

## The Complexity of Graeber and Wengrow's Argument

The question that Graeber and Wengrow are trying to answer evolves through the first four chapters of the *Dawn of Everything*. They start by questioning the origins of human inequality. Then, they note that many early human societies lived in a seasonal manner where societies were far from equal in certain parts of the year so there was not a specific origin to inequality. So, they transition to asking how we got stuck in a permanently hierarchical society. Then also transition to trying to find the origins of permanent private property. While doing all of this, they are trying to disprove common misperceptions of early human history by considering what the actual evidence shows. This changing narrative demonstrates how many misconceptions there are about prehistoric society – basically, everything assumed to be true is wrong. It also demonstrates how difficult piecing things together with minimal archaeological details is as well as the complexity of early human society.

By the end of chapter three, they have already debunked the teleological model of societal evolution, which states that agriculture is a necessary step in going from bands of hunter-gatherers to a state. They do this with the example of seasonal hierarchies and Stonehenge. These examples also mean that inequality comes and goes, so this “confirms that searching for ‘the origins of social inequality’ ... is asking the wrong question” (Graeber, Wengrow, 115). They switch their question to “how did we get stuck,” noting that the evidence seems to point to the idea that early humans assembled and dismantled hierarchical societies regularly and therefore had more political self-consciousness than modern humans (115). This idea completely goes

against the traditional thought that humans have evolved and societies have progressively become more complex. Instead of being primitive hunters and gatherers, it seems that early societies changed their social structures based on what worked best at different times in the year. They also understood that a few people having too much power for too long was detrimental to society.

Graeber and Wengrow find that the common wisdom about early human society is so wrong that asking about the origins of inequality doesn't make sense because it has always existed, but early humans were just better at managing it. In chapter four, they start dissecting why we have the understanding we do of early human society and how scholars went wrong. They discuss how Marshall Sahlins' "Original Affluent Society" may accurately represent some African tribes, but it completely ignores all other people. This raises another problem with common anthropological thought – that people try to imagine all early humans as similar societies. In chapter three they show that even season variation can come in many different forms. After describing how Poverty Point, Louisiana again bucks the teleological idea of evolution by again showing that a lack of agriculture did not stop people from complex gatherings and maybe even trade, Graeber and Wengrow's tone significantly changes. They take a striking direct shot at other anthropologists that they have been hinting at throughout the book: "Scholars and professional researchers, on the other hand, have to actually make a considerable effort to remain so ignorant" (Graeber and Wengrow, 147). They show that many indigenous thinkers have long said that the agricultural argument for human development makes no sense. They also note that people who support the agricultural revolution idea will say that these are just exceptions, but back then almost everyone was an exception.

The common understanding of early human society is so wrong that Graeber and Wengrow are not even able to ask the right questions about it at the beginning of the book. They have already shown that the idea that agriculture is a necessary step in the process from hunter-gatherer to civilization is wrong and that early humans may have been more imaginative and smarter at organizing their societies than modern humans.

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