

We Make Our Own History, but in Circumstances of Other People's Choosing: Intercultural Materialism in Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*

Enzo Rossi
University of Amsterdam

Preprint – Penultimate Version (September 2023)
Forth. as part of a 'Critical Exchange' in *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2024

The problem

The wide-ranging debate surrounding David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021, hereinafter *DOE*) attests to the landmark level of their contribution. Much of this debate has focused on the book's key historical claims: that complexity in human societies need not imply hierarchy, that Indigenous North American 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. In this essay I will not add to the chorus of those who wish to probe the book's empirics. I focus on the more abstract social-theoretic picture that emerges from Graeber and Wengrow's empirical claims instead.

If there is one overarching theoretical question the book answers, it is this: "We might ask what ultimately determines the shape a society takes: economic factors, organizational imperatives or cultural meanings and ideas?" (*DOE*, 206). Graeber and Wengrow put forward an answer: "societies [are] in effect self-determining, building and reproducing themselves primarily with reference to each other" (*ibid.*). One might interpret that answer as a variant of the third option, "cultural meanings and ideas". Several commentators understood it that way, sometimes going as far as accusing Graeber and Wengrow of idealism (Lindisfarne and Neale 2021, Scheidel 2022). Graeber and Wengrow themselves, however, label their answer a "fourth possibility" (*ibid.*). 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 another way, the question is whether cultural ideation can help explain social change in ways that do not posit non-material causal factors (cf. Aytac & Rossi 2022). I submit that the answer has to do with how each culture is materially impacted by other cultures, and how this leads to socio-political differentiation under similar environmental and technological conditions. In a nutshell, a culture's ideation is a material constraint for other cultures that come into contact with it.

In considering this issue I will at times squeeze and stretch the argument beyond the form it takes in *DOE*, in the interest of clarity, and admittedly to indulge my theorist's tendency to prioritise smooth abstractions over fine-grained—but still grainy—empirics. In the next section I lay out the thesis I attribute to Graeber and Wengrow, which I will call *intercultural materialism*. My exposition aims to establish two points: that *DOE* offers a novel theory of the interplay between material constraints and

human ideation, and that the charges of idealism are largely misplaced. In the third and final section I raise some concerns for intercultural materialism, as a way to canvass a few questions for further research.

Intercultural materialism

The title of this essay contains the gist of my understanding of *DOE*'s key theoretical insight. It takes its cue from a famous passage by Marx—one invoked by Graeber and Wengrow in support of their position (*DOE*: 227), but also one used as an indictment by some of their critics (Scheidel 2022: 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: 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. The continuation of Marx's passage suggests how 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” (*ibid.*). 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 talk about broadening rather than replacing Marx's picture because I maintain that 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 to the picture. Strictly speaking, one might even say that historical materialism is a subset of intercultural materialism, insofar as there are significant cultural changes between different historical eras. This may well be too quick, though. One should at least problematise Marx's commitment to prioritising explanations for social change internal to societies. What we need, then is a “looser understanding of Marx's internalism” (Miller 1984: 243). It may just be, though, that classical historical materialism suffers from a residual Hegelian tendency to focus on a single or primary locus of historical development, despite Marx's various pronouncements about conquest and other interactions between societies. But what I suggest here is that the priority of the internal is not a constitutive feature of the theory. And so intercultural materialism is even less of an internalist view than, e.g., those advanced by the many Marxists who focus on centre-periphery dynamics in the development of capitalism. That may well be an apt lens for understanding capitalism or imperialism, but it seems to me that 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 any given 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.

An empirical illustration from *DOE* should help bringing intercultural materialism into focus. In a chapter largely devoted to illustrating some problems with traditional understandings of the Marxian notion of modes of production, Graeber and Wengrow discuss cultural variation between Indigenous North American groups of the Pacific Coast before European colonisation. As we will see shortly, 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.

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. Let us start with what these societies had in common. First, in keeping with an important theme that runs through much of *DOE*, it is worth reminding ourselves that 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, etc.). Rather, these are societies anthropologists usually call ‘complex hunter-gatherers’ or ‘affluent foragers’: they do not practice agriculture (probably deliberately, as Graeber and Wengrow suggest), but they manage resources in ways that allow significant accumulation of wealth, and they are socially stratified, albeit in significantly different ways.

This is where we must start discussing differences. In terms of their use of natural resources they, the differences between the two culture areas were 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 run aground quickly, especially when we consider that, despite the fact that a more fish-based diet would have been an option for the Californians, the cultural differences were vast. One such difference stands out the most: the Northwesterners practiced 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 position 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 are characterised by an emphasis on hard work, self-denial, sobriety, and an unusual emphasis on money and individual private property. The accompanying material culture eschews adornment and conspicuous displays of wealth, while promoting its accumulation.

How to explain these profound cultural differences between contiguous peoples who have access to similar natural resources and technologies? Simply to say that the variation occurs within a range of possibilities determined by environmental factors is probably correct, but not particularly informative, let alone explanatory. To put it bluntly, it amounts to little more than saying that the cultural chips fall randomly within the space afforded by environmental constraints, be they natural or technological.

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 began by noting that most societies expressly refuse to take on culture traits that are known and available to them, often even in cases where doing so forecloses some material benefit. As Graeber and Wengrow pithily put it, cultures are “structures of refusal” (*DOE*: 197). Culture areas, then, emerge by schismogenesis: to a significant extent, 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. This means that the political choices of a society

work as material constraints on the political choices of neighbouring societies.

I take it that is the sense in which Graber and Wengrow say that we should understand modes of production as partly having to do with the production of people, as in 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.” (DOE: 213). Cultures are exposed to how other cultures produce people, and tend to choose to produce different kinds of people. To recognise this fact is not to posit ideation as a force capable of overcoming material constraints, but simply to identify the existence of (other) cultures as an often overlooked material constraint and source of socio-political possibilities. Recognising this causal factor does not replace but supplements the familiar ones to do with environmental and technological factors.

If that seems hard to accept, consider that we may think of other cultures are just another technological constraint: following one of the founders of analytic Marxism, G.A. Cohen, we may think of political institutions and other power structures as “social technologies” (Cohen 2009: 55ff)—deliberately designed systems that channel the raw material of human drives and motivations for specific purposes. That is a process no more driven by ideas and no less constrained by facts than the design of the steam engine or the transistor.

Questions, and prospects

We have seen how intercultural materialism, like historical materialism, takes seriously the fact that the political choices of others—be they our predecessors or our neighbours—has an impact on our own, much as the environment and the available technologies do. That helps explaining how ideation can play a causal role in a materialist conception of social change. But it also raises some further questions, chiefly to do with how to individuate the relevant units in the causal stories intercultural materialists may want to tell. In the remainder of this last section I pose some of those questions, as an agenda for further research.

The first issue that comes to mind concerns the initial circumstances that may or may not create the conditions for schismogenesis. Let’s grant that the Yurok and Kwakiutl deliberately define and design their societies in opposition to each other, within the range of options afforded by those and other material conditions. And, for the sake of the argument, let’s add the simplifying assumption that the previous, undifferentiated culture area was not in contact with any other culture areas. This scenario invites a number of questions. How do we go from a uniform culture area to one 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 at least 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 the ways in which intercultural materialism may contribute to debates on 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: 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, as Richard Miller points out, Marx’s description of the transition from the Roman Empire to feudalism does not involve changes in environmental factors nor in technology. Rather, the story is one in which political choices created

differences in the distribution of the benefits of imperial expansion, leading to the birth of a class of absentee landlords and one of non-enslaved tenant farmers, and so to the destruction of the traditional Roman society of independent household farms (ibid.: 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, then, 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.

That thumbnail sketch of how intercultural materialism may fit within fairly familiar Marxist categories is an indication of why I think the accusations of idealism levelled against Graeber and Wengrow are off the mark. That is also why I do not think any of the questions canvassed above present insurmountable difficulties, at least to the extent that the questions 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, how to avoid theoretical formalism when explaining social change (Banaji 2010: 55ff), and so on. 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.

References

- Aytac, Ugur, and Enzo Rossi. 2022. “Ideology Critique without Morality: A Radical Realist Approach.” *American Political Science Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001216>.
- Banaji, Jairus. 2010. *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*. Historical Materialism Book Series, v. 25. Leiden ; Boston: Brill.
- Cohen, G.A. 2009. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Graeber, David, and David Wengrow. 2022. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Penguin.
- Lindisfarne, Nancy, and Neal, Jonathan. 2021. “All Things Being Equal: A Critique of David Graeber and David Wengrow’s *The Dawn of Everything*.” 2021. <https://theecologist.org/2021/dec/17/all-things-being-equal>.
- Miller, Richard W. 1984. *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power, and History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scheidel, Walter. 2022. “Resetting History’s Dial? A Critique of David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.” *Cliodynamics*.
<https://doi.org/10.21237/C7clio0057266>.