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Should *The Dawn of Everything* Be Taught?

An essay on the meaning of David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. Pp. xii + 692. $35.00 (cloth).

The Dawn of Everything reassesses more than a century's worth of anthropological and archaeological evidence to challenge contemporary accounts of the ancient past. Its immediate focus is the Neolithic, which it excavates via recent archaeological discoveries as well as comparisons, carefully chosen, between very ancient small-scale human communities and recent analogues in Africa, New Guinea, West Asia, and, particularly, pre-contact North America. These comparisons rely on twentieth century anthropological field studies and on critical re-readings of early European accounts of indigenous peoples.

As Patrick Manning notes in a companion essay in this issue, David Graeber and David Wengrow engage World History glancingly. The reverse, of course, is also true: most world history classrooms relegate the Neolithic and its near-modern analogues to the margins of a story focused instead on migration, long-distance trade, cultural and environmental "exchange," and accelerating urban, technological, and economic development. Graeber and Wengrow challenge not only our received wisdom about the first human societies, but the whole way we think about human history.

Graeber and Wengrow say nothing whatsoever about world history classrooms. It is a fair bet, though, that if given responsibility for refashioning the curriculum, they would call for earth-moving equipment and dynamite. As most world history curriculum is structured, it would be very difficult for teachers to fully integrate Graeber and Wengrow's insights into their courses. It is worth examining why this is so, and whether there might be some accommodation between world history as it is now taught and a book uncomfortable with many of the field's working assumptions.

A fundamental question of history classrooms, rarely asked aloud, is this: do we, the living, choose our histories, or do our histories choose us? For the most part, world

history classrooms endow large historical forces with ultimate agency. To hijack Charles Tilly's blunt language about modernity, world history's educational projects have long aspired to reveal "Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons."[1] Over the decades, courses have taught, for instance, that racial or national character enacts history through the performance of its manifest destiny; or that history obeys "iron laws" of demography and economics; or that a gradualist liberalism, armed with a liberal legal-constitutional structure has channeled and checked human passions; or that successive modes of production have swept human beings from one transformative revolution to the next through a dialectical process; or that technological-economic synergies have hurtled us towards utopian or (lately) dystopian futures.[2] My own schooling in the 1970s-80s bristled with determinist phrase-making: cultural exchange, modernization, limits to growth, world systems, *Annales*. Though few classrooms make much mention anymore of Fernand Braudel, our curricula implicitly teach that individual actions were severely constrained by cultural and political institutions, which in turn were shaped, often harshly, by environment and geography.[3]

Frankly, one reason I enjoyed teaching world history was that it satisfied a personal appetite for such totalizing explanatory frameworks. Many students also delight in seeing, for the first time, the enormous and previously invisible patterns that have shaped their lives. Teaching such frameworks is essential—not so much because any one explanatory model of human history is superior than any other, but because they foreground complex chains of causation, demonstrating that the world is more complicated than it appears. Occam's Razor can be a very dull blade.

What is more, failure to perceive the Big, the Large, and the Huge can put us in peril. A few years ago, curious why so many people reject evidence for climate change, the cultural critic Timothy Morton coined the phrase "hyperobject," a phenomenon so vast that observers cannot perceive it. We live every day with *weather*, but who has ever lived with *climate*? For the same reasons that it is urgent that we *see* climate, it is imperative to *see* world history in all its complex and frightening glory.

Yet the study of world history is like climate in another way. Encountering vast deterministic patterns stretching back hundreds or thousands of years has the effect of trivializing human agency. Such an abrupt shift of scale does not necessarily inspire students to greater social responsibility or political empowerment. Instead, it may trigger demoralization, apathy, and a collapse of political will. Faced with something that looks an awful lot like inevitability, a student might even decide that moral systems do not much matter. If History's Strong Right Arm is really so powerful, maybe it is best to become that right arm's iron fist, punching through mere human resistance regardless of the consequences. Margaret Thatcher, speaking on behalf of free market modernism, once declared, "There Is No Alternative," later abbreviated as TINA. Many world history teachers, whatever our ideologies, effectively shout TINA! from the rooftops.

Graeber and Wengrow have no sympathy for such sweeping historical determinism. "This book," they say, is not so much about the Neolithic or about pre-contact North Americans. "This book is about freedom" (206). Against Margaret Thatcher, they stand with Arundhati Roy's defiant reply that "Another World is Possible." And not only is it possible, it has already happened, both in the deep past and in those societies we characterize as "traditional." Graeber and Wengrow champion radical historical contingency, radical in the word's original sense, right down to the roots of human social, political, and cultural development.[4]

This does not make for a very comfortable fit with world history curriculum. Imagine a world history teacher who has read Graeber and Wengrow over her summer break. She is utterly fascinated by the argument and its evidence. Then she turns her attention to planning next year's classes. *Well*, she thinks, *There's no time to teach the Neolithic. What needs explaining is modernity: the rise of states, globalization, and technological innovation. Maybe later, I'll have students wrestle with one of Wendat's speeches to get them thinking about 17th and 18th c. European ideas of the Other*.

What makes *The Dawn of Everything* even more difficult to shoehorn into a world history course is that, to borrow Gerald Graff's phrase, so many students show up to our courses "clueless in academe." They haven't any idea what we mean when we go on about *causation*, *periodization*, *change-over-time*, and the rest. This is no knock on our students: no previous generation arrived in its introductory history survey course fluently speaking historese. This is why, as Graff explains, our first responsibility is to introduce students to our language and invite them into our conversations.[5]

Our language is concerned, at its foundation, with *time*: periods, eras, change, sequence, narrative, and so on. But Graeber and Wengrow are not interested in temporal frameworks. A typical chapter compares archaeological findings from the eighteenth century BCE to anthropological work concerning peoples living in the eighteenth century CE. David Wengrow is an archaeologist; the late David Graeber was an anthropologist. They are concerned with how groups interact, and in revealing something about the structures of human behavior that transcend time. They know, of course, that our material conditions, our institutions, our interactions, and our sheer numbers have changed explosively in the past eight thousand years. But they believe that certain ground-truths about human social behavior have not changed all that much. Among these ground truths: we can, within limits, choose our futures.

To *really* incorporate *The Dawn of Everything* into history classrooms, we would have to mount a frontal assault against much of what we have built. We would have to back away from explaining modernity's large-scale structures as an evolutionary, more-or-less linear process featuring (for instance) pre-modern, modern, and post-modern phases; a narrative that, for students, looks an awful lot like teleology. We would have to completely rethink the way we teach students to understand time and causation. We

would have to engage the deep past, at least through the Neolithic. We would have to give greater attention to peoples outside the civilizational cores, people living for most of human history outside the "archipelago of world cities" engaged in long-distance trade.

To get an idea of what this would entail, consider one chapter in *The Dawn of Everything*, "Many Seasons Ago" (164-209), which explores "why Canadian foragers kept slaves and their California neighbors didn't." The "Canadians" here are represented by the Kwakiutl of coastal British Columbia; the "Californians" by the Yurok of the northern California coast. Though the cultural realms they represented were adjacent, their culture, social stratification, economic lives, and way of life, "could not have been more different" (179). The Kwakiutl and their neighbors held "perhaps a quarter" of their populations in systems of chattel slavery that, judging from social differentiation preserved in ancient cemeteries, developed nearly 4,000 years ago. The Yurok held very few slaves, and their California neighbors held none. The Kwakiutl economy was built on exchange and gift giving, the Yurok on money (dentalium shells) which could be used for material purchases, rents, and loans (which would make the Yurok "pre-capitalist" if Graeber and Wengrow were not seriously allergic to developmental theory). While Kwakiutl social display was analogous to that of medieval European landed nobility, that of the Yurok was closer to Calvinist Puritans, but neither was headed towards modernity, because modernity is not a destination. As they write,

> *Since this book is about freedom, it seems appropriate … to explore the possibility that human beings have more collective say over their own destiny than we ordinarily assume. Rather than defining the indigenous inhabitants of the Pacific Coast of North America as 'incipient' farmers or as examples of 'emerging' complexity—which is really just an updated way of saying they were all 'rushing headlong for their chains'—we have explored the possibility that they might have been proceeding with (more or less) open eyes… (206)*

Why tell this story in a high school classroom? First, because it is a particularly good example of *schismogenesis*, the mutual rejection of cultural norms by two adjacent societies. This process of defining one's community by rejecting another community's norms may, Graeber and Wengrow believe, help explain cultural differentiation everywhere. Second, because it upends our expectation that deterministic pressures—environmental, demographic, economic—decisively shaped human societies; in fact, those societies shaped themselves. Of the deterministic accounts embedded in our courses, Graeber and Wengrow acidly remark: "We know, now, that we are in the presence of myths" (526).

Students are quite capable of understanding these arguments, but doing so requires considerable classroom time. It is just not enough to sprinkle a little Graeber

and Wengrow stardust into a typical world history unit and expect that students will really get what the fuss is about.

To sum up: there is a real mismatch between *The Dawn of Everything* and the shape we've given our world history courses. Where our courses emphasize the state-centered and market-driven future at the expense of the local and small-scale past, Graeber and Wengrow argue that we were looking through the wrong end of the telescope. While history education moves students sequentially from era to era, Graeber and Wengrow counsel much more comparison, not just across cultures, but across millennia. Where world history's master narratives imply that "There Is No Alternative," Graeber and Wengrow stress human flexibility and social plasticity. Where world history teachers want students to understand the world-as-it-is in order to change it, Graeber and Wengrow would, I think, want students to understand that change is always with us. "Another World Is Possible" because other worlds *have* existed, again and again.

Still, for teachers who find themselves persuaded by Graeber and Wengrow's arguments (not all will), there are opportunities to make use of their work. The most ambitious: change the History Department's course sequence, and require a class in historical anthropology. Such a requirement would come at the cost of other courses, possibly including World History itself. If you really believe Graeber and Wengrow, then the importance of recent archaeological and anthropological work almost demands a substantive curricular rethink.

A second approach, considerably less disruptive, would structure a World History course around historiography. Such a class would explicitly ask that students consider the tensions between contingency and determinism, between big structures and local choices. The framework would remain chronological, but the focus would shift. For instance, rather than assessing explanations for World War I, students would use their knowledge of both world wars to assess explanations of war itself.

Another still more modest intervention: use short excerpts from *The Dawn of Everything* to prompt brief class discussions. Graeber and Wengrow pepper their work with tongue-in-cheek subtitles that read like they're out of eighteenth century novels: "In Which We Set the Scene Broadly for a World of Cities, and Speculate as to Why They First Arose" or "In Which We Ask How Much of North America Came to Have a Single Uniform Clan System, and Consider the Role of the 'Hopewell Interaction Sphere.'" One chapter subheading, "Ukraine and China—and How They Built Cities Without Kings" might be particularly apt just now. As I noted earlier, students will likely miss Graeber and Wengrow's deeper themes if they encounter their arguments solely through brief vignettes. However, over the course of a year, they will likely pick up on the broader argument: that our ancestors possessed some power to fashion their own futures. To make the point more sharply, students can read from "Farewell to Humanity's Childhood," Graeber and Wengrow's introductory essay.

Finally, teachers might search out contemporary stories that emphasize the kind of collective choice that so frequently makes *The Dawn of Everything* a delightful surprise. Tales of resistance against both global capitalism and against overweening states can serve this purpose. Students can also consider ground-up religious innovation of the kind assessed, for instance, in Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom*. This and other works demonstrate how local communities can redefine themselves and, in doing so, reshape the worlds in which they live.[6]

A careful reading of the day's international news will reveal many, many more instances of local communities reshaping the world around them. Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement and Spain's Mondragon industrial cooperatives come out of a Leftist tradition. Still others appeal to libertarians and conservatives, particularly when these include the creation of local currencies, self-sustaining religious enclaves, and right-wing militias. If you find some of these movements distasteful, keep in mind that Graeber and Wengrow argue only that history is highly contingent, not that we would like living there. In Graeber and Wengrow's account, the arc of the universe bends not toward justice. It bends in no particular direction at all. The good news, for ourselves and our students, is that we are more than marionettes in a human comedy whose outcome is already determined. We have agency, and if we want to bend the arc, we have some chance at success.

Given where our over-determined world seems to be heading, the idea that "other worlds are possible" strikes me as very appealing. To say that world history classrooms won't easily absorb *The Dawn of Everything* is not to say that they shouldn't try.

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Notes

[1] Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1989).

[2] Good introductions to the historiographic issues at play in world history may be found in Jerry Bentley, *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Daley, *Historians Debate the Rise of the West* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Palgrave Advances in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Ross Dunn, Laura Mitchell, and Kerry Ward, *The New World History: A Field Guide for Teachers and Researchers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018). Among the many general introductions to historiography and historical theory, teachers may find the following useful: James Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory,* 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); Joseph Mali, Mythistory: *The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Kenneth R. Stunkel, *Fifty Key Works of History and Historiography* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Daniel Woolf, *A Concise History of History: Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). For a map of some of the issues underlying Graeber and Wengrow's work, a standard text is R. John McGee and Richard L. Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, now in its seventh edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

[3] See Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperCollins, 1975-1977) and his trilogy *Civilization and Capitalism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982-1984).

[4] Thatcher's slogan "There is No Alternative" is generally credited to the nineteenth century social critic Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics Or, The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified and the First of Them Developed* (Boston: D. Appleton and Company, 1880), 55. For "Another world…," see Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (Boston: South End Press, 2004), 86.

[5] Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[6] For movements mounted against capitalist "world systems" see, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, Terrence Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Anti-Systemic Movements* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012). For anti-state resistance, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). For religious communities remaking both religion and culture see, for example, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).