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Book Review: The Dawn of Everything

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Reflexive Statement

My name is Steven Foertsch. I am a doctoral candidate at Baylor University in the sociology department, and a research assistant at the Institute for Studies of Religion. I received my first masters at the New School for Social Research in NYC, where I studied political theory. My research focuses on ideology, mostly religious or political. I recognize the praxis in forming a subaltern front to resist the statist cultural hegemony. Therefore, I am eager to explore options that aim at egalitarian, democratic, and autonomous methods of social organization. This is what drew me to David Graeber's work, including his last book *The Dawn of Everything*. I knew that this book had a narrative that challenged the stereotypical discourse surrounding "state formation" theory and was excited to engage with it.

"How too, for that matter, could such large populations be fed, without chains of command to organize the masses, formal offices of leadership; full-time administrators, soldiers, police, and other non-food-producers, who in turn could only be supported by the surpluses that agriculture provides? These seem like reasonable questions to ask, and those who make the first point almost invariably make the second. But in doing so, they risk parting company with history. You can't simply jump from the beginning of the story to the end, and then assume you know what happened in the middle" (Pg. 274). In the monograph *The Dawn of Everything* from Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow discuss the consequences of state formation theory, and how countless anthropological and archaeological cases disprove common assumptions regarding the evolution of civilization.

Using a range of diverse examples, Graeber and Wengrow set out to systematically contradict the main assertions of state formation theory. Their analysis spans from archaeological Holocene to recent anthropological accounts of indigenous America. The authors are in a unique place to do so, both penning several books related to the subject and its relevance today. Some well-known examples by the late Graeber are *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (David 2004) and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*

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(David 2018). Highlights from Wengrow include *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West* (David 2010) and *The Archaeology of Early Egypt: Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000 to 2650 BC* (David 2016). As such, this monograph represents the culmination of two careers of deep understanding, allowing the authors to pursue a meaningful and potentially paradigm-shifting thesis.

Explored over 12 chapters, Graeber and Wengrow claim that the domination of the state was not an inevitability, suggested by anarchistic forms of governance chosen by our predecessors. This "indigenous critique" of European society, they argue, inspired Enlightenment thinkers who would later revolutionize Western ideals of sovereignty. Tracing egalitarian values in examples as wide as Uruk (Mesopotamia), Mohenjo-Daro (Indus Valley), Taljanky (Neolithic Ukraine), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Upper NY), Teotihuacan (Mayan Mexico), Haida (Northwestern North America), and the Inca Empire, the authors make a compelling case for a lack of evidence supporting state formation theory across time.

In an effort to stress the egalitarian nature of these civilizations, however, the authors downplay nonegalitarian aspects to further their argument. This seems to be a recurring issue with the book as it progresses through potentially unhelpful tangents-the authors often claim that "nobody knows" what type of governance a society had, so they simply assume egalitarianism (for an example, see pg. 319, 321, or the difference between their account of the Maya collapse on pg. 336 compared to pg. 378). Much of the book operates in the "unknown," which indeed is the nature of anthropological and archaeological work. Graeber and Wengrow seem to thrive in this environment, making claims that are essentially (no doubt well informed) educated guesses and then moving forward as though they are truth. The benefit of doing this is that it is hard to contradict their arguments based on validity, but it is also hard to corroborate their ultimate "objectivity."

When moving into the realm of history, however, the strength of these arguments face difficulties. For example, the "Kandiaronk" case (a Wendat/Mohawk diplomat's account of European society popularized by French Enlightenment thinkers), which figures heavily in their transposition argument (Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by accounts such as Kandiaronk's—curiously not Medieval peasant anarchism), has issues with historiographical validity. Is the "indigenous American voice" really an indigenous voice? Graeber and Wengrow seemingly claim that the Kandiaronk account is an entirely genuine one, and brush aside other scholars who have suggested it to be fabrication (mentioned on pg. 50). The authors allude to other instances in which European Enlightenment thinkers used the "noble savage" to critique European society (pg. 58). Given the face of much evidence that this account could be fabricated, the authors state that "it could be possible that he was an ambassador to France" (pg. 51), a claim of racism on behalf of western intellectuals, cite an author from 1913 (pg. 70), and leave the question off with an assumption that Kandiaronk's account was genuine. It is ultimately unknown whether the Kandriaronk account is a fallacy or not, but this lack of historiographical nuance does little to strengthen their argument. This is

especially the case when it is widely known by academics that Europeans (especially Jesuit missionaries) took substantial liberties with their accounts of the New World. It is my conclusion that historiographical methods that analyze source bias are a necessity when constructing any subaltern paradigms.

It is easy to critique grand theory, though. We must respect and give credit to the authors' attempt to reframe human history, because they make an extraordinarily compelling case. By utilizing a postmodern deconstructionist approach, the authors give masterful and substantiated critiques of the evolutionary theory of human civilization (the difference between foraging and agricultural societies), determinism, and teleological states. After this deconstruction, the authors build an interesting theory on the "principles of authority/domination" through three forms: sovereignty (monopoly on violence), administration (monopoly on knowledge), and charisma (monopoly on politics), which is sure to inform theorists for decades to come.

If a social scientist is planning to read an anthropologically minded book, this should rank high on their list. Readers could expect to learn that there is no one specific way in which our ancestors arranged themselves socially. In addition, the reader would also receive a good update and synthesis of newer or forgotten discoveries in anthropology and archaeology. Outside of anthropology and archaeology, students and scholars of sociology, political science, and international relations could gain much from reading this account about the countlessly diverse and egalitarian ways in which human society manifests.

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