

*The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021, Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

The standard history of humanity begins with small bands of hunter-gatherers, mostly extended families, where all adults presumably participated in decisions for the band. Then groups of bands became tribes headed by chiefs or elders, domesticating animals and leading a life based on herding. Problems arose with the dawn of cereal agriculture, which demanded large irrigation projects and protection of stored surplus supplies, that is, a supreme commander and armed guards and urban administrative centers. These were supported by taxes on the surplus production: the taxes were set by laws, enforced by soldiers, and monitored by administrators. Hence, the inequalities of wealth and power and the loss of individual freedom that have characterized states and empires from the times of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China to the present day. While the state apparatus required the development of writing and mathematics, and supported full-time artists and scientists and inventors, these came at a price. But the price was unavoidable once human populations increased and needed agriculture to feed them. Basically, this is the story of the Fall from the Garden of Eden.

David Graeber, an anthropologist, and David Wengrow, an archeologist, set out to show that this history grossly oversimplifies the stages of social development it identifies and is wrong about the inevitability of the process it outlines. In doing so, they report on archeological discoveries of the last 30 years that I had never heard of, and they raise fascinating questions about the development of civilization. For instance, they ask what was happening during all the millennia between the appearance of homo sapiens and the first known signs of large-scale cereal cultivation. Could nothing have changed for hunter-gatherers between about 100,000 BC and about 4,500 BC? In fact, they show that there were scores of different kinds of hunter-gatherer groups, some small and some large, some egalitarian but others hierarchical, some living at least part of the year in large cities, some aggressive, some peaceable. They show that huge building-projects were accomplished in sites all over the world before the development of agriculture, and in many cases in cities without hierarchical leadership. And after agriculture, there were large cities that were democratic and without walls and others ruled by warlike kings and aristocracies. The evidence comes from sites unearthed all over the globe, on every continent—buildings, fortifications, graves, earth-works, inscriptions, artifacts. While interpretation of some of these discoveries is still controversial, the mass suggests that at least until relatively recent centuries, and still today in a few places, the way people lived was not the result of inevitable forces but, within obvious constraints, of collective human choices.

The book is full of stimulating ideas. Graeber and Wengrow challenge our current emphasis on rights, saying that what really counts is freedom, and they identify the basic freedoms as freedom to move, to disobey, and to rearrange social ties. They identify the primary bases of power in a society as control of force, control of information, and charisma, and give examples of societies built on one, two, or all three. They claim that criticism by Native Americans who met Europeans here and abroad influenced European thinkers of the Enlightenment, and thus our current thinking about a just society. You may disagree completely with all of this, but when have you been led to think about such questions?

The book is 526 pages of text, with thousands of endnotes, but it is not hard to read. Graeber and Wengrow write in colloquial English, often addressing us directly as if in conversation. As our weather continues to be uninviting and Covid continues to limit us in ways that seem to have no end, you might find this book an exciting companion.