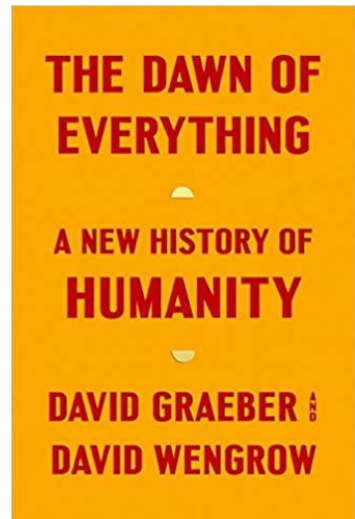


“The Political Sophistication of
Indigenous Peoples”
a review by Dick Burkhardt of
**The Dawn of Everything -
A New History of Humanity**

By David Graeber and David Wengrow



Forget about “primitive egalitarian bands and tribes”. Think pre-literate societies that were in some ways more politically sophisticated than our own. These early societies dealt with difficult issues of governance in a variety of ways, sometimes very egalitarian, sometimes authoritarian. This follows from startling advances in archeology and anthropology in recent decades. These investigations refute the dominant paradigm, based on increasing complexity and use of resources, of a progression from primitive egalitarian bands, to kingdoms then empires based on agriculture and cities, to our current hierarchical societies based on industry.

This book is well-written and provocative, full of insights, examples, and alternative viewpoints unknown to much of the public. Instead of simplistic interpretations and generalizations based on scant evidence, Graeber and Wengrow flesh out the counterexamples to yesterday’s grand narratives, especially real cities and societies that flourished for many hundreds of years with elaborate customs and sophisticated public discussions instead of authoritarian rule. And often when kings or warriors did manage to takeover, their powers were circumscribed over time, or they were overthrown. The kingdom of Cahokia (east St. Louis) was a prime example, long since reduced to earthen mounds and bitter memories, despite its once vast reach across eastern North America.

A more enlightened way was exemplified by Kandiaronk, the leading statesman and public intellectual of the Huron-Wendat confederacy in southern Ontario in the late 17th. In fact Graeber and Wengrow credit Kandiaronk as the leading indigenous voice behind the European Enlightenment. His devastating critique of French money, property law, class, and hierarchy was published in France, attracting widespread interest, by the adventurer Lahontan and backed up by publications from Jesuit priests. All this is validated by many documented cases of colonial people who had lived among native groups, then returned to colonial society, often decided to go back.

Leading French intellectuals like Montesquieu and Rousseau all responded with their own theories to explain the embarrassment of extreme authoritarian rule and social inequity in Europe compared to the amazingly egalitarian and effective governance in North America by peoples who had been termed “savages”. In turn this opened the eyes of leading American figures of the Enlightenment like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to new possibilities of governance. In other words, this “clash of civilizations” was not just destructive, but also constructive, in cultural ways that reverberate through the work of early anthropologists like Franz Boas to today’s renaissance of respect for native peoples.

All this gives substance to Graeber’s well known anarchism. He is suggesting that “another world is possible” – the slogan of the World Social Forums of the early 2000s, which featured self-organization. I organized workshops at two of these amazing forums – India (2004) and Brazil (2005). Yet it is clear that armies and money-power stand in the way. In Wendat society the power had been entirely social – with no prisons or vengeful punishments. Instead serious transgressions were handled by imposing non-monetary fines on the clan of the offending party, which in turn dealt with each individual situation as their councils deemed appropriate, presumably some kind of restorative justice.

Thus were vendettas and wars alleviated. To replicate this today courts could easily impose fines but we lack a system of clans. Yet the authors point out that the dozen or so major clans of eastern North America were not only widespread across the continent but only partly based on kinship – the key was to have a clan identity both for sustenance in hard times or when traveling and for accountability. Identity based on geography rarely works for this purpose today. That is, one’s national identity may occasionally be of use when traveling abroad (call the embassy) or one’s congressional representative may be of help with a bureaucratic issue, but accountability today reduces to the usual system of punishments.

The authors cite three kinds of freedom possessed by the Wendat which are far more circumscribed today: freedom (1) to move away, (2) to disobey, (3) to transform social relationships. But they do not grapple with how such freedoms, or similar ones, could be created in today’s mass society based on unsustainable, fossil-fuel driven, material abundance. Unfortunately, they disparage issues of scale and complexity.

But Graeber and Wengrow do address three issues that characterize modern states: (1) sovereignty, (2) administration, and (3) charismatic politics. The first two clearly limit the freedoms to move away and disobey, cultivated by some indigenous peoples. But charismatic leaders could stimulate needed social change, including disobedience to oppressive conditions, or simply leaving to look for greener pastures. Or, of course, they could make everything worse if they appeal to

legitimate dissatisfaction but lack practical plans or methods for productive social transformation. For example, authoritarian or violent revolutions often create enormous misery and backlash.

To sum up their key theme, Graeber and Wengrow state that “If something did go wrong in human history – given the current state of the world, it’s hard to deny that something did – then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence” (p 502). Yet they fail to note that 19th century America was full of Utopian experiments and even today there many world-wide. Yet these intentional communities rarely scale up to a mass society, and even if they could, mass societies are very hard to change, and one group’s utopia often becomes another’s nightmare.

Neither do they adequately address the economic / resource / ecological base of proposed “other forms of social existence”. This is the grounding which, though not deterministic, is absolutely critical, demonstrated by the long history of societal collapse as analyzed by Jared Diamond and others. Graeber and Wengrow are on more solid ground when analyzing identity groups, particularly “cultural schismogenesis” – the tendency of adjacent social groups to sometimes accentuate their social differences, instead of accommodating or assimilating.

In anthropology this leads to productive studies of “cultural areas” of geography but tribal warfare and its modern equivalents are more troubling consequence. Yet they point out that actual history also shows long periods of peace in many areas. They attempt to analyze the conditions that promote modern warfare in terms of the 3 aspects of states cited above, supplemented by other factors, such as patriarchy and the sanctity of private property from Roman law.

However I did not find this social analysis particularly compelling, since the economics of prosperity and wealth and its ecological impacts are the real underlying drivers. Far more useful would be analyses of how different societies have accommodated to different economic environments and what lessons can be learned.