

# A Carnival Parade of Political Forms

Exploring the possibilities of reinventing ourselves

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a review of

*The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by David Graeber and David Wengrow. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021

“In one sense,” David Graeber and David Wengrow write, “this book is simply trying to lay down foundations for a new world history” Simply?

As the title indicates, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* is an extremely ambitious, 692-page book. It’s also a bit of an anomaly in contemporary anarchist writing, which tends to shy away from Big History, with its overtones of imperial sweep and Smart White Guys explaining to everyone else How It Went Down.

But Big History usually traces a linear narrative of human development and progress: from hunter-gatherers to farmers to more complex forms of social organization to capitalism, the State, and industry. That’s roughly been the story we’ve told ourselves—or that our betters have told us—at least since Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Genevan philosopher put a pessimistic spin on the tale, framing it as a fall from grace, a modern version of the story of Adam and Eve, but later speculators quickly turned it into a hopeful story of human progress, of genius producing feats of innovation that were only possible in large, centralized states run by a knowledge elite.

Graeber (a good friend who died in 2020) and Wengrow set out to knock down this historical house of cards, assisted by several decades of new evidence and new suppositions from their respective fields of anthropology and archaeology. At the least, they call it seriously into question.

Even though they never mention it, they’ve also produced a much-needed continuation of the project that Peter Kropotkin began 120 years ago with *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Kropotkin set out to show that cooperation, as much as competition, was critical to human development. In so doing, he created an alternative to both the historical materialism of the Marxists and the combination of capitalist economics and social Darwinism that became mainstream thinking at about the same time.

Taking his point a step further, the Davids demonstrate that human history is far less linear and determined than we’ve been taught by either side. Human societies have moved back and forth between hunter-gatherer and agricultural modes, sometimes annually. They’ve adopted and discarded centralized, top-down political structures, and abandoned year-round settlements to become nomads. And, vice versa. They’ve moved in and out of large urban environments and constructed massive city-like settlements that they occupied only part of the time, possibly only for rituals. And, they’ve adopted and discarded institutions like slavery over and over again.

Contrary to the patronizing European assertion that Native Americans (for instance) lived in a separate time, a “mythic consciousness fundamentally different from our own,” and therefore didn’t practice politics in the way we moderns do, the authors point to example after example demonstrating that not only did they practice politics, but developed political theories that they tested, implemented, and could compare critically against the ones they encountered in settler communities.

There was no original state of innocence, equality, or grace for humans to fall from, because humans have always experimented with different forms of political and social organization, even in the face of severe material limitations.

That's not what mainstream or even Marxist historians, philosophers, and political scientists tend to want to hear these days. When these authorities "argue about the origin of the state in ancient Peru or China," Graeber and Wengrow say, "what they are really doing is projecting that rather unusual constellation of elements backwards: typically, by trying to find a moment when something like sovereign power came together with something like an administrative system."

When they find evidence of large, complex urban developments in places where these things are not supposed to be—Ukraine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, or the Mississippi floodplain, pre-Columbus—they call them mega-sites to avoid having to acknowledge that they are cities. Unless, of course, they fit the looked-for profile of sovereignty and hierarchy.

Much of the evidence the Davids present is from the Neolithic through the early Bronze Age, from about 10,000 to about 2,000 BCE, which is thought to take in the period when humans were first settling down to farm, then establish empires and war with each other. They remind us that this still accounts for the majority of organized human history. In other words, the period that follows, from ancient Egypt, Rome, and China through today's State-bound, neoliberal order, which we were taught is the only part of our history that really matters, was both shaped by the previous one and is a departure from it.

There was plenty of injustice, tyranny, and inequality in that earlier time, but also a lot of social and political innovation and experimentation and a more fluid approach to systems of economic production. Nothing was nailed down.

"It's becoming clear," Wengrow and Graeber tell us, "that the earliest known evidence of human social life resembles a carnival parade of political forms, far more than it does the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory." This is a vastly different way of understanding our history than we've been taught. Instead of classifying human development by technologies (Bronze Age, Iron Age, Gunpowder Age), they suggest, we should see it through the eyes of people at the time, who experienced it as a diversity of forms of social organization.

How did we get here?

Then how did we get to where we are today, to the rigid, almost fossilized state-capitalist system that's nailed vast inequalities into place globally and is now taking us on a suicidal sprint into the disaster of global warming? "There is no doubt that something did go terribly wrong with the world," say the authors. "A very small percentage of the population do control the fates of almost everyone else, and they are doing it in an increasingly disastrous fashion."

What we want to know, as activists, historians, and just people trying to extricate ourselves from the state-capital dead-end, is when did it go wrong, and why? Otherwise, what possible lessons can we draw from this book?

The central attack by critics on the left is that after announcing they will tell us what happened, Wengrow and Graeber never do, even after 526 pages of text and nearly 150 more of notes and bibliography. They've also been attacked for not stitching class struggle and gender inequality deeply into their account, although they do not ignore these issues and nothing they assert stands in the way of a class or gender analysis of the societies they discuss.

At least one Marxist anthropologist has charged that they ignore how the adoption of agriculture enabled social and economic inequalities to take hold. They don't. Instead, they point to evidence that there was no dramatic changeover from hunting and gathering to farming, and that stable societies that combined the two existed for millennia.

The Davids are said to have planned a sequel to *The Dawn of Everything* that picks up the story when large, deeply structured empires were starting to organize themselves. There, they would have told us how human society got "stuck" and how it can extricate itself. But they do give us a hint in the present book.

One important characteristic of early states, they argue—like China's Shang dynasty, which ruled just after the period that Graeber and Wengrow discuss—was that the nerve center of power—the court or the palace—was modeled to some degree on "the organization of the patriarchal household," and that this framework was closely connected with military might.

Most later kingdoms and empires—Han China, Rome, Aztec Central America—followed the same model. The patriarchal household included slaves and other dependents, with a male at its head whose social responsibility was to discipline and care for its members. This connection “between care and domination,” the authors say, “is utterly critical to the larger question of how we lost the ability freely to recreate ourselves by recreating our relations with one another.”

Prior to the formation of the patriarchal household, they tell us, humans enjoyed three basic freedoms that kept their social formations dynamic: “the freedom to move away or relocate from one’s surroundings, the freedom to ignore or disobey commands issued by others, and the freedom to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between them.”

Once rigid household formations appeared, and states began to adopt this model, their subordinate occupants were stymied. New forms of social organization would be planned and implemented from the top, not through some sort of consensus of the broader group.

This is an important observation, but the Davids don’t tell us why it had to happen (mightn’t the development of agriculture have played a part?) and, once it did, why it was so successful. Why did the patriarchal household sweep away so many other models of human organization in places where it didn’t develop organically? They leave the point hanging.

And so, they lead us back to a place they were supposed to be taking us away from: Rousseau’s discourse on inequality. The Neolithic may not have been the Garden of Eden, but in their telling the patriarchal household certainly looks like the forbidden fruit, and the rest of human history as a fall from grace.

Arguably, finding a way out of our present dilemma is not what Wengrow and Graeber set out to do. In a recent interview, Wengrow explained their intention. “We wanted to give people a flavor of the incredible discoveries that have been made in recent decades about the sheer diversity of human life pre-agriculture.” There was no fall from Edenic grace when small, egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers roamed the Earth. The authors make a strong case for this conclusion.

They leave us with a panorama of a world that’s not as far in the past as we thought, that was bloody and peaceful, cooperative and warlike, settling down and getting on the move, hierarchical and non-hierarchical, often at roughly the same time: where one model definitely did not fit all. *The Dawn of Everything* already has plenty of critics, but I suspect they will have a very difficult time putting that world back in the box.

Our next step is to take a closer look at what came next: at the persistence of Indigenous cultures, at the efforts to rediscover their practices, and to reclaim the three freedoms that Wengrow and Graeber spell out. We may not have a lot of time left, so we’d better get busy.

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