



David Graeber, David Wengrow

How to change the course of human history

(at least, the part that's already happened)

Published 2 March 2018

Original in **English**

First published in **Eurozine**

Downloaded from eurozine.com (<https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/>)

© David Graeber, David Wengrow / Eurozine

The story we have been telling ourselves about our origins is wrong, and perpetuates the idea of inevitable social inequality. David Graeber and David Wengrow ask why the myth of 'agricultural revolution' remains so persistent, and argue that there is a whole lot more we can learn from our ancestors.

1. In the beginning was the word

For centuries, we have been telling ourselves a simple story about the origins of social inequality. For most of their history, humans lived in tiny egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers. Then came farming, which brought with it private property, and then the rise of cities which meant the emergence of civilization properly speaking. Civilization meant many bad things (wars, taxes, bureaucracy, patriarchy, slavery...) but also made possible written literature, science, philosophy, and most other great human achievements.

Almost everyone knows this story in its broadest outlines. Since at least the days of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it has framed what we think the overall shape and direction of human history to be. This is important because the narrative also defines our sense of political possibility. Most see civilization, hence inequality, as a tragic necessity. Some dream of returning to a past utopia, of finding an industrial equivalent to 'primitive communism', or even, in extreme cases, of destroying everything, and going back to being foragers



again. But no one challenges the basic structure of the story.

There is a fundamental problem with this narrative.

It isn't true.

Overwhelming evidence from archaeology, anthropology, and kindred disciplines is beginning to give us a fairly clear idea of what the last 40,000 years of human history really looked like, and in almost no way does it resemble the conventional narrative. Our species did not, in fact, spend most of its history in tiny bands; agriculture did not mark an irreversible threshold in social evolution; the first cities were often robustly egalitarian. Still, even as researchers have gradually come to a consensus on such questions, they remain strangely reluctant to announce their findings to the public – or even scholars in other disciplines – let alone reflect on the larger political implications. As a result, those writers who are reflecting on the 'big questions' of human history – Jared Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Ian Morris, and others – still take Rousseau's question ('what is the origin of social inequality?') as their starting point, and assume the larger story will begin with some kind of fall from primordial innocence.

Simply framing the question this way means making a series of assumptions, that 1. there is a thing called 'inequality,' 2. that it is a problem, and 3. that there was a time it did not exist. Since the financial crash of 2008, of course, and the upheavals that followed, the 'problem of social inequality' has been at the centre of political debate. There seems to be a consensus, among the intellectual and political classes, that levels of social inequality have spiralled out of control, and that most of the world's problems result from this, in one way or another. Pointing this out is seen as a challenge to global power structures, but compare this to the way similar issues might have been discussed a generation earlier. Unlike terms such as 'capital' or 'class power', the word 'equality' is practically designed to lead to half-measures and compromise. One can imagine overthrowing capitalism or breaking the power of the state, but it's very difficult to imagine eliminating 'inequality'. In fact, it's not obvious what doing so would even mean, since people are not all the same and nobody would particularly want them to be.

'Inequality' is a way of framing social problems appropriate to technocratic reformers, the kind of people who assume from the outset that any real



vision of social transformation has long since been taken off the political table. It allows one to tinker with the numbers, argue about Gini coefficients and thresholds of dysfunction, readjust tax regimes or social welfare mechanisms, even shock the public with figures showing just how bad things have become ('can you imagine? 0.1% of the world's population controls over 50% of the wealth!'), all without addressing any of the factors that people actually object to about such 'unequal' social arrangements: for instance, that some manage to turn their wealth into power over others; or that other people end up being told their needs are not important, and their lives have no intrinsic worth. The latter, we are supposed to believe, is just the inevitable effect of inequality, and inequality, the inevitable result of living in any large, complex, urban, technologically sophisticated society. That is the real political message conveyed by endless invocations of an imaginary age of innocence, before the invention of inequality: that if we want to get rid of such problems entirely, we'd have to somehow get rid of 99.9% of the Earth's population and go back to being tiny bands of foragers again. Otherwise, the best we can hope for is to adjust the size of the boot that will be stomping on our faces, forever, or perhaps to wrangle a bit more wiggle room in which some of us can at least temporarily duck out of its way.

Mainstream social science now seems mobilized to reinforce this sense of hopelessness. Almost on a monthly basis we are confronted with publications trying to project the current obsession with property distribution back into the Stone Age, setting us on a false quest for 'egalitarian societies' defined in such a way that they could not possibly exist outside some tiny band of foragers (and possibly, not even then). What we're going to do in this essay, then, is two things. First, we will spend a bit of time picking through what passes for informed opinion on such matters, to reveal how the game is played, how even the most apparently sophisticated contemporary scholars end up reproducing conventional wisdom as it stood in France or Scotland in, say, 1760. Then we will attempt to lay down the initial foundations of an entirely different narrative. This is mostly ground-clearing work. The questions we are dealing with are so enormous, and the issues so important, that it will take years of research and debate to even begin understanding the full implications. But on one thing we insist. Abandoning the story of a fall from primordial innocence does not mean abandoning dreams of human emancipation - that is, of a society where no one can turn their rights in property into a means of enslaving others, and where no one can be told their lives and needs don't matter. To the



contrary. Human history becomes a far more interesting place, containing many more hopeful moments than we've been led to imagine, once we learn to throw off our conceptual shackles and perceive what's really there.

2. Contemporary authors on the origins of social inequality; or, the eternal return of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Let us begin by outlining received wisdom on the overall course of human history. It goes something a little like this:

As the curtain goes up on human history – say, roughly two hundred thousand years ago, with the appearance of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* – we find our species living in small and mobile bands ranging from twenty to forty individuals. They seek out optimal hunting and foraging territories, following herds, gathering nuts and berries. If resources become scarce, or social tensions arise, they respond by moving on, and going someplace else. Life for these early humans – we can think of it as humanity's childhood – is full of dangers, but also possibilities. Material possessions are few, but the world is an unspoiled and inviting place. Most work only a few hours a day, and the small size of social groups allows them to maintain a kind of easy-going camaraderie, without formal structures of domination. Rousseau, writing in the 18th century, referred to this as 'the State of Nature,' but nowadays it is presumed to have encompassed most of our species' actual history. It is also assumed to be the only era in which humans managed to live in genuine societies of equals, without classes, castes, hereditary leaders, or centralised government.

Alas this happy state of affairs eventually had to end. Our conventional version of world history places this moment around 10,000 years ago, at the close of the last Ice Age.

At this point, we find our imaginary human actors scattered across the world's continents, beginning to farm their own crops and raise their own herds. Whatever the local reasons (they are debated), the effects are momentous, and basically the same everywhere. Territorial attachments and private ownership of property become important in ways previously unknown, and with them, sporadic feuds and war. Farming grants a surplus of food, which allows some to accumulate wealth and influence beyond their



immediate kin-group. Others use their freedom from the food-quest to develop new skills, like the invention of more sophisticated weapons, tools, vehicles, and fortifications, or the pursuit of politics and organised religion. In consequence, these 'Neolithic farmers' quickly get the measure of their hunter-gatherer neighbours, and set about eliminating or absorbing them into a new and superior – albeit less equal – way of life.

To make matters more difficult still, or so the story goes, farming ensures a global rise in population levels. As people move into ever-larger concentrations, our unwitting ancestors take another irreversible step to inequality, and around 6,000 years ago, cities appear – and our fate is sealed. With cities comes the need for centralised government. New classes of bureaucrats, priests, and warrior-politicians install themselves in permanent office to keep order and ensure the smooth flow of supplies and public services. Women, having once enjoyed prominent roles in human affairs, are sequestered, or imprisoned in harems. War captives are reduced to slaves. Full-blown inequality has arrived, and there is no getting rid of it. Still, the story-tellers always assure us, not everything about the rise of urban civilization is bad. Writing is invented, at first to keep state accounts, but this allows terrific advances to take place in science, technology, and the arts. At the price of innocence, we became our modern selves, and can now merely gaze with pity and jealousy at those few 'traditional' or 'primitive' societies that somehow missed the boat.

This is the story that, as we say, forms the foundation of all contemporary debate on inequality. If say, an expert in international relations, or a clinical psychologist, wishes to reflect on such matters, they are likely to simply take it for granted that, for most of human history, we lived in tiny egalitarian bands, or that the rise of cities also meant the rise of the state. The same is true of most recent books that try to look at the broad sweep of prehistory, in order to draw political conclusions relevant to contemporary life. Consider Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*:

In its early stages, human political organization is similar to the band-level society observed in higher primates like chimpanzees. This may be regarded as a default form of social organization. ... Rousseau pointed out that the origin of political inequality lay in the development of agriculture, and in this he was largely correct. Since band-level societies are preagricultural, there is no private property



in any modern sense. Like chimp bands, hunter-gatherers inhabit a territorial range that they guard and occasionally fight over. But they have a lesser incentive than agriculturalists to mark out a piece of land and say 'this is mine'. If their territory is invaded by another group, or if it is infiltrated by dangerous predators, band-level societies may have the option of simply moving somewhere else due to low population densities. Band-level societies are highly egalitarian ... Leadership is vested in individuals based on qualities like strength, intelligence, and trustworthiness, but it tends to migrate from one individual to another.

Jared Diamond, in *World Before Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?*, suggests such bands (in which he believes humans still lived 'as recently as 11,000 years ago') comprised 'just a few dozen individuals', most biologically related. They led a fairly meagre existence, 'hunting and gathering whatever wild animal and plant species happen to live in an acre of forest'. (Why just an acre, he never explains). And their social lives, according to Diamond, were enviably simple. Decisions were reached through 'face-to-face discussion'; there were 'few personal possessions', and 'no formal political leadership or strong economic specialization'. Diamond concludes that, sadly, it is only within such primordial groupings that humans have ever achieved a significant degree of social equality.

For Diamond and Fukuyama, as for Rousseau some centuries earlier, what put an end to that equality – everywhere and forever – was the invention of agriculture and the higher population levels it sustained. Agriculture brought about a transition from 'bands' to 'tribes'. Accumulation of food surplus fed population growth, leading some 'tribes' to develop into ranked societies known as 'chiefdoms'. Fukuyama paints an almost biblical picture, a departure from Eden: 'As little bands of human beings migrated and adapted to different environments, they began their exit out of the state of nature by developing new social institutions'. They fought wars over resources. Gangly and pubescent, these societies were headed for trouble.

It was time to grow up, time to appoint some proper leadership. Before long, chiefs had declared themselves kings, even emperors. There was no point in resisting. All this was inevitable once humans adopted large, complex forms of organization. Even when the leaders began acting badly – creaming off



agricultural surplus to promote their flunkies and relatives, making status permanent and hereditary, collecting trophy skulls and harems of slave-girls, or tearing out rival's hearts with obsidian knives – there could be no going back. 'Large populations', Diamond opines, 'can't function without leaders who make the decisions, executives who carry out the decisions, and bureaucrats who administer the decisions and laws. Alas for all of you readers who are anarchists and dream of living without any state government, those are the reasons why your dream is unrealistic: you'll have to find some tiny band or tribe willing to accept you, where no one is a stranger, and where kings, presidents, and bureaucrats are unnecessary'.

A dismal conclusion, not just for anarchists, but for anybody who ever wondered if there might be some viable alternative to the status quo. But the remarkable thing is that, despite the smug tone, such pronouncements are not actually based on any kind of scientific evidence. There is no reason to believe that small-scale groups are especially likely to be egalitarian, or that large ones must necessarily have kings, presidents, or bureaucracies. These are just prejudices stated as facts.

In the case of Fukuyama and Diamond one can, at least, note they were never trained in the relevant disciplines (the first is a political scientist, the other has a PhD on the physiology of the gall bladder). Still, even when anthropologists and archaeologists try their hand at 'big picture' narratives, they have an odd tendency to end up with some similarly minor variation on Rousseau. In *The Creation of Inequality: How our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire*, Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, two eminently qualified scholars, lay out some five hundred pages of ethnographic and archaeological case studies to try and solve the puzzle. They admit our Ice Age forbears were not entirely unfamiliar with institutions of hierarchy and servitude, but insist they experienced these mainly in their dealings with the supernatural (ancestral spirits, and the like). The invention of farming, they propose, led to the emergence of demographically extended 'clans' or 'descent groups', and as it did so, access to spirits and the dead became a route to earthly power (how, exactly, is not made clear). According to Flannery and Marcus, the next major step on the road to inequality came when certain clansmen of unusual talent or renown – expert healers, warriors, and other over-achievers – were granted the right to transmit status to their descendants, regardless of the latter's talents or abilities. That pretty much sowed the seeds, and meant from then on, it was just a matter of time before the arrival of cities, monarchy, slavery and



empire.

The curious thing about Flannery and Marcus' book is that only with the birth of states and empires do they really bring in any archaeological evidence. All the really key moments in their account of the 'creation of inequality' rely instead on relatively recent descriptions of small-scale foragers, herders, and cultivators like the Hadza of the East African Rift, or Nambikwara of the Amazonian rainforest. Accounts of such 'traditional societies' are treated as if they were windows onto the Palaeolithic or Neolithic past. The problem is that they are nothing of the kind. The Hadza or Nambikwara are not living fossils. They have been in contact with agrarian states and empires, raiders and traders, for millennia, and their social institutions were decisively shaped through attempts to engage with, or avoid them. Only archaeology can tell us what, if anything, they have in common with prehistoric societies. So, while Flannery and Marcus provide all sorts of interesting insights into how inequalities *might* emerge in human societies, they give us little reason to believe that this was how they actually *did*.

Finally, let us consider Ian Morris's *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve*. Morris is pursuing a slightly different intellectual project: to bring the findings of archaeology, ancient history, and anthropology into dialogue with the work of economists, such as Thomas Piketty on the causes of inequality in the modern world, or Sir Tony Atkinson's more policy-oriented *Inequality: What can be Done?* The 'deep time' of human history, Morris informs us, has something important to tell us about such questions – but only if we first establish a uniform measure of inequality applicable across its entire span. This he achieves by translating the 'values' of Ice Age hunter-gatherers and Neolithic farmers into terms familiar to modern-day economists, and then using those to establish Gini coefficients, or formal inequality rates. Instead of the spiritual inequities that Flannery and Marcus highlight, Morris gives us an unapologetically materialist view, dividing human history into the three big 'Fs' of his title, depending on how they channel heat. All societies, he suggests, have an 'optimal' level of social inequality – a built-in 'spirit-level' to use Pickett and Wilkinson's term – that is appropriate to their prevailing mode of energy extraction.

In a 2015 piece for the *New York Times* Morris actually gives us numbers, quantified primordial incomes in USD and fixed to 1990 currency values. [1] He too assumes that hunter-gatherers of the last Ice Age lived mostly in tiny



mobile bands. As a result, they consumed very little, the equivalent, he suggests, of about \$1.10/day. Consequently, they also enjoyed a Gini coefficient of around 0.25 – that is, about as low as such rates can go – since there was little surplus or capital for any would-be elite to grab. Agrarian societies – and for Morris this includes everything from the 9,000-year-old Neolithic village of Çatalhöyük to Kublai Khan's China or the France of Louis XIV – were more populous and better off, with an average consumption of \$1.50-\$2.20/day per person, and a propensity to accumulate surpluses of wealth. But most people also worked harder, and under markedly inferior conditions, so farming societies tended towards much higher levels of inequality.

Fossil-fuelled societies should really have changed all that by liberating us from the drudgery of manual work, and bringing us back towards more reasonable Gini coefficients, closer to those of our hunter-forager ancestors – and for a while it seemed like this was beginning to happen, but for some odd reason, which Morris doesn't completely understand, matters have gone into reverse again and wealth is once again sucked up into the hands of a tiny global elite:

If the twists and turns of economic history over the last 15,000 years and popular will are any guide, the 'right' level of post-tax income inequality seems to lie between about 0.25 and 0.35, and that of wealth inequality between about 0.70 and 0.80. Many countries are now at or above the upper bounds of these ranges, which suggests that Mr. Piketty is indeed right to foresee trouble.

Some major technocratic tinkering is clearly in order!

Let us leave Morris' prescriptions aside but just focus on one figure: the Palaeolithic income of \$1.10 a day. Where exactly does it come from? Presumably the calculations have something to do with the calorific value of daily food intake. But if we're comparing this to daily incomes today, wouldn't we also have to factor in all the other things Palaeolithic foragers got for free, but which we ourselves would expect to pay for: free security, free dispute resolution, free primary education, free care of the elderly, free medicine, not to mention entertainment costs, music, storytelling, and religious services? Even when it comes to food, we must consider quality: after all, we're talking about 100% organic free-range produce here, washed



down with purest natural spring water. Much contemporary income goes to mortgages and rents. But consider the camping fees for prime Palaeolithic locations along the Dordogne or the Vézère, not to mention the high-end evening classes in naturalistic rock painting and ivory carving – and all those fur coats. Surely all this must cost wildly in excess of \$1.10/day, even in 1990 dollars. It's not for nothing that Marshall Sahlins referred to foragers as 'the original affluent society.' Such a life today would not come cheap.

This is all admittedly a bit silly, but that's kind of our point: if one reduces world history to Gini coefficients, silly things will, necessarily, follow. Also depressing ones. Morris at least feels something is askew with the recent galloping increases of global inequality. By contrast, historian Walter Scheidel has taken Piketty-style readings of human history to their ultimate miserable conclusion in his 2017 book *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, concluding there's really nothing we can do about inequality. Civilization invariably puts in charge a small elite who grab more and more of the pie. The only thing that has ever been successful in dislodging them is catastrophe: war, plague, mass conscription, wholesale suffering and death. Half measures never work. So, if you don't want to go back to living in a cave, or die in a nuclear holocaust (which presumably also ends up with the survivors living in caves), you're going to just have to accept the existence of Warren Buffett and Bill Gates.

The liberal alternative? Flannery and Marcus, who openly identify with the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, end their survey with the following helpful suggestion:

We once broached this subject with Scotty MacNeish, an archaeologist who had spent 40 years studying social evolution. How, we wondered, could society be made more egalitarian? After briefly consulting his old friend Jack Daniels, MacNeish replied, 'Put hunters and gatherers in charge.'

3. But did we really run headlong for our chains?

The really odd thing about these endless evocations of Rousseau's innocent State of Nature, and the fall from grace, is that Rousseau himself never claimed the State of Nature really happened. It was all a thought-



experiment. In his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind* (1754), where most of the story we've been telling (and retelling) originates, he wrote:

... the researches, in which we may engage on this occasion, are not to be taken for historical truths, but merely as hypothetical and conditional reasonings, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin.

Rousseau's 'State of Nature' was never intended as a stage of development. It was not supposed to be an equivalent to the phase of 'Savagery', which opens the evolutionary schemes of Scottish philosophers such as Adam Smith, Ferguson, Millar, or later, Lewis Henry Morgan. These others were interested in defining levels of social and moral development, corresponding to historical changes in modes of production: foraging, pastoralism, farming, industry. What Rousseau presented is, by contrast, more of a parable. As emphasised by Judith Shklar, the renowned Harvard political theorist, Rousseau was really trying to explore what he considered the fundamental paradox of human politics: that our innate drive for freedom somehow leads us, time and again, on a 'spontaneous march to inequality'. In Rousseau's own words: 'All ran headlong for their chains in the belief that they were securing their liberty; for although they had enough reason to see the advantages of political institutions, they did not have enough experience to foresee the dangers'. The imaginary State of Nature is just a way of illustrating the point.

Rousseau wasn't a fatalist. What humans make, he believed, they could unmake. We could free ourselves from the chains; it just wasn't going to be easy. Shklar suggests that the tension between 'possibility and probability' (the possibility of human emancipation, the likelihood we'll all just place ourselves in some form of voluntary servitude again) was the central animating force of Rousseau's writings on inequality. All this might seem a bit ironic since, after the French Revolution, many conservative critics held Rousseau personally responsible for the guillotine. What brought the Terror, they insisted, was precisely his naive faith in the innate goodness of humanity, and his belief that a more equal social order could simply be imagined by intellectuals and then imposed by the 'general will'. But very few of those past figures now pilloried as romantics and utopians were really so naive. Karl Marx, for instance, held that what makes us human is our



power of imaginative reflection – unlike bees, we imagine the houses we'd like to live in, and only then set about constructing them – but he also believed that one couldn't just proceed in the same way with society, and try to impose an architect's model. To do so would be to commit the sin of 'utopian socialism', for which he had nothing but contempt. Instead, revolutionaries had to get a sense of the larger structural forces that shaped the course of world history, and take advantage of underlying contradictions: for instance, the fact that individual factory-owners need to stiff their workers to compete, but if all are too successful in doing so, no one will be able to afford what their factories produce. Yet such is the power of two thousand years of scripture, that even when hard-headed realists start talking about the vast sweep of human history, they fall back on some variation of the Garden of Eden – the Fall from Grace (usually, as in Genesis, owing to an unwise pursuit of Knowledge); the possibility of future Redemption. Marxist political parties quickly developed their own version of the story, fusing together Rousseau's State of Nature and the Scottish Enlightenment idea of developmental stages. The result was a formula for world history that began with original 'primitive communism', overcome by the dawn of private property, but someday destined to return.

We must conclude that revolutionaries, for all their visionary ideals, have not tended to be particularly imaginative, especially when it comes to linking past, present, and future. Everyone keeps telling the same story. It's probably no coincidence that today, the most vital and creative revolutionary movements at the dawn of this new millennium – the Zapatistas of Chiapas, and Kurds of Rojava being only the most obvious examples – are those that simultaneously root themselves in a deep traditional past. Instead of imagining some primordial utopia, they can draw on a more mixed and complicated narrative. Indeed, there seems to be a growing recognition, in revolutionary circles, that freedom, tradition, and the imagination have always, and will always be entangled, in ways we do not completely understand. It's about time the rest of us catch up, and start to consider what a non-Biblical version of human history might be like.

4. How the course of (past) history can now change

So, what has archaeological and anthropological research really taught us, since the time of Rousseau?

Well, the first thing is that asking about the 'origins of social inequality' is



probably the wrong place to start. True, before the beginning of what's called the Upper Palaeolithic we really have no idea what most human social life was like. Much of our evidence comprises scattered fragments of worked stone, bone, and a few other durable materials. Different hominin species coexisted; it's not clear if any ethnographic analogy might apply. Things only begin to come into any kind of focus in the Upper Palaeolithic itself, which begins around 45,000 years ago, and encompasses the peak of glaciation and global cooling (c. 20,000 years ago) known as the Last Glacial Maximum. This last great Ice Age was then followed by the onset of warmer conditions and gradual retreat of the ice sheets, leading to our current geological epoch, the Holocene. More clement conditions followed, creating the stage on which *Homo sapiens* - having already colonised much of the Old World - completed its march into the New, reaching the southern shores of the Americas by around 15,000 years ago.

So, what do we actually know about this period of human history? Much of the earliest substantial evidence for human social organisation in the Palaeolithic derives from Europe, where our species became established alongside *Homo neanderthalensis*, prior to the latter's extinction around 40,000 BC. (The concentration of data in this part of the world most likely reflects a historical bias of archaeological investigation, rather than anything unusual about Europe itself). At that time, and through the Last Glacial Maximum, the habitable parts of Ice Age Europe looked more like Serengeti Park in Tanzania than any present-day European habitat. South of the ice sheets, between the tundra and the forested shorelines of the Mediterranean, the continent was divided into game-rich valleys and steppe, seasonally traversed by migrating herds of deer, bison, and woolly mammoth. Prehistorians have pointed out for some decades - to little apparent effect - that the human groups inhabiting these environments had nothing in common with those blissfully simple, egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers, still routinely imagined to be our remote ancestors.

To begin with, there is the undisputed existence of rich burials, extending back in time to the depths of the Ice Age. Some of these, such as the 25,000-year-old graves from Sungir, east of Moscow, have been known for many decades and are justly famous. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, who reviewed *Creation of Inequality* for *The Wall Street Journal*, [2] expresses his reasonable amazement at their omission: 'Though they know that the hereditary principle predated agriculture, Mr. Flannery and Ms. Marcus cannot quite shed the Rousseauian illusion that it started with sedentary life.'



Therefore they depict a world without inherited power until about 15,000 B.C. while ignoring one of the most important archaeological sites for their purpose'. For dug into the permafrost beneath the Palaeolithic settlement at Sungir was the grave of a middle-aged man buried, as Fernández-Armesto observes, with 'stunning signs of honor: bracelets of polished mammoth-ivory, a diadem or cap of fox's teeth, and nearly 3,000 laboriously carved and polished ivory beads'. And a few feet away, in an identical grave, 'lay two children, of about 10 and 13 years respectively, adorned with comparable grave-gifts - including, in the case of the elder, some 5,000 beads as fine as the adult's (although slightly smaller) and a massive lance carved from ivory'.

Such findings appear to have no significant place in any of the books so far considered. Downplaying them, or reducing them to footnotes, might be more easy to forgive were Sungir an isolated find. It is not. Comparably rich burials are by now attested from Upper Palaeolithic rock shelters and open-air settlements across much of western Eurasia, from the Don to the Dordogne. Among them we find, for example, the 16,000-year-old 'Lady of Saint-Germain-la-Rivière', bedecked with ornaments made on the teeth of young stags hunted 300 km away, in the Spanish Basque country; and the burials of the Ligurian coast - as ancient as Sungir - including 'Il Principe', a young man whose regalia included a sceptre of exotic flint, elk antler batons, and an ornate headdress of perforated shells and deer teeth. Such findings pose stimulating challenges of interpretation. Is Fernández-Armesto right to say these are proofs of 'inherited power'? What was the status of such individuals in life?

No less intriguing is the sporadic but compelling evidence for monumental architecture, stretching back to the Last Glacial Maximum. The idea that one could measure 'monumentality' in absolute terms is of course as silly as the idea of quantifying Ice Age expenditure in dollars and cents. It is a relative concept, which makes sense only within a particular scale of values and prior experiences. The Pleistocene has no direct equivalents in scale to the Pyramids of Giza or the Roman Colloseum. But it does have buildings that, by the standards of the time, could only have been considered public works, implying sophisticated design and the coordination of labour on an impressive scale. Among them are the startling 'mammoth houses', built of



hides stretched over a frame of tusks, examples of which – dating to around 15,000 years ago – can be found along a transect of the glacial fringe reaching from modern-day Kraków all the way to Kiev.

Still more astonishing are the stone temples of Göbekli Tepe, excavated over twenty years ago on the Turkish-Syrian border, and still the subject of vociferous scientific debate. Dating to around 11,000 years ago, the very end of the last Ice Age, they comprise at least twenty megalithic enclosures raised high above the now-barren flanks of the Harran Plain. Each was made up of limestone pillars over 5m in height and weighing up to a ton (respectable by Stonehenge standards, and some 6,000 years before it). Almost every pillar at Göbekli Tepe is a remarkable work of art, with relief carvings of menacing animals projecting from the surface, their male genitalia fiercely displayed. Sculpted raptors appear in combination with images of severed human heads. The carvings attest to sculptural skills, no doubt honed in the more pliable medium of wood (once widely available on the foothills of the Taurus Mountains), before being applied to the bedrock of the Harran. Intriguingly, and despite their size, each of these massive structures had a relatively short lifespan, ending with a great feast and the rapid infilling of its walls: hierarchies raised to the sky, only to be swiftly torn down again. And the protagonists in this prehistoric pageant-play of feasting, building, and destruction were, to the best of our knowledge, hunter-foragers, living by wild resources alone.

What, then, are we to make of all of this? One scholarly response has been to abandon the idea of an egalitarian Golden Age entirely, and conclude that rational self-interest and accumulation of power are the enduring forces behind human social development. But this doesn't really work either. Evidence for institutional inequality in Ice Age societies, whether in the form of grand burials or monumental buildings, is nothing if not sporadic. Burials appear literally centuries, and often hundreds of kilometres, apart. Even if we put this down to the patchiness of the evidence, we still have to ask why the evidence is so patchy: after all, if any of these Ice Age 'princes' had behaved anything like, say, Bronze Age princes, we'd also be finding fortifications, storehouses, palaces – all the usual trappings of emergent states. Instead, over tens of thousands of years, we see monuments and magnificent burials, but little else to indicate the growth of ranked societies. Then there are other, even stranger factors, such as the fact that most of the 'princely' burials consist of individuals with striking physical anomalies,



who today would be considered giants, hunchbacks, or dwarfs.

A wider look at the archaeological evidence suggests a key to resolving the dilemma. It lies in the seasonal rhythms of prehistoric social life. Most of the Palaeolithic sites discussed so far are associated with evidence for annual or biennial periods of aggregation, linked to the migrations of game herds - whether woolly mammoth, steppe bison, reindeer or (in the case of Göbekli Tepe) gazelle - as well as cyclical fish-runs and nut harvests. At less favourable times of year, at least some of our Ice Age ancestors no doubt really did live and forage in tiny bands. But there is overwhelming evidence to show that at others they congregated *en masse* within the kind of 'micro-cities' found at Dolní Věstonice, in the Moravian basin south of Brno, feasting on a super-abundance of wild resources, engaging in complex rituals, ambitious artistic enterprises, and trading minerals, marine shells, and animal pelts over striking distances. Western European equivalents of these seasonal aggregation sites would be the great rock shelters of the French Périgord and the Cantabrian coast, with their famous paintings and carvings, which similarly formed part of an annual round of congregation and dispersal.

Such seasonal patterns of social life endured, long after the 'invention of agriculture' is supposed to have changed everything. New evidence shows that alternations of this kind may be key to understanding the famous Neolithic monuments of Salisbury Plain, and not just in terms of calendric symbolism. Stonehenge, it turns out, was only the latest in a very long sequence of ritual structures, erected in timber as well as stone, as people converged on the plain from remote corners of the British Isles, at significant times of year. Careful excavation has shown that many of these structures - now plausibly interpreted as monuments to the progenitors of powerful Neolithic dynasties - were dismantled just a few generations after their construction. Still more strikingly, this practice of erecting and dismantling grand monuments coincides with a period when the peoples of Britain, having adopted the Neolithic farming economy from continental Europe, appear to have turned their backs on at least one crucial aspect of it, abandoning cereal farming and reverting - around 3300 BC - to the collection of hazelnuts as a staple food source. Keeping their herds of cattle, on which they feasted seasonally at nearby Durrington Walls, the builders of Stonehenge seem likely to have been neither foragers nor farmers, but something in between. And if anything like a royal court did hold sway in the festive season, when they gathered in great numbers, then it could only



have dissolved away for most of the year, when the same people scattered back out across the island.

Why are these seasonal variations important? Because they reveal that from the very beginning, human beings were self-consciously experimenting with different social possibilities. Anthropologists describe societies of this sort as possessing a 'double morphology'. Marcel Mauss, writing in the early twentieth century, observed that the circumpolar Inuit, 'and likewise many other societies . . . have two social structures, one in summer and one in winter, and that in parallel they have two systems of law and religion'. In the summer months, Inuit dispersed into small patriarchal bands in pursuit of freshwater fish, caribou, and reindeer, each under the authority of a single male elder. Property was possessively marked and patriarchs exercised coercive, sometimes even tyrannical power over their kin. But in the long winter months, when seals and walrus flocked to the Arctic shore, another social structure entirely took over as Inuit gathered together to build great meeting houses of wood, whale-rib, and stone. Within them, the virtues of equality, altruism, and collective life prevailed; wealth was shared; husbands and wives exchanged partners under the aegis of Sedna, the Goddess of the Seals.

Another example were the indigenous hunter-gatherers of Canada's Northwest Coast, for whom winter – not summer – was the time when society crystallised into its most unequal form, and spectacularly so. Plank-built palaces sprang to life along the coastlines of British Columbia, with hereditary nobles holding court over commoners and slaves, and hosting the great banquets known as *potlatch*. Yet these aristocratic courts broke apart for the summer work of the fishing season, reverting to smaller clan formations, still ranked, but with an entirely different and less formal structure. In this case, people actually adopted different names in summer and winter, literally becoming someone else, depending on the time of year.

Perhaps most striking, in terms of political reversals, were the seasonal practices of 19th-century tribal confederacies on the American Great Plains – sometime, or one-time farmers who had adopted a nomadic hunting life. In the late summer, small and highly mobile bands of Cheyenne and Lakota would congregate in large settlements to make logistical preparations for the buffalo hunt. At this most sensitive time of year they appointed a police force that exercised full coercive powers, including the right to imprison, whip, or fine any offender who endangered the proceedings. Yet as the



anthropologist Robert Lowie observed, this 'unequivocal authoritarianism' operated on a strictly seasonal and temporary basis, giving way to more 'anarchic' forms of organisation once the hunting season – and the collective rituals that followed – were complete.

Scholarship does not always advance. Sometimes it slides backwards. A hundred years ago, most anthropologists understood that those who live mainly from wild resources were not, normally, restricted to tiny 'bands.' That idea is really a product of the 1960s, when Kalahari Bushmen and Mbuti Pygmies became the preferred image of primordial humanity for TV audiences and researchers alike. As a result we've seen a return of evolutionary stages, really not all that different from the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment: this is what Fukuyama, for instance, is drawing on, when he writes of society evolving steadily from 'bands' to 'tribes' to 'chiefdoms,' then finally, the kind of complex and stratified 'states' we live in today – usually defined by their monopoly of 'the legitimate use of coercive force.' By this logic, however, the Cheyenne or Lakota would have had to be 'evolving' from bands directly to states roughly every November, and then 'devolving' back again come spring. Most anthropologists now recognise that these categories are hopelessly inadequate, yet nobody has proposed an alternative way of thinking about world history in the broadest terms.

Quite independently, archaeological evidence suggests that in the highly seasonal environments of the last Ice Age, our remote ancestors were behaving in broadly similar ways: shifting back and forth between alternative social arrangements, permitting the rise of authoritarian structures during certain times of year, on the proviso that they could not last; on the understanding that no particular social order was ever fixed or immutable. Within the same population, one could live sometimes in what looks, from a distance, like a band, sometimes a tribe, and sometimes a society with many of the features we now identify with states. With such institutional flexibility comes the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given social structure and reflect; to both make and unmake the political worlds we live in. If nothing else, this explains the 'princes' and 'princesses' of the last Ice Age, who appear to show up, in such magnificent isolation, like characters in some kind of fairy-tale or costume drama. Maybe they were almost literally so. If they reigned at all, then perhaps it was, like the kings and queens of Stonehenge, just for a season.

5. Time for a re-think



Modern authors have a tendency to use prehistory as a canvas for working out philosophical problems: are humans fundamentally good or evil, cooperative or competitive, egalitarian or hierarchical? As a result, they also tend to write as if for 95% of our species history, human societies were all much the same. But even 40,000 years is a very, very long period of time. It seems inherently likely, and the evidence confirms, that those same pioneering humans who colonised much of the planet also experimented with an enormous variety of social arrangements. As Claude Lévi-Strauss often pointed out, early *Homo sapiens* were not just physically the same as modern humans, they were our intellectual peers as well. In fact, most were probably more conscious of society's potential than people generally are today, switching back and forth between different forms of organization every year. Rather than idling in some primordial innocence, until the genie of inequality was somehow uncorked, our prehistoric ancestors seem to have successfully opened and shut the bottle on a regular basis, confining inequality to ritual costume dramas, constructing gods and kingdoms as they did their monuments, then cheerfully disassembling them once again.

If so, then the real question is not 'what are the origins of social inequality?', but, having lived so much of our history moving back and forth between different political systems, 'how did we get so stuck?' All this is very far from the notion of prehistoric societies drifting blindly towards the institutional chains that bind them. It is also far from the dismal prophecies of Fukuyama, Diamond, Morris, and Scheidel, where any 'complex' form of social organization necessary means that tiny elites take charge of key resources, and begin to trample everyone else underfoot. Most social science treats these grim prognostications as self-evident truths. But clearly, they are baseless. So, we might reasonably ask, what other cherished truths must now be cast on the dust-heap of history?

Quite a number, actually. Back in the '70s, the brilliant Cambridge archaeologist David Clarke predicted that, with modern research, almost every aspect of the old edifice of human evolution, 'the explanations of the development of modern man, domestication, metallurgy, urbanization and civilisation - may in perspective emerge as semantic snares and metaphysical mirages.' It appears he was right. Information is now pouring in from every quarter of the globe, based on careful empirical fieldwork, advanced techniques of climatic reconstruction, chronometric dating, and scientific analyses of organic remains. Researchers are examining ethnographic and historical material in a new light. And almost all of this



new research goes against the familiar narrative of world history. Still, the most remarkable discoveries remain confined to the work of specialists, or have to be teased out by reading between the lines of scientific publications. Let us conclude, then, with a few headlines of our own: just a handful, to give a sense of what the new, emerging world history is starting to look like.

The first bombshell on our list concerns the origins and spread of agriculture. There is no longer any support for the view that it marked a major transition in human societies. In those parts of the world where animals and plants were first domesticated, there actually was no discernible 'switch' from Palaeolithic Forager to Neolithic Farmer. The 'transition' from living mainly on wild resources to a life based on food production typically took something in the order of three thousand years. While agriculture allowed for the *possibility* of more unequal concentrations of wealth, in most cases this only began to happen millennia after its inception. In the time between, people in areas as far removed as Amazonia and the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East were trying farming on for size, 'play farming' if you like, switching annually between modes of production, much as they switched their social structures back and forth. Moreover, the 'spread of farming' to secondary areas, such as Europe – so often described in triumphalist terms, as the start of an inevitable decline in hunting and gathering – turns out to have been a highly tenuous process, which sometimes failed, leading to demographic collapse for the farmers, not the foragers.

Clearly, it no longer makes any sense to use phrases like 'the agricultural revolution' when dealing with processes of such inordinate length and complexity. Since there was no Eden-like state, from which the first farmers could take their first steps on the road to inequality, it makes even less sense to talk about agriculture as marking the origins of rank or private property. If anything, it is among those populations – the 'Mesolithic' peoples – who refused farming through the warming centuries of the early Holocene, that we find stratification becoming more entrenched; at least, if opulent burial, predatory warfare, and monumental buildings are anything to go by. In at least some cases, like the Middle East, the first farmers seem to have consciously developed alternative forms of community, to go along with their more labour-intensive way of life. These Neolithic societies look strikingly egalitarian when compared to their hunter-gatherer neighbours, with a dramatic increase in the economic and social importance of women, clearly reflected in their art and ritual life (contrast here the female figurines of Jericho or Çatalhöyük with the hyper-masculine sculpture of Göbekli



Tepe).

Another bombshell: 'civilization' does not come as a package. The world's first cities did not just emerge in a handful of locations, together with systems of centralised government and bureaucratic control. In China, for instance, we are now aware that by 2500 BC, settlements of 300 hectares or more existed on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, over a thousand years before the foundation of the earliest (Shang) royal dynasty. On the other side of the Pacific, and at around the same time, ceremonial centres of striking magnitude have been discovered in the valley of Peru's Río Supe, notably at the site of Caral: enigmatic remains of sunken plazas and monumental platforms, four millennia older than the Inca Empire. Such recent discoveries indicate how little is yet truly known about the distribution and origin of the first cities, and just how much older these cities may be than the systems of authoritarian government and literate administration that were once assumed necessary for their foundation. And in the more established heartlands of urbanisation – Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the Basin of Mexico – there is mounting evidence that the first cities were organised on self-consciously egalitarian lines, municipal councils retaining significant autonomy from central government. In the first two cases, cities with sophisticated civic infrastructures flourished for over half a millennium with no trace of royal burials or monuments, no standing armies or other means of large-scale coercion, nor any hint of direct bureaucratic control over most citizen's lives.

Jared Diamond notwithstanding, there is absolutely no evidence that top-down structures of rule are the necessary consequence of large-scale organization. Walter Scheidel notwithstanding, it is simply not true that ruling classes, once established, cannot be gotten rid of except by general catastrophe. To take just one well-documented example: around 200 AD, the city of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico, with a population of 120,000 (one of the largest in the world at the time), appears to have undergone a profound transformation, turning its back on pyramid-temples and human sacrifice, and reconstructing itself as a vast collection of comfortable villas, all almost exactly the same size. It remained so for perhaps 400 years. Even in Cortés' day, Central Mexico was still home to cities like Tlaxcala, run by an elected council whose members were periodically whipped by their constituents to remind them who was ultimately in charge.

The pieces are all there to create an entirely different world history. For the



most part, we're just too blinded by our prejudices to see the implications. For instance, almost everyone nowadays insists that participatory democracy, or social equality, can work in a small community or activist group, but cannot possibly 'scale up' to anything like a city, a region, or a nation-state. But the evidence before our eyes, if we choose to look at it, suggests the opposite. Egalitarian cities, even regional confederacies, are historically quite commonplace. Egalitarian families and households are not. Once the historical verdict is in, we will see that the most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale - the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude - the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence. If we really want to understand how it first became acceptable for some to turn wealth into power, and for others to end up being told their needs and lives don't count, it is here that we should look. Here too, we predict, is where the most difficult work of creating a free society will have to take place.

Watch the authors discuss some of the issues raised in this essay in the following videos:

1. *David Graeber and David Wengrow: Palaeolithic Politics and Why It Still Matters (13 October 2015)* ([Vimeo](#))
2. *David Graeber and David Wengrow: Teach-Out (7 March 2018)* ([Facebook](#))
3. *David Graeber and David Wengrow: Slavery and Its Rejection Among Foragers on the Pacific Coast of North America: A Case of Schismogenesis? (22 March 2018)* ([Collège de France](#))



Footnotes

1. 'To Each Age Its Inequality' by Ian Morris. *New York Times*, 9 July 2015.

See:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/opinion/to-each-age-its-inequality.html>

2. 'It's Good To Have a King' by Felipe Fernández-Armesto. *Wall Street Journal*, 10 May 2012. See:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304363104577389944241796150>