

# Anarchaeology

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## *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*

by David Graeber and David Wengrow

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LOOK CAREFULLY AT a man's sport coat. Now look again as if it were an artifact that survived into the distant future, unattended by any form of written, oral, or visual communication, and that you are an archaeologist trying to understand our long-dead culture. You would notice there are buttons on the sleeves, but no adjacent buttonholes. And that there is a buttonhole on the lapel, but no buttons opposite. Since buttons have been found on other objects that align neatly with available holes you might assume that the sleeve buttons were fastened to the lapel buttonhole. Not all your fellow scholars share the same interpretation. Some assert that the arm was crossed to allow for the sleeve button to be fastened to the lapel hole as a form of ritual act, while others are equally insistent that the arm was affixed straight up as a form of salute. Indeed, because some coats have four buttons on the sleeve while others have only three, there were few who dared to deny this was a mark of rank.

Ridiculous? Certainly. But is it any more speculative than a certain amount of archaeology?<sup>1</sup> The real question is not just one of standards for proving the unprovable, but appreciating that what one brings to the material remains may overshadow what one takes from it. Europeans seeing a rhinoceros for the first time portrayed it as armored like a medieval charger, and the Victorians, who felt compelled to medicalize all aberrant behaviors, considered kleptomania a form of "ovarian insanity" to explain why some middle class ladies might "go a-thieving" in the newfangled department stores.<sup>2</sup> Archaeologists and social historians have undoubtedly learned an enormous amount about our species, and thoughtful conjecture is vital to forming useful questions. But caution should always be exercised when the standards for interpretation are not clearly expressed, or the theory used to read between the lines is not itself the subject of careful self-criticism.

In recent years, writers such as Jared Diamond, Yuval Noah Harari, and Steven Pinker have become well-known for their broadscale syntheses. These overviews of human nature have occasioned both praise and pause.

The hesitation comes when Diamond relies on theories of geographical determinism and cultural evolution disowned by the very people he cites, when Harari claims without support that early human organization simply replicated that of chimpanzees and bonobos, and when Pinker cherry-picks archaeological examples to make the claim that we are far less violent than our ancestors.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that their interpretations are misleading in all respects. Nor is the problem solved by the occasional, not altogether convincing, admission that the issue is somewhat conjectural. The possibility that the narrative has overrun the facts is no less worrisome for the most recent of the grand schemas: that put forth by two University of London scholars, anthropologist David Graeber, who died suddenly last September, and archaeologist David Wengrow, in *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*.

CARRIED BY ITS attractive presentation and nimble writing, two central themes stand out in Graeber and Wengrow's account. First, human social and cultural development, far from following an ineluctable trajectory, has always incorporated a broad array of viable alternatives. Just as we have come to regard the evolution of our species as more like a bush than a tree and history as much more than a story of ever-greater Whiggish improvement, so, too, in the social realm we have always had multiple models that have not pointed in a singular direction.

The second theme follows from the first. It asserts that, since our history is not one of narrowing alternatives, we need not think of ourselves as inextricably tied to one or another means of social organization. On the contrary, it is precisely in the alternatives that salvation from Leviathan may be sought. The social history of our kind, the authors conclude, is one in which enacted alternatives and resistance to states show how it is possible to live without any central governing institutions, and that freedom has thrived in such circumstances. And this, readers are assured, is also the proper way to read the archaeological record. When Graeber's personal advocacy of anarchy and Wengrow's speculative archaeology meet, a new interpretation of human history becomes possible—*anarchaeology*.

The authors' new history of humanity goes something like this: Throughout the ages when they subsisted predominantly as hunter gatherers, human beings were great experimenters.<sup>4</sup> They worked their environs with great ingenuity and exploited time through the seasonal variation of their social arrangements. Dispersing to harvest widespread foods in one season, they could gather in another when resources were more consolidated. When they began what the authors call "play agriculture," permanent settlements and state structures did not inevitably follow. Six thousand years transpired between the appearance of part-time agriculture and settled cultivators. It is thus an error

to treat whole populations of "complex hunter-gatherers" either as deviants, who took some kind of diversion from the evolutionary highway, or as lingering on the cusp of an "Agricultural Revolution" that never quite took place. ... It is [their] ecological flexibility that tends to be excluded from conventional narratives of world history, which present the planting of a single seed as a point of no return.<sup>5</sup>

In this *longue durée* of seasonal organization, our predecessors are said to have enjoyed three key freedoms:

The freedom to abandon one's community, knowing one will be welcomed in faraway lands; the freedom to shift back and forth between social structures, depending on the time of year; the freedom to disobey authorities without consequence—all appear to have been simply assumed among our distant ancestors, even if most people find them barely conceivable today.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, as the archaeological record indicates, there was no magical moment when groups settled down and took up gardening or herding. Instead, in many cases agriculture was "systematically rejected," in part because it was needlessly strenuous.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the range of those with whom one interacted became smaller and more differentiated even in settled locales as people intensified the relationships that could only be maintained in face-to-face fashion.

Ever since Mesolithic times [c. 10,000 BCE], the broad tendency has been for human beings to further subdivide, coming up with endless new ways to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. ... [T]he overall direction of history—at least until very recently—would seem to be the very opposite of globalization. It is one of increasingly local allegiances: extraordinary cultural inventiveness, but much of it aimed at finding new ways for people to set themselves off against each other.<sup>8</sup>

Following the ages of hunter-gatherers and the introduction of agriculture, the story archaeologists usually tell would now have humanity settling into cities where ruling

figures, having emerged from tribal hierarchies, enforced limitations on earlier freedoms in exchange for relative security. But once again, say the authors, the archaeological record says otherwise. Residence patterns and architectural evidence suggest that early cities were not, in fact, characterized by central governance. Neighborhood groupings predominated over kingly authority, and early kingship consisted of "play kings" who often had little power to enforce their authority or even to maintain their status for long.<sup>9</sup> Whether in seasonal or settled modes, a great deal of knowledge—including one of its most valuable forms, ritual knowledge—emanated largely from the efforts and insights of women. When all of these features are assembled, the authors conclude, the issues that some scholars and commenters have taken as critical—determining the source of inequality in human societies and why we lost our freedom to centralized states—are less trenchant than appreciating that freedom and multiple organizational forms have characterized most of human history.<sup>10</sup>

**I**N PURSUING THEIR thesis, the authors undoubtedly get a great deal right. They appreciate that humans are not limited to one organizational structure at a time; that larger hunter-gathering groups were not all kin-related; that bureaucracies may have arisen in smaller group settings rather than large agglomerations and as a limitation on, rather than an instrument for, centralized control; and that kingdoms, far from concentrating on one region or crop, exploited multiple ecological zones simultaneously.<sup>11</sup>

Less sure are a number of their other interpretations: that certain archaeological sites should be seen as evidence of violence; that cities often possessed no ruling stratum because burials suggest no ruling hierarchy; and that current Buddhist monasteries prove it is possible to have cities without elites.<sup>12</sup> Though not unreasonable, these interpretations are far from self-evident. Burial goods may, of course, be statements of a person's rank. But they may also symbolize the ties the deceased formed with other individuals, ties that cannot be inherited; by containing the goods that represented those relationships, the graves signal that others must prove themselves through the creation of their own relational bonds. Elsewhere, the authors suggest that what they call assembly rooms in various prehistoric sites indicate that decision making was communal. But these rooms are only marginally bigger than other spaces, and what went on within them in terms of power or influence, as even the authors note, is not determinable from the physical remains.<sup>13</sup>

Or take the argument about women. It is indisputable that women's contributions have been undervalued in archaeological studies. But greater attention ought not to give way to favorable speculation. The authors' emphasis on female figurines at key European sites does not alone mean that women were crucial to the religious or political

organization of their societies. Indeed, animal figurines are more numerous than those of females at many sites. In the same thread, the authors claim: “Instead of some male realizing his solitary genius, innovation in Neolithic societies was based on a collective body of knowledge accumulated over centuries, largely by women.”<sup>14</sup> But there is no way, from material remains alone, to know who performed which tasks. And though the authors say that one cannot project back to prehistoric times from the activities of contemporary hunter-gatherers, they repeatedly fall off the wagon when they use such groups as the Eskimo and the Bushmen to read between the lines of the archaeological record.

Readers should hesitate again when the authors assert that the very concept of freedom came to Western thought from indigenous people who commented on the culture of the early explorers in North America.<sup>15</sup> This idea relies on the account of one Kandiaronk, a Huron chief, recorded by a European writer of the day. The authors claim that many such native individuals engaged in “self-conscious debate” within their own societies.<sup>16</sup> If Graeber and Wengrow’s interpretation is driven by contemporary efforts to credit indigenous peoples with insights denied them by the racism of an earlier era, without solid evidence to back such claims, the result is not science but politics. The same applies to their assertion that, among the Indians of the Great Lakes region, “[e]verything operated to ensure that no one’s will would be subjugated to that of anyone else.”<sup>17</sup> The authors ignore the informal sanctions of gossip and scandal, ostracism, and parental withdrawal that may have many of the same effects as outright command.

Archaeologists are faced with the problem of filling in between the tiny bits of material they collect with an interpretation that will string together all their findings. Graeber and Wengrow use several theories to create such linkages, theories that are in essence psychological. The first is Gregory Bateson’s notion of schismogenesis, which suggests that societies frequently exhibit divisions that reinforce each unit’s distinctiveness.<sup>18</sup> But whereas Bateson saw these divisions as invariably deleterious, Graeber and Wengrow, without mentioning Bateson’s misgivings, offer this theory to explain how people employ division to prevent themselves from being overwhelmed by overarching structures that threaten their freedoms. The authors argue that this thinking led people to imagine what it must be like to live in larger communities, such as cities, without losing small-group attachment. For this proposition, they rely on the suggestion of Elias Canetti, who argued that prehistoric man, as indicated by his cave art, craved association with others and imagined whole urban communities, which eventually came to exist.<sup>19</sup> The authors supplement these theories with the claim by Robin Dunbar that we can only keep track of about 150 people at a time. As a result, they argue, we are drawn into smaller units even when we live in large agglomerations. But Dunbar’s number, as it is called, has been roundly disputed, just as Canetti’s philo-

sophical musings find no traction in the material remains from prehistoric times.<sup>20</sup>

All this is brought to bear on the archaeological record, where investigators notoriously find disagreement their common coin. As the exchange between Kwame Anthony Appiah and Wengrow in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* indicates, some analysts see a managerial elite at Mohenjo-daro and others do not,<sup>21</sup> some see Teotihuacán as a city whose anarchic structure is evident from the building of popular housing while others do not,<sup>22</sup> and still others disagree as to whether the absence of early palaces in Mesopotamia is grounds for assuming there was no authority structure.<sup>23</sup> The authors acknowledge that “it’s difficult to resist the temptation to fill in the gaps, to claim we know more than we really do.”<sup>24</sup> And they are honest enough to say that, when there are simply no data to rely on, any given interpretation must be speculative. But the temptation to fill in a story is almost always irresistible.

It is not simply, as other reviewers have noted, that the book is really a manifesto for the authors’ personal politics. It is that some perspective, some plausible story, is always present when narrating the past. Certainly, Graeber’s anarchism—evident in his activism with Occupy Wall Street and similar endeavors—shows through in the version he and Wengrow offer. Having declared that “this book is mainly about freedom,”<sup>25</sup> the authors assert, “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.”<sup>26</sup> Yet they never clearly define the state or the actual organizational aspects of long-dead anarchies. One is reminded of a quip by the playwright Alan Bennett: “We started off trying to set up a small anarchist community, but people wouldn’t obey the rules.”<sup>27</sup>

There is more than a touch of noblesse oblige when the authors write,

As we’ve said before, there are certain freedoms—to move, to disobey, to rearrange social ties—that tend to be taken for granted by anyone who has not been specifically trained into obedience (as anyone reading this book, for instance, is likely to have been).<sup>28</sup>

The urge to imagine a time of Eden is hard to resist. Graeber and Wengrow indulge in their own form of romanticization, whether it is claiming that a Native American critique of Europeans showed their superior understanding of human possibilities, or that, in Iroquois culture, the directives of parents and elders or the infliction of ritual cutting were not to be regarded as authoritarian acts.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising, too, that the authors’ view of all scholarship before them reaches its extreme when they write, “Social science has been largely a study of the ways in which human beings are not free.”<sup>30</sup>

Science is just as susceptible to projections from our own momentary assumptions as are other domains of

human endeavor. In the first blush of genomic discoveries, we thought there was a single mitochondrial Eve, mother to us all. And when one macaque discovered a way to clean food to make it edible, Japanese scientists thought it proved group cooperation, Germans that it demonstrated direction by a key individual, and Americans that the discoverer expected compensation for teaching the technique to others.<sup>31</sup> The point is not to denigrate science, but the very opposite—to hold it to its own professed standards.

We will always seek, in our rage for meaning, to reassemble the scattered remnants of our past into a story—to find a buttonhole for the stray button. In the process, we will project an image of ourselves that speaks to our current needs. “Social theory is largely a game of make-believe,” the authors write. “Essentially, we reduce everything to a cartoon so as to be able to detect patterns that would be otherwise invisible.”<sup>32</sup> That may explain why, as Annalee Newitz noted in the *Washington Post*,

this isn’t a book that attempts to be scientifically accurate, whatever that might mean. It’s a polemic. ... Looking back into history, [the authors] find examples of anarchism everywhere, offering suspiciously utopian accounts of cultures to whom they ascribe values of feminism and anarchy.<sup>33</sup>

Science must often advance by ignoring certain facts. Just as Isaac Newton had to pretend his apple was falling in a vacuum, we may have to pretend that once we were truly free in order to understand our current state. Enormous strides have been made possible by scientific techniques that were unimaginable when many of our foundational stories were formed. Perhaps the authors are right, that what was once a “carnival parade of political forms” is now one in which, as our democracies are “currently coming apart,” “we can hardly envision our own past or future as anything other than a transition from smaller to larger cages.”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, too, we could do worse than to imagine there was a time when we were truly free and that we could choose to be so once again. But an honest recognition of our own projections is surely the prerequisite to being true to the story of how we got to where, for better and for worse, we now endeavor to find ourselves.

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1. For a recent example of such speculation, see Franz Lidz, “A 2,700-Year-Old Figurine Revives a Weighty Mystery,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2022.

2. See Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
3. On Diamond, see Jackson Lears, “The Round World Made Flat: The Curious Neoliberal Social Scientism of Jared Diamond,” *Bookforum*, December/January 2013. On Harari, see Galen Strawson, “Sapiens,” *The Guardian*, September 11, 2014. On Pinker, see Philip Dwyer and Mark Micale, eds., *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021). On Harari and Pinker, see also David Berlinski, “Gadzooks,” *Inference: International Review of Science* 3, No. 4 (2018), doi:10.37282/991819.18.7; and David Berlinski, “The Best of Times,” *Inference: International Review of Science* 1, no. 4 (2015), doi:10.37282/991819.15.21.
4. For a brief summation of their argument—and more explicit statement of their political goals—see, David Graeber and David Wengrow, “Ancient History Shows How We Can Create a More Equal World,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2021.
5. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 172, 268. Pagination to the American edition of the book differs slightly.
6. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 142.
7. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 173, 243, 263.
8. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 134, 174.
9. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 127.
10. Although stating that it is “unclear what ‘egalitarian’ even means,” the authors frequently relapse into its use, as in their discussion of Mohenjo-daro:

In fact, it seems very difficult for most of us even to imagine how self-conscious egalitarianism on a large scale would work. But this again simply serves to demonstrate how automatically we have come to accept an evolutionary narrative in which authoritarian rule is somehow the natural outcome whenever a large enough group of people are brought together.

Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 86, 326.

11. One example is the Calusa of Florida.
12. On the Buddhist example, see Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 326–28.
13. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 328.
14. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 501.
15. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 492–93.
16. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 454.
17. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 60. The authors draw a contrast to those, like ourselves, living in states where what we share is “equality in common subjugation.” Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 57.
18. Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).
19. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 284, citing Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (London: Gollancz, 1962).

20. Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships* (New York: Little Brown, 2021); and Patrik Lindenfors, Andreas Wartel, and Johan Lind, “‘Dunbar’s Number’ Deconstructed,” *Biology Letters* 17, no. 5 (2021), doi:10.1098/rsbl.2021.0158.
21. Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Digging for Utopia,” *New York Review of Books*, December 16, 2021, and his exchange with Wengrow, “The Roots of Inequality: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2022.
22. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 337 and 350.
23. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 320.
24. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 92.
25. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 213.
26. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 142.
27. Alan Bennett, *Getting On*, in *Alan Bennett: Plays*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).
28. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 483.
29. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 487.
30. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 500.
31. See generally, Angela Fiore et al., “Food Cleaning by Japanese Macaques: Innate, Innovative or Cultural?,” *Folia Primatologica* 91, no. 4 (2020): 433–44, doi:10.1159/000506127.
32. Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 34.
33. Annalee Newitz, “After 200,000 Years, We’re Still Trying to Figure Out What Humanity Is All About,” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2021. Referring to one of the freedoms that is key to their analysis, the authors exhibit their penchant for finding anarchy in early societies when they say, “An office holder could give all the orders he or she liked, but no one was under any particular obligation to follow them.” Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 55.
34. For the carnival quote, see Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 18, 128. The cages quote appears at page 515; the democracy quote at 433..

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