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Outlook Review

After 200,000 years, we're still trying to figure out what humanity is all about

By Annalee Newitz

Anthropologist David Graeber, famous for summing up several millennia of economic history in his best-selling "Debt: The First 5,000 Years," spent the past decade collaborating with the archaeologist David Wengrow on another ambitious project. The two scholars sifted through evidence from 200,000 years of human history in an effort to understand how inequality began. Their exhaustive research has come to fruition in "The Dawn of Everything," a fascinating argument about why humans today are "stuck" in rigid, hierarchical states that would have appalled our ancestors. "Something has gone terribly wrong with the world," they write. "A very small percentage of its population do control the fates of almost everyone else, and they are doing it in an increasingly disastrous fashion."

Sadly, this book is also Graeber's last work. The famed anarchist philosopher, a major figure in the Occupy movement as well as an influential scholar, died in late 2020. This final work is a fitting capstone to his career, a tome that rivals fantasy epics in heft and imaginative scope. Indeed, Graeber and Wengrow seem aware of this comparison, noting with a wink at one point that early human history, with its Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, was like a world full of "hobbits, giants and elves." And though the book is packed with explanatory material from early civilizations — Wengrow is an expert in ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern archaeology — it's also a self-conscious exercise in mythmaking. "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." Put another way, this isn't a book that attempts to be scientifically accurate, whatever that might mean. It's a polemic.

The book begins by turning the history of the Enlightenment on its head, contending that the 18th century European quest for rational thought actually begins in the Americas with a Wendat intellectual named Kandiaronk. Back in 1703, their story goes, a French colonial explorer named Lahontan published a book of dialogues with a thinly disguised version of Kandiaronk, in which the two debated the nature of freedom and civil society. (Lahontan spoke Wendat and Algonquin languages, so it's plausible that these dialogues were basically edited versions of actual conversations.) Lahontan argues that European society was wealthy, liberated and spiritually superior. Kandiaronk counters that the French were enslaved to their king, brutally ruled by money and morally impoverished because they allowed some people to go hungry while others wasted food.

Kandiaronk and other Indigenous thinkers were the true architects of Enlightenment, Graeber and Wengrow

argue, because they called into question everything that Europeans had taken for granted about their lives. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other French philosophers would eagerly read Lahontan's book, as well as other popular dialogues with Indigenous people published at the time, influencing their own thinking about inequality. What Europeans called wealth was in fact spiritual poverty; and their precious freedom was reserved only for aristocrats. Inspired by Kandiaronk's critique, "The Dawn of Everything" invites readers to look at our received wisdom about civilization from diverse perspectives and not assume that the Western state is the only rational political system.

Many of us were taught in school that civilization evolves in revolutionary jumps that are roughly the same no matter where you are. These "revolutions" take us from simple to complex cultures: Hunter-gatherers become farmers; farmers make the leap to industrialized nation states. In "The Dawn of Everything," we learn that this might have been true in some European regions, but it's not how most civilizations emerge. In the near east, for example, there were hunter-gatherers who developed urbanized states without ever moving through an agricultural phase. Meanwhile, in the Americas, some Indigenous groups were agriculturalists for half the year and nomads for the other half. Though some civilizations developed bureaucracies, militaries and property regimes, others held property communally and established temporary police forces that were dissolved every few months.

Slowly a new picture of human civilization emerges, one that does not conform to tidy Western myths of development. And that's when Graeber and Wengrow pull the rug out from under us, revealing that the search for the origin of inequality — ostensibly their project — isn't a useful way to cure what ails us. It's impossible for everyone to be "equal," they write, and indeed a focus on equality leads to one-size-fits-all accounts of history. Instead, we can only get unstuck from our present crisis of disaster capitalism by exploring the origins of "freedom," especially the freedom to move anywhere, disobey authority and redefine the mythologies that help us make sense of our lives.

Graeber and Wengrow tell a dazzling array of stories about civilizations across many continents and thousands of years, all of which are grappling with what it means to be free. We're immersed in tales of the 9,000-year-old Turkish city of Catalhoyuk, where there was no great "agricultural revolution," but instead thousands of years of gradual transformation from hunting and gathering to planting a yearly harvest; the 19th century Yurok civilization on the California coast, where people tried and rejected agriculture; and the Minoan urbanites of Bronze Age Crete, ruled by female politicians who shared power with male traders.

One of this book's most intriguing assertions is that humans have been engaging in social experiments and political debate throughout our entire 200,000 year history, trying every sort of political structure along the way. The problem is that we tend to remember the civilizations founded on war and hierarchy, often because those societies are generally obsessed with recording their every (exaggerated) deed in writing. Modern thinkers often marginalize societies built on oral traditions and ever-changing political structures, relegating them to "prehistory" or "the dark ages."

Exploring these supposedly inferior eras, we find models for civilizations based on vast networks of hospitality and trade, rather than conquest. Graeber and Wengrow speculate that the Hopewell peoples of North America, whose incredible earthworks have stood for millennia, did not define their civilization as a social ladder with some overlord at its top. Instead, their many cities and villages were in a loose confederation, where any individual had the freedom to disobey her chief, leave her band and visit other groups where she might be welcomed. Though the Hopewell were part of a mass society of great complexity, they managed to retain key freedoms for individuals — freedoms that everyone in the world has lost.

Occasionally, Graeber and Wengrow fall into the same kind of biased thinking as the Enlightenment-obsessed men they criticize. Looking back into history, they find examples of anarchism everywhere, offering suspiciously utopian accounts of cultures to whom they ascribe values of feminism and anarchy. Still, the authors admit openly that their examples are cherry-picked, and in some cases interpreted extremely speculatively, because they aren't writing a science textbook. They're writing a manifesto, suggesting another way for humanity to live, inspired by ideas our ancestors left to us.

The more we learn about the many paths our ancestors have taken, the more possible futures open up. "The Dawn of Everything" begins as a sharp rejoinder to sloppy cultural analysis and ends as a paean to freedoms that most of us never realized were available. Knowing that there were other ways to live, Graeber and Wengrow conclude, allows us to rethink what we might yet become.

A New History of Humanity

David Graeber and David Wengrow
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