

# BOOK FORUM: *THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK FORUM ON *THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING*: *A NEW HISTORY OF HUMANITY*

**A**nthropology has been described, amongst other things, as ‘the study of what makes us human’ (American Anthropological Association 2023), ‘the science of human beings’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2023), and ‘the comparative study of common sense’ (Herzfeld 2001: x). *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021), offers us an important suggestion of what ‘being human’ means: being creative and curious. Their argument is also common-sensical in that it brings to the fore something which is incredibly obvious when stated out loud, namely, that things—politics, economics, or society at large—*do not have to be the way they are*. Inequality, coercion, and hierarchy are unnecessary. That history of humanity is one of experimentation, polyphony, and imagination is, at the same time, a bold and much-needed argument at a time of seeming inevitability, of imminent ecological disaster, the mass extinction of species, dramatic world-wide disparities in wealth, health, and security, and a global political hegemony which gives us very little hope for something better. Furthermore, in such a world, a different reading of what we as humans are capable of—and, indeed, *can do*—is a much-needed alternative to waiting out the next wildfire, the next pandemic, the next famine, the next economic collapse, or

the next fascist takeover. At the same time, *The Dawn of Everything* is not only an argument for different political imaginaries, but a scholarly endeavour. Graeber and Wengrow, an anthropologist and an archaeologist, respectively, present a massive, systematically catalogued array of ethnographic and archaeological knowledge to support their case. Therefore, this book challenges us, as anthropologists and archaeologists, to not only critically examine what we know and think about the world, but also what the wider societal implications are of whatever we have learnt through our research.

This forum grew from the book launch of *The Dawn of Everything*’s Finnish translation (2022) in Helsinki in September 2022. Some of the contributors attended the launch, some have otherwise been engaged with the book for far longer, and some both. In his contribution, Matti Eräsaari (University of Helsinki) traces how Graeber and Wengrow go about reaching what they have set out to accomplish. As such, Eräsaari situates the book in the wider context of writings on inequality aimed at general audiences—Yuval Noah Harari, Jared Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, and Thomas Piketty—examining the argument presented within the tension between conservative social theory and the authors’ more radical, and more open-ended,

vision of humanity. This juxtaposition is important, as *The Dawn of Everything's* stated aim is to challenge the conventional wisdom of a broad strokes popular approach to historiography. Khalil Betz-Heinemann (University of Helsinki) points out how the book is a companion on the journey to affording our past as human beings respect, ultimately granting our ancestors the historical agency they deserve in an ongoing dialogue between peoples, on the one hand, and between the past and the present, on the other. He encourages us to observe the ways of doing differently, such as through mutual aid initiatives, which already help us to think differently about our political possibilities and imaginative potential. To engage in this kind of work is also a form of emergency preparedness for 'when the structuring relations of business-as-usual start to reveal themselves as incompetent, unjust, and ineffective'.

Linda Hulin (University of Oxford) and Veronica Walker Vadillo (University of Helsinki) offer us an archaeological view on Graeber and Wengrow's work, a maritime archaeological view to be exact. 'Thinking from water', they examine the book's notion of cyclical and seasonal changes in social organisation against the backdrop of the 'ever-changing nature of maritime landscapes'. Hulin and Walker Vadillo argue that, in the flow of water worlds, social organisation has only partially depended on trade and more likely on livelihood strategies following the seasonal patterns of fish. They point out that waterways are sites of connectivity rather than obstacles, and the communities of practice formed around them have implications for social organisation beyond 'just' the coastline. Finally, Tuomas Tammisto (Tampere University) takes *The Dawn of Everything's* criticism of evolutionary accounts of progress

from simpler forms of social organisation to more complex forms, and discusses sharing as a complex rather than simple or 'natural' activity, as well as one which maintains qualitative social relations through 'hard work'. This 'hard work' of building and maintaining egalitarian relations, he argues, is a skill learnt through trial and error. Social organisation is necessarily complicated and, if anything, state formations and commodity exchanges—previously seen as the most complex forms of organisation—tend to work towards simplification rather than complexity.

What all four contributions point to is that *The Dawn of Everything* is, first and foremost, a generative book. It makes you think. Graeber and Wengrow's work is not about providing answers, but about inspiring inquiry, including inquiries like the ones the contributors to this forum have engaged in from their own scholarly backgrounds. As anthropologists and archaeologists, and as human beings ourselves, these inquiries and the inquiries they, in turn, have the potential to inspire are perhaps the most enduring legacy of the book.

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