

# As Deep as it is Vast: An Introduction to *The Dawn of Everything* in Early America



We have become more accustomed to thinking about a [“vast early America”](#) in recent years. In place of a “colonial America” that was implicitly English and presumed to radiate from Jamestown and Plymouth, early America’s spatial dimensions now encompass competing empires, Atlantic and Pacific worlds, and at times even the interiors of other continents. Early America’s chronological parameters have remained more stubbornly fixed, adhering mainly to the beginning of colonization or more rarely reaching back to the period corresponding to the European Middle Ages.

The scale of *The Dawn of Everything* is of a different order. The book offers a history of humanity that extends some 30,000 years in the past and across the inhabited world. This expansive scope provides the authors, the late anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow, the means to demolish the “prejudices, dressed up as facts, or even as laws of history” (11) that have long guided scholarly and popular understanding of the human past.

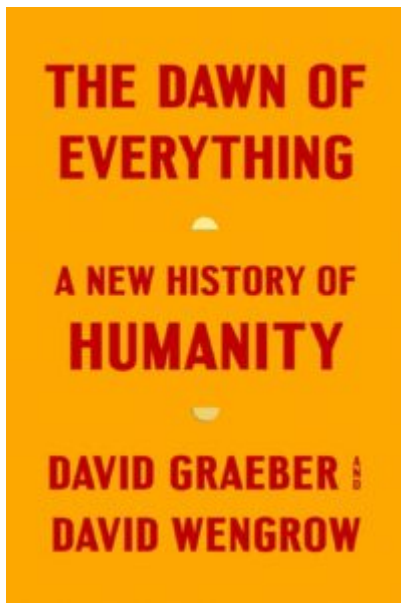


Figure 1: David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

In the eighteenth century, writers such as A.-R.-J. Turgot and Adam Smith took what had been invidious distinctions about proper land use and the rationality of dispossession found in the work of John Locke, among others, and transformed them into a theory about how societies developed over time. So-called savages

hunted, barbarians tended flocks, the civilized farmed, and at the apex of this sociocultural progression—or evolution—came European commercial society. Each stage was defined by modes of obtaining food and transforming the environment, increasing size and complexity, and different ways of thinking and speaking. That it was women who farmed in eastern North America disqualified them from practicing true agriculture in the minds of interested categorizers. What began as a justification of colonization and philosophical conjecture became the basis of more scientific hypotheses as scholars sought empirical evidence through excavation or collection to confirm evolutionary theories. The discarding of older labels and substitution of other, still pejorative, terms such as “modern” and “developing” did little to change the story. The invention of agriculture in most versions of this conventional narrative was a trap, one that multiplied the number of calories human beings could produce and allowed for the growth of urban settlements and specialization of labor, but which yoked human beings to longer and harder work under new hierarchies of rulers.



Figures 2a and 2b: Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire: The Savage State* and *The Consummation of Empire*. Thomas Cole, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#) and via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Graeber and Wengrow, however, insist that human beings are not trapped. Inequality is not a necessary price of “civilization.” This insistence pits them against the long line of writers, including Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—whose very different arguments about human beings’ natural condition and the effects of society and government formed another layer on which theories of sociocultural evolution rested—to contemporary writers of sweeping

histories such as Jared Diamond, Stephen Pinker, and Yuval Noah Harari. *The Dawn of Everything* argues that some of the most important archaeology of the last several decades reveals monuments and cities arising without agriculture or apparent hierarchy. Different forms of subsistence and exchange existed alongside one another for millennia. Zones of cultural influence based on ritual knowledge existed without states, as at Poverty Point in today's Louisiana some 3,600 years ago or the more recent Hopewell sites of the Ohio Valley, and some societies established hierarchies confined to particular places or times. The archaeological record, in Graeber and Wengrow's telling, shows that human beings have experimented with social-political-ritual orders throughout their history.



Figure 3: Hopewell Figurines. Little Miami Valley, Ohio, 200 BCE-500 CE, Terra Cotta. Daderot, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The Americas occupy a particularly important place in the authors' argument, an "independent point of comparison" with societies in Eurasia (451). They provide evidence that the development of agriculture did not foreordain the rise of monarchical states or highly stratified societies. When hierarchical and warlike societies did develop, Graeber and Wengrow stress, peoples across the Americas rejected the models they offered.

It is an old tradition in Euro-American literature to use Indigenous societies as mirrors to evaluate their own societies' shortcomings; but Graeber and Wengrow avoid romanticization and stress historical change, driven by human choices, in their interpretations of archaeological evidence. At times, they point to "schismogenesis," a process in which rival societies continually formulated social practices, cultural forms, and values in opposition to one another. The authors devote a chapter to contrasting the Indigenous societies of the Northwest Coast and California in these terms. The theory presents an alternative to models that presume some seemingly natural process of fission and divergence, presenting "culture areas" as the products of political debates and decisions. In other societies—Tlaxcaltecs in central Mexico, southeastern peoples who turned their back on the Mississippian chiefdoms, and the Haudenosaunee, among others—the authors see varieties of an Indigenous republican tradition. In her essay below, Robbie Ethridge questions an aspect of this argument. Even as such claims risk distorting Indigenous categories of

meaning, they complement work that has centered Indigenous politics, borders, and sovereignty.

Not only were the Native societies that colonizers encountered the “products of centuries of political conflict and self-conscious debate” (452), Indigenous people engaged Europeans in this debate. The template for sociocultural evolution, Graeber and Wengrow argue, was first formulated in rebuttal to what they call “the Indigenous Critique.” They refer to the record, especially pronounced in French missionary and literary sources, of Native speakers criticizing European societies for their inequality and lack of freedom. The form their argument takes opens it to criticism. They claim the Indigenous Critique propelled the Enlightenment, but the authors have not read as deeply in Euro-American cultural and intellectual history as they have in archaeology. They substitute a typology of liberty in place of historical analysis. Scholars will also continue to debate—as do Barbara Alice Mann and Gordon Sayre in their essays below—whether they place undue weight on the words of the literary character Adario as a faithful transcription of the words of the Wendat traveler and statesman Kandiaronk.

As for any ambitious synthesis, specialists will find fodder for objection—the several essays below articulate some of these. Regardless of the persuasiveness of any of Graeber and Wengrow’s particular interpretations, *The Dawn of Everything* provides a framework that engages with “big history” or “deep history” while avoiding explanations that flirt with biological, demographic, environmental, or technological determinism. It provides, instead, archaeological (and some ethnographic) evidence of sociopolitical experimentation, and thus of human decisions, and perhaps of human ideals. It is a point that both Daniel K. Richter and Keith Pluymers make in their essays below. Even in the absence of many identifiable individuals, it is a framework that scholars and readers should welcome, and debate, as they think about a deeper history of early America.

**Sean P. Harvey**

## **But What About the Modern World?**

The first thing one notices about *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by David Graeber and David Wengrow is that it is literally a “big book.” It comes in at a dense 526 pages, with an additional 83 pages of endnotes, and an 81-page bibliography. It is also a “big book” in the figurative sense in that Graeber and Wengrow propose to not only dismantle a social theory that has been foundational to Western thought for centuries, but also to offer an original and wholly new perspective on the history of humankind. Their central argument is that the social hierarchies, inequalities, and uneven development that characterize the modern world is not a preordained, inevitable outcome of human history. Rather, they argue that humans have always

had social choices and political consciousness, from our Paleolithic hunter and gatherer days to the early agricultural communities that dotted the globe soon after the end of the Ice Age, to the teeming social orders of Mesopotamia, the Inca, the Aztecs, the Shang Chinese dynasty, and so on. In short, humans have always experimented with social formations.

Why is this such a revelation? Because, as recounted by Graeber and Wengrow, modern Western thought is rooted in an origin myth derived from social evolution theory. With teleological aplomb, social evolution posits an orderly progression of humanity through time, and for any modern peoples left out of the benefits of the modern world, well, social evolution theory has an elegant, if wrongheaded, explanation—those people have simply not progressed as fast as others. It is a self-serving and comfortable theory for the Western world, and it relieves Western nations and peoples from facing our own culpability in the uneven development and the stark inequalities of the modern world.

Anthropologists jettisoned social evolution theory decades ago, recognizing that the social types were inaccurate and too categorical, that there was no place for history in the process, and that it was deterministic, ethnocentric, racist, and just plain wrong. Even so, one can occasionally detect remnants of the theory in modern anthropological, archaeological, and historical scholarship. Above all, it is still deeply embedded in popular thought. It is to the latter audience that Graeber and Wengrow address the book. Collecting evidence to the contrary from an awesome temporal and spatial reach, Graeber and Wengrow administer a massive and much needed slap in our collective face. It remains to be seen, however, if the blow will steer us away from social evolution theory once and for all.

Given the gargantuan nature of their evidence, it is almost inevitable that experts in various fields will take exceptions to the use of some of it. I, for one, take exception to a specific claim related to indigenous North America. Graeber and Wengrow use the ancient city and archaeological site known as Cahokia to make a point about political choices and human agency. They argue that social hierarchy, political centralization, violence, and the loss of some basic freedoms were integral to Cahokia's political and social order, and that when Cahokia declined in the fourteenth century, people did not inevitably reorganize themselves into hierarchically ordered political and social systems. Rather, they posit that former Cahokians and descendants of Cahokia, assessing their options, reorganized themselves into "tribal republics," with governing bodies consisting of councils rather than centralized authority.



Figure 4: Map Showing the Various Mississippian Cultures. Herb Roe, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Cahokia arose on the banks of the Mississippi River, near present-day St. Louis, and inaugurated an era known as the Mississippi Period (900 CE to 1700 CE). At its peak, Cahokia's influence emanated far and wide, with its greatest impact emerging in the American South. However, after offering only a brief history of the Native South from the rise of Cahokia to the end of the Mississippi Period in the seventeenth century, Graeber and Wengrow cinch their argument with an ethnographic analysis of clan assemblies among nineteenth-century Osage of the Plains, whom archaeologists believe were some of the descendants of Cahokians, and the political experiments of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), who had little, if any, connection to Cahokia. They conclude that the Haudenosaunee and Osage transformed into tribal republics because they consciously eschewed the authoritarianism of fourteenth-century Cahokia. This jump in time (over three to four hundred years) and space (into the northeast region) results in a muddled case study and, for experts in the field, an unconvincing and quizzical argument.



Figure 5: Artist's Conception of the Cahokia Mounds Site in Illinois. Herb Roe, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

A better fit, then, would be to examine what happened in the Native South after the fall of Cahokia. It is true that with the decline of Cahokia, people of the Native South reorganized their lives, but for the next 250 years after Cahokia their lives still resembled much about the chiefly order of Cahokia. Inherited authority was still the order of the day, only on a smaller scale. Rather, the transformation from hierarchically organized polities to tribal republics in the Native South occurred almost three-hundred years after Cahokia with the European invasion and the incorporation of Native people into capitalism and the global market system. The indigenous republics of the Native South were not a response to the fall of Cahokia but rather to living in a world of modern nation states. Those economic forces, and the attendant social, cultural, and political historical forces, resulted in the transformation of the small-scale, sixteenth-century hierarchical polities into the large Native nations of the American South—the Muscogeans, Cherokees, Catawbas, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, and so on. Not incidentally, I also would rather call these formidable polities Native “nations,” rather than “tribal republics” since they held the balance of power in the American South for the next 150 years.

Graeber and Wengrow cannot fully explain this transformation of the Native South because they, more or less, end their history of humankind in the early seventeenth century, before sustained European colonization in the Americas. They neither discuss how, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European colonialism bound the world within the structures of the capitalist world economic system, nor how those structures blended with and transformed everyday life for both Western and non-Western peoples, nor how those structures trend toward (if not actually mandate) uneven development. Graeber was an ardent critic of modern capitalism, and one is left wondering why they stopped their history when they did. I'll take a stab at answering this question. Throughout *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow emphasize human agency and choice and, although not completely ignoring the structures of history, they minimize materialist structures such as ecology, economy, biology, demography, technology, geography, and so on. Moving their history into the capitalist era would not only undermine their arguments about agency and choice, but it also would raise the question: are the inequalities of today due to people making bad choices or are they part and parcel of the structures of capitalism? (I understand this book was to be one of a trilogy, and perhaps they intended to grapple with modern capitalism in a subsequent volume. But with Graeber's untimely death, Wengrow, understandably, may not desire to see the other volumes to completion.)

*The Dawn of Everything* asks us to imagine a new kind of history, a history in which humans have been experimenting with social and political orders for thousands (if not millions) of years. It insists that we have choices and that, despite a deeply held and flawed Western origin myth, we are not stuck with the inequalities and inhumanities of the modern world. What it does not give us, however, is a way forward, a way to contemplate and be change agents in the modern world, a way to challenge and rectify the massive structural inequalities and uneven development of modern capitalism.

**Robbie Ethridge**

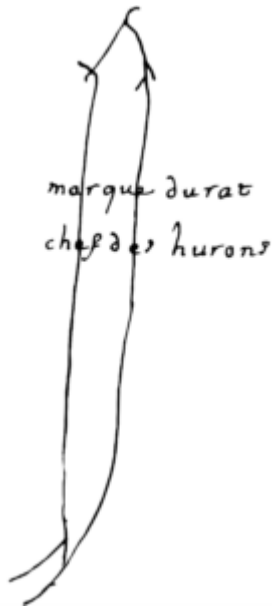
## **Hoc Tempore**

Anthropology and its subdiscipline, archaeology, have a lot of repair work to do worldwide, at least with Indigenous peoples. Since the eighteenth century, myths about racial differences and evolutionary stages were precisely what Europeans wanted to hear, so they transmuted them into Unassailable Facts. Albeit transparently self-serving, at least in Western minds, these myths justified the 500-year crime spree called colonialism.

David Graeber and David Wengrow begin some repair work in their *Dawn of Everything*, showing that Rousseau's ideas about the "noble savage" and Hobbes's concept of "war of all on all" are not, in fact, polar opposites, but are both conservative, European-excusing cover stories. They illustrate what the eighteenth-century Ohio Lenape called Europe's "scissors strategy" of conquest. The two, sharp blades of a pair of scissors look like enemies aiming to "destroy each other's edges" in closing, but all they wind up cutting is "whatever comes between them." Regardless of how they are dressed up, as modern Shawnee-Lenape scholar Steven Newcomb notes, all European philosophies cooperate to serve the "domination code."

Citing the recorded discourses of Wendat Speaker Kandiaronk (ca. 1649–1701), Graeber and Wengrow present Indigenous American Woodlanders as the real initiators of European "Enlightenment" thought, which Indigenous Americans pretty clearly were. Still, while quite eloquent, Kandiaronk—who as I have argued in another essay likely visited France—was neither unique nor first. Disdain for oppression with recommendations for freeing the self from servility was pretty much the Indigenous position from the beginning. In one of the earliest recorded instances I know of, the 1539 *cacique* of Acuera in Florida demanded to know why the Spanish adventurers before him put themselves under some distant bully, when they could just as easily walk free in a faraway place? Such Indigenous refuseniks are traditionally called "walkaways." Walking away was, and is, a regular thing.





marque durat  
chef des hurons

Figure 6: Signature of Kondiaronk on the Great Peace of Montreal 1701. Pierre5018, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Graeber and Wengrow also question the “teleology” inherent in Western schemas of culture, which follow the linear, Aristotelian requirements that all stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that stories run at breakneck speed from the starting gate to the finish line. Interestingly, linearity is not primarily a Greek proposition, but an overall monotheistic proposition birthed on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. It stems from what I call One-Thinking (or what Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen termed “Euro-Think”). Western One-Thinking is why Euro-scholars act as if they are oblivious of the existence of Other epistemologies, despite their clear, documented existence, of which many Euro-scholars are entirely aware. For instance, the Twinned Cosmos of the Americas has been relentlessly documented since at least 1724 when Joseph-François Lafitau recorded the two spirits (*âmes*, “souls”) possessed by every person: the erienta (Sky) of the uki half and the ganigonrha (Earth) of the otgon half. As unsettling as this multiplicity of sophisticated worldviews may be to Westerners accustomed to monotheism, they are stable and ancient approaches to understanding the world, consisting neither of “primitive” nor of partially evolved ideas, as Graeber and Wengrow rightly insist.

I was happy to see Graeber and Wengrow mention Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), the Lithuanian archaeologist who posited ancient Eurasian matriarchy as the dominant cultural form, noting that her findings turned out to be more accurate than her male counterparts. However, even today, talk of Gimbutas is suppressed in Euro-male archaeological circles, making *Dawn*'s mention of her sound daring. Alas, Graeber and Wengrow also accepted that matriarchal studies offer a crude theory stuck in nineteenth-century propositions, starting with Johann Bachofen (1815–1887) and ending anachronistically with Gimbutas. *Au contraire, mes amis*: matriarchal studies is today a burgeoning field, with extensive work being done in it, as matriarchal cultures can be found around the world, including the

Kerala of India, the Lahu of western China, the Minangkabau of Indonesia, the Iroquois of the American Woodlands, and the Igbo of Central Africa.



Figure 7: Iroquois women working, 1664 engraving. Public Domain [{{PD-US}}](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

I was glad to see Graeber and Wengrow call out the mistaken formulations of Jared Diamond, Steven Pinker, and others, who essentially still push the old evolutionary explanation of culture, while desperately pretending not to do so by tinkering with its diction. I was less thrilled by the habit, which is becoming fairly common in some Euro-circles, of calling Indigenous Americans, Africans, Asians, Australians, etc “our ancestors,” as though we were all in this together, just one big ol’ undifferentiated lump. I know that a standing Euro-dodge around histories of genocide and enslavement of Others is just such “we” talk, but as a friend of mine quipped to me a while back, “We, wii, oui—what are they? French?” Before the “we” stage can be honestly reached, some contrite acknowledgements, public apologies, and yes, reparations and land return must be forthcoming. Modern Euros might not be responsible for historical crime, but as long as they continue living high off the hog on the proceeds of historical crime, they bear some responsibility for it.

One of the most important insights offered by Graeber and Wengrow is that decentralization is a *cultural choice* rather than an evolutionary step on the inexorable path to statehood, the predetermined “end” of an Aristotelian tale. Graeber and Wengrow are correct that agriculture did not energize centralization or tyranny, but again, they are not the first to make this observation. Indigenous American Woodlanders deliberately kept their towns small, splitting into twinned sister towns whenever the population outgrew its britches. Typically missed by Euro-scholars is the deliberate de-gendering that accompanies decentralization. Gender play is anything but unusual in decentralized matriarchal cultures, where it is the job that is gendered, not the human being doing the job.



Figure 8: Secotan Village in North Carolina painted by John White, 1585. John White, explorer and artist, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Working from the concept of *illo tempore* (back then) to come forward into *hoc tempore* (nowadays), Graeber and Wengrow propose a multiplicity of ideas that cannot possibly be broached in this one, short essay. However, I will say that, all in all, anyone who comes out of *The Dawn of Everything* continuing to believe that stages guide the cultural history of “progress” was simply not paying attention.

**Barbara Alice Mann**

### **“Croy-moi; fais-toy Huron” (Trust me, make yourself a Huron) – From the *Dialogues Curieux***

*The Dawn of Everything* stands apart from other popular “Big History” books such as *Sapiens* and *Guns, Germs, and Steel* in part because it was written by anthropologists. David Wengrow studied archaeology at Oxford, while David Graeber studied with Marshall Sahlins at the University of Chicago. Their collaboration sets out to refute the stage theory of social development that has shaped anthropology since the eighteenth century, and to debunk the ideology of progress sacred to both capitalists and Marxists. A key weapon in their polemic is “the indigenous critique” of European imperialism and modernity.

The primary example is from the *Dialogues Curieux avec un Sauvage*, written by the Baron de Lahontan as the third part of his *Nouveaux Voyages dans l’Amérique Septentrionale* (1703). Lahontan was a military officer gone AWOL, and an anti-clerical skeptic of imperialism. I was also inspired by this text in my dissertation and first book, but my initial reaction when I read *The Dawn of Everything* was to disagree with Graeber and Wengrow’s interpretation. I

reviewed what I had written of how “the deism and primitivism” and critique of Europe that Lahontan was “placing in the mouth of the Huron character Adario in the philosophical dialogue . . . were in fact learned from the Indians.” *The Dawn of Everything* makes a very similar argument, but the way it cites other scholars of Lahontan’s text conflates the rhetorical construction of Adario with the historical individual on whom he was based.



Figure 9: Baron de Lahontan, *Dialogues Avec un Sauvage* Frontispiece, 1704. Baron de Lahontan, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Barbara A. Mann’s chapter in a collection she edited, *Native American Speakers of the Eastern Woodlands* (2001) was a key source for Graeber, who I believe wrote the section about “the Wendat Philosopher-Statesman Kondiaronk” in *The Dawn of Everything* (48-59). Mann is a scholar of Iroquois ethnohistory who celebrates the speech of “Adario” in Lahontan’s dialogue and attributes it directly to the Wendat leader. The chapter is a study of Kondiaronk’s career as a savvy negotiator, and as a Huron (also known as Wendat or Wyandot) allied with the French against the Iroquois. Mann defends the Iroquois cause and writes: “French bigotry was obvious in the word ‘Huron,’ their term for the Canadian Iroquois. ‘Huron’ is a slur compounded of the French word ‘hure’ which indicates the spiky hair on a wild boar’s head” (37). The chapter concludes with the text of “On Religion,” the first of four sections in Lahontan’s *Dialogues*. Mann edited the translation, her headnote explains, so as to eliminate archaic spellings and typography and to give the speeches a more modern vernacular style. *The Dawn of Everything* quotes from Mann’s version of the dialogue (53; Mann 67-68), but where Mann attributes the speeches to “Adario” as Lahontan did, Graeber begins each speech “Kondiaronk” (the spelling Mann used, rather than the “Kondiaronk” in Lahontan), and refers him a dozen more times in the book as an indigenous critic of European modernity.

However, the Adario who speaks in Lahontan’s dialogue is not Kondiaronk the Wendat leader. Contrary to Mann’s and Graeber’s claims, there’s no evidence Kondiaronk voyaged to France and back in the 1680s or 1690s, whereas Adario did, so as to authenticate his satire on the poverty of French peasants, the hypocrisy of Jesuit missionaries, and the sycophancy of the Sun King’s

courtiers. Graeber was aware of the genre of philosophical dialogues, but uses a straw-man rhetorical claim: "arguments attributed to figures like Kandiaronk could be written off as simple projections of Western 'noble savage' fantasies" (94-95). In fact, scholars such as Réal Ouellet and Gilbert Chinard who studied and edited Lahontan's *Dialogues* showed how "Lahontan" shifted his positions and contradicted himself. There are in effect four voices, not two, in the *Dialogues*, for Lahontan and Adario each play Devil's (or God's) advocate as they parry one another's claims.

Another key scholar of Lahontan is Georges Sioui, a Wendat from Wendake, Québec. In *Pour une Autohistoire Amerindienne*, based on his doctoral thesis in History at Université Laval in the 1980s, Sioui wrote a chapter entitled "Lahontan: Discoverer of Americity." "Americity" is a kind of continental gospel of freedom: "Lahontan . . . had simply discovered another truth. Indeed, he was like so many Europeans (particularly the French) who, after simply breathing the free air of America, had repudiated old truths."

Whereas Graeber follows Mann's lead by conflating Kandiaronk and Adario into a single historical person, Sioui claimed Lahontan himself as a kind of polymorphic avatar of Native consciousness because in the *Dialogues* the critique of imperialism fuses Lahontan and his Huron/Wendat surrogate. "Adario's message . . . through his interpreter, Lahontan, has echoed so profoundly in the hearts of other peoples" (68), Sioui asserts, but then switches directions: "Lahontan, through Adario's voice, declares that he [Lahontan] is convinced" that the French have been "brought to this Land by Providence so that you may correct yourselves through our example" (70). The problems of cultural appropriation or rhetorical sovereignty, so potent today, did not trouble Sioui, who saw a hybrid, tricksterish critique in the *Dialogues*.

*The Dawn of Everything* cites Lahontan and other eighteenth-century French texts, such as Françoise de Graffigny's epistolary novel *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747), as indigenous critiques of hierarchy and modernity. But other French colonial authors wrote quite different arguments. Natchez tribal leaders, whom they called Suns, were seen by French colonists as resembling the French *Roi de S*. In a section of *The Dawn of Everything* borrowed from Graeber and Sahlins' book *On Kings*, the Natchez are called "the only genuinely unambiguous example of divine kingship north of the Rio Grande" (*On Kings*, 390; *Dawn of Everything* 391-96). These indigenous Americans become a model for despotic sovereignty, defined as a control of violence, instead of an inspiration for Enlightenment egalitarianism. The story is abridged in *The Dawn of Everything* and it leaves out the most important source on the Natchez Grand Soleil, Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz. There's a hidden irony here. Le Page du Pratz in fact wrote a colonial history like Lahontan's. He was critiquing European imperial politics and using the voices of Natchez leaders to do so. Other scholars have excerpted Natchez speeches that Le Page du Pratz published as anti-imperial oratory, in the same mode as Mann did Kandiaronk/Adario. The Natchez rose up and attacked the French in one of the strongest indigenous

rebellions in American history, but the revolt was not a rejection of despotic authority. As Gilles Havard argues in a recent article, the Natchez performed a sacrifice of French men whom they saw as part of their own caste system.



Figure 10: Le Transport du Grand Soleil (Natchez), 1758. Miscellaneous Items in High Demand, PPOC, Library of Congress, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

*The Dawn of Everything* is persuasive, and the authors' rhetorical style wins the trust of the casual reader. Graeber and Wengrow accuse other scholars of failing to take seriously "ideas, concepts and arguments from indigenous thinkers" and of dismissing them as "sock puppets." However, closer study shows that many indigenous critiques arose from hybridized sources.

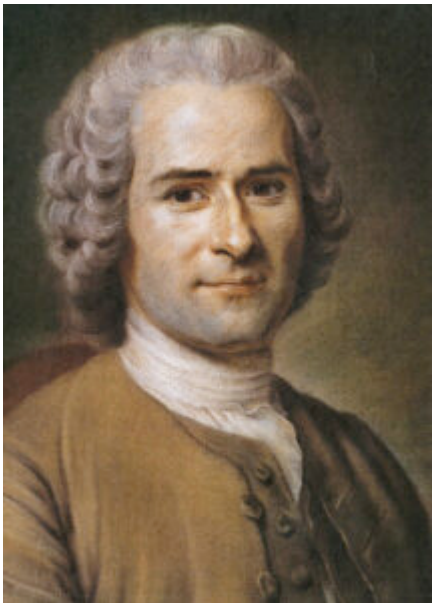
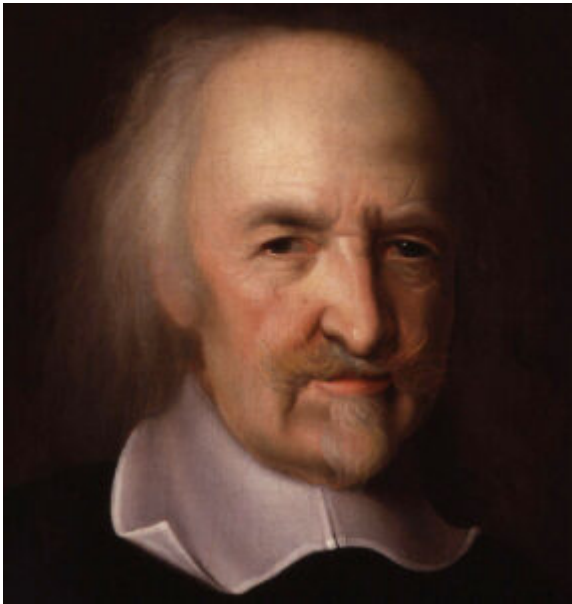
**Gordon Sayre**

## **Determinedly Indeterminant**

According to David Graeber and David Wengrow, all of our common assumptions about the deep human past are wrong. There was no primitive childhood of humanity, no Garden of Eden, no originary state of nature, in either its nightmarish Hobbesian or paradisaical Rousseauian guise. There was no vast undifferentiated stretch of time when all humans lived in small egalitarian foraging bands, and so there also was no inevitable development from foraging, to agriculture, to cities and states, determined by forces such as population growth, ecological change, or technological inventions. Graeber and Wengrow amass examples from across the globe and calendar to demonstrate that the story was far more complex, far less unilinear, and far more diverse than the standard narrative permits.

As a result, they conclude, the questions usually posed about the sources of inequality or the origin of the state are meaningless; in some way, humans have always been unequal, in multitudinous and shifting ways. During the past 20,000, or even 200,000 years, people moved in and out of a dizzying array of

political arrangements, some of which looked like states, many of which did not. Allegedly epochal inventions such as pottery or even farming seem to have started as part-time activities that may have had little to do with why people decided to live in cities, how they stored and acquired most of their food, or how they came to consider that food and the ground on which it grew private property. The real question, then, “is not ‘What are the origins of social inequality’ but ‘How did we get stuck’” in one particular form of economic, social, and political organization—so stuck that we have convinced ourselves that no other way is possible (112)?



Figures 11a and 11b: Portraits of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. John Michael Wright, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#) and Maurice Quentin de La Tour, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Western Europeans got stuck long before the modern era, but they got stuck

intellectually because of a set of deterministic fictions created during the Enlightenment. Turgot, Smith, and all the rest insisted that their own way of life, with its many inequities and power differentials, was the product of natural, inevitable, processes. Their insistence on inevitability, Graeber and Wengrow argue, was a deliberate response to an “indigenous critique” from Native Americans whose ways of life proved otherwise. During the era of imperial expansion, this indigenous critique entered European discourse in many ways, but it did so most profoundly in 1703, with the publication of the widely read set of *Dialogues* between a down-at-the-heels French aristocrat named the Baron Lahontan and a Wendat statesman-intellectual named Kandiaronk. If indigenous people could thrive without private property, massive inequality, authoritarian government, Kanadiaronk asked Lahontan, why couldn't we all? The Enlightenment answer was that “we” *had* once lived that way. But that was then, and this was now. Kandiaronk and his ilk were not viable present-day alternatives but instead living relics of the distant past, before hunting gave way to herding, then to agriculture, and finally to commerce. Inevitably, the same process would engulf indigenous people too, as superior Europeans colonized the globe. Thus, for Enlightenment philosophes and all who followed in their footsteps, “modes of subsistence and division of labour,” or, more crudely, a people’s “primary mode of acquiring food,” became the sole determinants of an inexorable process that justified imperial domination (61).

For Graeber and Wengrow, how we see the past is also how we see the future. If we truly are deterministically stuck, there is no way out for us in the twenty-first century. Necessarily, then, their “New History of Humanity” rejects any form of determinism—economic, ecological, biological, technological, or sociological—in favor of an emphasis on conscious choice. In essence, we decided to get stuck, and so we can also decide to get unstuck.



Figure 12: Hohokam Pottery, Arizona, ca. 850-950 CE. Daderot, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

A book of such audacious reach provides easy targets for crotchety or just lazy



reviewers. It is not hard to charge authors who set out to sweep away sweeping generalizations with introducing sweeping new ones. The authors proclaim, for instance, that, “when sovereignty first expands to become the general organizing principle of a society, it is by turning violence into kinship” (402). Nor is it difficult to construct straw-people criticisms when authors assert that “intellectual historians have never really abandoned the Great Man theory of history” (27)—particularly when they go on to set up Kandiaronk as a Great Man. And specialists on any given topic can easily identify subtleties overlooked, historiographical contexts lost, or borrowed ideas inadequately credited (for an example of the latter, see p. 511). “Had we tried to outline or refute every existing interpretation of the material we covered,” Graeber and Wengrow confess, “this book would have been two or three times the size, and likely would have left the reader with a sense that the authors are engaged in a constant battle with demons who were in fact two inches tall” (515).

Still, some of those diminutive demons must use their squeaky little voices to yelp “Wrong!” I squeaked myself when Graeber and Wengrow repeated the long-discredited notion about “settlers, captured or adopted by indigenous societies . . . almost invariably choosing to stay” (19). I did so again when I read that the fifty-some diverse Haudenosaunee prisoners that the French governor Denonville perfidiously sent into slavery in Louis XIV’s galleys included “all the permanent officers of the confederation and many from the women’s councils as well” (490–91). And I chuckled when the book’s bibliography credited a fine 1972 article, “Lahontan dans l’Enclopédie et ses suites,” not to its actual author, Maurice Roelens, but instead to “Richter, Daniel K.,” who in that year was just graduating from high school having never studied French (655). Other early Americanists may squeal more approvingly, if skeptically, at Graeber’s and Wengrow’s speculations about the shape of Indigenous North American history after 1000 CE (463–73), even as they wince at the authors’ oversimplified account of how the indigenous critique influenced the Enlightenment.

But in the end, none of this really matters. *The Dawn of Everything* is a book to think with, and boy does it make you think. The authors present not so much an argument as a way of framing better, or at least more complicated, questions. I set out to try to create a map of those questions and the historiographical epistemology they embody. But I quickly blew past the word limit for this essay while fearing that I would lose readers in a swamp of my own devising. So instead, I’ll just allude briefly, even cryptically, to three key insights. The first is about freedom, which, Graeber and Wengrow posit, exists in three dimensions: “the freedom to move away,” “the freedom to ignore or disobey commands,” and “the freedom to shape entirely new social realities” (503). Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, anyone? The second is about restraints on freedom: “control of violence, control of information, and individual charisma” constitute “the three possible bases of social power” (365). Nathaniel Bacon, anyone? The third is harder to summarize, but is about the centrality of emotions to the choices humans make about freedom and control. By a chain of reasoning too complicated to trace here, Graeber and Wengrow make a remarkable generalization. “Perhaps this is what a state

actually is,” they write, “a combination of exceptional violence and the creation of a complex social machine, all ostensibly devoted to acts of care and devotion” (408). Politics in 1776 or 2022 anyone?

**Daniel K. Richter**

## **Ecologies of Freedom and the Challenge for Environmental History**

David Graeber and David Wengrow wrote *The Dawn of Everything*, they claim, “to lay down foundations for a new world history” (25), one emphasizing freedom and creativity, while simultaneously attempting to synthesize decades of work in archaeology and anthropology that has challenged longstanding notions of exactly how “prehistory” looked. Rather than offering a complete picture, they describe their task as “to start putting some of the pieces of the puzzle together” and note that they hope their work will set off a process of “years of research and debate” (4). In taking on that challenge, they have produced an exciting and provocative work that should be read as the beginning of a conversation rather than the final word.

For historians of early America and the Atlantic World, *The Dawn of Everything* should be particularly useful to prompt new questions and discussion about relatively well-known sources. Indeed, their concept of the “Indigenous Critique” promises to spark new debates about how to distinguish between acts of ventriloquism and the presence of pointed commentary in early modern European sources purporting to record the words of Native people. Even beyond these obviously relevant sections, however, Graeber and Wengrow’s work offers useful challenges, particularly to early modern environmental historians.

Recently, historians have increasingly turned their attention to the impact of climate on human history, and early modernists have been at the forefront of this work. The presence of new, more detailed paleoclimate data and the pressing imperatives of our own climate crisis have prompted a series of books investigating the Little Ice Age and its impacts, including on moments of contact and early European colonial efforts in the Americas. For environmental historians working on this period, the challenge has often been how to navigate questions of determinism—how do we show that specific environmental conditions shaped human history without appearing to claim that societies fell or wars began, necessarily, because of them?

Graeber and Wengrow offer a complete reorientation to this problem. They are firmly opposed to any sense of environmental or ecological determinism, so much so that anthropologists Nancy Lindsfarne and Jonathan Neale [argue](#) that Graeber and Wengrow wind up with an “allergy to ecological thinking.” That aversion, Lindsfarne and Neale claim, leads them to abandon any sort of materialist explanation because “thinking about ecology and technology threatens to make the choices and revolution they want impossible.”

But that charge is not quite right. Graeber and Wengrow acknowledge that “the intersection of environment and technology does make a difference, often a huge difference” (205), and warn against “ridiculous extremes” in rejecting Marx’s dictum that we do not make history under conditions of our own choosing (206). Rather, they attack environmental determinists for failing to fully consider environmental conditions in their explanations—for claiming that environmental limits required a set of behaviors when, in fact, other options were ecologically possible.

This focus on choice animates their treatment of the environment throughout the book and is developed most explicitly in Chapters 6 and 7, “Gardens of Adonis” and “The Ecology of Freedom.” Here Graeber and Wengrow take on the idea of an “Agricultural Revolution,” arguing instead that the process by which farming was adopted was far slower, more intermittent, and more limited than the phrase “revolution” implies. They reject claims that environmental catastrophe or the changing climate of the early Holocene necessarily prompted the adoption of agriculture, but rejecting environmental causation does not mean abandoning attention to the environment. Instead, Graeber and Wengrow argue that closer attention to the diverse ecosystems in which neolithic peoples lived reveals that they were often spaces for play.



Figure 13: Native Americans planting seeds of beans or maize in Florida, 1591. Theodor de Bry (1528-1598), engraver; Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues (1533?-1588), Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

For example, Graeber and Wengrow challenge the idea of *the* “Fertile Crescent,” noting that “in ecological terms, it’s really not one crescent but two—or no doubt even more, depending how closely one chooses to look” (226). The sheer diversity of environmental conditions enabled diverse Neolithic experiments with subsistence practices, but “experiments” is the key word here. Early cultivation “was not a science of domination and classification, but one of bending and coaxing, nurturing and cajoling, or even tricking the forces of nature” (239). Environmental knowledge—specifically women’s environmental knowledge, lay at the heart of these practices, which took place in ecological niches in areas that might otherwise hold importance as sites of trading, hunting, fishing, or foraging—activities that often remained culturally central even as subsistence shifted towards domesticated plants or animals.

The types of “fluid ecological arrangements” that characterized early farming in the Fertile Crescent also frequently defined cultivation elsewhere in Eurasia, Oceania, and the Americas. There was a strong preference for what Graeber and Wengrow call “an ecology of freedom” (a term they adapt from the social ecologist Murray Bookchin), which they define as “the proclivity of human societies to move (freely) in and out of farming; to farm without fully becoming farmers; raise crops and animals without surrendering too much of one’s existence to the logistical rigors of agriculture; and retain a food web sufficiently broad as to prevent cultivation from becoming a matter of life and death” (260). The desire to maintain this ecology of freedom animated site selection for some of the first cities, they argue, allowing a wide variety of resources from foraging, fishing, and hunting and ensuring that agricultural practices retained their flexibility even as they scaled up. Such arrangements also structured environments in early America. As historian Anya Zilberstein has shown, Native peoples across North America cultivated multiple species of *Zizania* (wild rice) in ways that led consistently-confused European observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to label the plants as wild or naturally occurring and in need of “improvement.”

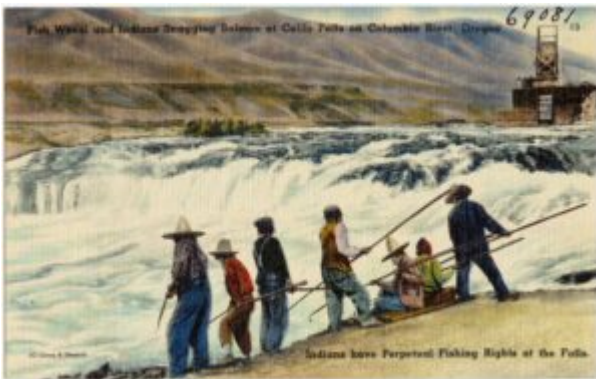


Figure 14: Twentieth-century postcard depicting Pacific Northwest Natives fishing at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River. Angelus Commercial Studio, Portland, Oregon. “Tichnor Quality Views,” Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Made Only by Tichnor Bros., Inc., Boston, Mass., Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Focusing on flexibility, freedom, and play, as they do, would re-orient early modern and early American environmental history (and the field of environmental history more broadly). Concepts like adaptation and resilience/vulnerability have become increasingly important in climate history to provide more nuanced explanations for the effects of climate and weather. Graeber and Wengrow push us to go further, to ask how the desire for freedom shaped engagement with the other-than-human world, to treat our subjects as creative rather than reactive. We need not always “set the dial between freedom and determinism” (206) where they do; acknowledging that it can turn that way and asking questions accordingly can transform our field.

**Keith Pluymers**

## Further Reading

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Robbie Ethridge is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Mississippi. In addition to editing four anthologies, writing numerous articles and book chapters on the history and ethnography of Native peoples of the American South, she is the author of *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World, 1796-1816* (2003), the Mooney Award-winning book *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540-1715* (2010), and co-author with Robert J. Miller of *A Promise Kept: The Muscogee (Creek) Nation and the End of the Trail of Tears* (forthcoming 2023). Her current research reconstructs the 700-year history of the pre-colonial Mississippian world.

Sean P. Harvey is associate professor of history at Seton Hall University and a member of the editorial board of *Commonplace*. His publications include *Native Tongues: Colonialism and Race from Encounter to the Reservation* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and articles that have appeared in *Journal of the Early Republic* and *William and Mary Quarterly*. His current research examines Albert Gallatin, colonialism, and capital in the Atlantic world from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Barbara Alice Mann, Ph.D., is Professor in the Jesup Scott Honors College at the University of Toledo, in Toledo, Ohio, USA. She has authored, co-authored, and edited numerous books, most recently including *The Woman Who Married the Bear* (forthcoming from Oxford, 2022); *President by Massacre* (2019, ABC-CLIO), and *Spirits of Blood, Spirits of Breath* (Oxford, 2016).

Keith Pluymers is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Illinois State University, where he teaches early modern environmental history. His first book *No Wood, No Kingdom: Political Ecology in the English Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania, 2021) examines how fears of wood scarcity shaped early modern English colonialism.

Daniel K. Richter is Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania and the former Director of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies. He is the author of *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

Gordon M. Sayre is Professor of English and Folklore at the University of

Oregon. In addition to his book *Les Sauvages Américains* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), he is Academic advisor for the entry on Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, baron de Lahontan in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, vol. 280.