black Sea, where the circular arrangement of houses ensured that no family was at the head and that there was plenty of room in the middle for communal assemblies and celebrations. Although the houses looked roughly the same on the outside, the varied insides suggests the culture strongly valued creativity and innovation (293-5).

The Dawn of Everything posits an analogy between the shift from playful farming to full-time agriculture and the transition from "play" states to real ones (429). But the authors could have gone further and made explicit the material connection between these two processes. Such an explanation would have echoed James Scott's account of the first state, Uruk, forming due to increased aridity around 3500 to 2500 BCE. By making irrigation more laborious and forcing people into more concentrated areas, this climatic change "diminished many of the alternative form[s] of subsistence, such as foraging and hunting" (Scott 2017, 120-121). In other words, people became stuck in these societies when it no longer became feasible to leave and become foragers again.

Fortunately, there are plenty of examples of farmers who managed to reverse hierarchy. Graeber and Wengrow point to the city of Taosi, where commoners razed the city walls around 2000 BCE.

They turned the palace into a trash pit, and buried their dead in the elite cemeteries. For two to three hundred years, commoners appear to have enjoyed prosperity in a self-governed city.

But when Graeber and Wengrow call Taosi's transformation "the world's first documented social revolution" (326), they omit, for example, a similar process that apparently occurred at Çayönü around 7200 BCE: mansions and temples burnt down, the temple turned into a municipal dump, the slums replaced with comfortable houses (Brosius 2004). Similar signs in 300 CE show Teotihuacanxs in present-day Mexico City desecrating the temple, halting pyramid construction, and shifting resources toward building massive public housing accompanied by egalitarian symbolism in artwork (341-2).

The most dramatic and durable reversals of hierarchy occurred in societies such as the Haudenosaunee confederacy, formed in 1142 CE, and the Wendat confederacy which was established afterwards. Farmers remained relatively mobile, while low population densities made it possible "to shift back to a mode of subsistence more oriented to hunting, fishing and foraging; or simply to relocate entirely" (472).

Iroquoian societies are also important for Graeber and Wengrow's contention that the "Indigenous critique" of Europe contributed to the Enlightenment. *The Dawn of Everything* notes how French and English settlers in North America marveled at the freedom of Indigenous societies and on many occasions even sought to join them, it was less common for natives to choose assimilation among settlers (19).

From the perspective of Wendat spokesperson Kandiaronk, who apparently visited France, it was Europeans who seemed to live in a Hobbesian condition of permanent conflict. Kandiaronk reportedly expressed incredulity at Christianity's belief in damnation: "I find it hard to see how you could be much more miserable than you already are. What kind of human, what species of creature, must Europeans be, that they have to be forced to do

good, and only refrain from evil because of fear of punishment?" (53). Sharply criticizing France's social hierarchies, he defended Wendat's "leveling equality" which proved conducive to "the qualities that we Wendat believe ought to define humanity – wisdom, reason, equity" (56).

Kandiaronk's ideas, as recorded and embellished by Baron de Lahontan, influenced the French Enlightenment's notion of social equality. Rousseau almost certainly read Lahontan's writings, and he definitely cited Lebeau's summary of them (536). When discussing Kandiaronk, Graeber and Wengrow draw on the scholarship of Seneca historian Barbara Alice Mann (aside from being a skilled scholar, Mann is an intellectual renegade who has collaborated with Ward Churchill and Heide Göttner-Abendroth).

Graeber and Wengrow seem unaware that by highlighting the influence of Indigenous thinkers on the Enlightenment, they are adding to an existing discourse of "Enlightenment from below." Historians of Latin America—such as Bianca Premo, S. Elizabeth Penry, and Nick Nesbitt—emphasize how eighteenth-century subjects in Spanish America and Haitian revolutonaries advocated for natural rights, secularization, free elections, and equality.[2] This is an exciting field, potentially adding everyday expressions of the desire for decolonization, equality, and abolition of slavery to the radical Enlightenment canon.

Graeber and Wengrow understate the influence of European commoners, asserting that social equality "did not exist as a concept" among the continent's "medieval thinkers" (32). I wonder how Graeber and Wengrow would interpret fourteenth-century chronicler Jean Froissart's account of John Ball's sermon: "And if we are all descended from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve, how can the lords say or prove that they are more lords than we are—save that they make us dig and till the ground so that they

[2] See Bianco Premo's *The Enlightenment on Trial*, S. Elizabeth Penry's *The People are King*, Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation.*