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# AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POLITICAL FORMS

## The Dawn of Everything According to Graeber and Wengrow

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*Rémi Hadad*

*Translated by Matthew Carey*

In the preface to his *Second Discourse*, on the origin of inequality and whether or not it could be justified by natural law, Rousseau cast a disapproving eye over the ample contemporary literature on the topic: “Among the most serious writers, one can hardly find two who are of the same opinion on this point. Without speaking of the ancient philosophers, who seem to have tried their best to contradict each other on the most fundamental principles” (Rousseau 1992 [1755]: 13). In *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), the anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow breathe new life into this classical polemical tradition. They begin by criticizing the current fashion for essays that appeal to the immemorial past to justify their frequently banal and conservative analysis of the present. Steven Pinker, Yuval Harari, Robin Dunbar, Jared Diamond, Walter Scheidel, Francis Fukuyama, and Ian Morris are explicitly named as so many variations on the liberal mystification of social evolution. Graeber and Wengrow’s self-proclaimed “new history of humanity,” however, runs the risk of leaving the reader with the same disappointment the author of the *Second Discourse* expressed over the proliferation of unwarranted positions on the issue. It is worthwhile, therefore, stating very clearly, and from the start, what separates this particular text from its peers.

### Three Hypotheses for Rethinking the Field of Social Evolution

Graeber and Wengrow’s enquiry, to begin with, is one of curiosity and wonder: “As we get to grips with the actual evidence, we always find that the realities



of early human social life were far more complex, and a good deal more interesting, than any modern-day State of Nature theorist would ever be likely to guess” (p. 15). This enthusiastic appeal to step outside the “limits of our imagination” (pp. 38–39) and to “consider a broader range of possibilities” (p. 251) is enough to set this book apart from the great mass of “dull” (p. 21) evolutionary histories. Whereas the desperate search for points of similarity between the past and the present eventually leads to simplification (cf. Hadad 2020), Graeber and Wengrow’s use of analogies systematically challenges established understandings of social evolution. The end result regarding the different case studies is sometimes a little forced (as the specialists will no doubt swiftly remind us), but it is closer to the spirit of the problems raised by current archaeological research.

The empirical cases the authors discuss are well known. Some number among the most famous cases in archaeological history (Uruk, Chavín, Stonehenge . . .); others have recently been the object of renewed interest (such as the Tripyllia “megasites” from the Ukrainian Neolithic, Arslantepe and the other margins of Mesopotamia, and the great earthworks of Poverty Point in the USA); all summon the familiar edifying picture of a monumentalized past. Nor are the authors’ analyses and interpretations entirely novel, as they are happy to admit. This book is, however, the first attempt to bring everything together in one systematic and comparative analysis that can speak to broader social theory. Their cross-cutting perspectives bring out potential points of convergence or contradiction (which is welcome indeed in the field of evolutionary theory), but it also weakens their demonstration. Thankfully, the proliferation of ideas and examples is undergirded by a red thread, or rather three of them. Though the authors do not present them as such, we can perhaps identify three core claims, each of which is probably ambitious enough to warrant a book of its own.

The clearest and most significant claim for the rest of the book is that *political organization is oscillatory in nature*. This hypothesis is first put forward in their analysis of the European Upper Paleolithic, drawing on Marcel Mauss’ (1905) theory of “double social morphology,” itself based on Henri Beuchat’s Inuit data (chap. 3). These hunter-gatherer economies divided the year into a summer season, when people spread out to gather food supplies, and another period when they gathered to consume these supplies in festive and ritual contexts, thus affording them an experience of different forms of political organization, structured at different scales and regulated by different norms. Like Mauss himself, who drew clear parallels with other American societies from more temperate regions, as well as with the annual rhythms of Western modernity punctuated by breaks and holidays, suggesting they all conformed to “a very general . . . law” (Mauss 1905: 125–128), Graeber and Wengrow reject any idea of technological or environmental determinism specific to hunters or fishers

in frozen climes. Their oscillatory hypothesis is not merely a response to the challenges posed by the social forms of the Upper Paleolithic, which are notoriously difficult to characterize (cf. Guy 2021). It goes against the classical quest for a singular origin point of inequality, by breaking with ideas of “egalitarian” societies as defined by the mere absence of later markers of inequality, arguing instead for a principle of political plasticity that cuts across the sequential mechanics of social evolution.

This spontaneous and yet fundamentally self-conscious plasticity is the underlying principle for the authors’ “new” way of analyzing social change—it is the originary deviation or *clinamen* for all the transformations that follow. The political and economic polarities of the seasons may be reversed, the range of variation may be diminished; what matters is that it affords the possibility of experimenting with domination in an “egalitarian” context (such as the “bison police” of Cheyenne or Pawnee communal hunts discussed by Robert Lowie, pp. 108–110) or of challenging it in a hierarchical societal context (as with Bakhtin’s “carnavalesque,” which allows for the abolition or reversal of values during moments of collective celebration or consumption, pp. 117–118 *ff.*). This “encyclopaedia of possible political forms” (p. 118) is thus built into the very fabric of society. On the one hand, it offers an elegant solution to the oft-remarked weakness of anarchist theories, such as that of Pierre Clastres, which rely on people’s preternatural prescience of state power to explain how certain societies avoid its emergence. However, unlike other theoretical or ethnographic attempts to resolve this problem (Buitron 2020; Viveiros de Castro 2019), this one remains resolutely attached to the Durkheimian idea of the social as a “single totality” (cf. Allard 2020), which looms over and gives direction to any political enterprise. On the other hand, the evolutionary transversality of the phenomenon allows the authors to argue for its importance in contexts completely unlike those first documented in the classical Americanist ethnographies. Graeber and Wengrow thus adapt the model to the highly ritualistic setting of Neolithic societies, where this oscillation explains the initial importance of a certain “ecological flexibility,” rather than the supposed uniformity of emergent agropastoralism (chaps. 6, 7). The mobilization of collective labor in the formation of state power can be interpreted similarly, as one example of the periodic festive suspension of hierarchical difference (chap. 8), rather than its popular representation as a despotic regimentation of the subjugated masses (Wittfogel 1957).

The second claim, which is less clearly delineated, but perhaps just as radical in its implications, covers a series of phenomena that we might term *cosmopolitan effervescence*. This explains how the aggregatory movement of the oscillation (that is, those times when people gather) gradually imposes itself as the normative mode of social existence. The claim can thus be considered a response to the grand Durkheimian problem of the long-term effects of

collective effervescence and its hypostasis. Where, however, certain sociological currents saw in this crystallization the transcendental, proto-secular specter of the homogenous nation, Graeber and Wengrow foreground exchange, play, and hospitality as the prime social movers. They trace this cosmopolitanism back to the long-distance circulation of objects during the Upper Paleolithic and use it to theorize the imbrication of the cumulative effects of integration and differentiation within “spheres of interaction” (to use a preferred archaeological term). Once more, they pledge their troth to Mauss and his notion of “civilisation” (which describes less a developmental stage than sets of cultural choices and interactions), and use it to frame the proliferation of different ways of life during the greater part of the Holocene (chap. 4). For the authors, the “most important findings of modern archaeology are precisely these vibrant and far-flung networks of kinship and commerce” (p. 433), and how such “culture areas” (Obeid, Lapita, Hopewell, Jōmon, Minoan . . .) constitute novel and yet interconnected paths, which generate in turn internal bifurcations or transform neighboring societies. These phenomena had been unduly neglected by synthetic anthropological approaches and ignored in efforts to sequentially classify long-term cultural variation. Contrary to the dominant view on social evolution, the vast majority of post-glacial history up until the formation of states was indeed marked by the intrinsic dynamism of “extended moral communities” (ibid.), sometimes uniting hugely different social conditions across vast scales, sometimes producing complementarity or opposition on the basis of shared experience, but always doing so on radically immanent grounds.

Despite being present at every stage of the argument, and even though it was at the heart of Wengrow’s earlier work on imperial formations (2013) and on the state simplification of everyday life in the late prehistoric Near East (2001), the question of scale nonetheless remains completely untheorized. The problem with this becomes obvious as soon as the authors try to address the relationship between cultural communities understood as agentive totalities capable of choosing their destiny and the extended spheres of interpenetration that influence the general orientation of those choices, whether these be heterogeneous centralities (such as the multicultural “democratic” cities of Mesopotamia or Meso-America, chap. 9) or the homogenous spread of more modest entities (such as the pre-urban culture of Obeid, which the authors boldly name the first era of the “global village,” p. 536). This flexibility of collective integration across different levels raises the question of the infrastructural, technical, and cognitive dimensions of social domination. The only discussion of this is a late presentation (chap. 11) of the Hopewell “sphere of interaction” in the early centuries of the Common Era, and of the Iroquois and Wendat confederations encountered by European colonizers—two examples of large-scale, non-state organization carried by cosmopolitan institutions (clans, games, and initiation societies), interrupted only by the short period of stratification and

centralization of twelfth-century Cahokia. While this ingenious fresco serves to lay “the historical foundations of the indigenous critique” of European political theory, by virtue of its mirroring effect, it offers little in the way of generalizable conclusions. This unresolved problem of scale ought to have been central to Graeber and Wengrow’s thesis. How else to defend the idea of “social complexity” untrammelled by the inequality that, in classical evolutionary accounts, constitutes the tragic and inevitable corollary of any form of social organization above a certain size?

Not that the authors merely push back the moment at which the singular power of the State, Empire, or Market imposed its dominion on a golden age of hospitality and gentle commerce. The forces of cosmopolitanism remain active and ready to challenge any hegemonic power (as attested to by the short-lived experience of Cahokia). What is more, they can also be present at the very root of domination itself. Thus, the authors imagine the origin of property not as an expression of individual sovereignty (“the first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground”; Rousseau 1992 [1775]: 43), but an extension into the open realm of exchange of a “structure of exclusion” previously restricted to the domains of esotericism and sacredness (chap. 4—thereby echoing, without citing it, the work of authors such as Fustel de Coulanges [1866] or Robertson Smith [1889]). Thus too, they see the emergence of charismatic authority as the result of a process of emulation born of games and competition, which produces a “heroic” polity entirely alien to the logic of the urban concentration of powers (chap. 8). And thus, finally, they see in the legitimate and even “divine” exercise of unlimited violence the same transgressive principle as was at play in the production of a “sacralized” sovereign with limited power, who is socially marginalized and held responsible for the well-being of his subjects (in line with Frazer’s classic thesis already addressed by Graeber and Sahlins 2017).

The reverse of cosmopolitical effervescence is, then, the local regimes of value that produce different forms of inequality (chap. 10). Graeber and Wengrow analyze this through the lens of “three elementary forms of domination [that] have entirely separate historical origins,” respectively charisma, information, and violence (and that one must suppose are broadly inspired by Weber’s typology of authority). Organized in opposition to the unitary teleology of state formation (reduced to an “amalgam” of heterogeneous elements, p. 368), and dissociated from the urban question with which it was long confused (Childe 1950), the authors’ frame of analysis is structured around what they call “first order” regimes, because they rely exclusively on one form of domination. They illustrate their thesis with the examples of three pre-Columbian societies: the Olmecs, among whom sport as spectacle was a vector of political competition and gave rise to charismatic domination; the Chavín, whose domination was based on mastery of esoteric knowledge—that is, information;

and the Natchez, who exercised divine sovereignty in the form of violence. This serves as a basis for thinking through the different variations identifiable in classical examples of proto-state formation, what they call “second order regimes,” which deploy two forms of authority and exclude a third: early Pharaonic Egypt, where the sovereign monopoly of violence was backed up by religious management, without recourse to charismatic power; the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia, where royal charisma relied on the peerless efficacy of bureaucratic knowledge, leaving sovereignty to the gods; and classic Maya civilization, where the violence of warfare and hunting was the vector of a heroic sovereignty that scarcely aspired to administer a vast territory.

This typology is indisputably the product of a structural simplification, whereby each proposition is only true in relation to another. Its virtuosity, in turn, is as much the product of what it excludes as of what it mobilizes. What is more, it makes no effort to hide the inspiration it draws from traditional schematic oppositions (cf. Frankfort’s [1978] opposition between Egyptian and Mesopotamian monarchies), while taking advantage of the interpretative liberty afforded by biased descriptions (as with the French obsession with the simultaneous weakness and absolutism of the Natchez “sun-king,” cf. Havard 2020) or by the little understood archaeological cases of the Olmecs or the Chavín. It is, in any case, the high-water-mark of the text’s comparative ambitions, insofar as it gives a pedagogical presentation of the principles scattered hither and yon throughout the text. It thus quietly allows the usual categories of evolutionary thought (the kings, states, cities, prestige and religion...) to shatter into their constitutive diversity.

The final hypothesis, which is the most original and personal of the three, is also unfortunately the least developed. It appears most strikingly towards the end of the book, as a response to the particular tenor that this steady accumulation of limit-cases gives to the classic problem of social evolution. Since we cannot identify a single origin point of social inequality (as it was already substantially present in the myriad institutions that preceded it), Graeber and Wengrow flip the question on its head. How is it that we have found ourselves caught in a historical situation where it has become so difficult to imagine such sociological dynamism? How have we come to forget the intrinsic precariousness and incompleteness of any state of domination? How did we end up so imbued with a sense of our own all-encompassment that we are condemned to project its shadow onto the past in a desperate attempt to justify the present? It is here that the authors’ proposition is most original and most provocative, as it opens its arms to the ambivalence of the social forces implied by this model and that might otherwise have seemed to hobble their argument: *it is in their paradoxical connection to care that fragile relations of domination acquire stability.*

Here again, the authors break with the search for foundational ruptures by tracing the deep history of the phenomenon back to the European Upper

Paleolithic. The “princely” tombs of this period often distinguish, via the opulence of the mortuary decorations and the complexity of the rite (or the mere fact of being buried), individuals with “extraordinary” or sometimes even disabling physical characteristics. These practices, which are more diverse than the book indicates, are difficult to interpret without reflecting critically on notions of dependence (Coqueugniot 2021) and singularity (Stépanoff 2019), which are absent from Graeber and Wengrow’s work. Nevertheless, these practices prefigure the subtle link between the recognized exceptionality of certain bodies and the care owed to them in death, which the authors compare to the remarkable outpourings of affection that often mark the death of the sovereign in proto-state formations. By rendering unto to the monarch’s corpse the care he was supposed to show his subjects during his lifetime, the fundamentally ambiguous legitimacy of a power that simultaneously asserts itself as guarantor of collective prosperity and occasionally cruel regime of coercion is symmetrically reinforced. The primordial otherness of the king, the source of his exceptional power and means of his confinement, can thus be transfigured into a paternal authority (according to a very classic analogy, but which here again poses unresolved problems of scale, cf. Steinmüller 2022). The mortuary care shown to the body of the sovereign serves, however, less to buttress individual claims to divine sovereignty than to sustain and externalize the forces of which it is the vehicle. “Perhaps this is what a State actually is,” the authors finally ask themselves, “a combination of exceptional violence and the creation of a complex social machine, all ostensibly devoted to acts of care and devotion” (p. 408).

Seen from this instrumental angle, the initial hypothesis that care and domination can be thought together remains undeveloped. But perhaps we can allow ourselves to push this thesis further than the authors do: *qua* object of obsessive memorialization and excessive care, the corpse of the sovereign makes it possible to extract certain political properties from the constant oscillations of the social body. Because of their reticence to address the ideological motives of this proposal, and how these properties percolate through and produce political subjects, Graeber and Wengrow fail to explain how the entire community is caught up in this deadly pact. They do, however, address two complementary phenomena that make it possible to sketch out a broader process that we might describe as a hierarchy of compassionate values. When state-formation focuses first on the person of the sovereign, the “sacrifice” or “ritual killing” of victims supposed to care for him in the afterlife (“accompanying deaths,” as Testart [2004] would have it) aims to transform strangers into kin, who are equal in the face of death and bound by the most intimate and total devotion. The relationship of interdependence that the monarchy thus weaves with its subjects allows the principle of individual sovereignty to “burst . . . out of its ritual cages” (p. 403) and the sovereign to assume effective, centralizing



power. Conversely, where this power is contained by the state apparatus, the ideology of care is instead directed by the state administration towards the commonweal. By diverting and depersonalizing pre-existing policies of village stewardship, the State can arrogate to itself the symbolic benefits of the collective organization of the material conditions of existence, and establish itself as an essential intermediary in the organization of all cosmopolitan life. The State thus stands alone in uniting care and domination by bureaucratizing “promises and commitments” (p. 427). In the absence of a proper consideration of scales, however, such a phenomenology of statecraft remains an intuition.

Another way of reformulating this last hypothesis would then be to suggest that, in the process of State formation, the already present government of the earth is replaced with a government of beings hitherto confined to cosmology (cf. Sahlins 2017). The move is interesting for it turns the modern representation of the State on its head, depriving it of its most noble functions (organizing mutuality, typically through the division of labor) for a less comfortable prerogative (perpetuating dependence). We could thus interpret the touching tribute paid, in the conclusion, to Franz Steiner’s thesis on how charitable institutions such as hospitality towards refugees can paradoxically generate arbitrary power: debts of life as a powerful way of normalizing subjugation (chap. 12). Anxious to stay clear of the last two centuries of history, however, Graeber and Wengrow are careful to avoid parallels with such central topics of contemporary debate on sovereignty as biopolitics, the state of exception, or the penetration of the intimate sphere. This avoidance is all the more striking since these controversies have often leveraged supposed archaisms, such as “promise” (Arendt 1958), “the pastorate” (Foucault 2004), or “sacrifice” (Agamben 1998), to challenge classic liberal theories of the State. By excluding modernity from a discussion of political forms that are of undoubted relevance to us, the authors spare themselves a painful reckoning with these phenomena’s actuality. They also avoid espousing radical (and so controversial) positions, while benefiting from the convenient stance of only addressing the present through the discourses it produces about the past. The result is a mere exhortation to reflect on a renewed, but no less cryptic, version of the old Hocartian intuition that behind the hegemony of a domination which manages to block all other horizon than itself is “the desire effectively to make the ritual last forever” (p. 430, cf. Hocart 1954).

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Some will see in these three hypotheses—of oscillation, effervescence, and care—the projection of new obsessions onto already dated problems. This forgets the extent to which these problems colluded in leaving vast empirical tracts of the subject in the shadows. It is also to forget the resolutely classical character of the references (at the intersection of Durkheim and Frazer)

on which Graeber and Wengrow base their demonstration and their neglect of contemporary critical theory. It is surprising that these connections had not already been explored in greater depth (or rather that they ceased to be made) by evolutionary thinkers. Though one may question the interpretative relevance of these proposals for each of the contexts mentioned, one must also hope that they are criticized on the basis of this kind of return to the source materials.

Simply put, the principal merit of this book is to show how archaeological cases can problematize anthropological knowledge. They are neither reducible to their incompleteness, which would make their study dependent on the importation of pre-existing models, nor condemned to serve as an entry point for the development of the most abstract universals. They generate reflections in themselves, which often exceed the ethnographic present. If we take this to heart, it becomes clear that many of the notions the authors rely on deserve to be refined. Distinctions could be drawn between authority, coercion, and alienation, for example, or between inequality and hierarchy (cf. Berger 2021). But the authors nonetheless succeed in establishing another alternative to the linear approach of social evolution than a mere multiplicity of paths to domination or the romantic invocation of a spirit of resistance.

At the heart of their argument lies a frontal attack on the essentialism of evolutionary stages in the form of a constant reminder of the fundamental ambivalence of the political configurations associated with them. Subject to contradictory forces, they each contain the germ of their own end or their potential transformation. Graeber and Wengrow oppose the fatalism of a history of inequality that sees it as emerging inexorably from an undifferentiated past, and propose a variability, no longer of type but of form, where the always incomplete expression of power never manages completely to exhaust the “forms of freedom” that are present in the same evolutionary processes: “to move, to disobey, to rearrange social ties” (p. 482). In short, this book endows the past with the political intelligence we are capable of in the present and whose importance we often neglect. And although it never quite manages to specify the conditions necessary to put this social creativity into practice, and although its hypotheses thus outline a problem that ultimately remains unsolved, this joyful, unbowed imperative will stand as an intellectual testament to David Graeber, who died prematurely before the book was published.

## **The Art of the Dialectic**

The vast panorama the book proposes can only flatter our intelligence. It gives a comfortable, cleverly configured impression of closed externality, which only ventures into the realm of experience through the subtle play of shadows. This exercise quickly reaches its limits, because the way it hesitates between the

pamphlet and the encyclopedia at times makes the book look like a disordered catalogue of cases in which the reader is expected to identify the references and reconstruct the scattered hypotheses. The constant hopping from one topic to another might charitably be interpreted as a demonstration of the conversation that occurred between the two authors, but the book refuses to embrace this transdisciplinary dialogue that might have been its principal merit. The narrative structure, in most chapters, cannot contain the excess of ideas and cases. What coherence it has is broadly chronological (from chap. 3 on the Paleolithic to chap. 10 on the State), interrupted by long digressions (chap. 5) and some inexplicable excursions taken on hobby-horses (such as ethnomathematics and geometry). The quest for completeness leads the authors to raise topics like divination or ancestrality in a far too allusive, and ultimately completely superfluous, fashion that fails to convey their fundamental character. Likewise, the very poorly referenced attempt to address the condition of women sounds like a clumsy obligatory passage. Little by little, the oft-repeated allusions, the absence of obvious theoretical references or the absent genealogy of certain ideas end up giving the impression of a bird's eye overview of issues that is never translated into concrete realities on the ground. One can legitimately wonder how many of the wider public at which this book is aimed will struggle on to the end of the 650 pages; academics meanwhile might have appreciated a presentation of the theses that was simultaneously more didactic, more in-depth, and much briefer.

To make clear why this text remains interesting, and to delimit the field of critiques that may legitimately be addressed to it, it is worth taking the time to clear up one possible misunderstanding. *The Dawn of Everything* is not an archaeology book, either in its academic approach or by virtue of its popular appeal. It says nothing about the materiality of the sites and their context, nor about the manner in which social phenomena are translated during excavations, which cannot be compared to direct observation or historical documents. This explains the absence of such essential topics as the role of technology, the history of art, or the relationship to the environment. What image will it evoke in the reader's mind of places like Arslantepe or La Venta? What role did the last Ice Age, and its different impacts across the globe, play in establishing the oscillatory character of political systems? What place remains for style in a political definition of "cultural areas" and "civilizations"? These questions might seem like an optional extra of the book, but they were in fact essential to the research it draws on. They underpin the bias that is evident from the opening lines, in the astonishing confession that "most of human history is irreparably lost to us"—as if the mystery, rather than the concrete reality, of the past was the prerequisite to historiographical analysis.

Restricted by a chronological fresco that is so exhaustive as to be allusive, the authors have no choice other than to rely on artifice to enliven the

spectrum of political forms. The idea of “schismogenesis,” freely adapted from Gregory Bateson, plays the role of a *deus ex machina*, acting as a ubiquitous driver of the creation of new traits. Analytically, its only purpose is to translate, with the scholarly authority of neologism, the idea of diversification by mutual distinction. Stripped, however, of the continuous dynamic relationships inherent in the original concept (Bateson 1935), it ends up looking a lot like the merging of personal and collective traits typical of the heyday of American culturalism (chapter 5 recalls Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*). Even though the focus is on change rather than identities, the unchallenged telescoping of individual agency and group decision-making can only lead to new essentialism. This avowed recourse to a Boasian historicist tradition is quite startling, as it contrasts sharply with the social theory that provides the framework for the book’s hypotheses. Such theoretical eclecticism also blurs internal dissonances, when for example they invoke the idea of a “sphere of interaction” without mentioning that it was developed by archaeologists unsatisfied with the Kroeberian idea of “cultural areas,” specifically in relation to the Hopewell phenomenon (Binford 1965). The upshot is especially problematic when they engage in a fanciful reconstruction of the geography of the Neolithic Near East (chap. 6), another site of tension between culturalism and its archaeological critiques (Asouti 2006), based on an opposition between lowlanders and highlanders worthy of a nineteenth-century orientalist. Above all, by avoiding questions of scale, such a conception of culture inevitably comes with a psychologizing notion of collective will, or an individualized version of *Volksggeist*, that prevails over cosmopolitan forces. Seen from this angle, the curious *incipit* from Jung on the “right time” for a “metamorphosis of the gods” into one’s self, is troubling, to say the least.

The appeal to “schismogenesis” emerges from the authors’ insistence on explaining something that would require no explanation at all if they had cleaved to an idea of “arbitrariness,” central to the definition of “civilisations” for Mauss (1969 [1929]), and simply tested their hypotheses against different archaeological cases. This is not to challenge either the reality of the phenomena they describe or their importance for the study of social configurations, but rather to question the usefulness of a strategy that reduces the politics of groups to their identity. This adds nothing to the book’s broader argument. The idea of schismogenesis is only necessary for work whose evolutionary ambition consists in verifying general laws or establishing comparative frameworks; it is supposed to work like natural selection in biology, conferring explanatory value on what would otherwise be little more than a static systematics of change. It betrays their desire to establish a unified theory of social evolution. The problem is that its understanding of change fails to account for the actual historicity of the contexts described. Here, variability across space replaces that across time. Schismogenesis reproduces a kaleidoscopic vision of a past

without texture (of a monolingual cosmopolitanism, of care without relationships . . .). Archaeological facts, no more than ethnographic sources, are never presented as the result of an (imperfectly transcribed) confrontation with alterity whose practices are all the more confusing as they only emerge in the light of a commensurability anchored in experience. The *tour de force*, here, is to draw on the most particularistic form of culturalism only to ultimately fall back on the dominant, positivist, and masculine narrative common to all the great contemporary evolutionary stories. This is the whole paradox of the book, which sets out to demonstrate the breadth of possibilities, not only in the field of social organization, but also in that of the political imagination, but which in the end relies on the kind of discourses that structure our contemporary horizons.

This gesture is anything but neutral. It is as much the result of the authors' intellectual hubris in trying to cover everything as a matter of editorial strategy. It perhaps even explains the book's broad public success and so, by indirect means, its importance in the history of ideas. We can fruitfully compare it to the book David Graeber wrote on royalty (Graeber and Sahlins 2017), in which many of the hypotheses of this work were already discussed, and which was equally ambitious in scope, though structured around a single theme. The readerships do not completely overlap, of course, but this allows us to better understand what distinguishes the two approaches. There is, in the authors' gesture, something of their theory: an agonistic principle of oscillation and revitalization of the field in which it is located, and a desire to maintain a generative, internal tension—a schismogenesis. As a result, the book's theses are always at risk of disappearing behind the slightly vain (and slightly concerning, in a world of conspiracy theories) contention that, since Rousseau, "accounts of the general course of human history . . . simply aren't true" (p. 3).

By thus opposing their "new history" to naïve reproductions of patterns of social evolution imagined in the Enlightenment, the authors above all demonstrate a certain political lucidity: they have understood and accepted that evolutionism remains the dominant intellectual current in anthropological approaches to history. But they struggle to explain why the considerable increase in empirical knowledge over the last two centuries has apparently not called this heritage into question. While they make use of data that are often dated, they do not attempt to situate their critical project within this process of knowledge production, nor do they really discuss the history of their interpretation. Their urge to replace one story with another has less to do with the build-up of contradictory evidence than with a theoretical tradition, marked by a tendency towards systematic inversion, of which Graeber and Wengrow are both heirs and critics. Indeed, their insistence, over the first hundred pages of the book, on putting clear blue water between themselves and Rousseau in fact betrays an awkward proximity.

The limited development of anthropological knowledge in the eighteenth century partly explains the plasticity of the debate into which Rousseau threw

himself. This also allowed him to justify the radicalness of his intervention: it was enough at the time to remove “the dust and sand that surround and disguise the edifice” such that “one perceives the unshakeable base upon which it is built” (Rousseau 1992 [1755]: 15). In contrast to the epoch’s blind confidence in the civilizing process, Rousseau based his own retrospective reasoning on the only two things that he was convinced one could not doubt: “self-love” (or “-preservation”) and, more crucially, “pity” for one’s neighbor (or “commiseration”; nowadays we would say compassion). His critique was thus addressed at what he saw as gratuitous conjectures. However, it remained subject not only to the embryonic character of anthropological knowledge, but above all to philosophical debate on natural law. All the examples he provides, including those that are obvious hearsay, are fundamentally concerned with the constitution, justification, and critique of a political order.

Graeber and Wengrow do not ignore this dimension, which echoes the whys and wherefores of contemporary debates on social evolution. But they embrace it by attributing it to an “indigenous” American critique of European modernity. They focus on the figure of Kandiaronk, a Wendat chief whose oratory talents (proper to his diplomatic function) and personal critical flair must have greatly impressed the French colonists he frequently met in the Montreal area, themselves adepts of the newly flourishing art of conversation. His arguments spread clean across the Age of Enlightenment thanks to Lahontan’s *Curious Dialogues with a Savage*, a highly influential book published in 1703, in which the indigenous interlocutor is directly inspired by Kandiaronk, or may even, according to Graeber and Wengrow, simply represent a direct transcription of his words and opinions, subsequently appropriated (and corrupted) by Europeans critiques such as Rousseau.

This intervention is as welcome in a popular anthropological work as its formulation is crude in the domain of intellectual history (although we should let the specialists judge). Within the general framework of the argument, it aims at establishing over the course of the book a link between this “indigenous critique” and evolutionary theory, based on the highly speculative (given the distances and durations at play) but narratively pleasing idea that Kandiaronk represents the voice of the long political history of eastern North America. Having seen centralization and social stratification undone by the same cosmopolitan forces that had given rise to them, Kandiaronk possessed an expertise that allowed him to enlighten these representatives of the *ancien régime*, specifically those engaged in imagining the coming revolution. This is basically his role from the start of the book: the sections devoted to him are not meant to open new historiographical discussions or to start a wider reflection on colonial contact in New France, but to introduce an agonistic spark into the discourse.

Had the authors’ objective been to highlight the influence of Native Americans on European political thought, it is hard to explain the importance

attributed to the watershed date of 1703, which ignores a century of works, from Montaigne's "Of Cannibals," to the *New Dialogues of the Dead* in which Fontenelle, twenty years before Lahontan, presented Moctezuma as an enlightened opponent of Cortez. Regardless of the extent to which it reflects Kandiaronk's arguments, the success of Lahontan's *Curious Dialogues* is explained by the fact that such a staging of non-European wisdom was already a literary trope at the time of its publication. The omnipresence of the "noble savage" in the first half of the eighteenth century is not limited to the role of archetype or initiator of a new political radicalism. The same figure also embodies a certain ideal of aristocratic court society (readily critical of absolutism), the echo of which could be heard in the best-known tune of French lyric classicism, when Rameau closes his ballet-opera *Les Indes Galantes* (*The Amorous Indies*) by establishing the moral superiority of its Native American protagonist, Adario (who shares the name Lahontan gives to Kandiaronk), over European invaders by virtue of his sensibility.

This political economy of the emotions that was so critical to the Enlightenment, from the constitutional sense of "pity" in the "state of nature" to the affection (in the original meaning of being affected) of Rameau's Adario, is precisely what Graeber and Wengrow neglect when they accuse Rousseau of having presented a "savage" more "stupid" than "noble," incapable of anticipating the political consequences of his actions and a prisoner to mechanisms that outstrip him (p. 67). There is no doubt that this mystification is present in most of the writings that this book rightly criticizes, but it seems at least as much the result of colonial history after Rousseau as of his presentation, which is shot through with sensitive and sincere identification. And even if such prejudices were already identifiable in the contemporary materialist progressivism of Turgot, as Graeber and Wengrow maintain, we still need to address the objections that questioned it. What, for instance, drove Françoise de Graffigny to ignore Turgot's advice to make the "civilization" of the protagonist of *Letters from a Peruvian* (1747) a model *in petto* of the evolution of societies? What drove her to refuse the idea that her female character should thus justify and embody the inevitability of inequality in "prosperous and developed nations"? Could it perhaps be precisely this idealization of the "savage" that the authors believe lays the ground for such tragic outcomes? The reason is less the nostalgic evocation of default, irremediably lost equality (the supposedly incontestable pillar of Enlightenment thought), than the enactment of solidarity in the character's choice not to submit to the "superior" morals of Europe (in this case, marriage) and instead to insist on her preference for the enlightened despotism of the Inca Empire. What never appear in Graeber and Wengrow's critique are these subtle processes of identification and the way in which they reflect the internal conflicts of the time. And yet, this does not prevent them from encouraging the reader to consider herself—and the authors themselves, we

must suppose—somehow closer to a Native American of the early eighteenth century than were any of their European contemporaries (p. 41).

This fixation on Rousseau therefore allows the authors to introduce, from within, a dialectic into the field of reflection opened up by the Enlightenment on the diversity of political forms over time and (above all) space: with Rousseau against Turgot, and with Adario against Rousseau. By rejecting everything in Rousseau that did not yet completely embrace the aspirations of a bourgeois class ready to take power, as well as everything that might prefigure any romantic sensibility, Graeber and Wengrow make Kandiaronk into a stooge, which allows them to re-appropriate the Enlightenment as the matrix of a form of evolutionary thought based on a confrontation between timeless political forms. They can thus situate themselves in a space of internal opposition within this field, thereby reinforcing it, rather than engaging in a dialogue with the forces that opposed it from the start and that their own hypotheses unwittingly evoke: from the moral superiority of de Graffigny's Inca, "obliged to provide for the subsistence of his peoples" (1747: 167), to the Native American embodiment of counter-revolutionary freedom in Chateaubriand (cf. Hartog 2005), by way of the "perennial movement" of the world in Montaigne, which we might well prefer to Rousseau's search for an "unshakeable base" of the social edifice (cf. Jeanneret 1998).

It would therefore be mistaken to see in this "indigenous critique" nothing more than an opportunistic means of critiquing the Enlightenment by decolonizing it. On the contrary, it is the tool that allows the authors to take up a position within Enlightenment thought, or at least the commonly accepted and impoverished version of it (in a manner Graeber [2019] had already tried and tested in his books on pirates). Going as far as to echo the anti-Jesuitism and other prejudices of a time that defined itself in contrast to the "dark ages," Graeber and Wengrow adopt its dismissal of a pre-modern past that lacked a vocabulary of equality and must have been incapable of properly imaging emancipation and justice (p. 32). Thus the idea of an "equaliberty" founded on utilitarian individualism (Balibar 2010) becomes the common denominator and ultimate horizon of a tale in which inevitably emerges the ghostly figure of the modern liberal individual, with his fears and his certainties, jealous of the privileges that make him indeed free "to move away, to disobey, to rearrange social ties." Yet, so long as we cleave fast to this unitary idea of freedom, and so long as we refuse also to challenge the way in which it ranks values, as Rousseau did by contentiously stressing the place of "pity," neither private property nor male domination can ever be problematized.

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We are now in a better position to understand the "novelty" of *The Dawn of Everything*. Far from constituting an epistemological or conceptual rupture,



it takes up the mantle of Enlightenment rationalism to generate “counter-histories” that consciously aim to invert existing narratives, in a double movement that relativizes their universalizing claims and simultaneously makes new ones. Their success is less a product of the rigorous exploration of a different evolutionary framework than of the demonstration, often based on the same examples, the same axiological coordinates, and the same vocabulary, that another human history is possible. This explains the pointed homage paid to the “anarchist” political scientist James C. Scott (2017), whose most recent tome presents the “barbarians” resisting cities and the State from the margins as an inexhaustible breeding ground for potential political bifurcations. Although this theory is apparently incompatible with that of Graeber and Wengrow, who present these same warring margins as the cradle of a monarchical sovereignty that snuffs out urban democratic experiments, it bases its argument on the same internal coherence of existing discourse.

Following on from Pierre Clastres and Marshall Sahlins (who was David Graeber’s supervisor), *The Dawn of Everything* re-establishes the hackneyed figure of the Native American “savage” as the simultaneously distant and familiar axis around which they operate a critical reflection. It is worth mentioning another author, who even better illustrates the complicated relationship to evolutionism and the impossibility of moving beyond it that I have suggested is central to this work. While he is often only portrayed as the inventor of evolutionary stages in their crudest form (a caricature Graeber and Wengrow themselves perpetuate, p. 446), Lewis Henry Morgan developed out of his association with the Iroquois confederation a completely different framework of political analysis. In his more empirical work on North American indigenous architecture, he proposed that “communism in living” and the “laws of hospitality” distinguished *all* social configurations across the continent from their equivalents in the Old World. This ardent defender of an intrinsically American republicanism, and visceral critic of the inequality of old Europe (cf. Raulin 2010), concluded with a perfect dialectical reversal: “liberty, equality and fraternity are emphatically the three great principles of this [Native American] *gens*” (Morgan 1881: 276).

The unresolved problems of *The Dawn of Everything* are fundamentally the same as those of Morgan and other anthropologists who tried to describe social relations in the abstract, but who could never extricate themselves from their own relations with their object of study or from their own social ideals. Though Graeber and Wengrow remain seemingly uninterested in the former, more reflexive set of relations, they take a clear position regarding the latter, more familiar field, which has the advantage of offering an easily graspable frame that helpfully organizes different oppositions. The oscillation of political systems, the ambivalence of cosmopolitanism, and the contradictions of care all aim at resolving the tensions between an evolutionary framework and the consideration of alterity. In so doing, Graeber and Wengrow write themselves

into a tradition in which Morgan is actually less a straw-man than the great American tutelary figure (Deloria 1998)—a figure already struggling with the same kind of dilemmas they are dealing with.

If we were to retain one thesis from this book, it is the claim that we should recognize the primordality of politics over any other form of social institution. Though they insist it was not their aim to put forward a new naturalizing discourse on the “origin of inequalities,” their book nonetheless remains—as with Rousseau, but without the sensibility—a sincere critical meditation on its “unshakable basis.”

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