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CRITICAL EXCHANGE

Material conditions and human freedom

David Graeber and David Wengrow, The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

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We make our own history, but in circumstances of other people's choosing: intercultural materialism in *The Dawn of Everything*

Much of the debate surrounding David Graeber and David Wengrow's landmark contribution, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021, hereafter *DOE*), has focused on the book's key historical claims: that complexity in human societies need not imply hierarchy, that Indigenous North America had significant influence on the European Enlightenment, that there was no irreversible "agricultural revolution," let alone an irreversible transition to state-like polities, and that there is no discernible sequence of "stages" of human history, since for much of our history we experimented freely with a great variety of political and economic arrangements. Rather than adding to the chorus of those who wish to probe the book's empirics, I focus on the more

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abstract social-theoretic picture that emerges from Graeber and Wengrow's empirical claims.

If there is one overarching theoretical question the book answers, it is this: "What ultimately determines the shape a society takes: economic factors, organizational imperatives or cultural meanings and ideas?" (p. 206). Graeber and Wengrow propose that "societies [are] in effect self-determining, building and reproducing themselves primarily with reference to each other" (p. 206). Several commentators interpret this answer as a variant of the third option, cultural meanings and ideas, sometimes even accusing Graeber and Wengrow of idealism (Lindisfarne & Neale, 2021; Scheidel, 2022). Graeber and Wengrow themselves, however, label their answer a "fourth possibility" (p. 206). That is the claim I will try to unpack and probe here.

The question, as I understand it, is whether looking at interactions between cultures and ideas yields an account of social change that is not reducible to an implausible form of idealism—roughly, the view that human ideation can effect material change in ways that largely float free of material constraints, such as those posed by the environment, available resources, technology, and so on. Put differently, the question is whether cultural ideation can help explain social change without positing non-material causal factors (cf. Aytac & Rossi, 2022). The answer depends on how each culture is materially impacted by other cultures, and how this leads to sociopolitical differentiation under similar environmental and technological conditions. In short, a culture's ideation is a material constraint for other cultures with which it comes into contact.

In my view, charges of idealism are largely misplaced because *DOE* offers a novel theory of the interplay between material constraints and human ideation—a theory I will call "intercultural materialism." The title of this contribution to the present Critical Exchange contains the gist of my understanding of *DOE*'s key theoretical insight. It takes its cue from a famous passage by Marx that is invoked by Graeber and Wengrow in support of their position (p. 227), but also used as an indictment by some of their critics (Scheidel, 2022, p. 13): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1852, p. 1). The view I am calling intercultural materialism is a view about how culture—including political ideation and deliberate action—constitutes some of the circumstances not of our own choosing. That may sound like a contradiction, but the continuation of Marx's passage suggests it isn't, given Marx's staunch materialism: the "circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" are not just environmental and technological factors, but "names, battle slogans, and costumes" (Marx, 1852, p. 1). Where Marx emphasises the role of a culture's past as a material constraint—historical materialism—Graeber and Wengrow broaden the picture by emphasising the role of other contemporary cultures—intercultural materialism. I say they broaden rather than replace Marx's picture, because historical and intercultural materialism are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Historical materialism focuses primarily on social change within single societies. Intercultural materialism adds the interplay *between* societies. Historical materialism might even be described as a subset of intercultural materialism, insofar as there are significant

cultural changes between different historical eras. Sceptics of this view will want to problematise Marx's commitment to prioritising explanations for social change internal to societies and call for a "looser understanding of Marx's internalism" (Miller, 1984, p. 243). It may just be that classical historical materialism suffers from a residual Hegelian focus on a single or primary locus of historical development, despite Marx's various pronouncements about conquest and other interactions between societies. But my suggestion is that the priority of the internal is not a constitutive feature of the theory. Thus intercultural materialism is even less of an internalist view than Marxist accounts of centre-periphery dynamics in the development of capitalism. That may well be an apt lens for understanding capitalism or imperialism, but the intercultural materialism developed in *DOE* has a wider focus.

Crudely, on more familiar materialist models of social change, environmental and technological factors constrain the range of political options available to a society: there is a dyadic relationship between material constraints and culture, including political institutions and other power structures. On the intercultural (and historical) materialist view, the salient constraint relationship is triadic: environmental and technological factors materially constrain culture, and the presence of other cultural formations is another such constraint. That is the sense in which we make our own choices, but in circumstances of other people's choosing—be they our ancestors or the tribe on the other side of the mountain.

Intercultural materialism can be presented as a way of integrating the idea of a mode of production with the old anthropological notion of "culture areas"—the near-universally observed geographical clustering of culture traits. To illustrate, consider Graeber and Wengrow's discussion of cultural variation between Indigenous North American groups of the Pacific coast before European colonisation. Schematically, the main cultural contrast that is relevant for the present argument is between two culture areas: "Protestant" and "aristocratic" societies of the Pacific coast inhabiting a comparable environment at the same time. The Yurok are the best-known group among the former, the Kwakiutl among the latter. *DOE* identifies some commonalities between these societies. First, in keeping with an important theme that runs through much of *DOE*, none of these societies fit the layperson's stereotype of the hunter-gatherer band (near-total material and political equality, nomadism, no accumulation of wealth). Rather, they are what anthropologists usually call "complex hunter-gatherers" or "affluent foragers": they do not practice agriculture (probably deliberately, as Graeber and Wengrow suggest) but manage resources in ways that allow for a significant accumulation of wealth, and they are socially stratified, albeit in significantly different ways.

But there are also important differences. In terms of their use of natural resources, the differences are not particularly significant: the "Protestant" societies of present-day California drew mainly on a varied basket of terrestrial resources, whereas the "aristocratic" peoples of the Pacific northwest relied primarily on salmon and other anadromous fish, supplemented by game and plants. Both environments were bountiful and afforded large population densities. Attempts to explain cultural differentiation in terms of food sources quickly run aground, especially when we consider that, even though a pescatarian diet would have been an option for the Californians, the cultural differences were vast. The most notable difference was the northwesterners'

practice of inter-group raiding for purposes of chattel slavery. This practice was inscribed within a culture often described as aristocratic, or "Homeric": there was no money, and a hereditary warrior aristocracy jockeyed for positions and the allegiance of commoners by engaging in competitive displays of excess, such as the famous potlatch feasts. This was accompanied by a material culture of elaborate and extravagant arts and crafts. By contrast, the "Protestant" societies of California were characterised by an emphasis on hard work, self-denial, sobriety, and an unusual emphasis on money and individual private property. The accompanying material culture eschewed adornment and conspicuous displays of wealth, while promoting its accumulation.

How to explain these profound cultural differences between contiguous peoples with access to similar natural resources and technologies? It is probably correct that variation occurs within a range of possibilities determined by environmental factors, but this is not particularly informative, let alone explanatory.

Intercultural materialism goes some way towards closing that explanatory gap. The core idea builds on Marcel Mauss's classic discussion of the formation of culture areas, or "civilisations." Mauss noted that most societies expressly refuse to take on culture traits that are known and available to them, even at the expense of some material benefit. As Graeber and Wengrow pithily put it, cultures are "structures of refusal" (p. 197). Culture areas, then, emerge by schismogenesis: the Yurok developed their "Protestant" ethos, invested in terrestrial resources rather than fisheries, and rejected slavery because they consciously defined themselves against the Kwakiutl, and vice versa. The political choices of a society therefore work as material constraints on the political choices of neighbouring societies.

I take it that is the sense in which Graber and Wengrow propose to understand modes of production as, in part, modes of producing people suited to specific social and political roles: "What was ultimately being produced here … were certain kinds of people: nobles, princesses, warriors, commoners, servants, and so on" (p. 213). Cultures are exposed to how other cultures produce people, and tend to choose to produce different kinds of people. To recognise this is not to posit ideation as a force capable of overcoming material constraints but to identify the existence of (other) cultures as an often-overlooked material constraint and source of socio-political possibilities. If this is hard to accept, G.A. Cohen's conception of political institutions and other power structures as "social technologies" (Cohen, 2009, pp. 55ff)—that is, deliberately designed systems that channel the raw material of human drives and motivations for specific purposes—might help us think of other cultures as yet another technological constraint. It is a process no more driven by ideas and no less constrained by facts than the design of the steam engine or the transistor.

Like historical materialism, intercultural materialism takes seriously the impact of the political choices of others—be they our predecessors or our neighbours—on our own, much in the same way as the environment and available technologies affect our choices. This helps explain how ideation can play a causal role in a materialist conception of social change. But it also raises some questions about how to individuate the relevant units in the causal stories intercultural materialists may want to tell.

The first issue concerns the circumstances that may or may not create the conditions for schismogenesis. Let's grant that the Yurok and Kwakiutl deliberately

defined and designed their societies in opposition to each other, within the range of options afforded by their material conditions. Let's add the simplifying assumption that the previous undifferentiated culture area was not in contact with any other culture areas. How do we go from a uniform culture area to a differentiated area that splits? What makes it the case that a social group—or a potential new social group—is a candidate for schismogenesis? Is the ideation that leads to the first instance of schismogenesis itself a reaction to some material stimulus, and if so, of what kind?

The latter question in particular points towards how intercultural materialism may contribute to debates about the material conditions for social change. For instance, the role of schismogenesis may help explain how, *contra* technological determinism but still within a Marxist perspective, "change may be based on developments in the forms of cooperation *or* in technology, giving access to enhanced productive power to an initially subordinate group, and motivating their resistance" (Miller, 1984, p. 172, emphasis added). The idea here is that there may be features of a society's mode of production that are self-destructive and so create opportunities for social groups to enact change. For instance, Marx's description of the transition from the Roman Empire to feudalism neither involves changes in environmental factors nor in technology. Rather, political choices created differences in the distribution of the benefits of imperial expansion, leading to the birth of a class of absentee landlords and a class of non-enslaved tenant farmers, and so to the destruction of the traditional Roman society of independent household farms (Miller, 1984, pp. 214ff, 220). Technological and environmental factors are on a par with political factors—or at any rate it is quite difficult to explain all relevant phenomena without reference to political power and political choices, and to disentangle the political from the environmental and the economic. Be that as it may, most Marxist accounts of change focus on how, when a mode of production becomes unstable, new social classes emerge and assume new roles within societies. Intercultural materialism adds to this picture by showing how self-destructing modes of production may also create opportunities for the creation of new, separate societies (or "culture areas") through schismogenesis, and how that, in turn, constitutes a new material constraint on the political choices of societies at the edges of such new culture areas.

This sketch of how intercultural materialism may fit within fairly familiar Marxist categories indicates why I think the accusations of idealism levelled against Graeber and Wengrow are off the mark. It is also why I do not think any of the questions canvassed above present insurmountable difficulties, at least to the extent that they resemble or even mirror problems familiar from the vast literature on historical materialism: how to individuate social classes, how to understand which material factors prevent or foster social transformations, or how to avoid theoretical formalism when explaining social change (Banaji, 2010, pp. 55ff). At any rate, the proof of this theoretical pudding should be in the empirical eating. Graeber and Wengrow's monumental work is an auspicious beginning.

Enzo Rossi

Questions about *The Dawn of Everything*

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 and pose several questions about *DOE* for Wengrow, whose participation in this Critical Exchange we greatly appreciate.

Reading *DOE*, 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. Graeber and Wengrow primarily criticize 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. Another part of the difficulty comes from *DOE*'s need for greater clarity about what philosophical and economic debates it enters, and what exactly it says about their subjects' conclusions. Graeber and Wengrow summarize their intentions in three hard-to-interpret phrases: "farewell to humanity's childhood," that inequality has no origin, and "the state has no origin" (2021, chapters 1 and 10).

Although the phrase, "farewell to humanity's childhood," appears to endorse the idea that humanity had a collective childhood to which it can now bid farewell, Graeber and Wengrow mean very much the opposite: we should bid "farewell to" the concept of a collective childhood of humanity: no such period ever existed.

The view that our ancestors were collectively childlike was once extremely common. It goes back at least as far as Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century and was in place in the early days of nineteenth-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 unthinkingly did whatever was necessary to survive in a "savage" environment. This view is clearly fatuous.

In this respect, we strongly agree with Graeber and Wengrow. People in the deep past were our intellectual peers. They were intellectually capable of conceiving of social inequality and considering under what sort of social institutions they wanted to live in the exact same way we are today. Humanity had no "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 state 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 possible 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 of 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 five interpretations at various points, but after several readings we cannot find a definitive elaboration of the two statements. So what exactly do they mean?

DOE definitively communicates a scepticism about the dichotomies of equality-inequality and state-statelessness. This scepticism might imply there is more disagreement between *DOE* and our books (Widerquist & McCall, 2017, 2021), which tend to criticize claims about these dichotomies rather than their existence. We agree that simplistic dichotomies like equality/inequality, states/statelessness don't really exist, but we understand the state and statelessness as a spectrum of 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 Graeber and Wengrow and others like Kelly (1995), is a step in the right direction, but this way of thinking is inadequate even then, given that concepts like "inequality" and "state" subsume 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 modern large-scale political-economic systems and everything else. Unfortunately, productive anthropological theory-building requires breaking concepts like "inequality" and "state" 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 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 & McCall, 2017; 2021). Despite the difference of approach and focus, this effort has no conflict with *DOE*.

During European colonial expansion, many Western philosophers believed in a dichotomy between "civilized man" and "natural" or "savage man." They supposed that "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, or very close to that natural state, 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 many 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 addressed should be reformulated or rejected once the debunked claims are removed.

For instance, *DOE* criticizes 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 on the role played by claims about prehistoric, nonliterate, and/or stateless peoples in these philosophers' arguments. Therefore it doesn't clearly connect its criticism to these philosophers' conclusions.

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

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 on 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 we all know that even the lowliest day labourer 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. Although Rousseau wrote, "Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men," his main focus was on the basis rather than the origin. Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau's (1994) central concern was not about human origins. He specifically states that his researches are "hypothetical and conditional reasonings." He uses his hypothetical state of nature primarily (and arguably exclusively) as a device by which to criticize contemporary European social arrangements rather than as a means to examine actual human origins. His references to "natural man" make more sense as a metaphor for childhood rather than for early humans. In any event, he could drop any reference to "natural man" and still insist on contemporary institutions being corrupting, and that part of his arguments holds up well today. Like Graeber and Wengrow, Rousseau's point is that we are not stuck with the institutions we have, and we have good reason to change them in order to create a modern society with much greater equality of wealth and power.

Here we have two questions. Why focus so much on Rousseau, rather than Hobbes and Locke, who introduced the talk of "origins" a century before Rousseau? What does the evidence 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 are better for everyone than looser political groups, Locke's argument that highly unequal private property makes everyone freer and wealthier, and Rousseau's argument that highly unequal political and economic power corrupts rich and poor alike?

DOE makes a 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, p. 144).

Economic determinism and cultural evolutionism have already been discarded. The belief that technology or any other factor *fully* determines socio-political arrangements is no longer taken seriously. The idea that remains alive is that human agency is only one of many factors that *influence* political outcomes. Other factors include technology, geography, ecology, population density, scale of political organization, subsistence strategy, or the choice between nomadism or sedentism. In the effort to emphasize the mental capacity of early humans to choose how they wanted to live, Graeber and Wengrow deemphasize the possible influence of all these factors and thereby (perhaps unintentionally) imply that peoples who have been subject to despots must have "run headlong into their chains," to use Graeber and Wengrow's paraphrasing.

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

DOE provides detailed examples showing that a few states 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 most known states have been tyrannies, it does nothing to refute the claim that large-scale societies are relatively favourable to dominators and to high levels of social, economic, and political inequality. Are these examples intended to merely show the possibility of relative egalitarianism at larger scale, or that large scale is no particular advantage for 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. It also discusses historical and archaeological 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 that 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 and instead consider some remaining questions.

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 the possibility that forgers can form larger, more unequal societies or that all foragers actually 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 unfavourable to dominators and/or favourable 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 favourable to people who resist domination.

We think Graeber and Wengrow are too hard on Christopher Boehm (2001) who argues that immediate-return societies are favourable to relative equality. Although they recognize the value of 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" (pp. 86–87).

A large part of the problem with this statement is the use of the word "assume." To assume is to state something with no supporting evidence. In this sense, Boehm doesn't merely assume that nomadic hunter-gatherers followed similar social arrangements. He has a sophisticated analysis of strategies by which people in observed immediate-return societies have consistently been able to resist domination. Boehm combines his strategic analysis with the widely accepted empirical hypothesis that, until the late Pleistocene, population density was very low and most people lived in small-scale, nomadic foraging groups that did not store food. Either his theory or the empirical hypothesis could be wrong, but he is not merely assuming his conclusions. Our best guess is that the assumption-allegation was merely a poor choice of words.

Another problem with Graeber and Wengrow's accusation that Boehm's conclusions necessarily toss early humans "back into the Garden of Eden." Graeber, Wengrow, and Boehm all agree that all humans 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. Graeber and Wengrow 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 distant ancestors were stuck in a different set of circumstances necessarily accuses them of being unthinking childlike innocents in the Garden of Eden. We see no treatment of our ancestors as childlike innocents 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 favour 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 Graeber and Wengrow 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 Graeber and Wengrow's 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 & Wengrow, 2021, p. 429). 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 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 concerns what the empirical evidence in *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 the southeastern United States, Pacific northwest fishing-societies in the recent Holocene, Gobekli Tepe about 12,000 years ago, and Dolni Vestonice about 26,000 years ago. These examples certainly show that hunter-gatherers can establish large-scale, stratified societies, but this has been known for a long time. They do not show that all hunter-gatherers always established 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.

Graeber and Wengrow claim that complex hunter-gatherer societies like the Calusa in the southeastern United States and Pacific northwest fishing-societies may have been more common in deep human prehistory than is widely understood based on current archaeological evidence. To support this idea, they suggest that we know relatively little from the archaeological record about hunter-gatherers that existed prior to late Upper Pleistocene sites like Dolni Vestonice. They argue that an absence of evidence does not provide evidence of absence.

But on this issue, 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 systematically collected evidence about sites older than Dolni Vestonice for nearly two centuries, and no indications of significant social inequality (Ames, 2007) have been found among hunter-gatherer societies predating the late Upper Pleistocene. Given Ames's (2007, p. 495) view that "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. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that hunter-gatherers might have formed larger-scale, more unequal societies, the existing evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Perhaps the evidence from these sites is meant to show merely the intellectual capability of early hunter-gathers. Or is it meant to suggest a burden-of-proof reversal? That is, because early humans were our intellectual peers, we should assume the earliest experienced the full range of political possibilities, unless proven otherwise. Although this sounds reasonable, we find it problematic, given the preponderance of the evidence. We do not treat early humans as child-like innocents by suggesting that the circumstances in which they lived favoured 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" does not amount to confining early humans to a state of childhood or a Garden of Eden. It only suggests that our sophisticated, intellectual peers of the Pleistocene were affected by their circumstances just as we are affected by ours.

Karl Widerquist and Grant McCall

Freedom and the bureaucratic state

Today most of us live in bureaucratic states, where our lives are subject to constant control. The government's grip can be felt in the most banal aspects of our lives. We can be fined, or worse, for jaywalking or littering. More fundamental aspects of human existence are subject to extensive regulation as well. If we want to marry a foreign national, for example, our government may not allow our spouse to immigrate, if we lack the means to support them. We have only limited control over the upbringing of our own children: in many countries, they must attend school from a certain age and for a particular time. And although we are to a certain extent free to choose what work we do, we must pay taxes to the government.

How did the bureaucratic state, with its extensive rules and regulations, become the dominant political model? Most historians and archaeologists answer this question by referring to the agricultural revolution, which took place some 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East, and then in several other parts of the world. Before this revolution, people lived as hunters and gatherers in small communities with egalitarian structures, where important decisions were made by mutual agreement. The invention of agriculture changed everything. Thanks to agriculture, people suddenly had surpluses of foods that were less perishable than the proceeds of hunting, fishing, or gathering. Population numbers exploded because there was more food, and because the sedentariness induced by agriculture facilitated reproduction.

But these developments had several unforeseen consequences—or so the story goes. The agricultural revolution did not just lead to the formation of sedentary farming communities. An elite specialized in violence also emerged, using its skills with weapons to demand from farmers a share of their food—a primitive form

of taxation. Gradually, an educated elite emerged who recorded on clay tablets exactly how much the farmers had to pay: the first bureaucrats were born. Due to the increase in population, there were fewer and fewer ways to escape these new rulers. Where hunter-gatherers could easily move to new hunting grounds if chieftains became unruly, such escape routes became smaller in the increasingly densely populated areas of the Neolithic. The result of both developments was that bureaucratic states—a partnership of violence specialists and tax collectors—gradually conquered the world.

David Graeber and David Wengrow contest this story, first formulated in the eighteenth century by philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and still popular today, in their 2021 book *The Dawn of Everything*. Their aim is to make us see that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of great bureaucratic states. By sifting through a vast body of academic literature in anthropology and archaeology, their respective academic specialties, they argue that there was no causal relationship between the emergence of complex, densely populated agricultural societies and the first bureaucratic states. In Egypt, for example, irrigation agriculture was long organized at the local level in decentralized partnerships. Conversely, Graeber and Wengrow show that there were different hunter-gatherer societies with rigid hierarchies and other forms of inequality, such as slavery. The result is a radically new story about the beginning of human society, with significant political implications. If there is no causal link between the emergence of sedentary agricultural societies and the rise of the bureaucratic state, then people had much more freedom to shape their political world than previously assumed. This is not only important for a better understanding of the early history of mankind. Graeber and Wengrow also want to inspire us to reclaim the freedom to remake our world. Complex societies are not condemned to the bureaucratic state but free to choose other forms of political organisation. That freedom also includes the liberty to govern in a much less top-down manner than is currently the case. More specifically, Graeber and Wengrow want to convince us that anarchism, in which people arrange everything by mutual agreement without coercion from above, is not a utopia but social form with a storied past—and therefore a potential future as well.

It would be difficult to overstate the originality of Graeber and Wengrow's book. A sweeping narrative spanning several thousands of years and different continents, *DOE* squarely belongs to the genre of "big history" pioneered by Jared Diamond in the 1990s. Yet most other contributions to this genre tend to be heavily deterministic, emphasizing the inescapable influence of structural factors such as geography (Diamond, 1997) or climate (Frankopan, 2023). Graeber and Wengrow, by contrast, use *longue durée* history to highlight the human potential for agency. This makes their main message a hopeful one: human beings *can* make their own history. We can *choose* to make better, more equal, and more sustainable societies, if we can muster the necessary political imagination.

Yet Graeber and Wengrow's story, for all its groundbreaking qualities, is not entirely persuasive. After all, it is an inescapable fact that today, the vast majority of the world's population live in bureaucratic states. At some point we seem to have lost our freedom to experiment with different organizational forms, including anarchism. How did this happen? Graeber and Wengrow do not have a conclusive

answer and pay hardly any attention to modern developments like the industrial revolution and the vast military and technological changes in its wake. It could be argued that precisely these developments made the victory of bureaucratic states inevitable. In premodern times, it was still possible for stateless peoples, such as nomads, to withstand the power of the bureaucratic state and sometimes even dominate nations with states. Genghis Khan's Mongols, for instance, lacked anything resembling a bureaucracy. Yet, thanks to their vast cavalry, they were more than a match for the armies of Jin China, the quintessential premodern bureaucratic state. In the wake of the industrial revolution, by contrast, this was no longer the case, as the U.S. army's destruction of North American Indigenous tribes in the nineteenth century tragically demonstrates.

Simultaneously, Graeber and Wengrow ignore differences between bureaucratic states that dominate the world today. Most notably, how democratic states treat their citizens differs from how authoritarian governments do so. Of course, residents of both types of states live under rules and regulations, and their personal freedoms are restricted in various ways. But in democratic states, citizens have some degree of control over how they are governed, including the right to protest and to try to change the rules. This is not the case in authoritarian states. Compare, for example, the Chinese authorities' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic with the responses of democratic governments. In both China and Europe, governments initially responded by imposing lockdowns and mask requirements. But after the Chinese government committed to a zero-Covid policy, it continued these policies even when their efficacy was questioned. In most European countries, by contrast, the government's attempts to contain the pandemic were discussed and contested in the public sphere from the very beginning, and protests resulted in frequent and quite substantial policy changes and a much earlier elimination of the most stringent measures.

The choice today, in other words, is not a choice between bureaucratic states and anarchist societies but between democratically governed bureaucracies and their autocratic counterparts. For those interested in enhancing human freedom, the pertinent question is not how Neolithic peoples organized themselves politically, but how we can boost democratic self-government in modern, bureaucratic states. Historians and political scientists have extensively reflected on this question, and their answers have changed substantially over time. A generation ago, they tended to emphasise structural factors, in particular economic development, as the key to understanding a state's path to democracy or dictatorship. In his 1966 classic *The Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*, sociologist Barrington Moore, for instance, argued that the divergent pathways of twentieth-century states—democratic, communist, fascist—resulted from the timing of industrialization and the social structure at the time of transition.

Today, however, scholars of democracy tend to emphasise the importance of human agency, as do Graeber and Wengrow. In his recent bestseller *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (2017), for instance, political scientist Daniel Ziblatt highlights the role of traditional elites in the making or unmaking of democracy. Comparing the different political trajectories of the United Kingdom and Germany, Ziblatt argues that the triumph of democracy in the former had much to do with the ability of landed elites, through the vehicle of the Conservative Party, to

harness democracy to their own ends, thus increasing support for this regime. By contrast, the dramatic breakdown of the Weimar Republic stemmed from the failure of similar elites in Germany to successfully play the electoral game, leading them to throw their weight behind antidemocratic actors instead.

Graeber and Wengrow's main message—that we are not condemned to live in unfreedom—may well be right. Yet their focus on the very distant past makes this argument less persuasive than it could be. This does not diminish their scholarly achievement. Their book poses a major challenge to standard narratives about the political implications of the agricultural revolution. Graeber and Wengrow assemble a great deal of evidence that the emergence of complex, sedentary societies did not inevitably lead to stratified, bureaucratic regimes. This makes their book a riveting read that will surely keep specialists in the field engaged for quite some time. But the present-day inferences they want us to draw from their narrative are less convincing. If we want to foster human freedom, we had better think about how to do so within the context of bureaucratic societies. And here, the history of the past two hundred years has far more to teach us than the dawn of human society.

Annelien de Dijn

On historical materialism and *The Dawn of Everything*

> To lend itself to the misunderstanding of such people has been one of the main misfortunes of Marxism ever since the days when Engels had to tell Joseph Bloch in this connection that "many of the recent 'Marxists' [of 1890]" had certainly turned out "a rare kind of balderdash."
> Edmund Wilson (1972 [1940]), *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History*, p. 183.

I wish to thank the contributors to this critical exchange for their discussions of *DOE*. One of the main incentives for David Graeber and me to embark on this project was our sense that much important research on social inequality has become siloed within academic disciplines (economics, political science, philosophy), which have their origins in a time when our own specialisms of archaeology and anthropology barely existed. For their own part, contemporary archaeologists and anthropologists tend to get embroiled in theoretical debates about topics that shift ground on a regular cycle every decade or so, such that little cumulative progress is made on questions of major importance to other disciplines.

Worse, while archaeology and anthropology themselves were once closely related fields, today they have drifted apart. The result is that specialists rarely talk across these fields, let alone to people in other disciplines, about the implications of their findings, which (we, at least, felt) are increasingly turning much conventional wisdom about the course of human history on its head. We wanted to see what happens when you put them back together again after a long period of mutual estrangement. *DOE* is the result.

We also noticed the creeping effects of intellectual isolation on debates about topics of urgent public concern. Thus, when someone from outside our fields—say, a

biologist, a political scientist, an economist, an evolutionary psychologist, or even an ancient or modern historian—tries to capture the "broad sweep" of the human past to make general statements about the origins of political order, the development of human ethical systems, the future of work and leisure, the economic consequences of warfare and pandemic, or our prospects for a sustainable relationship with the Earth system, they tend to replicate the state of knowledge in our fields as it stood in the 1950s or 1960s, or even harking back to natural law theory of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

In the present climate, stepping outside one's chronological or regional specialism takes a lot of intellectual courage. Leaping headlong into the choppy waters of a completely different discipline might be considered downright reckless. We all have a lot of catching up to do. And inevitably, there will always be colleagues who remind you that everything you are saying about their particular sub-field has already been covered. By contrast, the contributions to this Critical Exchange invite us to reconsider some of the intellectual problems that lie at the very core of our respective disciplines.

Enzo Rossi defends *DOE* against charges of "idealism" or "anti-materialism" and shows how our arguments (e.g. concerning the "cultural schismogenesis" of foraging societies in California and the northwest Pacific coast) are, in fact, consistent with Marxist frameworks of analysis. It's odd, in a way, that such a defense should have been necessary, since we ourselves have explicitly aligned our approach with Marx's famous (1852 [1974]) opening to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (see *DOE*, p. 206): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." We quote Marx in the context of a wider discussion of the role of human volition in relation to material determination, which concludes an analysis of the rejection of hereditary slavery among Indigenous populations on the ecologically rich Pacific littoral of North America.

Our most detailed treatment of that particular case (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018a) appeared some years before *DOE* in *American Anthropologist* with commentaries from specialists in the archaeology and cultural anthropology of the region (Field, 2018; Fitzhugh, 2018; Grier, 2018) and a response by myself and David Graeber (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018b). Rossi's summary of our arguments there is not completely accurate. We do not make any strong claim that historical differences in uses of the landscape are insignificant for an understanding of social change. Our point is rather that these differences (e.g. between an emphasis on anadromous fish on the northwest Pacific coast versus acorns as food staples in California) do not account adequately for the presence of hereditary, household slavery in one area (i.e., the northwest Pacific coast; see Donald, 1997) and the culturally marked absence of this institution in another, directly neighbouring area (i.e. the northwestern part of California; the ancestral and contested lands of the Yurok, Wintu, Tolowa, Hupa, Atsugewi, and others). We considered in some detail the arguments about contact-era Indigenous societies presented to date by behavioural ecologists (e.g. Tushingham & Bettinger, 2013) and explained why we find them insufficient. We also introduced a range of other source material that, to our knowledge, had hardly been brought to

bear on the problem of slavery and its rejection among west coast foragers before. It includes oral histories and ethnographic studies of collective rituals, feasting practices, trade festivals, systems of law and morality, and forms of material culture (see also *DOE*, ch. 5).

A comparison of such sources suggested to us that, at some point, which is now difficult to reconstruct with any accuracy, that there had been a creative process of cultural divergence and refusal, or "complementary schismogenesis," to use Gregory Bateson's (1935, p. 182) term), which produced many contrasting features of the Californian and northwest Pacific coast "culture areas," as broadly recognised by early ethnographers. As initially described by Alfred Kroeber, the same process gave rise to a cultural "shatter zone" at the points where they met. Within this contact zone we find the clearest and most abundant evidence for the highly conscious nature of the schismogenetic process (including morality tales, which warn against the dire consequences of keeping slaves and profiting from another's hard labour). We explore how this process of cultural divergence unfolded within specific sets of ecological and material circumstances, but we do not find any persuasive or determinant link between environmental factors (such as the presence or absence of anadromous fish-runs) and the presence or absence of slavery.

On the other hand, as Rossi correctly notes, there are no claims in our writing on this or any other topic for an idealist or voluntaristic understanding of social change, floating free of material context. Instead, we seek to understand how two sharply contrasting systems of labour and value (one based on slavery, the other rejecting it) emerged historically in adjacent parts of North America through changes in the material *and* ethical basis of domestic life, and also to shed light on how—in the absence of central coordination or overarching systems of government—such initially small-scale differences generated highly distinct social formations, detectable over impressively large regions.

We venture that similar processes of self-conscious cultural differentiation may account for a significant amount of variation in human political forms and systems, before and beyond the establishment of modern nation-states with hard borders (compare, for instance, Fausto et al., 2016, on processes of conflict, peace, and social reform in Indigenous Amazonia). Once recognised, such processes may also be understood as contributing to long-term trajectories of political development, in ways that have previously been masked by the catch-all designation of "affluent" or "complex" hunter-gatherers as members of a single type of human society, defined largely in negative terms by its lack of agriculture, and its differences from "immediate return," or in older parlance, "simple" hunter-gatherers. Given the focus of this discussion on questions of historical materialism, it is worth restating in full the conclusions of our *American Anthropologist* piece:

> In broader historical terms, it is still widely assumed that institutional change in preindustrial societies was closely anchored to intensification in methods of food production, especially the adoption and refinement of agriculture. Within this established paradigm, the development of forager societies on the west coast of North America can only be conceptualized as a puzzling anomaly or a truncated experiment in "paleo-political ecology," real politics being suppos-

> edly reserved for agrarian societies and "modern-day elites." The case of Aboriginal slavery and its rejection on the Pacific coast serves as an important corrective to such views. It reminds us that terms like "emergent" or "incipient," when applied to forms of inequality, are by their very nature fictions. Forms of inequality are always equally real for those who live them and thus equally open to challenge and reversal. There are no evolutionary false starts in this regard, no "archaic peoples," nor any dormant seedbeds of political change, awaiting the magical hand of agriculture that brings them to fruition. It is these lingering illusions that still prevent us from exploring the pathways that lead from the hunting retinue to the dynastic court, from tribal slavery to tributary states, and from "original affluence" to the modern leisure class (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018a, p. 247).

It is unfortunate that a more recent treatment of this topic (Alden Smith & Codding, 2021) makes no attempt to engage with the arguments we presented in 2018, but instead reverts to a far narrower range of explanatory factors based on the contrasting distribution of subsistence resources across the Indigenous landscapes of California and the northwest Pacific coast. In this context, it is worth emphasising that there is nothing especially "materialist" about measuring rates of inequality across different societies along a single index, as Alden Smith and Codding do. In fact, this kind of approach glosses over questions that would be central to any Marxian analysis of social change, such as the social forms taken by human labour, how value is generated, and the means by which material resources are translated into power over human beings. Instead, Alden Smith and Codding give us a "hierarchy index" with decreasing values as one transitions south from the northwest Pacific coast area into the Californian.

Let me dwell a little more on this (increasingly common) kind of procedure. What exactly is the problem with it? To begin, consider how hierarchy is defined and measured. This turns out to rely on the presence or absence of certain diacritical traits, specifically slavery, levels of ranking within family groups, and unequal food distribution in the landscape. As Alden Smith and Codding acknowledge, much of the relevant data is simply missing (at least in statistical form) from the Californian area, which is one half of their comparison. Moreover, the hypothesis that unequal distribution of food is a causal factor in the emergence of social inequality can only be tested by separating these two variables for spatial and temporal analysis. Combining them in a single index of hierarchy introduces circularity into the argument and weakens it; and there is a more basic objection to their approach (and other studies in the same vein), which hinges on the definition of institutionalized inequality. For them, this concerns the degree to which certain individuals or kin-groups could extract labour and services from subordinates by monopolizing access to key environmental resources, thereby raising themselves up to the level of chiefs or elites, or in their own preferred language: "how control of highly clumped, productive resource patches allow subsets of social groups to trade access for labour contributions and surplus production" (Alden Smith & Codding, 2021, p. 2). While there is a certain amount of violence to the ethno-historical record that one can perhaps tolerate, here I suggest things have gotten out of hand.

A wide range of sources make it abundantly clear that groups on the northwest Pacific coast and in the immediately adjacent parts of the Californian culture area did not share a similar orientation to the relationship between labour and inequality, or indeed between wealth and inequality (Wengrow & Graeber, 2018a; Field, 2018). In fact, the contrary seems to be true, and this was largely the point of our article, building on the earlier insights of Walter Goldschmidt (1951). A historical materialist account, at least in the Marxist sense, would need to grapple with the fact that Hupa and Yurok chiefs moved up in status by conspicuously performing strenuous acts of labour (hauling canoes, building fish weirs, etc.), while exactly the opposite applied to chiefs on the northwest Pacific coast, for whom the performance of such activities would have meant reducing themselves to the status of commoners or even slaves.

In describing our alternative approach, Rossi credits us with inventing a new variant of historical materialism, which he calls "intercultural materialism." While this is gratifying, I believe it is also overstated. The principle that "we make our own history, but in circumstances of other people's choosing," as Rossi puts it, is already clearly present in Marx's own formulation and explicitly underpins all Marxian attempts to develop a spatial understanding of inter-societal inequalities, at least since the pioneering work of Immanuel Wallerstein and André Gunder Frank in the 1960s. Such approaches long ago found their way into archaeology (e.g. Kristiansen & Rowlands, 1998) and into the study of west coast foraging societies (notably Chase-Dunn & Mann, 1998). In fact, some of my first exchanges with David Graeber revolved around the applications of world-systems theory in our respective fields (Graeber, 2013; Wengrow, 2011). What we both found to be of value in such models is their insistence (as Marshall Sahlins once put it to us over lunch, in characteristically pithy terms) that "inequality" is always a relation between societies, never just within them. But like others before us, we are wary of assuming that what defines a "centre" in relation to a "periphery" can be reduced to asymmetries in their capacity for energy extraction or the transformation of raw materials into finished goods, especially once one moves outside the context of Eurasian history into equatorial Africa (cf. Guyer, 1995) or pre-colonial North America.

Fitting archaeological evidence for regional centres such as Chavín de Huantar, Poverty Point, or Cahokia into a framework of social evolution based on the history of Eurasian polities has proved difficult, not so much because of any oral/literate distinction, but because such frameworks assume from the outset that power over others resides primarily in ownership of landed estates and in the capacity to administer, exploit, and defend them. Similar assumptions also underpin recent comparisons between the Americas and Eurasia, which suggest disparities in material wealth (measured by proxy; i.e. house-size) were of secondary importance in many pre-Columbian societies, forming an aggregate contrast with Bronze Age Eurasia, where they reached much higher levels (Kohler et al., 2017).

Macro-differences of this sort have been taken to indicate that overall levels of social inequality were greater in ancient Eurasia than the Americas, but this may well be misreading the evidence. What the quantitative studies may instead reflect is that power and centralisation in pre-colonial North America were not primarily grounded in the stockpiling of manufactured goods or defence of landed estates, but

in control over what Robert Lowie (1928) termed *sacra*: Indigenous forms of property that took the form of image-systems and ritual prerogatives, e.g. pertaining to the design of monumental earthworks, processional routes, or effigy mounds and associated forms of calendrical and ecological knowledge; the right to perform a certain dance; administer a certain kind of medicine, and so on (see also Pauketat, 2013; and *DOE*, pp. 158–163, 456–481).

Ownership of such goods unlocked rights of usufruct over land and resources: weapons, tools, and hunting grounds might be freely shared, but the initiatory powers to grow maize, reproduce game, or ensure luck in the chase were individually owned and jealously guarded; they were also inherited, bought, and sold. As we noted in *DOE* (p. 149), the dispossession of Native lands was based on a denial that such forms ownership counted as legal property or tenure, which European scholars and settlers insisted must be based on intensive forms of agriculture. In that context it is important to note that there is nothing "immaterial" about *sacra*, which like all forms of wealth (including what we often refer to as "landed property") are ultimately based on a combination of immaterial and highly material elements (see *DOE*, p. 363).

Such is obviously the case with grand earthworks but equally with the ceremonial "bundles" used by Great Plains societies, which include not only physical objects but accompanying dances, rituals, and songs, while on the northwest Pacific coast, such rights were fiercely contested through claims to honorific titles, captured in images emblazoned on heirloom treasures. In Kwakwaka'wakw society, for instance, ownership of a wooden feast-dish also conveyed the right to gather berries on a certain stretch of land to fill the feast-dish, which in turn afforded its owner the right to present those berries while singing a certain song at a certain feast. Feast-dishes are both corporeal and incorporeal property at the same time. While the dish itself may rot away or be burned, the names of protective spirits carved onto its surface (and onto ladles used with such dishes) are considered eternal, and images are the means of calling them to mind and contesting claims upon them (Walens, 1981, pp. 56–58).

The broader implications of all this for an analysis of social change were perceptively summarised by David Graeber (2006, p. 70):

> What has passed for "materialism" in traditional Marxism—the division between material "infrastructure" and ideal "superstructure"—is itself a perverse form of idealism. Granted, those who practice law, or music, or religion, or finance, or social theory, always do tend to claim that they are dealing with something higher, more abstract, than those who plant onions, blow glass or operate sewing machines. But it's not really true. The actions involved in the production of law, poetry, etc., are just as material as any others. Once you acknowledge the simple dialectical point that what we take to be self-identical objects are really processes of action, then it becomes pretty obvious that such actions are always (a) motivated by meanings (ideas) and (b) always proceed through a concrete medium (material), and that while all systems of domination seem to propose that "No, this is not true, really there is some pure domain of law, or truth, or grace, or theory, or finance capital, that floats above it all," such claims are, to use an appropriately earthy metaphor, bullshit.

I will now move on to Widerquist and McCall's request that I clarify what is meant by our claim that things such as inequality and the state have "no origin." The explanation is in the title of the book (or at least, its English edition, which has proved difficult to render in certain other languages), which reflects our dissatisfaction with endless and largely inconclusive debates about the "dawn" or "origins" of this or that specific institution. These debates assume that the ultimate explanation for any given phenomenon (patriarchy, civilization, warfare, the city, the state, even inequality itself) lies in identifying the precise moment when "it" first came into existence.

As Karl Popper (1945) showed long ago, the problem with this way of thinking about history or social science is that it transforms its object of study from a category into an essence: that is, from being the product of a particular cultural context (which categories like "civilization," "complexity," and "the state" most certainly are) to a status that is almost God-like in its infallibility and transcendence. Instead of trying to critically untangle what particular combination of material factors and conceptual processes gave rise to such a category in the first place, we find ourselves trying to picture its deep "origin" in ancient Egypt, the Neolithic Fertile Crescent, or any number of other remote locations. The effect is to reify our own categories of thought, rather than subjecting them to critical and historical scrutiny.

Anthropology—and by extension archaeology—are in some ways distinguished as disciplines by their unwillingness to tell stories that begin by dividing human experience into categories like "economy," "religion," "gender" or "politics" (or indeed "materialism" and "idealism") and to insist, instead, on trying to find the lived reality of one within the other: the politics of gender, the sanctity of private property, the materiality of religion, and so on. To posit the isolated "dawn" or "origin" of any one such facet of human experience is really to engage in a kind of make-believe or thought experiment, where we pretend temporarily that the others either don't exist or are somehow unimportant.

There is nothing inherently wrong with thought experiments, but they have to be judged by the usefulness and clarity of their results. With regard to understanding the nature and origins of "the state," these have hardly been stellar. For well over a century social scientists and political philosophers have been puzzling over this question. All that is generally agreed upon is that "the early state" first emerged independently in a series of unconnected locations, widely scattered in time and space (Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica, and Peru). Ever since these early or "archaic" states became known, modern scholars have attempted to fit their development into an explanatory framework devised largely in the nineteenth century, and strongly influenced by the history of modern European nation-states. So far, these attempts have failed to produce anything like a coherent theory, to the extent that the whole issue remains something of an enigma. Even those who find such studies useful must concede that any attempt to define the common characteristics of early states "inevitably paints with a frightfully broad brush" (Scheidel, 2013, p. 16).

None of this is to say that we can do without categories and classifications altogether. The challenge it is to define them in ways that at least try to escape the most obvious conceptual trap of casting one's own familiar values and institutions as a timeless standard against which all other human achievements must be measured.

By approaching things differently, could we learn something new? Most of our chapter 10, "Why the state has no origin," was devoted to exploring an alternative framework for comparing regimes of domination across time and space. Since none of the commentators mention this framework, I will briefly summarise it.

What is commonly referred to as "the state," we suggest, is not a single thing but a confluence of three institutional forms (sovereignty, administration, and competitive politics) that have entirely different histories, do not always come together, and—as some political economists have been arguing (e.g. Strange, 1996; Bayart, 2007)—are now in the process of once again drifting apart. All three forms are elaborations of elementary modes of social domination, which operate at a variety of social scales, including domestic households, families, or local groups.

Sovereignty, in the last resort, is control over the legitimate use of violence in a given territory. Absolute sovereigns, just like domestic patriarchs, stand outside and beyond the moral order that applies to others in their domain; and throughout history, most kingdoms and empires have modelled themselves on the patriarchal organization of households (patrimonial systems in the sense of Weber 1978 [1922]). Administrative power rests on control over the circulation of knowledge or information—which may be esoteric just as well as bureaucratic (and, of course, most bureaucracy has an esoteric aspect, too)—while competitive politics comes down to the exercise of individual charisma: one's ability to attract followers and put down rivals (most often, these days, in the form of national elections). Access to violence, knowledge, and charisma, we propose, define the very possibilities of social domination, and offer a more productive—dare we say, scientific—framework for comparing and contrasting systems of domination.

For some decades now archaeology has offered direct evidence for the small-scale origins of these forms of domination in various parts of the world, e.g. the tiny kingdoms of pre-dynastic Egypt (Baines, 1995), the village bureaucracies of Late Neolithic (Halaf-'Ubaid period), Mesopotamia (Akkermans & Verhoeven, 1995), or the warrior aristocracies of Bronze Age Europe (Treherne, 1995). Importantly, these same institutional features appear to be either lacking or highly attenuated in at least some (but by no means all) of the world's earliest known cities. Consider, for instance, the "mega-sites" of Trypillia. Ukraine (Müller et al., 2016), the first cities of the Indus Valley (Green, 2020), or the later phases of urban life at Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico (Froese et al., 2014; and more generally, *DOE*, chs 8 and 9). In short, there is simply no sense in which literate administration, urbanisation, and sovereignty come together to form a universal stage of human political development that might be characterised as the "origins of the state": this turns out to be a teleological projection of our own institutions onto the remote past.

One of the more peculiar objections to our broader arguments (echoed, to some degree, in Annelien De Dijn's comments) is that since the world today is covered from end to end by contiguous, bureaucratically ordered nation-states, this must somehow represent the logical unfolding of processes that began millennia ago in the deep human past. But there is no particular reason to imagine the global distribution of modern nation-states in this way (other than, perhaps, the fact that nationalists tend to do so; Anderson, 1983), since their "spread" has been anything but evolutionary in character (assuming we reject a Spencerian definition of

evolution as "survival of the fittest"). More often it has been the result of imposition by armed conquest, colonialism, and empire, abetted by enslavement, enclosure, and the mass murder and dispossession of entire populations.

To insist we continue searching in the ancient past for the "origins" of something vaguely defined as "the state" has the unfortunate side-effect of sublimating a great deal of that recent violence, which seems another good reason to stop doing it and try another approach. In that very particular sense, I can only agree with De Dijn's assertion that "the history of the past two hundred years has far more to teach us than the dawn of human society"—and the lessons are not especially pretty. The parallel project of investigating a more remote human past is not in any way diminished by this, since for us at least it was never a matter of "digging for utopia" but of freeing us to think about the possibilities of human social arrangements, unhampered by dogmatic interpretations of obsolete theories based on poor data.

Lastly, an endless quest for the origins of something called "the state" leaves largely unspecified the particular and very different forms of power involved in, say, the rise of the Egyptian Old Kingdom and the formation of classic Maya polities. This lack of a clear or systematic framework of comparison in turn renders the disappearance or reconfiguration of such polities incomprehensible in social or historical terms. As their chronological labels suggest, those "intermediate" and "post-classic" periods in which people of the past moved away from or against specific forms of organized power are instead recast as periods of "collapse," or as temporary interruptions ("lag-times") in a meta-historical process of "state power" consolidating itself. But this is simply myth-making.

No doubt, part of the reason why such thinking persists is that so-called "archaic states" are still often conceptualised as bringing utterly novel forms of power into being, as if such forms of power simply appeared from nowhere. As Michael Mann (1986, ch. 2) noted, following Pierre Clastres, this idea finds no support in the anthropology of recent stateless societies ("there were *no* general origins of the state and stratification," writes Mann (1986, p. 49), "It is a false issue" (see also Graeber & Sahlins, 2017). One of our main goals was to show that it has little basis in archaeological evidence either, which presents just the opposite impression of societies "before the state"—a picture of Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic communities that were no strangers to our three forms of domination, or in fact, to "revolution"—if we define that term broadly, in Tolstoy's sense in *The Russian Revolution* (1907, p. 2)—of a "change that occurs in a people's relation to Power"; see *DOE* chs 3–6).

Widerquist and McCall have some other questions, but I believe the answers to most of them, like much of the above, can already be found in a faithful reading of *DOE*. On the matter of "immediate return" hunter-gatherers, they seem to have largely missed the point of our discussion—and they are not the only commentators to do so. It is true that most archaeologists and social scientists have long ago jettisoned the idea of treating contemporary groups such as the Ju/'hoansi, Mbuti, or Hadza as a universal baseline for human social organisation or as an ancient evolved pattern; but by no means all have done so, and the idea remains quite pervasive both in other fields and in the popular imagination (see e.g. Singh & Glowacki, 2022).

Since Widerquist and McCall cite the foundational work of James Woodburn (1982) on this topic, it is important to recall that Woodburn himself did not consider "immediate-return" systems to represent an egalitarian baseline of social development. In fact, he took seriously the notion that at least some were the historical outcome of foraging groups becoming "encapsulated" by agricultural and herding societies—in which wealth in land or cattle could be freely transformed into power over others—and developing strongly oppositional forms of organization (based on sharing and levelling) in response, as a way of preventing the outbreak of similar inequalities within their own societies (Woodburn, 1988; see also Denbow, 1999). If this is the case, then it is another example of cultural schismogenesis.

As we note in *DOE* (pp. 158–163), Woodburn (1988) also observed that the egalitarianism of "immediate return" foraging societies does not always extend to intangible forms of property, which can become the basis of durable social inequalities based on age and gender. Recall, here, our second elementary form of domination: control over knowledge, in this case sacred knowledge deemed central to the reproduction of life, access to which is tightly controlled through rites of initiation. Almost three decades ago, Stephen Shennan (1996) developed this point with further ethnographic examples, and noted the implications for "materialist" understandings of social equality, narrowly defined:

> Most of the arguments in favour of forager egalitarianism centre on the importance of food-sharing as evidence of equality, and when they acknowledge the existence of hierarchically organized forager societies [they] account for these in terms of ecologically specific possibilities for the control of material resources (cf. Alden Smith & Codding, 2021, and discussion above). While the relevance of material resources cannot be denied, the assumption that they are the only resources that matter arises from an entrenched view derived from nineteenth-century analyses of social class that material disparities are the only significant ones, so the lack of concern with them on the part of most foragers, combined with the importance of food-sharing, means they must be egalitarian.

But within these very same societies, Shennan (1996, p. 329) notes, differential access to sacred knowledge plays a "central social role":

> In many such societies the transmission of ritual "knowledge" and control over it through initiation and other rites are one of the main social focuses of the people concerned. In fact, the control of cultural transmission of such knowledge is often the only legitimate locus for the generation of inequality among the members of forager societies, not the material goods or food with which anthropologists have been so obsessed. Furthermore, in some contexts such control is actually hereditary, again in complete contrast to what are usually asserted as the key characteristics of forager societies.

With regard to the place of Christopher Boehm's work in *DOE*, I would encourage Widerquist and McCall to look again at what we wrote. They allege, wrongly,

that we reject Boehm's central thesis that Pleistocene humans were already highly self-conscious political actors, capable of formulating and implementing strategies of counter-power. By contrast, we explicitly embrace this point (pp. 86–87, 93, 129) and seek to take forward its implications through an empirical analysis of the archaeological record (at least, as far back as we feel such direct evidence for social organisation can reasonably take us), as opposed to making assumptions (yes) about the universal egalitarianism of human societies before the invention of agriculture. We find abundant testimony that humans before the adoption of farming were already experimenting consciously with a wide range of political and economic arrangements, both hierarchical and egalitarian, and often moved quite flexibly between such alternatives on a seasonal basis (chs. 3–4). However disappointing or confusing it may be for Boehm's defenders (and we count ourselves among them), it is undeniable that assumptions (taking no account of the archaeological record) about the universal existence of an egalitarian stage of human social development, prior to the appearance of farming, appear in Boehm's work, despite going against the grain of his own main insight (for avoidance of doubt, see Boehm, 2001, pp. 3–4).

In addition to proposing three elementary forms of domination (control of violence, control of knowledge, and personal charisma), *DOE* also posits three elementary forms of human freedom: to move away, to disobey, and to dismantle and redesign the social worlds we inhabit. As Widerquist and McCall correctly note, this formulation (and especially the freedom to disobey; see also Boehm, 1993, p. 230) is entirely consistent with Boehm's analysis of "Reverse Dominance Hierarchy" and his contention that, in social and cognitive terms, the human line became distinct from our closest primate relatives (the African great apes) partially by developing collective strategies to constrain potential bullies and dominators (see also Mann, 1982, p. 67; *DOE*, p. 86; and note that Boehm defines his theory explicitly as being grounded in "political," "psychological," and "moral" factors, as opposed to what he terms "materialistic" explanations for the emergence of egalitarian social arrangements; Boehm, 1993, p. 227).

We would not see the exercise of such elementary freedoms as being historically confined to small-scale foraging societies, or indeed, as particularly characteristic of small groups in general. As we note elsewhere, quite the opposite seems more likely to be true: "the most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale—the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude—the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence" (Graeber & Wengrow, 2018). On this general question of scale, it seems worth noting that a sea-change is currently taking place in evolutionary anthropology, which is now coming to terms with what many ethnographers insisted all along: that recent hunter-gatherers (even under conditions of displacement and demographic decline) are not usually confined to isolated bands, but keep open the possibility of social relations with some thousands of other individuals regarded as potential kin—sharing rights, debts, and other obligatory relationships—despite the fact that they are geographically dispersed, have little common genetic inheritance, and often speak different first languages (Bird et al., 2019; see also *DOE*, pp. 278–281).

Our presentation of the "three freedoms" is clearly at odds with the perspective offered in De Dijn's (2020) book *Freedom: An Unruly History*, which traces a history of the concept of freedom that remains strictly confined to the western canon of political philosophy and constitutional theory, from ancient Greece to modern America. As Orlando Patterson (1991; strangely omitted from De Dijn, 2020) showed in enormous detail, it is a lineage that begins in societies that took chattel slavery for granted, and if followed to its logical conclusion, more or less obliges one to conclude (as De Dijn does both in her comments here and in her book) that "if we want to foster human freedom, we had better think about how to do so within the context of bureaucratic societies."

Against the backdrop of such claims, I am unable to agree with those who find in "materialism" a means of naturalising the most violent and intractable inequalities of the present, by insisting that a society of significantly greater justice and equality is only possible if we somehow turn back the clock of civilization to a primordial (largely imaginary) stage of human social development. This seems to me nothing less than a subversion of the central goal of a historical materialist approach, which is not to tighten the chains that bind us to those particular structures and forms of reality but to liberate us from their grasp.

Marx and Engels developed historical materialism as a radical exploration of the potential for human freedom. Pre-agricultural societies were believed to have lived in a state of "primitive communism," not consciously created but the necessary outcome of an existence defined by the struggle for material survival ("bare subsistence"). The original division of society into classes thus came as a tragic necessity, which enabled progress in the arts and sciences at the price of a separation between those with the leisure to experiment or create and the masses whose fate was to toil in their service and obey their every whim. But freedoms lost would one day be recuperated through a dialectical process leading (via feudalism and capitalism) towards the birth of collective self-consciousness among a revolutionary proletariat.

Today, the rudiments of this story (generally with the last part removed) are less likely to be told by political radicals than by conservative thinkers, for whom its ultimate lesson is that the original separation of "master" and "servant" must continue indefinitely—until the sun explodes, as David liked to say—and that there really is no alternative. War means peace, freedom means slavery, and that boot of impersonal bureaucracy really will keep stomping on your face, and your children's faces, forever. It's important to stress that the seeds of this striking ideological reversal, which we are now witnessing, were sown much earlier, around the middle of the eighteenth century, when Anne-Robert Turgot and the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment first proposed the classification of human societies according to "modes of subsistence" (hunters, shepherds, farmers, commercial civilisation) as a framework for understanding the course of human history.

As we show in ch. 2 of *DOE*, this framework—upon which historical materialists would later erect their theory of human freedom—began life as something entirely different: as part of a conservative backlash against the "Indigenous critique" of European civilization. And ironically, it is under the guise of a "materialist" approach to human history that this backlash continues right up to the present day. What it insists on is basically this: Indigenous critics such as the seventeenth

century Wendat statesman Kandiaronk—or their modern counterparts, say, Ailton Krenak or Davi Kopenawa—may have whatever opinions they like about the state of contemporary civilization. But what they say or think is ultimately of little value, because the "traditional" nature of the societies they come from renders all such perspectives equal insofar as they are all equally irrelevant to the concerns of modern, progressive nations.

In fact, so the argument goes today, just as it did back then, the reason why such people can hold radically creative ideas about the potential for human freedom, participatory democracy, alternatives to capitalism, or a more healthy relationship with the biosphere—*Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, as Krenak (2020) puts it—is not because their thinking is more advanced, but precisely because it comes from a world that is "behind" us in every meaningful sense ("meaningful," for such self-proclaimed "materialists," usually boils down to the technological capacity for capturing energy and resources, so of course, the logic of the argument is itself rather circular). Although few these days would dare to say it outright, the prevailing assumption is that Indigenous critics offer us little more than a nostalgic window onto earlier phases or stages of human history, which we may variously choose to admire or despise, but to which there is ultimately no return.

In political terms, then, perhaps the larger question at stake here is whether historical materialism, as a theory of human liberation, can really hope to retain any force, relevance, or even coherence, while clinging to empirically bankrupt systems of social and chronological classification forged in the high tide of European colonialism and commercial expansion with precisely the opposite ends in view. As Robin D.G. Kelley points out to me, this echoes questions first raised by Cedric Robinson (2021 [1983]) who argued that genealogies of capitalism based on universal stages of development (defined by forces of production) have largely ignored the lived reality of capitalist exploitation, which from the beginning was rooted not just in unequal access to land, technology, or other material resources but also in the systemic derivation of social and economic value by certain human beings from the racialized identity of other human beings.

With this in mind, it becomes critical to understand the specific nature of cultural schismogenesis under conditions of capitalist extraction and the rise of the modern nation-state: in particular, how the hardening of social identities into racial types established forms of structural violence (and modes of resistance) that long pre-date the industrial revolution and remain with us in the here-and-now: transcending the (stadial) timelines of "orthodox" historical materialism (Robinson, 2021 [1983], pp. 24–28; cf. *DOE*, pp. 188–190). Insofar as historical materialism remains concerned with the study of past events, not as a story of humans "running blindly for their chains," but as a project of emancipation able to accommodate new sources of evidence, I believe our work in *DOE* is fully compatible with its aims and principles. On this point, and to conclude, I wish to turn back briefly to De Dijn's (2020) history of freedom. In that extensive study, the only non-western example of a concept of freedom to receive a mention is the concept of *merdeka* (see Reid, 1998), but this single example is instructive nonetheless. *Merdeka* can be traced back to Wajo'—a confederation of seafaring societies on the south Sulawesi peninsula—and in fact seems to correspond quite neatly to our formulation of the three freedoms in *DOE*:

> According to the [Sanskrit] chronicles, one of the founding fathers of the Wajo' had announced "the people of Wajo' are free; free from birth." The Wajo' were also quite clear on what they meant by this. To secure freedom, their chronicles note, three things are crucial: "firstly not to interfere with people's wishes; secondly not to forbid the expression of opinions; thirdly not to prevent [people going] to the south, the north, the west, the east, upstream or downstream.

Could this be a straw in the wind, pointing the way to entirely new (material) histories of human freedom, still to be written?

David Wengrow

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