

Socio-Economic Inequality in the Pleistocene and the

Present, Part 2: What Can We Say?

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William Faulkner (Faulkner, 2011) once wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” David Graeber and David Wengrow’s (2021) recent book, *The Dawn of Everything* (and much of their work elsewhere), has demonstrated that phrase to be abundantly true. We, too, share this belief wholeheartedly and much of our careers has been dedicated to examining the role of misconceptions about the past in modern political discourse. A sticking point within both their work and ours, however, is the fact that the process of making inferences about the human past on the basis of archaeological evidence is hard, and prone to ambiguity and disagreement—often vocal disagreement.

This leaves us in a rather precarious position: either experts in the various fields of human prehistory can force some kind of false consensus about complex issues in the past (or ignore them altogether); or we can debate each other in public with the risk providing fodder for those who might wish to ignore us. After all, they might suppose, if anthropologists can’t agree on such basic issues, how can we believe anything that they say? Sometimes we ask ourselves this same question.

Although we agree with Graeber and Wengrow (2021) about many, likely most, key issues having to do with prehistoric and contemporary human variability—and we certainly embrace the overwhelming value of their project—we feel that it is worth debating the origins of human social inequality, or what sometimes gets labeled by anthropologists as *social complexity*. Our views on this issue differ in terms of both our understanding of the relevant evidence and its theoretical implications. Though this endeavor requires a rather technical view of the archaeological evidence involved, we think that it is a debate worth having. The issue of how, when, and why significant social inequality and stratification appeared among human societies is crucially important, if only because it can help us understand what conditions are likely to foster more egalitarian versus more hierarchical societies. Graeber and Wengrow are right that this matter is too important to allow 19th century stereotypes of “primitive” societies to characterize it. We also believe that it warrants grappling with the complexity and ambiguity of the archaeological record surrounding it.

In making the claim that “inequality has no origin,” Graeber and Wengrow (2021) point to a number of Pleistocene archaeological contexts that would seem to defy the traditional view that social complexity originated as an element of so-called “post-Pleistocene adaptation” (Binford, 1968), which includes a range of major cultural changes experienced by late hunter-gatherer

societies in their transition to (among other things) farming and hierarchical societies. The earliest of these supposed archaeological manifestations of Pleistocene social inequality mentioned by Graeber and Wengrow is the site of Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, which dates to around 26ka. Dolni Vestonice is astonishing in the richness of its attendant material culture, and it is indeed striking in the richness, diversity, and artistic virtuosity of its assemblages of symbolic artifacts. We also feel that it can provide a touchstone for more critical thinking about what social inequality might (or might not) look like in the archaeological record of Paleolithic hunter gatherers; and how it might have transformed over time.

This article focuses on Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) use of Dolni Vestonice (Wengrow and Graeber, 2015) and a few other archeological sites and observed societies as case studies in the archaeological analysis of social structure in our evolutionary past. On the one hand, we think Graeber and Wengrow are wrong to claim that Dolni Vestonice is evidence for Upper Paleolithic social inequality. On the other hand, even if they are right, Dolni Vestonice dates to a mere 26ka against the backdrop of perhaps 300,000 years of modern human prehistory and 2.5-3 million years of the existence of closely related members of the genus *Homo*. All of Graeber and Wengrow's other examples are far more recent.

This article provides our reasoning for doubting the evidence for Pleistocene social complexity provided by Graeber and Wengrow and discusses some lingering problems concerning the social structure of both early hominins and early modern humans. Part 1 puts the discussion in context. Part 2 looks closely at the example of Dolni Vestonice. Part 3 discusses Dolni Vestonice in its relationship to other archaeological evidence and to some of Graeber and Wengrow's other examples. Part 4 concludes with a discussion of why such a discussion of what social and economic conditions tend to foster equality remains important.

1. The Evolution of Cultural Evolutionary Thinking

The core of Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) critique is that early anthropologists, as well as the Enlightenment-era philosophers and incipient social scientists that preceded them, viewed social inequality through the lens of cultural evolution, which saw increasing hierarchy evolutionarily mapping onto other elements of social and economic sophistication in an *ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny* sort of way. The term "social complexity" as an anthropological codeword for social inequality is a vestige of such a cultural evolutionary tradition. As Graeber and Wengrow point out, this perspective saw "primitive" societies in both the past and the present as lacking differences in terms of wealth, power, status, and/or rank by virtue of both their underdeveloped "stage" of cultural evolution (e.g. Morgan, 1877). As Graeber and Wengrow rightly state, this perspective led early social scientists to view hunter-gatherers as belonging to an ontogenetic "childhood of man" (Wengrow and Graeber 2015).

Furthermore, although unilinear cultural evolutionism of the sort proffered by Tylor (1871), Morgan (1877), and Engels (2004) was driven out of Boasian American anthropology by the early 20th century, this general view of egalitarian hunter-gatherers as a primitive cultural type remained (see Binford, 2001 for a lengthy review). For example, in outlining his famous typology of human political systems, Service (1962) argues that hunting and gathering was a cultural type with particular package of related features—nomadism, band-level social organization, patrilineality, egalitarianism, etc.—descended from some kind of (ab)original Paleolithic evolutionary ancestry. The extent to which various modern hunter-gatherer societies reflected that ancient cultural type depended on the extent to which they had been influenced by cultural

diffusion from their more complex, hierarchical, and agricultural neighbors. This general perspective made its way into the *Man the Hunter* era (Lee and DeVore, 1968) and came to dominate the mid-20th century roots of modern research on hunter-gatherer societies.

Since this time, there have been manifold critiques of the view of all hunter-gatherer societies as part of a cultural type that has egalitarianism as one of its features. Among the more famous of these is Kelly's (1995) argument for a "foraging spectrum" encompassing the many dimensions of hunter-gatherer cultural variability. Graeber and Wengrow (2021; Wengrow and Graeber 2015) are quick to align themselves with this theoretical movement emphasizing hunter-gatherer variability. However, to many of us, this argument comes across as preaching to the choir, since the focus on hunter-gatherer variability has represented the mainstream for the last three decades. In this sense, too, the idea that some forms of social inequality may have existed among Pleistocene hunter-gatherer societies is much less shocking if hunter-gatherer societies are understood as variable in relation to their environmental and demographic contexts rather than as a modal cultural type of which egalitarianism is a defining feature.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021) seem to believe that the universality of egalitarianism among Pleistocene hunter-gatherers is crucial to modern explanations of the origins of social inequality: so crucial, in fact, that identifying even a handful of counterfactual cases would bring down the whole house of cards and demonstrate that, in effect, that "social inequality has no origin" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). We find this view problematic. There are enormous shifts in human social systems that occur at the end of the Pleistocene, including much more profound forms of inequality in terms of wealth, power, status, and/or rank. Furthermore, these profound amplifications of social inequality have material manifestations upon which most archaeologists agree. Whether the massive increase in the ubiquity and amount of social inequality among late Pleistocene societies counts as the "origin" of inequality is a semantic issue. What we want to know is the extent to which Dolni Vestonice and other cases discussed by Graeber and Wengrow represent examples of those late Pleistocene shifts or support complete revision of our thinking about how all hunting and gathering peoples lived throughout the Pleistocene.

2. Dolni Vestonice

Dolni Vestonice is one of a number of late Upper Pleistocene archaeological sites invoked by Graeber and Wengrow (2021; Wengrow and Graeber 2015) and others (Mellars, 1985; Boyle, 2010) as evidence of early social inequality. More broadly, Dolni Vestonice is important for many reasons: it has a large concentration of human burials during a time period in which those are extraordinarily rare; it has the earliest known fired ceramic technology; it provides evidence for highly specialized hunting practices in relation to the extreme "Ice Age" conditions of Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) Europe; and, of primary importance to Graeber and Wengrow, it is extremely rich in symbolic objects, including beads, pendants, statuary, and other forms of mobiliary art, much of which occurs in the context of the aforementioned burials.

Graeber and Wengrow's (2021; Wengrow and Graeber 2015) argument is basically that differences in the richness of grave good assemblages between individuals at Dolni Vestonice reflects their accumulation within social system characterized by inequality in terms of some combination of wealth, power, status, and/or rank. In short, some individuals are buried with lots of expensive jewelry and other forms of symbolic objects, which generally tick the boxes of Marx's (Marx, 1867, 54) notion of commodity fetishism in being essentially useless in a functional sense, being made from rare or exotic raw materials, and in requiring huge investments of labor to

produce. Furthermore, differences in the wealth of individual grave good assemblages does not appear to be age-graded, as one might expect if wealth were accumulated over the course of a lifetime, or to exhibit any other forms of demographic patterning that might indicate other kinds of association with age-grade or gender roles. Graeber and Wengrow take this pattern to indicate that certain individuals were born into families with elevated rank and concomitant material wealth, some of which ended up in burials including those of young children.

We find the above argument unconvincing for a number of reasons. First, there seems to be a rather widespread belief that the increasing richness of hunter-gatherer material culture during the late Upper Pleistocene indicates increasing social inequality (see, for example, Mellars 1985 for an early discussion). The basic idea here is, if egalitarian societies forbid differences in wealth between individuals and the accumulation of material goods, why would they need so much stuff? The fact of the matter is that most ethnographically studied egalitarian societies have a diversity and abundance of symbolic objects—especially decorated items of personal adornment along the lines of those found at Dolni Vestonice.

Perhaps the best-known case in this respect is the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari Desert, for whom items such as ostrich eggshell bead jewelry represent a major currency of exchange between reciprocity partners (Lee, 1979; McCall and Widerquist, 2015). In such a system, people establish reciprocity partnerships with other individuals, often within alternative foraging groups in neighboring territories, as a way of ensuring “back-up plans” in the event of disruptive events, such as the failure of key foraging resources within a particular territory or a social conflict that requires relocation to a new social group. Such partnerships are established and maintained by giving gifts, which again mostly take the form of decorated items of personal adornment (particularly made from ostrich eggshell beads), and which otherwise follow a set of fairly strict rules about what kinds of gifts are acceptable.

Such forms of symbolic objects represent a socially acceptable form of material accumulation since, on the one hand, they have no practical value; and, on the other hand, everyone has the same theoretical possibility of obtaining them. They also reflect variable individual levels of connectedness within networks of reciprocity relationships, which is again something that people want. While individuals may appear foolish for displaying all of their items of personal adornment obtained through reciprocity exchanges at once (in the same way that anyone else might appear foolish wearing all of their jewelry at the same time), there are no social limitations on the accumulation of such items in the same way that there would be for the hoarding of food or, in the modern economy of the region, in the accumulation of cash (McCall, 2000). In short, living in an egalitarian society does not prevent an individual from accumulating items of personal adornment of the sort for which Dolni Vestonice is famous.

In Southern Africa, there are still further complications having to do with the production of ostrich eggshell bead jewelry and the distinction between egalitarian and hierarchical social systems. We know from ethnohistoric sources, for example, that Khoi-speaking cattle and sheep herders in the western regions of Southern Africa exhibited profound differences in terms of individual wealth and political power that derived above all from the ownership of cattle (Penn, 1986; Smith, 1990, 1992; Kinahan, 1996, 2000; Sadr, 1998). We also know that the ownership of symbolic objects, especially ostrich eggshell beads, figured into this system of individual material wealth in ways that are radically different from the role of such items in the egalitarian social systems of Ju/'hoansi (see Smith 1990, 1992, for further discussion). Furthermore, the archaeological record of Holocene foragers and herders in Southern African shows that they made the *exact same* kinds of items of personal adornment and in indistinguishable amounts in the

aggregate (Orton, 2008; McCall and et al, 2011). Yet, in one context, ostrich eggshell beads relate to the strongly egalitarian systems of hunter-gatherers and, in the other context, they relate to accumulation of material wealth by livestock-owning political-economic elites.

Owning lots of ostrich eggshell beads didn't make Khoi cattle chiefs rich and powerful: owning lots of cattle did. Similarly, for the Ju/'hoansi, *owning* ostrich eggshell jewelry isn't really the point: the social connections that the jewelry represents is. In this respect, it is the *act of giving* that holds the great value and personal significance relative to the system of ostrich eggshell bead production, and it is likely the act of giving gifts to the dead works according to the same principle. In short, the production of large quantities of symbolic objects says very little about the social systems of a given society, though (as we will discuss further below) other aspects of the archaeological record do.

The other inherently problematic issue here is the inference of social inequality on the basis of the differential richness of grave good assemblages. Many latent assumptions having to do with the relationship between mortuary ritual and cultural tradition were questioned long ago by Binford (Binford, 1971). Since then, *many* people have criticized the long-held notion that “patterns in death directly and fairly simply reflect patterns in the life of a society” (Hodder 1980: 163; see Chapman, 2003, for a review). Behind these critiques is the recognition that the dead don't bury themselves and, for the living who do bury the dead, decisions about how to do so amount to strategies for achieving various social goals: communication about issues such as group affiliation, kin relationships, clan membership, moieties, sodalities, gender roles, cause of death, etc.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021; Wengrow and Graeber 2019) appear to work with a kind of “Pompei premise” assumption (which is by no means unique to them; see for example (Binford, 1983) that the items in the grave goods assemblages of buried individuals at Dolni Vestonice were actually owned by those individuals and that they reflect a kind of “snapshot” of the material possessions of the deceased individual at the moment when they died. Beyond this, there is ample evidence that a broad swath of egalitarian hunter-gatherers and other small-scale societies engage in elaborate mortuary rituals that involve interment with grave good assemblages, which relate to various dimensions of the personal identity and social relationships of the deceased individual, and have little or nothing to do with personal wealth, power, status, and/or rank (see Hofman 1986 for a lengthy discussion; see also Binford, 1971; Saxe, 1971; Chapman, 2003; Bement, 1991; Taylor 1998; Rodan 2021).

We see Dolni Vestonice as a particularly extreme manifestation of a broader pattern of the Upper Paleolithic production of decorated items of personal adornment and symbolic objects, which were an element of a social system that included the production of cave art and the conduct of other extraordinary ritual activity (Barton, Clark and Cohen, 1994). Yet, in our opinion, there is no reason to believe that this abundance of symbolic objects related to social systems of inequality. In fact, it may well be the opposite. There was a well-known explosion in the production of both parietal and mobiliary art in the run-up to tremendously harsh LGM environmental conditions that peaked at around 24ka (Soffer, 2013). Dolni Vestonice is a part of this phenomenon and our belief is that it can be understood in terms of the intensification of egalitarian social systems in the context of human populations living under extreme pressure from deteriorating environmental conditions. Certain kinds of decorated items of personal adornment, which were often made from exotic materials originating from distant sources (Vanhaeren and d'Errico, 2005), may well reflect individual efforts to build social networks of reciprocity manifested by gift-giving exchanges conducted across vast distances.

As for the richness of certain of the burials at Dolni Vestonice, we also see little to reason to view these as evidence of social inequality. Instead, we see these burials as elements of a social system in which individuals built and maintained crucial relationships with one another in part through the conduct of mortuary rituals, which (sometimes) involved grave goods. Furthermore, rather than simplistically equating the production of decorated items of personal adornment with “prestige goods,” we might recommend a more thorough consideration of archaeological data sources that speak more directly to egalitarian behaviors like food sharing. For example, at Verberie, a somewhat later (~12ka) and extremely well-preserved Upper Paleolithic site in France, there is abundant evidence for the butchering of hunted reindeer and the extensive sharing of meat between households (Enloe and David, 1989; David and Enloe, 1992; Enloe, David and Hare, 1994; Enloe, 2003). This evidence shows that households at Verberie routinely, ubiquitously, and evenly shared food with one another in precisely the way that modern egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies do (see also Shultziner et al. 2010).

Finally, there is a lot about Dolni Vestonice that we still do not know and a lot that is, for lack of a more scientific term, weird. As one of many examples: a key burial at Dolni Vestonice is a triple burial (DV 13, 14, and 15) of three young adult males who were all closely related and possibly brothers or half-brothers (Alt *et al.*, 1997; Fu and et al, 2013; Mitnik *et al.*, 2016). One is buried face-down (which, in a cross-cultural sense, is seldom a sign of affection or respect) and another is buried with their hands in the groin of the third (Formicola, Pontrandolfi and Svoboda, 2001). A combination of skeletal and genetic analyses suggests that all three may have had rare and serious congenital health problems (and physical defects), which may have contributed to their causes of death (Formicola, Pontrandolfi and Svoboda, 2001; Trinkaus, 2018). There is no doubt that the triple burial at Dolni Vestonice is odd, as are other unique elements of the site (e.g. a ceramic firing feature filled with apparently intentionally exploded animal figurines; (P.B. Vandiver *et al.*, 1989). At a minimum, it is clear that there are major aspects of the mortuary rituals evidenced at the site that we do not understand and potentially more relevant forms of archaeological patterning having to do with foraging, sharing, and artifact production that are less well-known by virtue of being less studied.

3. Timing is Everything: A Late Upper Pleistocene Turning of the

Tide

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. If the question is what human social systems were like *in the beginning* or what they were like for the bulk of our hunter-gatherer past, Dolni Vestonice isn't very relevant to either issue. In dating to ~26ka, 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 2.5-3ma and australopiths appearing before 4ma). If we were to start a 24-hour clock of hominin prehistory beginning at 2.5 million years ago and ending today, then the burials at Dolni Vestonice occurred at about 11:45pm. What actually happened during the first 23 hours and 45 minutes of that clock remains basically unmentioned.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021) do, however, make the 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.

Here, we must once again disagree. 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.”

By arguing that there may be evidence of complex societies in the Lower/Middle Paleolithic that we somehow haven’t found yet, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) are effectively employing a burden of proof reversal tactic. Their approach is to suggest that the burden of proof is on others to show positive evidence that there *was not* social inequality in the Lower and Middle Pleistocene. Such burden of proof reversals are highly problematic for the field of archaeology and other historical sciences (paleontology, geology, etc.) because their arguments rest on things that haven’t been found and therefore do not exist, at least in an analytical sense. For example, a similar argument could be made concerning early hominins using smartphones: because we can’t conclusively demonstrate that early hominins *did not* use smartphones, it is supposedly a viable argument that they did. Solid archaeological inferences can only work from things that we have actually found; not things that we might plausibly find in the future but haven’t yet.

In contrast, hunter-gatherer societies with high levels of social inequality have distinctive archaeological features and are well-known from terminal Pleistocene and Holocene contexts (Arnold, 1996). Complex hunter-gatherer societies, such as the Calusa and Pacific Northwest fishing societies, produce distinctive archaeological patterns in terms of their large and permanent architecture, their food storage features, their retinue of prestige goods, and innumerable other salient features. In fact, another late Upper Pleistocene archaeological site discussed by Graeber and Wengrow (2021; Wengrow and Graeber 2015), Gobekli Tepe on the Anatolian peninsula, which dates to just after 12ka (or 11:53pm on our clock of hominin prehistory), is a striking example of early complex hunter-gatherers in the Paleolithic archaeological record. Gobekli Tepe is an enormous complex of monumental carved megalithic standing stone circles that bespeak profound social and political complexity. While residential structures and evidence of quotidian daily activities is so far lacking, there are innumerable examples of sedentary hunter-gatherer societies with the architectural and material cultural trappings of social complexity dating between ~20-10ka throughout the Near East (Maher, Richter and Stock, 2012) and elsewhere (Habu, 2004). In short, we know what the archaeological features of complex 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.

The points above matter principally in the sense that current archaeological evidence indicates a major shift in human social, economic, and political organization that seems to have begun during a time range roughly spanning the LGM and the end of the Pleistocene. During this time, many hunter-gatherer societies seem to have developed increasingly assertive egalitarian

social systems that involved greater production of symbolic objects, including both mobiliary and parietal art, as well as more elaborate forms of religious ritual. We believe that Dolni Vestonice, with its rich assemblages of symbolic objects and its striking evidence for mortuary ritual, falls into this category. Elsewhere in places like the Near East, as human populations expanded dramatically in the waning millennia of the Pleistocene, hunter-gatherer societies became sedentary, shifted their subsistence foci, stored food, and developed increasingly hierarchical social systems (Maher et al., 2012). We believe that Gobekli Tepe falls into this category. In the transition to the Holocene, as agricultural economic systems and farming populations expanded, hierarchy was profoundly amplified as increasingly complex chiefdoms, states, and eventually empires appeared.

Arguing, as Graeber and Wengrow (2021) do, that there has always been some degree of inequality among human societies rests on a semantic distinction concerning the social systems of Pleistocene hominins about which we admittedly don't know very much. With that said, it is an inescapable fact that human hunter-gatherer social systems undergo a dramatic set of transformations that are especially focused on the period between the LGM and the end of the Pleistocene that is archaeologically visible. Part of Graeber and Wengrow's point is that, under the right circumstances, any human group in any time period was *capable* of developing social inequality and that no "primitive" societies ever existed in which people were trapped in an egalitarian "childhood of man." We don't disagree with that claim. Instead, our point is that human social systems changed dramatically in a relatively short space of time and in the context of both a major demographic expansion and extreme environmental volatility at a global scale. 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 revolutionary 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.

4. Why It Matters

Above all, what we share with Graeber and Wengrow (2021) is the belief that our understanding of human inequality in the past matters in the present. Our previous work has demonstrated the role of the idea that some form of human inequality is innate or inevitable in a wide range of modern political philosophy, which has been used to justify real-world policies regarding the authority of the state and the concept of private property (Widerquist and McCall, 2017, 2021). We have criticized this traditional line of political philosophical thinking to a great extent by merely pointing out the existence of egalitarian societies in which people live secure and happy lives. There, too, many have questioned whether such societies are *really* egalitarian or if egalitarianism is simply the invention of utopian anthropologists; and whether people who live in egalitarian societies are *really* secure and happy; or whether that, too, is simply a wishful figment of the anthropological imagination.

No societies exist or have ever existed in which every single individual across all social categories and/or gradations of age, gender, kinship, group affiliation, etc., are exactly equal in terms of the possessions they own, the food they eat, and the influence they have over other group members. Just as no two real-world objects can have precisely the same shape, no two people in any society can be exactly alike in the above respects. That's not the point and questioning how close any particular society comes to total and absolute equality is like wondering how many angels

can dance on the head of pin. Egalitarianism among small-scale societies has been so striking to the field of anthropology because it is characterized by powerful systemic cultural limitations on individual political authority, material wealth, and social status. Such systems are vastly, fundamentally different from our own, as well as the long sequence of Holocene state-level societies that preceded ours, and the millennia of hierarchical complex societies that came before them.

For us, although there was obviously massive variability in the social systems of our Paleolithic ancestors (about which we know very little), there is simply no evidence for the kinds of systemic inequalities that characterize the last 15,000-20,000 years, and especially the last 5,000 years, of human life on Earth. While there may be a semantic case to be made that there was no origin of human social inequality, the reality is that most human social systems changed fundamentally in the evolutionary blink of an eye as the Pleistocene came to a close. That is not an indication that people before that point were “primitive” or evolutionarily incapable of more complex social systems.

Rather, it means that the systems of human economic and social interaction shifted dramatically in the context of a novel combination of terminal Pleistocene demographic and environmental conditions. In that context, anthropologists ought to be able to examine differences between Paleolithic and contemporary peoples without falling into (or being accused of falling into) narratives of the state of nature, the Garden of Eden, or the romanticized noble savage. After a long history of investigation of the origins of inequality, which has proven disappointing for many, the question of why these shifts happened at that time is still worth asking.

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