Questions About *the Dawn of Everything*

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David Graeber and David Wengrow's (2021) book, *The Dawn of Everything* (DOE), and our books, *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy* and *the Prehistory of Private Property*, are part of a growing body of literature debunking dubious beliefs about prehistoric, nonliterate, and stateless peoples. Prehistoric myths and paleofantasies are so common in academic literature, and empirical evidence is coming out so rapidly, that it could take decades of back-and-forth for common understanding to catch up. In that back-and-forth spirit, we compare our perspective to Graeber and Wengrow's (G&W's) and pose several questions about DOE for Wengrow, whose participation in this symposium we greatly appreciate.

Reading this book, we've often found it hard to determine when and whether we agree or disagree with it. Part of that difficulty comes from the different issues we address. G&W primarily criticizes contemporary anthropology. We, instead, use contemporary anthropology (however imperfect) to criticize contemporary philosophers, political theorists, and economists, who have consistently ignored anthropological evidence as they make pronouncements about anthropological issues.

Part of the difficult in understanding comes from DOE's need for greater clarity about what philosophical and economic debates it enters, and what exactly says about their subjects' conclusions. G&W summarize their intentions in three hard-to-interpret phrases, "farewell to humanity's childhood," "inequality has no origin," and "the state has no origin" (2021).

Although the phrase, "farewell to humanity's childhood," sounds as if it endorses the concept that humanity had a collective childhood, and can now bid Farwell to it. G&W make it very clear that they mean very much the opposite: we should bid "farewell to" *the concept* of a collective childhood humanity: no such period ever existed.

The view that our ancestors were collectively childlike was once extremely common. It originated perhaps with Thomas Hobbes in the 17th Century and was in place in the early days of 19th-century evolutionary anthropology. Since then, for a variety of historical reasons, it has been hard for the field to shake. The core of this idea is that, in terms of cultural evolution, ontogeny somehow recapitulates phylogeny—which has been an obsolete concept in the field of evolutionary biology for more than a century (Gould, 1985). A related belief is that societies with less complex technologies, economies, social systems, and so on—what the field used to call "primitive societies"—were populated by people whose individual minds were less sophisticated than our own, perhaps because either they unthinkingly followed their instincts, or they unthinkingly did whatever was necessary to survive in a "savage" environment. This view is clearly fatuous.

In this respect, we strongly agree with G&W (2021). People in the deep past were our intellectual peers. They were intellectually capable of conceiving of social inequality and of considering what sort of social institutions they wanted to live under in the exact same way that we are today. Humanity had no such "childhood" in which people were intellectual incapable of establishing social inequality or large-scale social organization.

We are less confident of our interpretation of the other two phrases, "inequality has no origin," and "the state has no origin." These two statements appear to deny the truism that *there's a first time for everything*. When our ancestors were single-celled organisms living in the "primordial ooze,"

they were extremely equal and they did not live in states. At some point, there was a first state and a first stratified society. The formative periods of the first states and first stratified society—short or long, together or separate—could reasonably be called the *origins* of states and inequality. So, we can rule out this literal interpretation, but we don't know what interpretation to rule in.

That uncertainty brings us to our first question. What exactly does DOE mean by the statements "inequality has no origin" and "the state has no origin"? We can think of at least five interpretations: 1. As long as humans have existed, they have (at least occasionally) formed states and/or highly unequal societies. 2. As long as humans have existed, they have been intellectually capable of forming states and/or unequal societies even if there was a long period in which they chose not to do so for any length of time. 3. The formation of every state and every unequal society is different: knowing the causes of the formation one state and/or one unequal society (even the first one) tells us nothing about the origins of any other state and/or any other unequal society. 4. Although we know little about the types of social organization that existed before about 10,000-25,000 years ago, the burden of proof should be on anyone who claims to say they've found the point where inequality or the state first appeared. 5. The terms "equality," "inequality," "the state," and "statelessness" are too vague to be meaningful.

DOE can plausibly be read as hinting at all these five interpretations at various points, but after several readings (or listening to the audiobook), we cannot find a definitive elaboration of their use of these statements in DOE. It would be extremely useful if Wengrow could clarify exactly what DOE means by these two statements—whether it is any one, a mix of these five, or something else entirely.

DOE definitively communicates a skepticism of the dichotomies of equality-inequality and state-statelessness. This skepticism might imply there is more disagreement between it and our books (Widerquist and McCall, 2017, 2021), which tend to criticizing claims made about these dichotomies rather than the existence of the dichotomies. We agree with G&W that simplistic dichotomies like equality/inequality, states/statelessness don't really exist, but we understand the state and statelessness ranges a spectrum from societies with more and less centralized power and use this language to challenge other erroneous claims.

Treating these supposed dichotomies as gradated spectra, as do G&W and others like Kelly (1995), is a step in the right direction but, even then, this way of thinking is inadequate given the fact that concepts like "inequality" and "states" subsumed a vast number of features, some of which are related and others of which aren't. Our books could succeed with the simple contrast between the characteristics of specific modern political-economic systems and everything else. Unfortunately, productive anthropological theory-building requires atomizing concepts like "inequality" and "states" into more meaningful operational units.

Our books speak in the language of these dichotomies not because we are committed to seeing the world through those lenses, but because we debunk ideas that are expressed in those terms. People often invoke the state/state-of-nature and equality/inequality dichotomies to justify existing levels of socio-economic and political inequality. Societies with less authority and/or more equality than these writers want to see do exist, and evidence shows life in most societies at the end of the spectrum isn't as horrible as contemporary philosophers so often claim (Widerquist and McCall 2017; 2021). Despite the difference of approach and focus, this effort has no conflict with DOE's effort.

During European colonial expansion, many Western philosophers believed in a dichotomy between "civilized man" and "natural" or "savage man." They supposed that a true uniform "human nature" existed and could be seen in people without the socializing influence of civilization

(Hampsher-Monk, 1992, pp. 2, 117–119; Hoekstra, 2007). Once civilization begins, the diverse flowering of human culture begins to develop. From that perspective, the "origin" of everything seems very important. During the colonial period, popular belief held that many indigenous peoples were still in that uniform natural state or very close to it, and this belief was one of many used to justify European aggression against indigenous peoples (Taylor, 1991 is a typical example).

This idea has been long rejected by serious students of prehistoric and indigenous peoples. Although some legacies of this set of beliefs persist, we doubt that any social scientists or philosophers today believe humans once lived in a child-like, primitive state, to which we would all return if separated from the guiding influence of civilization. To the extent that vestiges of this belief remain in our thinking, DOE's effort to debunk the search for origins can only help, but the book also attempts to debunk such a large number of related ideas used in many diverse theories, across several disciplines including philosophy, politics, economics, sociology, anthropology, and more. As readers, we ask for a fuller explanation of which ideas in these fields DOE rejects, what role those ideas play in which theories, and whether the theories being address should be reformulated or rejected once the debunked claims are removed.

DOE criticizes Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and their modern-day followers for making pronouncements about the origin of inequality and the state. But DOE does not focus enough the role claims about prehistoric, nonliterate, and/or stateless peoples played in these philosophers' arguments. Therefore, it doesn't clearly connect its criticism these philosophers' ultimate conclusion.

DOE treats Rousseau—we believe unfairly—as the prime purveyor and perhaps the originator of the belief humanity's childhood. Hobbes and Locke began talking about the origins of the state and inequality a century before Rousseau, who was simple responding to the by-then entrenched social contract theory in kind.

Hobbes (1996) and Locke (1960) used claims about stateless and prehistoric peoples to defend existing institutions. Hobbes argued that statelessness was so bad that people should accept any government that successfully maintains order despite unequal political power. Locke argued that people who lived common land were so poor that everyone should accept the private property system with all its unequal political power. Even if we were not inevitably stuck with existing institutions, we had good reason to stick with them, because otherwise we would have to live like naked savages, and supposedly why all know that even the lowliest day laborer in London in the 1680s was far better off than that (Locke 1960).

Rousseau's goal was to challenge existing institutions. He attempted to debunk Hobbes's portrayal of "natural man" as savage and modern institutions as civilizing by arguing that "natural man" is innocent and modern institutions are corrupting. Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau's (1994) central concern was not about human origins. His references to "natural man" make more sense as a metaphor for childhood rather than as having anything to do with early humans. In any event, he could drop any reference to "natural man" and go with the part about contemporary institutions being corrupting, and that part of his arguments holds up pretty well today. Like G&W, Rousseau's point is that we are not suck with the institutions we have, and we have good reason to change them to create a modern society with much greater equality of wealth and power.

So, here we have to questions. Why focus so much on Rousseau rather than on Hobbes and Locke who originated the "origins" talk a century before Rousseau? What does the evidence found in DOE imply about Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's conclusions? Specifically, what does DOE's evidence imply about Hobbes's argument that extreme political inequality and a strong, centralized state were better for everyone than looser political

groups, Locke's argument that highly unequal private property made everyone freer and wealthier, and Rousseau's argument that highly unequal political and economic power corrupted rich and poor alike?

DOE makes great effort to show that people have always been intellectually capable of establishing and moving between large- or small-scale societies and hierarchical or egalitarian forms of social organization. It is not always as clear what theories these claims oppose.

One theory DOE's arguments clearly oppose is economic or technological determinism—the belief that technology fully determines political and social structures. The belief that all foragers are and must be egalitarian is one example. Closely connected with economic determinism is cultural evolutionary theory: the belief that societies pass through a necessary set of stages as their technology advances. As Karl Marx explains this idea, "the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist" (as quoted by Cohen, 1978, 144).

Economic determinism and cultural evolutionism are already discarded theories. The belief that technology or any other factor *fully determines* socio-political arrangements is no longer taken seriously. The idea that remines alive is that human agency is only one of many factors that *influence* political outcomes. Others factors that influence political outcomes include but are not limited to technology, geography, ecology, population density, scale of political organization, subsistence strategy, the choice between nomadism or sedentism, and so on. In the effort to emphasize the mental capacity of early humans to choose how they wanted to live, G&W's (2021) deemphasize the possible influence of all these factors and thereby (perhaps unintentionally) imply that peoples who have been subject to despots must have "ran headlong into their chains," to use Rousseau's phrase.

Therefore, we ask three more questions: do people resist domination when they can? If so, which economic and geographical conditions tend to favor equality and which tend to favor domination? Does greater population density tend to favor domination even if it does not fully determine domination?

DOE provides detailed examples of a few states that were more equal than commonly believed possible. The presentation disproves the idea that all large-scale societies are necessarily stratified, but against the massive historical and archaeological evidence that the vast majority of known states have been horrible tyrannies, it does nothing to refute the claim that large-scale societies are relatively favorable to dominators and therefore to high levels of social, economic, and political inequality. Are these examples intended to show merely the possibility of relative egalitarianism at larger scale or are they meant to show that large-scale provides no particular advantage to dominators?

DOE also discusses some detailed, and fairly well-known, examples of relatively large-scale foraging societies, such as the Pacific Northwest fishing societies, that had significant socio-economic and political stratification. They also discuss many historical and archeological examples of foraging societies that grouped together temporarily or permanently into large-scale groups. These examples refute the long-discarded idea that all foraging societies are egalitarian, small-scale, and stateless, but they do not address the existing belief that so-called immediate-return societies (small-scale, nomadic, foraging societies that do not store food (Woodburn, 1982) tend to be highly egalitarian. DOE accuses this idea of being an ad hoc rescue of the belief all foraging societies are egalitarian by portraying immediate-return societies as being "true" foragers. Let's drop the notion that any type of foraging society is truer than any other, but consider some remaining question.

Is DOE supposed to show that small-scale, foraging societies are as likely as large-scale, agricultural societies to have significant economic and

social inequality? What are the examples of temporary large-scale groupings of hunter-gatherers (going back to 26,000 years ago) supposed to show? Are they meant to show merely that *the possibility* that forgers can form larger, more unequal societies or that *all* foraging *do* gather at least temporarily into relatively large-scale inegalitarian groupings? Even if we all agree that immediate-return societies are no more natural than any other type of foraging society, have societies that fit the description of "immediate-return" ever existed, and if so, do they tend to be unfavorable to dominators and/or favorable to greater economic, social, and political equality?

We have not found examples in DOE of fulltime small-scale, immediate-return societies that don't gather into larger groups but are subject to significant domination or social stratification. And so, we ask, are there any such examples? If there are no such examples, it would provide at least inductive evidence that immediate-return societies are relatively favorable to people who resist domination.

We think G&W are too hard on Christopher Boehm (2001) who argues that immediate-return societies are favorable relative equality. Sophisticated people. Although Graeber and Wengrow (2021, 86-87) recognize value Boehm's work, they write, "confusingly, Boehm assumes that all human beings until very recently chose … to follow exactly the same arrangements … thereby casually tossing early humans back into the Garden of Eden."

One problem with this statement is the word "assume." To assume is to state something with no supporting evidence or argument. Boehm (2001) doesn't merely *assume* anything. He has a sophisticated analysis of strategies that how and why people in observed immediate-return societies have consistently been able to resist domination. Boehm combines his strategic analysis with the widely believed empirical hypothesis that, until the late Pleistocene, population density was very low and most people lived in small-scale, nomadic foraging groups that do not store food. Either his theory or the empirical hypothesis could be wrong, but no one can accurately accuse him of merely *assuming* his conclusions. Our best guess, is that the assumption-allegation was merely a poor choice of words.

Another problem with G&W's statement the accusation that Boehm's conclusions necessarily toss early humans "back into the Garden of Eden." One thing that we, and G&W, and we guess Boehm as well all agree on is that all human through the 200-300,000-year history of the species are our intellectual peers, as capable as we are of thinking about the rules under which we live. G&W admit that modern humans are stuck in a set of circumstances that allow a lot of domination, but they seem to believe that any suggestion that our distance ancestors were stuck in a different set of circumstances necessarily accuses them of being unthinking childlike innocents in the Garden of Eden. We see none of this in Boehm. We see people like ourselves (some of whom try to dominate others, some of whom resist domination) living for a long period in circumstances that tended to favor resistance to domination.

If Boehm actually has analysis rather than mere assumption, and if the mere statement that many of people of the distant past might have tended to live similar circumstances is not necessarily pejorative and therefore cannot be dismissed offhand, the question becomes what do G&W believe is wrong with his analysis: Is he wrong to say that the reverse-dominance strategy tends to work in the circumstances he describes? Is he wrong to suppose that most humans lived in such circumstances in the Pleistocene? Is he wrong to suppose that anyone ever lived in those circumstances, except perhaps for a few modern foragers living on the periphery of industrial-age societies? Is there evidence that small-scale, nomadic foragers who live in low-population-density areas and who do not store food, regularly do form pronounced dominance hierarchies? Is there evidence that people lived at higher population densities and/or formed

large-scale polities before the late Pleistocene—50,000, 150,000, 200,000 years ago?

We were surprised by G&W rejection of Boehm's (2001) analysis. The most important levelling strategies in his reverse-dominance hierarchy overlap heavily with DOE's three primordial freedoms: to move, disobey, and transform social relationships (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). It seems very easy for nomadic foragers living in groups of a few dozen adults to exercise these freedoms, and not much more difficult for swidden agriculturalists living with a few hundred adults to do the same. It seems to us far more difficult for people to exercise these freedoms in a society of thousands of people all of whom are dependent on stored food from a once-a-year salmon run and more difficult still for the 35 million people in contemporary Tokyo. Although most modern humans can't walk away from potential dominators, they can make laws that restrain powerful people in ways that help protect the "primordial" freedom of disadvantaged people.

If these observations are correct, they do not imply that small-scale societies are always free from domination or that people in large-scale societies always fall victim to dominators. They imply only that people in now-prevalent, large-scale societies live in circumstances that force them to work harder to maintain freedom from domination. To say make these observations is not to say that people in any set of circumstances are any more or less intellectually capable than other, only that intellectual capability is not the only thing that affects outcomes. Circumstances matter as well, and circumstance changed enormously in the transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene to the Anthropocene. We see the semantic distinction in terms of whether or not inequality had an origin as much less productive than the theoretical investigation of what conditions tend to foster greater or lesser equality; why human social systems changed so starkly during the late Upper Pleistocene; how those changes set the stage for the monumental events of the Holocene that led us to the modern world; and how our understanding of these events can help us understand the world today. Is it possible to make these observations without "casually tossing early humans back into the Garden of Eden"?

Our final question or series of questions has to do what the empirical evidence provided by DOE is supposed to show about these issues. DOE discusses several examples of large-scale, hunter-gatherer societies with significant social equality, including the Calusa in Southeastern U.S. and Pacific Northwest fishing societies in the recent Holocene, Gobekli Tepe about 12,000 years ago, and Dolni Vestonice from about 26,000 years ago. These examples certainly show that hunter-gatherers are capable of establishing large-scale, stratified societies, but this fact has been known for a long time. These examples do not show that all hunter-gatherers always did establish such societies; that small-scale hunter-gatherers often or ever have social inequality, hierarchy, stratification or domination; or that large-scale, stratified societies were common before the Holocene or that they existed at all before about 26,000 years ago.

Even if Dolni Vestonice is indeed evidence of early hunter-gatherer social complexity, it is, in fact, very late in the span of human/hominin evolutionary prehistory. Dolni Vestonice belongs to the late Upper Pleistocene era, coming hundreds of thousands of years after the appearance of the earliest members of our own species (*Homo sapiens*, i.e. anatomically modern humans) and millions of years after the appearance of the earliest hominins (with the genus *Homo* appearing between 2.5-3 million years ago).

G&W (2021) claim that complex hunter-gatherer societies like the more recent examples of the Calusa in Southeastern U.S. and Pacific Northwest fishing societies may have been more common in deep human prehistory than is widely understood based on current archaeological evidence. In supporting this idea, they suggest that we know relatively little about the archaeological record of hunter-gatherers that existed prior to late

Upper Pleistocene sites like Dolni Vestonice; and, in such a case, an absence of evidence does not provide evidence of absence.

An equal absence of evidence on both sides of the equation is not evidence of absence, but on this issue, the evidence is not equally absent on both sides. Evidence exists of small-scale, nomadic hunting-and-gathering societies that shared food long before this period. Paleolithic archaeologists have been systematically collecting evidence about sites older than Dolni Vestonice for nearly two centuries and no indications of significant social inequality have been found among hunter-gatherer societies predating the late Upper Pleistocene. In his review, Ames (2007) provides a relatively short list of features of the archaeological record that have been used as potential markers of social inequality and none have been found in context predating the late Upper Pleistocene. As Ames (2007: 495) concludes, "If stratification is strongly developed, we will see it archaeologically."

We know what the archaeological features of large-scale, inequal hunter-gatherer societies look like (Arnold, 1996); we have spent centuries looking in the right places for them in the Lower and Middle Pleistocene; and we have not found any that predate the late Upper Pleistocene. In the Lower and Middle Pleistocene, we find only hunter-gatherers with the features of small-scale more equal societies. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that hunter-gatherers might have formed larger-scale, more unequal societies like the Calusa or Pacific Northwest fishers from time-to-time during this period, the existing evidence strongly they were highly uncommon and perhaps nonexistent.

Is the evidence from these sites supposed to show merely the intellectual capability of early hunter-gathers? If so, we agree completely, but it seems that it's meant to do more.

Is the evidence meant to suggest a burden-of-proof reversal? That is, because early humans are our intellectual peers, unless proven otherwise, we should assume the earliest experienced the full range of political possibilities, from small to large, from highly equality to extremely unequal with stratification and domination. Although this statement sounds reasonable, we find it problematic for reasons stated above. It is after all from the absence of evidence that we determine that the earliest humans (e.g. 100,000-300,000) years ago had no domesticated animals, no wheels, no metallurgy, no electrical power, and so on. Given the preponderance of the evidence, we do not treat early humans as child-like innocent just by drawing the conclusion that the particular circumstances they were in favored small-scale, relatively equal forms of socio-political organization.

We do not see how the evidence in DOE can go beyond the burden-of-proof reversal to answer the following question. Is the evidence in DOE meant to show that it is equally likely that large-scale and/or stratified societies were common or even that they existed at all before the Upper Pleistocene? Answering no to this question does not require such to toss early humans back into the Garden of Eden. It only suggests that our sophisticated, intellectual peers of the Pleistocene were affected by their circumstances in the way we are affected by our circumstances.

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