

# Against Linear History

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David Graeber and David Wengrow,  
*The Dawn of Everything: A New History  
of Humanity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
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**T**O BE MODERN IS TO PRIVILEGE THE PRESENT OVER THE PAST. It is characteristic of modern people to assume that our cultures and societies are more advanced than those of previous generations. Modernity is unique in this regard however, and the presentism of the modern mind therefore demands explanation. The present can most plausibly be judged to have surpassed the past by material, technological or economic criteria. Modernity therefore assumes that such criteria are the most appropriate means of evaluating progress, which in turn involves the prior assumption that progress is desirable. These assumptions inspire the kind of pop-anthropology to which this book claims to be the antidote. *The Dawn of Everything* is an effective debunking of the self-satisfied narrative of progress espoused by such bestsellers as Yuval Noah Hariri's *Sapiens* (2017) and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997).

Modern societies are distinguished from their predecessors by their commitment to unceasing change: to never-ending economic growth and, as a result, to permanent social revolution. This faith in social progress is rationalized by analogy with the scientific concept of evolution. The contention that living creatures are formed by adaptation to their environments was never seriously disputed by scientists. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, it became widely accepted that this adaptation was progressive in nature—that it took the form of evolution. Charles Darwin argued that the sole cause of evolution was competition among individual organisms for scarce resources. Modern thinkers generally, if often unconsciously, applied Darwin's theory of evolution to human society.

Before the modern age, Westerners lived in awe of antiquity. The ruins of Rome seemed so impressive that they were frequently attributed to a race of giants. In contrast, modern Westerners take it for granted that their societies are more highly evolved than those of our ancestors. It appears self-evident to communists and capitalists alike that the industrialized nation-state represents an advance on agrarian feudalism, which in turn represented progress from the primitive hunter-gather cultures of prehistory. From the postmodern standpoint of the twenty-first century, however, we can begin to recognize this assumption as a rationalization of Western imperialism. The West's domination of the world was justified as a process of modernization: often brutal, but nonetheless inevitable, in accordance with the amoral demands of progressive evolution.

In *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow trace this linear conception of history to the earliest encounters between European colonists and native Americans. The book begins with an absorbing account of the “indigenous critique” to which imperialism’s American victims subjected its European perpetrators. The authors argue that the Western notion of history as progress developed in direct response to that critique. Several native American intellectuals recorded their impressions of European society. In 1699, for example, the Huron leader Kandiaronk engaged in a series of debates with the French Governor of Montreal, Hector de Calliere. Kandiaronk’s critique of European culture was disturbingly incisive:

I affirm that what you call “money” is the devil of devils, the tyrant of the French, the source of all evils, the bane of souls and slaughterhouse of the living. To imagine one can live in the country of money and preserve one’s soul is like imagining one can preserve one’s life at the bottom of a lake. Money is the father of luxury, lasciviousness, intrigues, trickery, lies, betrayal, insincerity—of all the world’s worst behavior.

It is impossible at this historical distance to know whether Kandiaronk’s wisdom was originally indigenous, or whether he had already absorbed Plato’s *Republic* or St. Paul’s Epistles. But seventeenth-century Frenchmen could not deny that class conflict, political hierarchy, patriarchy, crime, poverty and other deplorable features of their own society were conspicuous by their absence from native American cultures. Instead, the colonists claimed that Europe’s social problems were the unavoidable price of progress. This argument formed their conception of the non-European world as primitive and underdeveloped. For three centuries, Europeans believed that all “savages” lived in a “state of nature.” This condition might be conceived as good (as in Rousseau) or bad (as in Hobbes), but it was a truth universally acknowledged that it belonged to an earlier phase of human evolution than European civilization.

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Imperialist ideology also determined Europeans' understanding of their own history. Advanced societies like France and England must once, they reasoned, have resembled the primitive cultures of the Mississippi, the Amazon and the Congo. Over the few decades, however, new research in archaeology and anthropology has revealed that the conception of history as a linear narrative is empirically untenable. Once assimilated by the public, this information will deal a severe blow to the West's self-image, and *The Dawn of Everything* is the first book seriously to explore its implications. The discovery of complex civilizations, such as Gobekli Tepe, that flourished tens of thousands of years ago; the revelation that large urban centers like Poverty Point and Teotihuacan are far older than previously assumed; the new insights into nutrition made available by advances in archaeobiology; the elaborate graves and other traces of ultra-ancient civilizations recently exposed by climate change, will force us to reconsider everything we thought we knew about human prehistory.

Earlier anthropologists assumed that until around ten thousand years ago, human beings lived in small, egalitarian, blood-related "bands" of foragers or hunter-gatherers. The evidence no longer supports that assumption: prehistoric societies were much larger, highly organized, wealthy, mobile, leisured and sophisticated, much earlier than we had imagined. We must take seriously the pronouncement of the structuralist guru Claude Levi-Strauss: "Man has always thought equally well." Since the human brain has undergone no significant physical changes in the last fifty thousand years, there is no biological reason to suppose that prehistoric cultures were less intricate or various than our own. This book's central thesis is that the imposition of the capitalist nation-state was not the inevitable culmination of a progressive narrative as Europeans have tended to assume, but a tragic wrong turn leading to a dead end. "The real question," as the Graeber and Wengrow put it, is "how did we get stuck?"

The evidence presented here discredits the idea that civilized history began with an "agricultural revolution," in which the discovery of farming suddenly rendered earlier, foraging cultures obsolete. It now appears that human beings farmed and foraged at the same time for millennia, and that many people experimented with farming only to abandon it. The idea that agriculture necessarily supersedes foraging is

unsustainable. So is the argument that political hierarchies and economic disparities are the ineluctable consequences of complex social structures. The recent information from prehistory shows conclusively that small groups can be hierarchical, and that mass cultures can be egalitarian. Indeed it now seems that ancient American societies were often hierarchical during the hunting season, and egalitarian over the winter.

The difference between Western and indigenous cultures was not that the former was hierarchical and the latter egalitarian. Native American, African, and Australian societies might contain significant disparities in wealth. Unlike European cultures, however, the mere possession of wealth did not allow the rich to rule. There was no systematic means of translating wealth into power. Europeans had such a means: they called it “usury.” Usury attributes independent agency to money. It provided both the motive and the means for imperialism, and thus for the systematic denigration of indigenous cultures that Graeber and Wengrow describe and deplore in this book.

Yet they declare: “This is not the place to outline a history of money and debt.” We are not told why. A footnote refers us to Graeber’s earlier book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), which is the most important study of usury published this century. In fact, Graeber establishes usury’s importance so convincingly that it seems hard to justify its omission from this volume. Surely it is difficult to understand Europe’s relentless imperial expansion without acknowledging the driving motor of compound interest? Usury is teleological; it imposes a narrative on history by forcing humanity to pursue economic growth at all costs. This book would have been bolstered by a discussion of financial teleology, which is inseparable from the historical teleology the authors attack so eloquently.

As anarchists Graeber and Wengrow are opposed, above all, to the nation-state. They write as if the nation-state was the real, durable tragedy of imperialism: a political cage in which humanity has become “stuck.” But this claim is contradicted by their acknowledgment that:

... there are now planetary bureaucracies (public and private, ranging from the IMF and WTO to J.P. Morgan Chase and various credit-rating agencies) without anything that resembles a corresponding principle of global sovereignty or global field of competitive politics; and everything from cryptocurrencies to private security agencies, undermining the sovereignty of states.

That is not the only contradiction in this book. Its title alludes to the Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade, who claimed that “traditional” societies lack a linear conception of time. According

to Eliade, such cultures envisage quotidian life as mere repetition of the creative gestures made by the gods in the *illo tempore*: “the dawn of everything.” Eliade portrays the emergence of a linear conception of time as a primordial fall from grace, which left humanity a prey to its own tragic notion of history. We might have expected Graeber and Wengrow to agree. They too describe the idea that history is progress as a rationale for tyranny, and as an error that is in the process of being corrected—not least by works like this one.

Yet they go out of their way to distance themselves from Eliade. They find the “political implications” of his argument “unsettling,” and they note that he was “close to the fascist Iron Guard in his student days.” The “political” problem is Eliade’s claim that the teleological view of history was introduced to humanity by “Judaism and the Old Testament.” This elicits an arch response from Graeber and Wengrow:

Being Jewish, the authors of the present book don’t particularly appreciate the suggestion that we are somehow to blame for everything that went wrong in history.... What’s startling is that anyone ever took this sort of argument seriously.

This is an overt lapse into the irrational: lack of appreciation is not an argument but an expression of taste. It is fair to wonder why the authors choose to make their ethnicity an issue. They should not find it “startling” that Eliade’s critique of teleology has been found credible, for they find it credible themselves. Their entire book is based upon it.

So it seems that Graeber and Wengrow object specifically to Eliade’s identification of the “Old Testament” as the earliest emergence of narrative history. It would have been interesting to read their refutation of his argument, but they offer none. Instead, they call him a fascist. Perhaps they protest too much, and their work owes more to Eliade than they wish to admit. But the idea that it was the “Old Testament” that first introduced a narrative conception of history does not seem wildly implausible. To suggest that Jews should find it unpalatable is silly. To smear it by association with the Romanian Iron Guard is unfeasible. When authors are reduced to such tactics, readers may legitimately ask questions about their general approach to evidence and reason. This is an unabashedly polemical work, and that is the fundamental source of its appeal. But we must wait longer for a cool, objective appraisal of the startling information we are now receiving about human prehistory, and its implications for the present and the future.  ▲