FREE FOR ALL

Is it time to rethink everything we've been taught about the origins of "civilization"?

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

Moments of sociopolitical tumult have a way of generating all-encompassing explanatory histories. These chronicles either indulge a sense of decline or applaud our advances. The appetite for such stories seems indiscriminate—tales of deterioration and tales of improvement are frequently consumed by the same people. Two of Bill Gates's favorite soup-to-nuts books of the past decade, for example, are Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of Our Nature" and Yuval Noah Harari's "Sapiens." The first asserts that everything has been on the upswing since the Enlightenment, when we learned that rational argument was preferable to religious superstition and wanton cudgelling. The second concludes that everything was more or less O.K. until about twelve thousand years ago, when we first beat our swords into plowshares; this innocent decision, which must have seemed a good idea at the time, heralded an era of administrative hierarchy, state-sanctioned violence, and the unchecked proliferation of carbohydrates. Perhaps what readers like Gates find valuable in these books has less to do with the purported shape and direction of history than with the broad assurance that history *has* a shape and a direction.

Both stories, after all, adhere to a model of history that's at once teleological (driven by specific forces to arrive at the foreordained present) and discontinuous (such magical things as farming and rationality emerged from the woodwork, unlocking successive stages of developmental maturity). They generally agree that the crucial rupture divided some original state of nature from the grand accession of civilization. Their arcs of irrevocable decline or compulsory progress are variations on themes that were given their most recognizable modern elaborations by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pinker takes up the Hobbesian notion that early human existence was a brutish war of all against all. Harari takes rather literally Rousseau's thought experiment that we were born free and rushed headlong into our chains. ("There is no way out of the imagined order," Harari writes. "When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.") In both accounts, guilelessness and egalitarianism are exchanged for knowledge and subordination; the only real difference lies in the cost-benefit assessments of that trade.

About a decade ago, the anthropologist and activist David Graeber, who died suddenly last year, at the age of fifty-nine, and the archeologist David Wengrow began to consider, in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, how they might contribute to the burgeoning literature on inequality. Not inequality of income or wealth but inequality of power: why so many people obey the orders of so few. The two scholars came to see, however, that to inquire after the "origins" of inequality was to defer to one of two myths—roughly, Hobbes's or Rousseau's—based on a deeply ingrained and deeply misleading fantasy of the human career. The product of their extended collaboration, "The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is a profuse and antic account of how we came to take that old narrative for granted and why we might be better off if we let it go.

The consensus version of the story begins with the appearance of the first anatomically modern humans, about two hundred thousand years ago. For approximately a hundred and ninety thousand years, or about ninety-five per cent of our existence as a species, we lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers, following migratory herds and foraging for wild nuts and berries. These cohorts were small enough, and the demands of resource procurement and allocation were sufficiently minor, that decisions were face-to-face affairs among intimates. Despite the lurking menace of large cats, these early hunter-gatherers didn't have to work particularly hard to fulfill their caloric needs, and they passed their ample leisure hours cavorting like primates. The order of the day was an easy egalitarianism, mostly for want of other options.

Twelve thousand years ago, give or take, the static pleasures of this long, undifferentiated epoch gave way to history proper. The hunter-gatherer bands lucky enough to find themselves on the flanks of the Zagros Mountains, or the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, began herding and farming. The rise of agriculture allowed for permanent settlements, which, growing dense, became cities. Urban commerce demanded division of labor, professional specialization, and bureaucratic oversight. Because wheat, unlike wild berries or the hindquarters of an aurochs, was a storable, countable good that appeared on a routine schedule,

ABOVE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



"The Dawn of Everything" aims to expand our political imagination by exploring how human beings once lived together.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROB SATO



"I'm sorry, that's incorrect. Release the bees."

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the selfish administrators of inchoate kingdoms could easily collect taxes, or tributes. Writing, which first emerged in the service of accounting, abetted the sort of control and surveillance upon which primitive racketeers came to depend. Where hunter-gatherers had hunted and gathered only enough to meet the demands of the day, agricultural communities created history's first surpluses, and the extraction of tributes propped up rent-seeking élites and the managerial pyramids—not to mention standing armies—necessary to maintain their privilege. The rise of the arts, technology, and monumental architecture was the upside of the creation and immiseration of a peasant class.

From roughly the Enlightenment through the middle of the twentieth century, these developments—which came to be known as the Neolithic Revolution—were seen as generally good things. Societies were categorized by evolutionary stage on the basis of their mode of food production and economic organization, with full-fledged states taken to be the pinnacle of progress.

But it was also possible to think that the Neolithic Revolution was, all in all, a bad thing. In the late nineteen-sixties, ethnographers studying present-day hunter-gatherers in southern Africa argued that their "primitive" ways were not only freer and more egalitarian than the "later" stages of human development but also healthier and more fun. Agriculture required much longer and duller working hours; dense settlements and the proximity of livestock, as well as monotonous diets of cereal staples, encouraged malnutrition and disease. The poisoned fruit of grain cultivation had, in this telling, led to a cycle of population growth and more grain cultivation. Agriculture was a trap. Rousseau's thought experiment, long written off by conservative critics as romantic nostalgia for the "noble savage," was resuscitated, in modern, scientific form. It might have taken three or four decades for these insights to make their way to TED stages, but the paleo diet became a fundamental requirement of any self-respecting Silicon Valley founder.

For Graeber and Wengrow, this basic story, whether relayed in a triumphal or a defeatist register, is itself a trap. If we accept that the rise of agriculture meant the rise of the state—of political élites and intricate structures of power—then all we can do is tinker around the edges. Even if we regard the Paleolithic era as a garden paradise, we know that our reëntry is forever barred. For one thing, the requirements of hunting and gathering could support only some trivial fraction of the earth's current population. A life under government control now seems inescapable.

"The Dawn of Everything" is a lively, and often very funny, anarchist project that aspires to enlarge our political imagination by revitalizing the possibilities of the distant past. Superficially, it resembles other exhaustive, synoptic histories—it's encyclopedic in scope, with sections introduced by comically baroque intertitles—but it disavows the intellectual trappings of a knowable arc, a linear structure, and internal necessity. As a stab at grandeur stripped of grandiosity, the book rejects the logic of technological or ecological determinism, structuring its narrative around our ancestors' improvisatory responses to the challenges of happenstance. The result is an almost hallucinatory vision of the human epic as a series of idiosyncratic digressions. It is the story of how we made it up as we went along—of how things could have been different and, perhaps, still might be.

Drawing on new archeological findings, and revisiting old ones, Graeber and Wengrow argue that the granaries-to-overlords tale simply isn't true. Rather, it's a function of an extremely low-resolution approach to time. Viewed closely, the course of human history resists our favored schemata. Hunter-gatherer communities seem to have experimented with various forms of farming as side projects thousands of years before we have any evidence of cities. Even after urban centers developed, there was nothing like an ineluctable relationship between cities, technology, and domination.

The large town of Çatalhöyük, for example, on the Konya Plain in present-day Turkey, was settled around 7400 B.C. and seems to have been occupied for approximately fifteen hundred years—which, the authors note, is "roughly the same period of time that separates us from Amalafrida, Queen of the Vandals, who reached the height of her influence around AD 523." The settlement was home to about five thousand people, but it had neither an obvious center nor any communal facilities. There weren't even streets: households were densely packed together and accessed via roof ladders.

The residents' living areas were marked by a "distinctly macabre sense of interior design," with narrow rooms outfitted with aurochs skulls and horns, along with raised platforms that encased the remains of up to sixty of the households' dead ancestors. It was, as far as we know, one of the first large settlements to have practiced agriculture: the citizens derived most of their nutrition from cereals and beans they grew, as well as from domesticated sheep and goats. For a long time, all of this was taken together as a key example of the "agricultural revolution" in action, and the material remnants were interpreted to support the old story. Corpulent female figurines, assumed to be part of fertility rituals, were found in what were understood to be proto-religious shrines of some sort—the first indications of organized cultural systems.

In the past three decades, however, new archeological methods have disturbed many of these long-standing assumptions. The "shrines" were, Graeber and Wengrow tell us, just regular houses; the female figurines could be the discarded Barbie dolls of the Anatolian Neolithic, but they could also be a way of honoring female elders. The community seems to have supported itself for a thousand years with various forms of agriculture—floodplain farming and animal husbandry—without ever having committed itself to new forms of social or cultural organization. From what we can derive from wall murals and other expressive residues, Graeber and Wengrow say, "the cultural life of the community remained stubbornly oriented around the worlds of hunting and foraging."

So what was actually going on in Çatalhöyük? Graeber and Wengrow interpret the evidence to propose that the town's inhabitants managed their affairs perfectly well without the sort of administrative structures, royal or priestly, that were supposedly part of the agricultural package. "Despite the considerable size and density of the built-up area, there is no evidence for central authority," the authors maintain. "Each household appears more or less a world unto itself—a discrete locus of storage, production and consumption. Each also seems to have held a significant degree of control over its own rituals." Some houses appear to have been more lavishly furnished with aurochs horns or prized obsidian (which was brought in from Cappadocia, more than a hundred miles away), but there is no sign of élite neighborhoods or marks of caste consolidation. Different forms of social organization likely prevailed at different times of year, with greater division of labor necessary for cultivation and hunting in the summer and fall, followed by something more equitable—and, perhaps, matriarchal—during the winter.

Çatalhöyük isn't the only site that calls into question the presumption that the Neolithic era was patterned on a single civilizational kit. Graeber and Wengrow report that some cities thrived long before they showed signs of hierarchical systems—such as temples and palaces—and some never developed them at all. "In others, centralized power seems to appear and then disappear," they write. "It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any form of political organization."

If cities didn't lead to states, what did? Not any singular arrow of history, according to Graeber and Wengrow, but, rather, the gradual and dismal coalescence of otherwise unrelated, parallel processes. In particular, they think it involved the extension of patriarchal domination from the home to society at large. Their account of how household structures were transformed into despotic regimes requires some unconvincing hand-waving, but throughout



they emphasize that any given process can be historically contingent without being simply inexplicable. The guiding principle of "The Dawn of Everything" is that our remote ancestors—not to mention certain present-day Indigenous groups long dismissed as living relics of superannuated barbarians—must be viewed as self-conscious political actors. Historical ruptures cannot be reduced to technological novelties or geographical constraints, even if those factors played crucial roles. They arose from our own choices and actions.

Graeber and Wengrow point to moments in the distant past in which they see instances of deliberate refusal: communities that weighed the advantages and disadvantages of one ostensibly evolutionary step or another (pastoralism, royal domination) and decided that they liked their current odds just fine. The communities that built Stonehenge had once adopted ways of cultivating cereal from Continental Europe, but recent research suggests that they returned to hazelnut collection around 3300 B.C. Various ecological theories have been floated to explain the sudden collapse, around 1350 A.D., of the brutal dynasty of Cahokia (in present-day Illinois), then the largest city in the Americas north of Mexico, but Graeber and Wengrow propose that the proto-empire's subjects—who lived under constant surveillance and the threat of mass executions—simply defected en masse. Land wasn't scarce, and they just walked away.

Where some groups adopted and abandoned different arrangements over time, others maintained a repertoire of assorted practices to suit fluctuating purposes. Modern ethnographic treatments of Indigenous communities describe an astonishing level of social plasticity (available to us, perhaps, in the highly etiolated form of Burning Man and other "temporary autonomous zones"). In a 1903 essay, the anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Henri Beuchat described the routine organizational reversals in Inuit communities. These groups spent their summers fishing and hunting in small cohorts under the possessive—and coercive—authority of a single male elder. Graeber and Wengrow describe how then, as the winter brought an influx of walruses and seals to the shore, "the Inuit gathered together to build great meeting houses of wood, whale rib and stone," where "virtues of equality, altruism and collective life prevailed. Wealth was shared, and husbands and wives exchanged partners." It's impossible to say whether such practices were designed or preserved to diminish the threat of permanent domination, but that was one of their effects.

Such groups weren't ignorant of whatever else was on offer; they were frequently in contact with other societies,

took stock of their habits, and sought to define themselves in contrarian ways, in a rather underexplored process that, following the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Graeber and Wengrow call "schismogenesis." In the Pacific Northwest, men of rank among the Kwakiutl held lavish, greasy potlatches and took war captives as slaves; their neighbors to the south of the Klamath River, the Yurok, prized restraint and self-denial, and committed themselves to modes of subsistence that rendered slavery, which they found morally repugnant, unnecessary.

When divergences in cultural values occurred within societies rather than between them, the result could take the form of revolutionary sentiment. Consider the city of Teotihuacan, which was founded around 100 B.C.—more than a thousand years before the rise of the Aztecs—and was almost certainly the largest city in the pre-colonial Americas. The metropolis was first constructed on a monumental scale, with the kind of pyramids and palaces that indicate social hierarchy. At a certain point, however, the people of Teotihuacan decided against investing in more fancy villas. Instead, Graeber and Wengrow write, "the citizens embarked on a remarkable project of urban renewal, supplying high-quality apartments for nearly all the city's population, regardless of wealth or status." They accomplished all of this without wheeled vehicles, sailing ships, animal-powered traction, or advanced metallurgy. Perhaps most important was that, although they were in contact with the monarchical Mayan societies nearby, the people of Teotihuacan flourished for some three centuries without submitting to the rule of anything like a king.

Except, we learn in passing, some archeologists believe that they did. (The scholarly debate on the matter turns in part on the interpretation of a few inscriptions in the Mayan city of Tikal.) Though Graeber and Wengrow have marshalled a vast amount of archeological evidence, they acknowledge that much of what anyone has to say about ancient societies is speculative. Their hope is that, even if some of their examples remain dubious, the accumulated weight of recent findings—and the more inventive assortment of political organization they imply—establishes the glib tendentiousness of Big History. As they put it, "We are at least trying to see what happens when we drop the teleological habit of thought."

Big History, to be sure, has long been out of favor in academic circles. Although Graeber and Wengrow can be a little self-congratulatory, they do point out that one of the first things you learn in an introductory course in anthropology or archeology is that pat appeals to cultural evolution are retrograde and silly. Critiques of grand narratives have been important to the modern self-image of these fields—in part as penance for having once been happy to serve the priorities of empire, peddling "civilization" as a gift to the "primitives." One consequence, however, is that wholesale synthetic accounts of human history tend to be written in the extravagantly roughshod mode of Harari's "Sapiens" or Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel." (Graeber and Wengrow neglect to mention their strongest rivals: the science fictions of writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson.)

At the same time, Graeber and Wengrow know better than to limit "The Dawn of Everything" to a litany of counterexamples. In the late nineteen-sixties, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz worried that his discipline had gained a reputation for simple negation—a message encapsulated in the phrase "Not on Easter Island." In other words, there were holes in every story: you could always puncture some "high-wrought" theory with a shard of anomalous data from the remote place where you did your fieldwork. Yet when anthropology was reduced to "spiteful ethnography," Geertz argued, it put itself in the business of "disapproving of intellectual constructions but not of creating, or perhaps even of understanding, any." Graeber and Wengrow seem to agree. It's all well and good, they might think, to murmur "Not on Easter Island" when a popularizer gets too expansive or confident, but they worry that if people aren't offered an alternative framework they will still default to some version of the pernicious cultural-evolution myth—and accept that the familiar hierarchies of governance are simply the price of sophistication.

Consider the widespread assumption, which Graeber long contested, that larger human societies can't resolve collective-action problems without top-down authority. In 2014, he and the tech investor Peter Thiel debated the issue onstage. Thiel argued that modern life is much too convoluted for truly democratic participation, which is why his model for innovation was the miniature suzerainty of the startup. As a quasi-libertarian, he admitted some sympathy for Graeber's political anarchism,



but he didn't see how it could ever work: "Could you build the Manhattan Project, could you build Apollo, could you get someone to the moon in a radically decentralized chaotic system? Or do you need coördination and planning?"

Curiously, there are moments in "The Dawn of Everything" in which Graeber and Wengrow seem to yield to this way of thinking; they suggest, at one point, that we pay less attention to Egypt's heroic pyramid-building Old and Middle Kingdoms and more to its apparently helter-skelter "intermediate" periods, during which masterpieces might have gone unbuilt but people did not have to fear being summarily enslaved or buried alive as part of a funeral entourage. Still, it's by contending at length with the prejudices of scale—the expectation that there is some natural upper bound on the number of people who can live and work together without significant coördination from above—that the book signals its broader ambitions. "In the standard, textbook version of human history, scale is crucial," the authors write. "The tiny bands of foragers in which humans were thought to have spent most of their evolutionary history could be relatively democratic and egalitarian precisely because they were small." We therefore persuade ourselves that, given the problem of strangers, we need "such things as urban planners, social workers, tax auditors and police."

Yet pre-agricultural people erected great testaments to their ways of life in the absence of those structural supports—at Göbekli Tepe, also in Turkey, as well as on the Ukrainian steppe and in the Mississippi Delta. And post-agricultural societies could maintain systematic achievements without administrators to run them. "It turns out that farmers are perfectly capable of coordinating very complicated irrigation systems all by themselves," Graeber and Wengrow say. "Urban populations seem to have a remarkable capacity for self-governance in ways which, while usually not quite 'egalitarian,' were likely a good deal more participatory than almost any urban government today." Ancient emperors mostly "saw little reason to interfere, as they simply didn't care very much about how their subjects cleaned the streets or maintained their drainage ditches." About eight thousand years ago, the villagers of Tell Sabi Abyad, in present-day Syria, saw to a variety of complex tasks—pasturing the flocks; sowing, harvesting, and threshing grain; weaving flax; making beads; and carving stones—that presumably required extensive inter-household coöperation, yet everyone lived in uniform dwellings. Though writing wasn't invented for another three thousand years, a scheme of geometric tokens, stored and archived in a central if nondescript depot, had been put in place to monitor resource administration. The archeological remains of the village, remarkably preserved by a catastrophic fire that baked its structures of mud and clay, show no signs of caste division or a presiding authority.



Graeber and Wengrow hope that, once we grasp how ancient mega-sites (in Ukraine or in Jomon-era Japan) could grow large and manifold without a literate bureaucracy, or the way early literate societies (Uruk, in Mesopotamia) might have managed the trick of participatory self-governance, we might renew and expand our own cramped notions of what's politically tenable. We could come to detach progress from obedience. As they put it, "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. If this is so, we can at least refine our initial question: the real puzzle is not when chiefs, or even kings and queens, first appeared, but rather when it was no longer possible to simply laugh them out of court."

Graeber and Wengrow's dearest aspiration is to quicken that laughter once again. "Nowadays, most of us find it increasingly difficult even to picture what an alternative economic or social order would be like," they write. "Our distant ancestors seem, by contrast, to have moved regularly back and forth between them. If something did go terribly wrong in human history—and given the current state of the world, it's hard to deny something did—then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence."

This wasn't a matter of sheer forgetfulness, they say. It was by design. At least some of the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, they tell us, were bewildered and appalled by the strange European custom of giving and taking orders. Their judgments were widely circulated in the Europe of the early Enlightenment, where Indigenous people were often featured in dialogues meant to criticize the status quo. At the time, they were typically dismissed as the rhetorical sock-puppetry of canny European heretics. For how could "Natives" credibly engage with political constitutions or deliberate over consequential decisions?

"The Dawn of Everything" makes a persuasive case that what was passed off as Indigenous criticism of European political thinking was, in fact, Indigenous criticism of European political thinking. These Indigenous objections could be safely deflected only if they were seen as European ventriloquism, not ideas from another adult community with alternative values. "Portraying history as a story of material progress, that framework recast indigenous critics as innocent children of nature, whose views on freedom were a mere side effect of their uncultivated way of life and could not possibly offer a serious challenge to contemporary social thought," Graeber and Wengrow write.

The whole symbolic apparatus of cultural evolution aimed to make freedom—which they define as the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey orders, and the freedom to imagine less hierarchical ways of organizing ourselves—seem archaic and perilous. When we speak of the onset of social inequality, we're accepting the idea that real freedom is the plaything of children. The species grew up, and grew out of it. Peter Thiel wonders why we don't yet live in the future of our dreams. Graeber and Wengrow think the first step forward is a reminder of the past we deserve. ♦