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Hunter-gatherers: Perspectives from the starting point

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Graeber and Wengrow set out to revise “the conventional narrative of human history that is not only wrong, but quite needlessly dull.” After some 526 pages they do indeed succeed, though perhaps more for the latter than the former. *The Dawn of Everything* is intriguing for the efforts to make use of lesser-known sources, such as the Jesuit records or obscure works of Lévi-Strauss, and for putting a new spin on oft-cited examples. There is rarely a dull moment in this volume, which achieves the goal of documenting that “the course of human history may be less set in stone, and more full of playful possibilities, than we tend to assume” (p. 25).

The story, though engaging, is inconsistent and fails to build a convincing new narrative while dispatching the conventional socio-evolutionary one. Reasons are many but some of the fundamental problems come from muddles in the starting point with hunter-gatherers, which I will address here. The first is the lack of recognition of the role of environment in the history of humanity in general and for hunter-gatherers in particular. Having no food to feed a family is a nonstarter; hunter-gatherers must map onto resources in order to survive, a fact that cannot be ignored. The range, predictability, productivity of resources exploited by different hunter-gatherer societies and the potential to store surplus from the harvest underlies much of the extraordinary variation in hunter-gatherer societies from the mobile foraging bands of the US Great Basin (Kelly 2013) to the complex, more sedentary societies like the Kwakiutl or Tlingit of the northwest coast of Canada. A similar range of economic, political, social and ceremonial variation is mirrored between hunter-gatherer groups on the main island of New Guinea (Roscoe 2002).

Hunter-gatherers in areas with rich, predicable and storable resources are able to build larger, more permanent settlements regulated by semi-hierarchical institutions to govern rights to resources, organize feasting, ceremonies and intergroup competition, institutionalize status positions, and mediate conflict. Foragers, by contrast, lead a more constrained lifestyle in part owing to the high mobility required to map on to available resources. So what about the “original

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affluent society” of foragers? Sahlins (2013 [1972]) developed his essay to make a point in the formalist-substantivist economic debate in anthropological economics at the time (Polanyi 2001 [1944]): that affluence has no set goalposts but can be achieved when wants/needs are satisfied by either desiring little or producing more. A primary example of wanting less came from Richard Lee’s (1968) classic study among the !Kung (Ju/’hoansi) Bushmen in a time of seasonally copious conditions. But what happens when needs cannot be met by available means as in the seasons or years of severe drought, failure of the mongongo nut crop, or alterations in game movements so familiar to the !Kung? What then? At such times foragers are truly stuck unless they have secured access to resources in other places through storage or in social relationships built over lifetimes to manage social and environmental fluctuations (Wiessner 1982, 2002). Contrary to Woodburn’s (1982) arguments, they have truly delayed return systems. They must pack up the household and kids and make arduous treks for tens to a few hundred kilometers to request alternate residences on the land of lifelong exchange partners. As Sahlins has quipped, for such societies, wealth is a burden when carried on one’s back. Is this “freedom”?

Environmental adaptations underlie social forms but do not determine them. For example, in desert foraging societies alone, social arrangements are many—built and transmitted over generations by the agency of men, women and groups. The !Xo Bushmen have a nexus system to hold land, define cooperative groups, and maintain boundaries (Heinz 1972; Cashdan 1983), while the Ju/’hoansi engage in *hxaro* exchange partnerships to open alternate residences with partners up to 200 km away (Wiessner 1982). No institutions have been developed to address conflicts; parties vote with their feet and disperse until tempers cool. The Mardu and other Aboriginal groups of the Australian Western Desert (Tonkinson 2002; Berndt and Berndt 1988), who live under similar environmental constraints, by contrast, have elaborate male initiations which establish dominance of elders over youths and allow elders to enjoy polygynous marriage. Kinship systems structure marriage and access to resources; formal dyadic spear duels may be called on to resolve conflicts. However, despite the myriad of social options explored in hunter-gatherer trickster traditions (Biesele 1993; Guenther 1999; Hyde 1997), environment still shapes possibilities, perceptions, motivations, freedoms, and restrictions underlying much of the extraordinary variation in hunter-gatherer societies. The role of environment cannot be by-passed in the history of humanity.

A second confounding feature in the Graeber-Wengrow narrative comes from circling round and round in the question of the human dance between hierarchy and equality. The perspective taken draws on Boehm’s (1993, 2012) argument that we are hierarchical in nature from our chimpanzee-like heritage and that equality is achieved by coalitions of the weak constantly leveling the dominant through

shame, shunning, or eradication. This view of social leveling comes largely from descriptions of hunter-gatherer meat sharing when people are in the clutches of meat hunger and tensions high. However, the reputation of the hunter is elevated after people are satiated and the story of the hunt is told and retold (Wiessner 2014). This raises the question of whether models other than that of leveling the dominant are more appropriate for explaining the cooperation that comes with egalitarian relations, for example, models from bonobo societies (de Waal and Lanting 1998) or cooperative breeding for sharing childrearing (Hrdy 2009; Van Schaik and Burkart 2009).

Graeber and Wengrow struggle with the concept of egalitarianism, which they see as “sameness” in some specific ways that are agreed upon to be important (p. 126). However, egalitarian relations are not about sameness in small-scale societies, but rather about respect and appreciation of different skills offered by group members to build complementarity and dependency. As a group of Ju/'hoansi put it during a firelit conversation about what constitutes the core of their culture: “It is not the trance dance, hunting techniques, apparel or songs that are the essential elements of our culture but rather relations of respect and appreciation for what others have to offer. We walk/talk softly, unlike the Bantu who are big penises” (an expression for relations of dominance). This fits with what is probably the best anthropological definition of egalitarian societies, that proposed by Fried (1967): in egalitarian societies there are as many positions as there are qualified individuals to fill them. The respect for the abilities of different individuals creates tolerance for the variation on which cultural developments draw. It is this respect that lies at the heart of the testimony by the Huron-Wendat chief Kandiaronk about the dynamics of his own society, mentioned frequently by Graeber and Wengrow.

Egalitarian and hierarchical elements co-exist in all human societies. Though both appear to have roots in our simian heritage, why were both maintained through social selection and cultural means? Institutionalized hierarchy reduces internal competition and the often-destructive race to the top, allows for efficient organization of collective action, and coordinates responses to intergroup competition which benefit many group members. Egalitarian institutions reduce the transaction costs of social and economic exchange in a number of respects. As equals, it is not necessary to work out relative social standing with every interaction. Women and men can help each other knowing that as equals they can give, ask, take and receive help when in need. With egalitarian institutions people do not fear that assistance given will be used to dominate, fostering the conditions and trust for delayed exchange. Finally, equality facilitates the mobility necessary for intergroup interaction, as hierarchies do not mesh easily (Wiessner 2010; Whallon 2006).

Both egalitarian and hierarchical institutions can be repressive and tension-ridden. In egalitarian systems, the more productive may feel burdened by having to share the products of their efforts, receive limited rewards, or, for young men, to have their aggrandizing squashed. As one capable Ju/'hoan put it: "I bump my head against the sky." Freedom? Those on top in hierarchical institutions, by contrast, may abuse power and take advantage of those below. In view of the benefits and burdens of both systems, it is not surprising that influence in most small-scale societies was achieved through the "power to" get things done by building a willing followership rather than by "power over" others. The former favored the development of the persuasive oratory, organizational and mediatory skills crucial to all human societies. Come the Holocene with its kinder and more stable climactic conditions, the balances between egalitarian and hierarchical dispositions were transformed in many playful and not-so playful configurations following resource potential, societal history, and actions of agents of change.

Given the dance between hierarchy and equality that has been played out throughout human prehistory and history, the most baffling aspect of the book is the central claim that we have got "stuck." Did we indeed get stuck? Have we not maintained the freedom to relocate, disobey commands, and shape new social realities? Doesn't the dance between hierarchy and equality persist as it has throughout human history? What about the Russian and French revolutions, civil rights and subsequent movements, social programs in many European societies, post-pandemic rejection of jobs with poor rewards? Or in non-Western, small-scale societies, isn't modernity being indigenized as men and women refashion the new to the fit old? A far more important suggestion of *The Dawn of Everything* is that we "recognize the many ways humans have used to find alternatives, to reshape societies, and explore many options, rather than following the conventional socio-evolutionary model." This resourcefulness remains active today and the realization is more important than ever at a time when democracy is failing in many parts of the world and when climate is pushing back.

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