

THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING: SOCIAL SCIENCE WITH A MISSION

The Dawn of Everything is a general-audience social science book with a mission. In a nutshell, the book argues against evolutionary accounts that view societal development as a trade-off involving increased social complexity, increased social control, and the loss of egalitarian ideals. Since Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Graeber and Wengrow argue, Western thought has followed a 'myth' which sees inequality and coercion as necessary byproducts of the transition to higher states of civilisation. Laying out a broad array of recent archaeological and classic anthropological evidence, the authors argue that unilineal accounts of world history ignore too much evidence to the contrary to be convincing.

Given the above, in what follows, I primarily discuss the strategies employed by the authors. But, let me begin with a clear pronouncement: I think this is a welcome publication that makes accessible a great deal of disciplinary knowledge that has not been made as widely available to the general public as we anthropologists would like to think we have. Too often, the task of writing broad accounts of human sociality has been left to narrow-minded dilettantes, whilst top-notch theorists have instead pursued novelties. I, therefore, highly value the thought, but also the vast amount of work necessary to produce this volume in a way that stands a genuine chance of reaching audiences not accustomed to reading the professional literature of archaeologists and anthropologists.

But, how does the book go about accomplishing this task?

The Dawn of Everything follows what Gregory Schrempp (2012) has described as the

most popular strategy in popular science writing, the notion of replacing 'myth' with 'science'. From anthropology's point of view, this might even be an odd strategic choice, insofar as anthropology has traditionally placed science on a shared trajectory with myth instead of embarking on myth-busting missions. But, of course, the myths busted herein are our own, which makes all the difference. *The Dawn of Everything* was quite obviously positioned 'against' bestsellers such as Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*, Jared Diamond's *The World Until Yesterday*, or Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order*.

The book's critique follows some familiar paths laid out by Marshall Sahlins and Graeber's other Chicago teachers. In fact, one could argue that most of the core points have been largely accepted, at least within anthropology, but less effectively so amongst wider reading audiences. It is often to this effect that the book deploys the 'harder' data of archaeology, accompanied by its myth-slaying approach. This strategic choice becomes particularly apparent if one compares *The Dawn of Everything* to another recent popular account of 'how we got here' – Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* (2020), a book written on the premise that 'every human society must justify its inequalities' (op. cit.: 1). Following Piketty's argument, the theoretical position according to which inequality and violent coercion are unavoidable side effects of development ought to be understood as an ideological construction. Graeber and Wengrow, surprisingly, make no such claim; instead, they are predominantly content to treat this construction as false knowledge.

Perhaps the relative absence of ideological claims is also a consequence of the way the book's core argument is structured. Specifically, this is not a book with a strong storyline. Unlike the accounts ('myths') of human progress Graeber and Wengrow challenge, they offer no simplified master narrative. Instead of outlining a unilineal developmental path—let alone an underlying human nature—they amass evidence against such generalisations. Human societies are not driven to such outcomes, but show evidence of actually collectively contemplating the outcomes of different social and political arrangements, even consciously experimenting with communal life. These varied and scattered cases do not lend themselves to a unified account. Rather, the data arrangement employed by the authors is often more reminiscent of the older 'amongstas' style within anthropology, which consequently subjects the grand development narratives to a form of criticism at times reminiscent of what Mary Douglas (2004 [1970]: xxxvii) once called 'bongo-bongoism': the rejection of any scientific generalisation on the basis that 'it doesn't apply to the Bong-Bongo'. But where the Bongoist position challenges generalisations with exceptions, *The Dawn of Everything* undertakes the hard work of collecting a body of evidence.

Yet, the point the authors recurrently make remains humble: 'we simply cannot know'. This is not a sterile position from which to argue: the authors successfully show that the 'agricultural revolution' was neither abrupt nor the hinge-like point in human history it is often ascribed; that prehistoric human populations were quite capable of recognising social injustice and acting upon it; that social concentrations comparable to urbanisation can also be abandoned when things go wrong; and that seasonality offers a fruitful starting point from which to study such ideas. Importantly, the authors also make the case for introducing non-European

commentary and a critique of European social thought that far predates most established accounts. European Enlightenment, they argue, owes much more to indigenous American thought than is commonly acknowledged.

Having said that, the question remains: Will this approach allow *The Dawn of Everything* to convince the unconverted? The book obviously does enough to make its readers doubt the teleological necessity of inequality, violence, and authoritarianism. But, will 500+ pages of archaeological and anthropological evidence compiled in opposition to conservative social theory achieve its goal? Will it provide a rallying point from which to convince a 'general reading public' that social evolutionary theories turning vice into necessity ought to be abandoned in favour of better narratives? Graeber's *Debt* (2011), for example, managed to do something like that. *Debt* makes claims I have heard echoed by experts, activists, and journalists in meetings, public policy debates, and interviews. Whether *The Dawn of Everything* can accomplish something similar remains to be seen.

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