

Reading and Restructuring Relations and Imaginations: An essay on Graeber, David and David Wengrow 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Penguin/Allen Lane. ISBN: 9780374157357

The book *The Dawn of Everything* is an introduction to some of the diversity and surprising complexity of ancestral social lives written in an accessible, yet academic fashion. The book also develops a theory of human development as emerging from encounters between peoples. This sits in contrast to the idea of development as driven by isolated eureka moments at each stage of social evolution. As Bateson (2021) (mentioned in the book's acknowledgements) noted, 'Stage theory... is BS'. In this review, I introduce what I think is one of the theoretical premises of the book in order to then focus on the book's decentring of origin myths as driving human development. In doing so, I touch upon how the book's relational approach differs from the more dominant approach in science. I then consider a number of categories used in the book, such as farming, to touch upon how categories are mobilised in scientific research and the implications of that mobilisation. I follow this by using a recent Netflix documentary series on ancient peoples and explore how ideas such as (pre)history are politically mobilised. I conclude by examining what the authors might mean when they invoke imagination.

PREMISE AND THEORY

Before this book came out, I remember reading a precursor article on the myth of 'the childhood of man' (Wengrow and Graeber 2015). It set my imagination on fire. At the time, I was researching contemporary hunting, which inspired me to familiarise myself with the archaeological evidence of my fieldwork

site and the histories of hunting in the region. I had already realised how deeply enveloped contemporary hunting is in interpretations of our ancestral past. However, Wengrow and Graeber opened up a new and generative set of questions for me as a doctoral student of social anthropology, offering a new and generative perspective for considering human-animal relations across millennia.¹ When the full book, *The Dawn of Everything*, came out, it cast a further 692 pages of light onto a whole litany of openings to other (pre)historic peoples through their archaeological traces, from mammoth monuments (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 87–92) to the mega sites of Ukraine (288–297), from ancient luxury social housing (ibid 337–345) to the Great Village of Natchez (ibid 392–398).

From a philosophical standpoint, I find Plato's allegory of the cave helpful in unpacking what some of these archaeological traces mean. In this allegory, humans remain chained, watching a dance of shadows on a cave wall mistaking them for reality. The allegory's lesson is not to confuse shadows with reality, but to instead free ourselves through Plato's reason from the cave and seek reality above ground. By contrast, the authors of *The Dawn of Everything* reject the more recent version of this image courtesy of Rousseau. This image shows humanity rushing headlong into this cave of chains and shadows, away from their true origins in a paradise before history and civilisation (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 67). The authors line up 1137 references to argue there is no true reality from which humanity has fallen. However, the authors do not believe we should, thus, reject the idea of

seeking truths in an epistemological fashion nor reject generalisation in its entirety. Of course, as the authors go to great lengths to explain, nor should we wait for eureka moments or great men (ibid 27) to lift us out of the cave we find ourselves stuck in. Instead, we can feel around and grasp at truths all around us to find that our ancestors were not stuck in a primordial cave before history.

Trained in social anthropology, genetics, and fine art and having been on the road for as long as I can remember, I was already familiar with different ways of life before reading this book. What these authors did was open up this recognition across thousands and thousands of years, covering various (pre) historic ancestors. In doing so, they also allow me to reconsider what prehistoric assumptions are entrenched in our understanding of life today. Thus, I think even the most reflexive social anthropologist must reconsider some of the assumptions they have as they read this book. All the authors really ask of readers, however, is to stop primitivising, exoticising, simplifying, naturalising, dehistoricising, and depoliticising the past through assuming the further back you go the simpler or more stupid people were and then egocentrically assuming all roads lead to now. Because, when you pause from this incessant othering and afford our supposed 'prehistoric' ancestors a little respect, a vast subaltern network of catacombs comes to hand.² This book serves as a companion to help to us do this.

RELATIONS AND TRENDS

The book spans twelve chapters, each with titled subsections. Pieced together, they develop multiple lines of enquiry theorising some relations structuring different human ways of living. Hence, the theory is that, whilst one

cannot entirely know what is, one can bring together knowledge to theorise how certain relations extending from different ontological levels shape life around us. Smaligo (2022) offers a sound summary of the inspirations and implications of searching for these structuring relations. In doing so, he notes the authors' indebtedness in this approach to Bhaskar in their 'search for structures', but this is not the structures of structuralism and it is also not a 'search for laws' (ibid). Neither, I would add, is this poststructuralism being advocated. Instead, as I understand it, we can talk of a theory of *structuring relations*, which involves centring the relationship between past and present as one of an ever-changing dialogue, memory, and learning toward reconfiguring who we are, along with our relations with each other as agents. This understanding replaces seeing ourselves as subjects of ongoing relational structures, or stuck in some weird search for a universal underlying order, or damned to poststructuralist hell.

Briefly, the authors attempt to outline how peoples have learnt through encountering each other, as persons and groups, which crucially includes learning with our ancestors, regenerating or resisting their endeavours, and restructuring our relations today. At the same time, being attuned to differences in how we organise across different seasons and different peoples doing and having done this in various ways, rather than as part of some monolithic humanity on a one-track journey to now. I would add, I find no appeal to or possibility of humanity achieving a universal structure or stage of structure in the future either. Together these positions form a binary based on a vapid appreciation of the human condition enabling the colonisation of time as a whole. The authors, by contrast, seek to research and show rather than state a theory absent context by exploring

the archaeological case studies they present in their book and then theorising how to make sense of them. One of the more obvious threads they use to do this is a questioning of origin myths.

The authors start with a reflection on the popular inquiry into ‘the origins of inequality’, which itself represented an initial dialogue between the two authors leading to this book (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 493). The authors note that, in trying to answer the question and tracing the question’s history, they realised that this question presupposes that before civilisation a stage of equality existed, a savage stage, whether noble, stupid, or brutish. Crucially, this savage stage is understood to directly precede civilisation; but, with the eureka moment of the agricultural revolution, the civilisation stage could begin. This stage was accompanied by the development of social complexity, settlements, a coercive hierarchy, and cities. The authors deliver this book as a demonstration that the evidence does not reflect this story and the question itself was never based on any evidence from any specific case. By doing so, they decentre the concept of an origin of civilisation and origin more broadly, even if they might for purposes of communication descriptively fall back on using the plural ‘origins’ on occasion to point to examples that make their case. The authors then proceed to outline how the questions of the origin of cultures (ibid chapter 4), the origin of agriculture (ibid chapters 6 and 7), and the origin of the state (ibid chapter 10) are also flawed.

I think the critique of the concept of an origin is already implicit in the title of the book. I read the repurposing of Eliade’s phrase for the title (ibid 496) to reflect the Levi Straussian tradition of dual meanings for book titles.³ In this light, the book’s title refers to it being a critique of the idea of dawns of everything

(origin myths that define everything that comes after them, e.g., agricultural revolution as the dawn of civilisation). The title is also about the importance of it *dawning* on us that we are not locked into these mythical dawns having to await the next eureka moment to steer us to the next dawn or stage. This decentring of an origin or eureka moment as driving human development is not left simply as a critique by the authors. Whilst they do not suggest any alternative future blueprints in place of this critique, they do theorise how people have developed. The authors theorise that encounters, rather than moments of genius,⁴ play a crucial role in human development, whether in the form of dialogues (ibid chapter 2) or schismogenesis (ibid chapters 2 and 5).⁵ This comes from the authors attempting to make sense of trenches full of archaeological traces that do not fit the diffusionist and evolutionist theories normally used.

In their digging, the authors do not find object-orientated lineages of progress extending outwards as branches of an ‘undying tree of life’ stemming from a singular trunk or stuck origin point.⁶ This goes against the grain of much scientific writing, which looks retrospectively at a mangle of moments and tidies them up so that it looks like they make sense as a linear sequence of stages progressing from original hypothesis to final conclusion (Pickering 1992, 1995). The book suggests leaving this primitive style of thinking to superhero comics. Otherwise, we end up believing in the super genius, super gene, super man, super culture, or super civilisation, which cannot explain the archaeological evidence. In addition, this way of thinking justifies falsely naturalising claims to life as the private property of the progenitor via the continued conflation of property deeds with biological inheritance, leaving no space for a workable theory of intergenerational

learning (Waddington 2014; Ingold 2022). In other words, ‘Stage theory is... colonial as hell’ (Bateson 2021).

Coming back to the question of the origins of inequality, the authors also take issue with how the concept of inequality is mobilised given the myths of eureka origins and subsequent stages. Specifically in terms of how inequality frames ‘social problems appropriate to an age of technocratic reformers, who assume from the outset that no real vision of social transformation is even on the table’ (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 6). This reflects my experience teaching a public health programme, where I was at first expected to teach students to pick a variable defined in a way salient in the present and project an average of it over the whole of time. This is quite disempowering because it does not enable students, many of whom are health practitioners, to ground their research in their lived experience. It dislocates their learning from a tangible reality and from recognising their agency. Instead, science becomes a practise of everyone measuring alienated variables and identifying trends, but with little means to connect them to what is happening on the ground. The one option they have is to fight it out to have their policy suggestions heard in the ether or to obtain the proper credentials to proceed to the next stage of their career development.

In addition, this logic misses plurality and prioritises what is dominant today—a social structure of ongoing coercive authority. For example, the authors introduce how double morphology (ibid 115), seasonal variability (ibid 227), and heterarchy (ibid 631) have played an important role in human social life and are highly generative for problem solving when considering challenges today, yet these have remained on the periphery of social science. The authors provide some reasons for why they

have remained at the periphery (ibid 98–102). I think it is also in part because they disappear in averaged trends and science that prioritise a single ethnocentric present as the pinnacle by which to arbitrate the whole of time. We have probably all encountered a more familiar version of this logic as the oft-repeated phrase ‘humans cause global warming’. Again, this kind of belief mystifies the different ways various peoples do things and hides the structuring relations that enabled global warming. To summarise, the kind of logic that centres on inequality reinforces the idea that what is easily quantifiable about humans across space and time (from an ethnocentric standpoint) is, therefore, basically what humanity is on average. Therefore, it is basically what humanity and its development amount to and thus probably has some underlying prehistoric primitive origin in the microbiology and micropolitics of being a savage—that is, most popular science explanations of everything.

FARMING AND CATEGORIES

This brings me to the chapter titled ‘The Ecology of Freedom’ (ibid chapter 7), which uses the example of farming to drive the point of no origin home. Rather than archaeological traces of farming reflecting a linear story unfolding from a revolutionary moment, in fact, as they put it, farming ‘hopped, tumbled, and bluffed its way around the world’ (ibid 249). This is indeed unsurprising once the blindfold of looking for an origin is cast off. The authors, in fact, could have gone much further and ‘explored the distinction between horticulture and agriculture more fully’ (Smaje 2021) or indeed considered whether farming is the most appropriate categorical generalisation into which very different practices and associated politics and economies can be swept together. In particular,

in light of the etymological history of the word 'farm' being related to the idea of taxable and rentable units. If anything, it is the category of farming that has bluffed its way into urban cosmologies in such a way that it continues to be used to mistakenly try to deny that 'the peasant food web primarily feeds the world today' (ETC Group 2022: 6). It is rather absurd that these practices share a category called farming with the industrial food chain based on mining land and sea rather than having anything to do with the image of farming broadly held.

A similar problem arises in labelling people hunter-gatherers. This again reproduces the same issues highlighted above, where the overall implication at first seems to be that techniques of farming or hunting share a similarity or continuity and it is the organisational contexts that change and reshape these techniques. I disagree. The techniques involved in hunting or farming vary dramatically, just as they do in hunting. From the perspective of my doctoral research (Betz-Heinemann 2018: 23, 2021), both the techniques and organisational contexts of hunting are quite different at all scales, as are their consequences, observations which extend to my current fieldwork in farming as well. Graeber and Wengrow (2022: 241) note a similar conclusion. There is, therefore, no natural category of hunting or farming even if popularly held. But, taking for granted a precise category feeds into origin myths. In that sense, farming and hunting are social categories pretending they are not. This is not just a pedantic point. If you are familiar with any land-based struggle almost anywhere in the world, the politics and economics of who or what are categorised as farmer, hunter, nature, and so on and the mythological origin stories that accompany them, shape entire biomes, including us. Thus, the chapter on the ecology of freedom is crucial for peasants, landworkers, farmers, and others

today. As such, farmers and the myths about agriculture, in particular, represent a leading sock puppet used to justify and frame the industrial food chain as civilised.

Hence, I am not critiquing the use of the idea of farming in *The Dawn of Everything* so much as drawing attention to how it is mobilised. In a precursor to this book, Graeber (2007) argued that the Zapatistas understood the issues related to using generalising terms, in their case, 'democracy'; but instead of standing on the sidelines critiquing it (or embracing it as given), through their practice they appropriate it in a way that effectively builds pragmatic solidarity. In the same spirit, I read the book as employing many categories including farming, history, and science. For example, the authors explicitly treat history as a set of dialogues, not simply as evidence and facts. If anything, this is what makes this book 'anarchist' in precisely that it does not tell you what farming is or what history is amongst others. It brings the reader into the dialogues that mobilise these categories. At most, it seems to me that the authors hope to inspire the realisation that 'we' each and together have the capacity to do and are not simply subject to phenomenon. Thus, it would make no sense to write a book that told you what the one history is or to provide one blueprint for what to do in light of it.

Mobilising (Pre)History

This brings me to the importance of the concept of myth and the different ways it can be mobilised as part of an understanding of (pre) history with its political implications. Netflix released a new documentary series called *Ancient Apocalypse* by Graham Hancock (2022). This series claims to mobilise myths about (pre) history against an established archaeological science which ignores them to inform their interpretations of the past. It does this by

pitching Hancock as providing the eureka moment of enlightenment, a man on a mission against all odds of a civilisation that has fallen, just like the great men of ancient times who he supposes brought civilisation to the primitives the last time there was a worldwide crisis. As *The Dawn of Everything* demonstrates, there is quite evidently a problem with current popular narratives of (pre)history, but the leading writers are not actually from 'the archaeological establishment' (Harari, Diamond, Pinker, etc.) nor is there one tradition in archaeological science as is patently obvious from the existence of the book and the many sources from which it draws. In addition, the narrative Hancock uses, whilst claiming to be antiestablishmentarian, has sold many books, received much media attention, and reiterates a story as old as Adam and Eve.

I find Graeber's (2018) observation regarding the movement of the political ground today rather helpful here. Given that our relationship with distant ancestors may be shifting, this also means recognising that (pre)history can be mobilised to suit the needs of reactionary antiestablishmentarians like Hancock. This represents a common challenge faced by those familiar with popular mobilisations and uprisings on the ground (Collective 2014, 2018). People unfamiliar with expressing themselves politically but who sense something unfair is happening are easily co-opted by reactionary elements. At the same time, those who work in the attention economy capitalise on the noise that can be made from reducing the multiplicity of such situations down to false dichotomies such as pro- or antiestablishment. In doing so, they feed the dichotomy and whoever benefits from either side of it. *The Dawn of Everything* invites us to educate ourselves away from rushing to either side, but still recognise that something is quite

wrong. To summarise, I found it empowering to reclaim my imagination and engage in dialogues that support others to do so.

POSSIBILITY LABORATORIES

Having hosted a panel at the European Association of Social Anthropologists' 2022 conference on *The Dawn of Everything*, engaged in reading groups and forums, and gifted or inspired friends and family to read the book, numerous interesting conversations have ensued. One question has been what the book means today? One key answer has been to appreciate how important imagination is to our present situations and how that imagination shapes the way we relate to the alternative lives of our ancestors. As the authors note:

The fact that we find it hard to imagine how such an alternative life could be endlessly engaging and interesting is perhaps more a reflection on the limits of our imagination than on the life itself. (...) If social scientists today continue to reduce past generations to simplistic, two-dimensional caricatures... The actual result is to impoverish history—and, as a consequence, to impoverish our sense of possibility. (Ibid 21–22)

Taking the lead from one of the book's authors, Graeber, who differentiates imaginative identification and immanent imagination (Vansintjan 2021), the book expresses both of these imaginative capacities together. Imaginative identification acknowledges our ancestors' cognitive and social capacities, including in some cases having more fruitful imaginations, rather than othering them by mistakenly treating them as stupid and devoid of imagination. Immanent imagination opens up

considering what our ancestors' social lives were possibly like rather than remaining confined to just-so stories. This involves dismantling these just-so stories and then openly imagining what actually might have been happening, starting from a point of imaginative identification rooted in archaeological data.

I raise this issue because, in the wake of the first lockdowns, in response to the current pandemic, one of the authors, Graeber, noted that the 2008 global crisis and the crisis that ensued with the current pandemic, both involved moments of questioning just-so stories and the status quo they justify. However, Graeber (2021) notes that this window was then shut after the 2008 crisis and 'most of us' went back to business as usual. Graeber then hoped for us that we would not return to business-as-usual after the 2020 pandemic lockdowns, since such moments of crisis in business-as-usual offer an opportunity for new possibilities to emerge. However, if we take the differentiation between imaginative identification and immanent imagination, then I think the phenomenon of enthrallment is missing from Graeber's characterisation of what happens in the wake of moments of crisis. Enthrallment is what happens when you become a follower of an immanent imagination lacking imaginative identification.

One key example I am familiar with is B*tcoin,⁷ having myself presented at their annual conference in 2012 and being pushed off stage for introducing how Graeber's work on debt might help b*tcoin participants do some imaginative identification. B*tcoin began in 2009 on the back of the 2008 crisis and was one of a number of promises based on an immanent imagination of a world without central banks. Many other promises using a similar recipe have occurred since then, including the release of the aforementioned Netflix documentary series

Ancient Apocalypse. But this kind of imagination lacks imaginative identification in the sense that what is imagined excludes any care for people who suffer its consequences, excludes learning from economic traces of past peoples, or all of the dangerous externalities involved. Thus, in reclaiming our imaginations, we should ensure involving both immanent imagination and imaginative identification, not just appeal to imagination more broadly. Otherwise, we can get stuck in the promises that immanent imagination offers on its own. In that spirit, if there is a proposal of 'what to do' in the book, it is to combine both kinds of imagination to 'foster political self-consciousness and laboratories of social possibility' (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 117).

In my understanding, these laboratories are where different experiments in social possibility are played with, including creative imaginaries as well as latent practises. Expanding beyond that, Graeber indicates that the windows of possibility open up in moments of crisis in the status quo—when the structuring relations of business-as-usual begin to reveal themselves as incompetent, unjust, and ineffective—whereby people find themselves using these experiments to organise their lives. As Machiavelli indicated, we 'the people' are subject to lords and luck unless we prepare ourselves in advance for moments of misfortune (Sanbonmatsu 2004: 132). You can see versions of this in practise today in your specific location or across locations between which you move. For example, there are probably some stereotypical emergency preparedness measures such as fire engines, emergency hospitals, lifeboats, signposts towards a safe places or bunkers, flood overflows, and firebreaks in forests amongst others. However, in addition to these 'hard measures', you might also find 'soft measures' like a community plan that defines how your group of people will

communicate, organise, and lead themselves and help others in the event of an earthquake or a military invasion. You can find work in the anthropology of preparedness studies in which forms of power are identified as implicated in these kinds of measures. My particular favourite lies in a study of birds and disease (Keck 2020).

However, perhaps at a more globally familiar level of experiencing crisis was during the initial responses to the pandemic. What was important was who you decided to listen to, how knowledge about the situation was sourced and evaluated, who controlled communications, how resources were shared, who you trusted, and how relations of power and authority structured these relations. These then largely depend upon what groundwork has already been laid beforehand. Some laboratories of possibility based on an imaginative identification and immanent imagination were experimented with and expressed themselves. For example, but not exclusively, within the vast self-organising mutual aid networks that formed. Broadly speaking, however, latent relationships, practises, and ideas based on different social possibilities did not become the new normal. Nonetheless, they did provide practise and education for many in experiencing new possibilities if only fleetingly. However, in IWW Wobbly language, more base building is required. Or, as Bateson (2022: 990) puts it, ‘linear managing or controlling of the direction of change may appear desirable, [however] tending to how [we] become ready allows for pathways of possibility previously unimagined’.

In other words, until we engage in experimenting more extensively with our social possibilities through education and practice whilst pushing our imaginations, then maybe we are not ready to become unstuck from business-as-usual or fall under some thrall, and no amount of policy policing will change that.

No one knows the answer, but everyone can get ready to be surprised!

GETTING READY

To get ready, however, does not mean to stop struggling. To get an education, does not mean getting a schooling. Instead, it is precisely through experimenting in workplaces, leisure spaces, at home and wherever we come together with others that we can learn from practice, from trial and error, to discover new rules-of-thumb for new social possibilities. However, as Graeber (2007) has noted, based on his experiences of experimenting, ‘Revolutionary theory, it seems to me, has in many fronts advanced much less quickly than revolutionary practice’. In that vein I want to conclude this book-review-cum-essay by coming back around to Bhaskar and how some simple theory can liberate the imagination. At the heart of their philosophy is the epistemic fallacy (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2016). This is the conflation of what is with what you partially know about what is. This is done when one conflates what happens in a laboratory with what happens outside it, what is responded to on a survey with the lives of the people who responded, big data with the real world, a photograph of Earth with Earth, the constructed icons of savings lives with qualities of existence itself, between models, systems, information, code and lived experience (Cayley 2021).⁸

When you collapse the space between these you not only confuse ‘the map with the territory’ but you also start to use policy and policing violence to discipline the terrain in an attempt to make it fit the map. One also precludes other maps, ways of thinking and representing the terrain, as *The Dawn of Everything* seeks to address with regards to telling the stories of

our ancestors. But perhaps most importantly one builds a wall between people and the ‘transcendent other’, the unknown, our shared ontology. In this situation there is no room for allowing ourselves to be surprised, and so there is no room for imagination. This is because the acknowledgement of the epistemic fallacy leads to the observation that there is a transcendent ‘other’ that is always beyond us, but at the same time because we are all connected through it in some way, it is also what we all share in common. It is in realizing this space between the two that revolutionary imagination has the grace to grow. Therein is the beauty, in the creative surprises that can emerge from encountering *another*, to whom we also connected.

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NOTES

- 1 Whilst waiting for this essay to be published, I came across a fantastic critique of how gender and family are mobilised in *The Dawn of Everything* (Walters 2023), which reminded me that I was also inspired during my thesis to analyse the archaeological literature on the different idols and archaeological traces of dwellings in Cyprus. I concluded that, prior to binary gendered idols and the social life that centred a gender binary, artefacts in Cyprus suggest life was not structured or focussed on binary gender, but instead on an ancient nonbinary notion of the individual (Betz-Heinemann 2018: 87–90, 95).
- 2 I draw upon the metaphor of a warren of caves in relation to Plato’s allegory from Richardson’s book *Epidemic Illusions: On the coloniality of global public health* (2020).
- 3 In reference to Levi Strauss’ book, *The Savage Mind*, which can be read in multiple ways.

- 4 The video essay ‘The Creativity Delusion: Brains, Geniuses and Originality’ summarises the issues with the idea of genius (TilVids 2022).
- 5 Schismogenesis ‘describes how societies in contact with each other end up joined within a common system of differences, even as they attempt to distinguish themselves from one another’ (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 180).
- 6 I presented at the same EASA 2022 conference on why the ‘tree of life’ concept is rooted in colonial ideas of belonging and, thus, it is time for this tree to die, like all living trees do (Betz-Heinemann 2022).
- 7 B*tcoin is a currency built on hype. Thus, I feel writing about it is contributes to that hype, which I would rather not do. Hence, the asterisk.
- 8 I would argue it also includes those who believe writing is culture, reality is discourse, culture is text etc. Where one ultimately ends up trying to do system change through attempting to shift the narrative.

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