

Anthropology and Human History: Broadening a Debate

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Anthropologists David Graeber and David Wengrow wanted to make a big splash with their book on human history, and they succeeded. Reviews poured in, expressing excitement about the flamboyant language, the social critique, and detail on the past, although many reviewers spoke as much about Graeber himself as about the book. Graeber had complemented his critical stance in anthropology with anarchist social activism, most notably as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. He died of a sudden cancer in 2019 and missed the excitement that the book generated.

The Dawn of Everything poses a challenge to world historians and their view of the past.

The authors, specialists in anthropology and archaeology, argue that current understandings of long-term history misstate the world, especially by assuming that the hierarchical and unequal state of the world today is the inevitable result of historical processes. They offer “a new history of humanity.”

This is a review of the book intended for an audience of world historians, both as teachers and researchers. In it I inquire about the relationship between this “new history” and the existing “world history.” After an initial commentary on the book, I pause to ask the world historians to consider which side you are on for the future of this relationship.

Graeber and Wengrow’s opening chapter attacks, as a fallacy, the notion that early humans lived simple and fully egalitarian lives as hunter-gatherers. Instead, early humans are presented as highly varied communities of “political animals” who made recurring choices in their lifestyle. The next chapter portrays a forceful critique of monarchical French society by the Native American noble, Kandiaronk. The fourth chapter argues that humans have lived seasonal lives, shifting places and social groups as each year unfolded. Chapter 5 claims that early days of agriculture, rather than devoted to laborious production of a surplus, were experiments in gardening. Further on, chapter 7 describes great cities that functioned without rulers, and chapter 10 claims that states arose almost imperceptibly rather than with an imperial bang. The book portrays a “carnival parade” of social orders, mostly viewed from the bottom up.

Graeber and Wengrow argue that an informed commentary on the world of today requires study of the more distant past. They admit that they began their study by asking, “What are the origins of inequality?” But they found that answering such a question, while it might identify some origins, would do nothing to address the problems of today. They changed direction and instead asked, “What went wrong?” As they see it, this question calls for a diagnosis of what went wrong in human society (and when)—and calls for a follow-up of corrective action. Graeber and Wengrow give readers a choice between two theses. First, humans lived strictly egalitarian lives from their beginning until they accepted hierarchical life with the rise of agriculture, after which life became more productive but more constrained (the “conventional narrative”). Second, humans have always been “political animals” who make wide-ranging choices including degrees of inequality, so that the social constraints of today are reversible (the “new history of humanity”). Overall, as G. Sampath wrote in *The Hindu*, “Two thematic strands run through the book: the consolidation of a corpus of archaeological evidence, and a history of ideas.”¹ I would expand Sampath’s two themes to three: the book relies on the digs of archaeologists, on anthropological theory and field studies, and on intellectual history of public discourse.

Historians will find that their discipline is quite left out of the discourse of the authors and of reviewers. The book includes almost 60 references to “human history”; I found only 10 references to “world history” and eight references to “prehistory.” Of more than a thousand citations in the bibliography, only about 25 were authored by

¹ G. Sampath, “Exploding Myths of Prehistory,” *The Hindu*, December 18, 2021.

historians. Most reviewers of the book focused on the modern intellectual history of public discourse. Of the 19 reviews I read, three authors were anthropologists, two were historians of recent times, along with one philosopher, one psychologist, and 12 journalists or general readers.² (There were four female reviewers and only one review from outside the U.S. and UK). Only the anthropologists addressed the book's content on early times. But virtually all the reviewers (except in the *Wall Street Journal*) agreed on the question of, "What went wrong?"; the only objection was that the authors could not provide an answer.

Before continuing with my review, I need to pause for a moment. While my instinctive impulse is to encourage world-historian readers to absorb this remarkable book and learn more about the wealth of anthropological knowledge on human society, I realize that I should ask how you situate yourself in relation to the subject matter and arguments of this book.

By "the field of world history," I mean the historical writings contained in as many as a dozen world-historical journals, the monographic studies reviewed in those journals, and the world-history textbooks assigned to students in high school and college in nations around the world. World history also includes explicit and implicit commentary on the world of today. But the field of world history has minimized its contact with anthropology. Even the wide-ranging *Cambridge World History* centers heavily on urban life in states in the last few thousand years.³ Do the materials in *The Dawn of Everything*—ranging far before 5,000 years ago—fall within the boundaries of world history? Do these early studies of small groups of people, documented mostly by archaeology, belong within the scope of world history?

If the answer is "yes," then the historian becomes responsible for substantial reading in archaeology and anthropology, for guiding students through selections of such materials, and for interpretively linking these early times to more recent times and larger scales of past society. In practice, most historians, including most world historians, have laid low, offering no response to this issue. More than 60 years after the rise of world history as a field of study, historians rarely rely on anthropological literature and participate only to a very slight degree in discussion of the world before literacy and empires. Will that continue? Or will the trajectory of world history be redirected?

Anthropology focuses on bottom-up views of the social order. Graduate study in anthropology includes four interdependent fields: archaeology, bioanthropology, social-cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. Graeber and Wengrow—while they do not emphasize bioanthropology or linguistics—*do* emphasize the immense

² Among the more extensive reviews are Daniel Immerwahr, "Beyond the State," *The Nation*, October 4-11, 2021; William Deresiewicz, "Human History Gets a Rewrite," *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2021; David Priestland, "Inequality is not the price of civilization," *The Guardian*, 23 Oct. 2021; Jennifer Schuessler, "What if Everything You Learned About Human History is Wrong?" *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2021; Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "Early Civilizations had it all figured out," *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2021; Molly Fischer, "David Graeber's Possible Worlds," *New York Magazine*, Nov. 9, 2021; Robert Henderson, *City Journal*, November 19, 2021; Chris Knight, "In Fundamental Ways Incoherent and Wrong," and Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, "All Things Being Equal," both in *Climate & Capitalism*, December 7, 2021; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Digging for Utopia," *New York Review of Books*, 16 December 2021;

³ The *Cambridge World History*, published in 2015, has a topical and temporal scope clearly indicated by the titles of its volumes:

Volume 1: Introducing World History (to 10,000 BCE)

Volume 2: A World with Agriculture, 12,000 BCE-500 CE

Volume 3: Early Cities in Comparative Perspective, 4000 BCE-1200 CE

Volume 4: A World with States, Empires and Networks, 1200 BCE-900 CE

Volume 5: Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE-1500 CE

Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE, Part 1, Foundations

Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 C.E., Part 2, Patterns of Change

Volume 7: Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750-Present, Part 1: Structures, Spaces, and Boundary Making

Volume 7: Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750-Present, Part 2: Shared Transformations?

variety and mutability of human experience, challenging the notion that today's large-scale society means we must all be alike and act alike. So that's point one: *Dawn* effectively claims that early human history must rely on anthropology.⁴ The authors' critical approach reminds us, further, that anthropology went through a crisis in the era of decolonization, when it became clear that governments had involved anthropologists in exploiting colonized and indigenous peoples.⁵ Point two is that anthropology is also central to the main public debates of our day.⁶

As I see it, there are two levels at which world historians can join in the debate that has been unleashed with the publication of *The Dawn of Everything*. First, from the standpoint of historiography, world historians can enter the contemporary debate over ideas about inequality, freedom, and variety in human experience. Second, from a multidisciplinary and long-term standpoint, world historians can develop expertise in human history in times before and beyond urban and literate social life. In the first case, world historians are well trained in the historical literature broadly and in global interconnections over the last few centuries or even the last few millennia. From this standpoint they can read the book and comment effectively on its strengths, weaknesses, and its association with varying standpoints in the existing historical literature. This is a step world historians can take right away—if they believe it is a priority. Second, world historians could undertake wide but selective reading in the bibliography of *Dawn of Everything* and in other works addressing human history before 5,000 years ago, to develop teaching materials, design research projects, and write analytical or interpretive studies. Such work will go a little more slowly, but it could open up new vistas for historical studies. Even within this expanded historical arena, however, historians will still face the question of whether to present their interpretations as authorized narratives that readers are to ingest—or as problems and debates about the past, in which readers are to explore and develop their own perspectives.

The historiographic approach should be the easiest for world historians to adopt. World historians could scrutinize the two prongs of the intellectual history that Graeber and Wengrow present on the place of Kandiaronk and Rousseau in setting up the modern discourse over inequality. One is the debate between Kandiaronk and Lahontan; the other is the series of debates among anthropological theorists, from Mauss to Geertz. Such theory remains important, and world historians need to become knowledgeable in it. Some reviewers, notably Appiah and Immerwahr, found fault with the intellectual history of Graeber and Wengrow. Thus, Appiah found the claim in *Dawn* that pre-Enlightenment Europeans had no concept of social inequality to be “clearly wide of the mark,” and cited counterexamples from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries.

Graeber and Wengrow offer critique of “world historians” in their rejection of assumptions that crucial early changes led teleologically to today's hierarchical society. In practice, they refer to Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari, both of whom have written widely read narratives of human change—and portray both as justifying neoliberal globalization. The reviewer for the *New York Times* argued that, “Most recent big histories are by geographers, economists, psychologists and political scientists, many writing under the guiding framework of

⁴ Other anthropological surveys of historical value include: Steven Mithen, *After the Ice: A Global Human History, 20,000 to 5000 BC* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2012); Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Robin Dunbar, *Evolution: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Allen W. Johnson and Timothy Earle, *The Evolution of Human Societies: From Foraging Group to Agrarian State*, 2nd ed. (Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁵ The debate on decolonizing anthropology was painful, but the field emerged with a better balance between functionalist study of how a social system works and a critical approach toward malfunctioning and oppression.

⁶ Graeber participated in public debates through his, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011). The public and theoretical discourse of anthropologists—cited throughout *Dawn*—does not have a clear equivalent among historians.

biological evolution. Graeber and Wengrow, by contrast, write in the grand tradition of social theory descended from Weber, Durkheim and Levi-Strauss.”⁷ Is there not space for world historians to speak up on these issues?

The specific examples chosen by Graeber and Wengrow may also attract comment. Spatially, they chose to center on Europeans and native North Americans. As such, their analysis included most people of European ancestry but left out the vast majority of peoples of color. Temporally, all but a few pages of their argument are restricted to the past 10,000 years; indeed, much of it is within the past 500 years.⁸ Graeber and Wengrow claim that documenting variety in social organization after the rise of agriculture is sufficient to confirm such variety in earlier times. They argue that showing social variety, for Europe and North America, confirms the same story for the rest of the world. But historians might want to see more evidence.

With more reading and reflection, world historians can pursue some of the details of life in the distant past, as discussed by Graeber and Wengrow. One could attempt to decode their mysterious statement about the emergence of *Homo sapiens*: “a single Eve never existed.”⁹ One could scrutinize the shifting meanings they give to private property and their attention to processes of social fission and fusion, as households joined in larger groups for various purposes, but for which they explore only seasonal and no other alternatives.¹⁰ In two cases, they argue effectively that pairs of ethnic groups differentiated through interaction: the contrast of farming populations in the Levant and intensive foragers in adjoining Anatolia; and the distinction between wealth-gathering Kwakiutl and adjoining and modest Yurok.¹¹ They pursue narratives of ethnic groups right up to the present, showing that they still exist and influence the world. They introduce the theories of the founders of anthropology, showing how their early insights were gradually updated. The book’s bibliography of over a thousand entries—now mostly available online—is available for the perusal of those who want to check the facts and the interpretations.

At a basic level, *Dawn* confirms that archaeology and anthropological theory add to knowledge and debate about the historical past. The book is fascinating, argumentative, informative, and raises important questions for debate. World historians, as dependably wide readers of the best current books, should see it as a must-read, and must go further and read more anthropology. Anthropologist reviewers have shown that Graeber and Wengrow gave short shrift to the field of human evolution and that they exaggerated a number of points. I argue that they also gave short shrift, like many others, to the crucial study of human language—and also to social institutions, migration, and the shifting scales of human social structure.¹² Surely, there is no simple key to the complex history of early humanity.

⁷ But historians, journalists, and others should use the term “evolution” with care, distinguishing Darwin’s focus on change and adaptation, with no long-term objective, from Herbert Spencer’s belief that evolution meant teleological progress in biological and social development.

⁸ The section on “‘social stratification’ some 30,000 years ago” (pp. 87–92) gives examples of rich burials at Sungir in northern Russia and Dolni Vestonice in Moravia (34,000–26,000 years ago), and refers to monumental architecture and other burials, mostly at somewhat earlier times. The authors emphasize the importance of such early evidence on institutional inequality yet describe it as “sporadic” and “staccato.” *Dawn*, 87–92.

⁹ This is a concise reference to a very large literature on human evolution before 100,000 years ago. They refer (pp. 80–82) to the work of archaeologist Eleanor Scerri. (See Scerri et al., “Did our species evolve in subdivided populations across Africa, and why does it matter?” *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 33 (2018): 582–594.) Also concisely referenced is the evolutionary interpretation of anthropologist Christopher Boehm (pp. 86–87).

¹⁰ Many readers have been impressed by the Graeber-Wengrow description of seasonal fission and fusion in social structure (pp. 106–111), but anthropologist Chris Knight asks, “Don’t Graeber and Wengrow know that most hunter-gatherers follow not just the annual seasons but the monthly cycles of the moon?”

¹¹ The authors use Gregory Bateson’s term “schismogenesis” to define this dynamic. *Dawn*, 179–182, 224–227.

¹² Manning, *A History of Humanity: The Evolution of the Human System* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 13–15.

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For the past 20 years, a few individual historians have ventured into these early times, laying the groundwork for research linking “prehistory” to contemporary society.¹³ I think that the encounter with *The Dawn of Everything* will help world historians to make up their minds about whether to pursue this opening or not. Individually and as a group, world historians will decide if they will expand the scope of their field into human history that preceded agriculture or remain focused the global issues of more recent times, leaving the experience of early humanity and its current implications to others.

Big History, in which human history is encompassed within the history of the natural world, was born out of historical studies in the 1990s, especially through the efforts of David Christian.¹⁴ While historians are active within this discourse, it seems to be remaining a separate field rather than joining with history. In contrast, the authors of *The Dawn of Everything* sought to link archaeology and anthropology of early humans to contemporary public discourse in multiple disciplines. We shall see, in perhaps another 10 years, whether the field of history begins to include early human history and its links to humanity today as a field within historical studies, or whether the long-term experience of humanity will remain an eclectic and informal arena of reading—*outside* of the formal discipline of history.

¹³ J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Birds'-Eye View of World History* (Norton, 2003); Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800*, 2nd ed. (University of Virginia Press, 2016); Ehret, *Ancient Africa in World History* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming); James L. A. Webb, *Humanity's Burden: A global history of Malaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Webb, *The Guts of the Matter: A Global History of Human Waste and Infectious Intestinal Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, and Patrick Manning, eds., *Migration History in World History* (Brill, 2010); Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work: A New History of Humankind* (Yale University Press, 2021); Patrick Manning, with Tiffany Trimmer, *Migration in World History*, 3rd ed. (Routledge; 2020; first published 2005); Manning, *Methods for Human History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Manning, *A History of Humanity*.

¹⁴ David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).