



Coming Home to History

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity

David Graeber and David Wengrow

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2021, 704 pages.

This is a long, difficult, fascinating book. I took several months to get through it, reading it in fits and starts, alternately feeling resistant for superficial reasons (its blocky orange cover, its intimidating heft, or elements of its writing style) and deeply intrigued by the fact that it upends the understandings of human social evolution that virtually all of us have grown up with and/or that we may have adopted upon questioning the original narratives we absorbed. Written by an anthropologist and an archaeologist, and benefiting from recent archaeological discoveries as well as anthropological reassessments, *The Dawn of Everything* challenges what almost all of us think we know, whether we have bought into one of the conventional narratives that civilization immerses us in, or whether we have embraced a different version of history.

Most who've been drawn to the worlds of intentional community and cooperative culture may already question the "history as written by the winners" by which our present social order is presented as the best one possible. We may have explored other views, helping us to see the world through a much less culture-centric lens and perhaps leading us to reject the interpretations of history that celebrate our "ascension" to our current precipice while ignoring its pitfalls and the viability of alternatives to it. Over the past several decades, books like *The Great Cosmic Mother* (Monica Sjo and Barbara Mor), *In the Absence of the Sacred* (Jerry Mander), and *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Jared Diamond) helped me see the evolution of humanity and our social arrangements differently, suggesting that we are not living in the best of all possible worlds, or the *only* currently possible world, and that we would all do better to return to some of the ancestral and indigenous ways that Western patriarchal culture has done its best to suppress or stamp out. *The Dawn of Everything* does not challenge this aspect of those works.

What it does challenge is the sense of inevitability to the downfall we all may be experiencing, and the idea that better lifeways practiced by people in the past were the result of innocence and mere circumstance rather than of actual choice. It particularly brings to task *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, for, among other things, implying that "guns, germs, and steel" are predestined to win the day. The authors reject linear views of history, and simple stories. Some assertions and assumptions about history are so common in our society (in fact, accepted as "common sense") that we may have never examined them; yet they prove to be seriously flawed when assessed in the light of recent archaeological finds.

Do urbanization, growth of population, and a larger scale necessitate more centralized power and bureaucracy, or can power still remain dispersed? Does a shift from hunting-gathering to agriculture, or the embrace of any new technology, need to be

permanent, and is it an inevitable choice? Does agriculture need to be accompanied by permanent settlement, hoarding of resources, the development of a money economy, war, gross inequality, and restrictions on freedom? Can those things arise independent of agriculture, and also be rejected after being tried out? Is "means of subsistence" the most important way to categorize people and their cultures? Is "trade" the only explanation for the distribution of goods throughout indigenous North America? Are forms of social organization fixed, or a lot more malleable than we are used to imagining (such that a people's wintertime and summertime arrangements may be entirely different, flipping back and forth between "stages" in a supposedly straight-line human developmental history)? And will "schismogenesis" soon become a household word?

Most important of all: Is self-conscious reflection and choice about the direction of society something we've only recently become capable of, if we are even now, or is it possible that the kinds of discussions highlighted in this book have been going on among all peoples since the dawn of time, and sometimes in much more sophisticated ways than they are today? Are we trapped in any of our current choices, and were people ever so trapped as we may think they were in the past?

Through numerous examples the authors illustrate that people have frequently made choices to reject what our cur-

rent narratives imply are inevitable “next steps” in linear social evolution. The authors suggest that those narratives serve to disempower us, whether they are telling us that life is continuously getting better (a clear fallacy, in their opinion and that of anyone whose head is not buried deep in the rapidly-warming sand) or that it’s doomed to always get worse (a “fall from grace” that they also see as not inevitable, and a particularly unfortunate fallacy whose fatalism serves to reinforce the status quo).

People in the past, they suggest, have made choices and followed many alternative pathways. They’ve experimented, changed their minds, changed the direction of their societies, self-corrected in their courses, and engaged in seasonal fluctuations in power relations, social organization, and means of subsistence. By so doing, they’ve flown in the face of our inherited ideas of history and often reversed what we’ve been told are inevitable linear trends—whether those trends are couched in terms of continuous improvement from an original state of life’s being “nasty, brutish, and short,” as per Thomas Hobbes, or as a tragic downfall from an ideal original state, as per Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Both of those overarching stories, the authors assert, are wild oversimplifications; Rousseau has more of their sympathies, but they take a considerably more optimistic view, presenting many examples of people defying this supposed “direction of history,” contradicting the formulae that, whether of Hobbesian or Rousseauan persuasion, most of us have come to accept as truth.

This book is full of extremely valuable information and insight, is amazingly wide in its scope, and contains so many eye-opening moments that they’re almost too much for one book. I read about settlements, societies, and practices, including right here on the North American continent, that I had been wholly ignorant of—and I suspect this will be true for most readers.

At the same time, I found myself longing for a different version of this book, one that does not seem so much like an argumentative “polemic” (in the words of one reviewer), one that is less self-conscious, one that omits speculation that does not add to its “case” (or else more honestly treats it as speculation), one that avoids the weeds entered by putting so much focus on disputing the particulars of previous interpretations of history, and instead simply presents a new one.

There may have been no other way to present this material initially—and the untimely death of David Graeber three weeks after this book’s completion precluded any further revisions anyway, as well as interrupting plans to produce at least three follow-up volumes. But I hope this book will be the basis of other versions—perhaps a Young Adult edition that eliminates some of the academic arguments in favor of the core insights and examples explored, or a graphic narrative version, or a movie—and that it will inspire others to explore this material more and present it in different ways that may be more accessible to a wider range of people.

Currently, however, it’s the best single source available for this information, viewpoint, and set of insights. You will not regret borrowing it from the library—nor renewing it, as I did for nearly three months.

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How do we know if what we read is true? Footnotes can go only so far. Judging this book by its cover would be ill-advised—but can we find some other way to assess its basic insights, without first becoming expert anthropologists and archaeologists ourselves?

What if, in order to get a perspective on the nature of history and of the power of human choice within it, we mine not archaeological evidence or anthropological studies of past or distant peoples, but instead our own experiences?

Would we find that our lives as individuals and/or as groups start out being “nasty and brutish” in our early years, but then, through increasing control exerted upon us from centralized authority and unstoppable, ever-more-advanced material innovation, become ever-better or at least more secure? Would we find instead that our

happiest times as individuals or as communities were our earliest ones, and that everything in our development since then has been a tragic fall from grace, a tale of increasing misery? Or would we find something much more complex and ultimately hopeful than either of those two scenarios?

Even just considering the first two possibilities raises some questions: How often may we have applied a familiar view of history (whether tending toward Hobbes or Rousseau) to our own lives, and allowed that to limit how we perceive and even how we act in the world? How many people have rejected the idealism of community out-of-hand, having absorbed the pessimistic view of human nature inherent in the Hobbesian narrative? Even among communitarians, how many have imposed that limiting view upon what they see as possible, replicating the same trust-averse paradigms in their groups that are common in the wider society? And at the other end of the spectrum, how many Rousseauan idealists, once hoping to re-enact Eden, have “thrown the baby out with the bathwater” after a negative community experience upon which they have placed the tragic interpretation? Indeed, how many idealists have become cynics through community experiences, simply because the dominant versions of human history have been so one-sided, in one direction or the other, and we are not prepared for the complex, rich, and ultimately empowering reality in between and beyond them?

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A sober assessment of what we've each actually experienced, especially if we've been involved in cooperative culture for a while, will most likely lead us to a different, much more nuanced conclusion about the possibilities of human social organization—and ultimately, of what has been happening throughout human history, although until now most of our narratives have not told us this.

I saw countless parallels between my own experience of community and the insights into history offered in *The Dawn of Everything*. The dominant views of history are deterministic and linear, with large forces at work in the face of which individuals, groups, and even whole societies are seen as powerless. An alternative, much less discussed, more mythic view of history, and indeed of time itself, is purely cyclical (but also, as Graeber and Wengrow point out, not ultimately amenable to change). None of these approaches to history match my own lived experience, although among them, the cyclical view seems more plausible—though also not clearly true, nor verifiable, because we each can live through only a snapshot of time.

Do we actually have choice, as the authors suggest? Perhaps we *are* puppets upon a stage, guided by Fate, but if that is the case, our stories clearly do not go in just one direction, and we at least *appear* to have some choice in the matter of how we live, how we govern ourselves, what modes of living we embrace and what we reject, what we value, how we interact, and numerous other areas about which we make decisions in community. In my own experience, at least within the microcosm of human society that is intentional community, if something is going poorly, that is not the end of the story—we can make different decisions and change direction. We operate within some constraints imposed by the broader society and by physical circumstance, but within those constraints, an almost unimaginably wide range of possibilities exist for how we live together and organize ourselves.

The life story of the group I've been part of longer than any other is anything but a straight line, and neither starts nor

ends “in the pits.” Periods of energy, idealism, and innovation have been followed by periods of disillusionment, near-collapse, and reassessment. Periods of greater community connection and intimacy have been followed by periods of greater interpersonal distance and less community cohesion. Egalitarian governance systems have given way to greater concentrations of authority. The group has come together over shared missions, then entered a period in which our purposes were not as clear. Various forms of technology have been embraced, then sidelined. And after each move in one direction in any of these areas, we've usually moved back in the other direction, sometimes in new ways to match the changing times.

Community living is a matter of continuous readjustment, the result of ongoing discussion and new decisions made each time something seems “out of whack.” New possibilities are always available; no problem needs to remain unaddressed. We experiment a lot, and learn from both “successes” and “failures.” A particular approach to decision-making may work for a while, then fall out of favor. It may come back around several years down the road, perhaps with a new twist. Even particular garden vegetables (kale comes to mind) have waves of popularity followed by periods of disinterest and even disdain.

Not only do things change from year to year, with varying degrees of focus on interpersonal intimacy, outer mission, dispersed or concentrated decision-making, etc., but we go through seasonal cycles and frequent role-shifts. Those who are “in charge” in one area or at one time are in “follower” roles in other areas or at other times. This nearly exactly mirrors the authors' descriptions of societies whose seasonal cycles give the lie to the idea that people progress from one state of “development” and corresponding set of power relations to another in any kind of predetermined, one-directional way. In fact, if our experience is any indicator, choice is always involved, and no social relations or in fact any aspects of our lives about which we can decide are actually set in stone.

Has something led us to believe that people in the past were somehow radically different from us, and were not involved in this process of perpetual discussion, adjustment, change, and learning? If so, the skewed views we've received of history are likely to blame. Graeber's and Wengrow's most important message is that, despite the messages that would tell us otherwise, **we have agency** and our forbears did too, even if we are just overcoming our ignorance about their stories.

The Dawn of Everything makes clear that history does not in fact fit into the neat patterns we've been taught about. As new discoveries continue to upend our understandings and contradict much of what we thought we knew, we may come to recognize that people throughout time and throughout the world have made *different* choices, including ones we've been told were impossible. It's a significantly more hopeful view of humans' capacities to self-organize in ways that can serve the common good, and it applies to the present day, in which, as the authors acknowledge, we as a species seem to be “stuck” in huge problems of our own making.

Some of the power of community lies in its suggestion that we are not actually stuck—that together, we can find viable ways forward. Many communitarians know this intuitively, viscerally, and on a practical level, through shared experience in responding to daunting problems confronting their own groups. None of the versions of history we've been taught may seem to correlate with this lived experience, creating the potential for cognitive dissonance and even a devaluing of what we know to be true in our own lives. New histories like *The Dawn of Everything* can help us appreciate that our efforts have more precedent, more relevance, and more potential than we may have recognized, and that we do indeed have agency. In confronting the admittedly unprecedented scale of current challenges to humanity, our hope lies, according to Graeber and Wengrow, in *asserting* that agency, which is not a newfangled invention but a genetic birthright, embedded in our DNA and in the history we are just starting to uncover. 🌸

Chris Roth edits COMMUNITIES.