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Reframing Historical Rhymes from the *Dawn of Everything*

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The Dawn of Everything is neither modest in title nor timid in content. From its vantage on humanity's deep history, the authors, David Graeber (now deceased) and David Wengrow, bring anthropological perspectives (not present in most comparable global syntheses) to the broad sweep of humanity's history. Befitting its intended scope and pluck, the authors aspire not merely to offer "a completely new account of how human societies developed over roughly the last 30,000 years" (3), but to probe and reframe the questions that have been asked about the past over the last several centuries of socio-historical studies as well as constitute new ones (25). From the authors' perspective, "the conventional narrative of human history is not only wrong, but needlessly dull" (20), and so inadequate to rhyme with a more inspiring future.

The aims and contents of this hefty volume—with its global montage of cherry-picked and selectively presented examples—are too broad in scope to address comprehensively in a short review. Rather, this essay forays into two key elements of the work. The first is largely philosophical framing, the critique and the authors' alternatives to what Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher (2016) refer to as the "European Consensus"; basically, the entrenched stream of conceptual thought grounded in the alternative visions of Rousseau and Hobbs that underpins the seminal works of Montesquieu, Marx, and subsequent twentieth-century neoevolutionary frames. The second, somewhat more empirically grounded, concerns the processes that undergird the scaling up of human social networks and interpersonal arrangements. This is a critical topic as it reflects a key facet of humanity—in that we, as a species, are able to live in large differentially durable cooperative groupings in which most of the members are non-kin. At the same time, ideas regarding how and why such larger groupings and aggregations form and the characteristics of these social arrangements link closely to the philosophical issues previously outlined.

As with the material realm, ideas and conceptual frames are far easier to tear down than convincingly construct or rebuild. Graeber and Wengrow deserve praiseful recognition for directly challenging long-entrenched Occidental frameworks that self-congratulate the advent of "modernity" and the rise of the

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West, while, at the same time, stripping most people in the past of agency. Likewise, in drawing heavily on anthropological, and especially archaeological, findings, they illustrate and acknowledge that human history did not take a uniform path and that you cannot adequately recreate the dynamism or complexity of the past by pyramiding a step-wise sequence of select synchronic cases. And yet, when it comes to accounting for historical variation and change, the authors are less convincing—too steeped and reliant on traditional cultural historical tropes, unsuccessful in avoiding scalar blind spots, and too willing to apply paleopsychology (e.g., schismogenesis). Frustratingly, *The Dawn of Everything* never transparently lays out even the skeleton of a coherent alternative frame to the perspective they rightfully challenge, preferring instead to hop from one example to another without ever adequately pausing to evaluate systematically the serious, alternative viewpoints and interpretations that populate the literature on which they draw.

Despite perceived limitations, which are elaborated in more depth below, I do not want to understate the significance of the authors' population of the past by thinking agentic humans, who are neither the innocents envisioned by Rousseau nor the unruly brutes of Hobbes. Likewise, the challenges that the authors forge to deeply rooted armchair ideas that were birthed in prior centuries, but not subsequently supported by recent compilations of archaeological data, must be commended. I can agree that transitions from foraging to farming were neither uniform nor linear region to region, that agriculture does not necessarily lead to private property, that polities and social institutions were not uniformly built through coercion, and that it no longer makes sense to dichotomize the courses of global history into the West vs. the Rest (Blanton and Fargher 2008). But, when they offer alternatives, it would have been more convincing if the authors brought an equally skeptical lens to the facile tenets integral to another nineteenth-century frame, culture history (Feinman and Neitzel 2020).

My points of difference with the perspective advanced in the volume are, perhaps, best exemplified by looking at a specific core question, even though it is but one theme addressed. My issues begin with Graeber and Wengrow's perspective on human nature, once they jettison the diametric oppositions of Hobbes and Rousseau. Despite citing Marx, who presciently recognized that humans "make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing" (206), the authors acknowledge that they see the ascription of human nature as "largely a matter of taste" (206), and thereby rather dreamily envision humans as playful, free, and fiercely egalitarian until they are entrapped in institutional webs of bureaucracy and sovereignty, which are argued to crush individual freedom and usher in domination. In an ironic twist, Graeber and Wengrow flip the script on the mid-twentieth-century neoliberal linear vision, which proceeded from coercive

past to rational, enlightened present/future, by imagining a free, equal past later engulfed by larger-scale polities characterized by secrecy, administrative structures, and the concentration of power.

In general, I do not observe humanity's history to follow a strict progressive or linear course. A broad-brush trend, but one that has often been reversed (Feinman 1998), is the scaling up of human institutions and affiliations. Surely, the framing of new questions must encompass the expansive growth of human networks of cooperation and collective action. Knowledge of human history and its various "dawns" requires understanding how people got things done, and for our species that is social (Kowalewski and Birch 2020: 30): affiliations, institutions, networks, and polities. New questions should investigate the diverse ways they were/are organized, as well as the factors that contributed to their relative degrees of sustainability. And yet, despite a scattershot of examples, it is in this key fundamental dimension that this book seems thin. The most persistently referenced means by which larger affiliations were seen to form was schismogenesis, a culture-historical process in which groups were seen to identify and define themselves in diametric opposition to their neighbors. Yet readers are left largely in the dark when it comes to the parameters, social mechanisms, boundaries, scales, and dynamics at which such oppositions are argued to have been manifested, beyond vaguely inferenced environmental parameters and specific historical events.

Rather than just investigator preference, a more convincing and empirically grounded foundation might be the recognition that humans can be both unprecedented cooperators and highly selfish (Blanton and Fargher 2016; Feinman 2013). As a consequence, human cooperation tends to be situational and contingent. The key question then becomes what factors promote different degrees and forms of cooperation, and a key point of contention concerns scale. The authors (278–97) basically dismiss a raft of interdisciplinary research and empirical findings that repeatedly illustrate that human organization and leadership generally shift and differentiate as the density of interpersonal interaction increases (e.g., Fletcher 1995; Hill and Dunbar 2003; Holland-Lulewicz et al. 2022). Although Graeber and Wengrow are on more solid footing when they argue that domestic human groupings also may be fragile and that small human aggregations may not be restricted to close kin, these arguments do not refute the repeated observation that when human groupings in sustained close contact exceed certain demographic thresholds, organizational adjustments take place (Feinman 2013, 2021). Modes of leadership, political offices, and institutional arrangements can be created in widely different forms and involve lesser or higher degrees of economic stratification (even at comparable sizes), but past or present, some kind of supra-household institution emerges if these aggregations are

sustained, even for the Bronze Age historical context that the authors draw on to make their case (e.g. Hofmann et al. 2019).

Perhaps this line of argument seems esoteric and a matter for specialists, but sharing the book's passion for seeing lessons in the past for the present and future, I think not. Given their anarchistic mistrust of human institutions and bureaucracies (Appadurai 2022), Graeber and Wengrow aim to dismiss any necessary links between scale and the loss of personal freedom. Freed of constraints on human cognitive capacities and the demands of scale, the authors tout governance through self-organized, domestic autonomy that is not so far off from a kind of libertarian ethos (513). But at great scale, an overabundance of individual freedom and independence may be antithetical to economic equity (Blanton et al. 2021). Might it be more cautiously realistic to recognize that in today's world, cooperative governance and institutions are essential, these political associations take many forms, and to keep them equitable requires the persistent investments and participation of the citizenry?

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