

## **Introduction to Special Issue: Leading Scholars of the Past Comment on *Dawn of Everything***

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### **Critical Reception of *The Dawn of Everything***

David Graeber and David Wengrow's [The Dawn of Everything](#) (DoE) is by all accounts a sensation, as far as a 700+ page study of global comparative prehistoric sociopolitical dynamics can be. Number two on *The New York Times*' Best Seller list in 2021 and top seller in multiple categories on Amazon, its immediate success puts it on par with other high-profile works popularizing the idea that understanding the present requires exploring the past—Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond 1998), Pinker's *Better Angels* (Pinker 2012), Morris's *Measure of Civilization* (Morris 2013), Harari's *Sapiens* (Harari 2014), or Ferguson's *Doom* (Ferguson 2021). Like these other works, and perhaps even more so, though, it has also proven to be quite polarizing.

Praise has been heaped on the scope of the work, eloquence of the arguments, and ingenuity displayed in Graeber and Wengrow's reimagining of how modern society *could* be. Reviews largely in mainstream media outlets such as [The New York Times](#), [The Guardian](#), [The Atlantic](#) and others describe the work as “an exhilarating read” (D. Priestland, *The Guardian*) and “A brilliant new account [that] upends bedrock assumptions about 30,000 years of change” (W. Deresiewicz, *The Atlantic*). The publisher's website lists among the champions historian Robert Kelly, who declares it “The most profound and exciting book I've read in thirty years” and Noam Chomsky, who likewise calls it “A fascinating inquiry, which leads us to rethink the nature of human capacities.” Many social justice advocates likewise felt the work “a revelation” for the way it upended traditional narratives and offered hope for more equitable, less hierarchical futures (E. Daley, [Resilience.org](#)).

On the other hand, an equal number of more skeptical commentaries have come mainly from practicing historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists who felt disabused by the work, particularly the parts touching on their own areas and time-periods of study. While perhaps less visible than the more positive reviews, these largely academic commentators criticized DoE's departure from typical scholarly practice, perceived logical flaws in how arguments are laid out, or just errors of historical fact. A critique by philosopher [Kwame Appiah](#)—which led to a

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heated (for academic circles) [exchange with the authors](#)—disparaged Graeber and Wengrow’s treatment of the history of ideas and “cherry-picked” examples; “The vista we’re offered is exhilarating, but as evidence it gains clarity through filtration. Two half-truths, alas, do not make a truth, and neither do a thousand.” Anthropologists [Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale](#) likewise concluded that DoE is “energetic, committed and kaleidoscopic, but also flawed.” Surveying their challenges to traditional narratives about the deep past, they note that “such categorical statements, stated so boldly, make their claims to have written a new human history attractive. But there are two stumbling blocks. First, the very arguments they make are at odds with their own political project. Second, the evidence doesn’t fit what they are trying to say.” In a similar vein, historian [David Immerwahr](#) concedes that DoE raises many enticing points, but in the end leaves just as many questions unanswered: “What’s exasperating about *The Dawn of Everything* is that it never really answers the question; at most, it offers quick hints and hypotheses.”

## **A Book of Contrasts**

Readers of DoE and those thinking about picking up the tome, then, are left with a number of contrasting ideas about what the work really is:

It is full of detailed, exciting descriptions of a host of societies from the builders of the Trypillia mega-sites in Ukraine, to the indigenous Yurok people of northern California, to the hierarchical nation-states with millions of inhabitants that dominate the geopolitical landscape today, and much in between; or it overlooks so much of the detail, ambiguity, and uncertainty that characterizes contemporary scholarship on these areas.

It is a lively and radically novel retelling of our ancient roots, eschewing the idea that humans became locked into our destiny of coercive, centralized states once we fully took on sedentary lives; or it largely rehashes arguments widely accepted in most academic circles today, recognizing how persistent alternate modes of life remained even after farming became widespread and highlighting the variation and multiplicity of the sociopolitical and economic trajectories taken by societies around the world.

The style and arguments are engaging and compelling; or the logic is flawed, railing against strawpersons, cherry-picked evidence and interpretations, and relying on overblown contrasts between extreme (and not widely supported) positions.

It makes an essential contribution to the general public’s awareness and appreciation for long-term social dynamics; or it hinders these same efforts by presenting incomplete, one-sided characterizations of our shared past.

## Evolutionary Explanations and Cliodynamics

These apparent contrasts make DoE an intriguing work on their own, but the book also offers much that is specifically relevant to this journal. Of the many central themes running through DoE, two in particular will strike a chord with readers of *Cliodynamics*: Graeber and Wengrow set out to reconstruct narratives about our shared past that are not “needlessly dull” (p. 3) as most standard accounts are, in their estimation, by comparing dynamics in disparate societies across the globe and throughout the Holocene; and they seek to dismantle and offer alternatives to “the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory” (p. 4). Regardless of how successful readers feel Graeber and Wengrow are in these aims, DoE without a doubt raises a number of interesting questions about the nature of change in human social formations over the long term, about the relevance and applicability of different approaches to uncovering broad patterns in the past, and about the use of historical evidence to support contemporary social, economic, and political ideals. All of these are themes, approaches, and questions that any cliodynamicist would feel comfortable with and which fill the pages of past issues of this journal.

It needs to be stressed, however, that when Graeber and Wengrow critique the “familiar narratives” of cultural evolutionists, it is clear that they are referring to the concept of ideal-typical “stages” of social development—hunter-gatherer band to small sedentary village, then on to chiefdoms, proto-states, archaic states, ancient empires, and so on. These are arguments found more often in the works of anthropologists and archaeologists from the mid-twentieth century like Elman Service and Marshall Sahlins (Service and Sahlins 1960; Service 1962) than contemporary cultural evolutionists such as Robert Boyd, Peter Richerson, Richard Blanton, Lane Fargher, Gary Feinman, Joyce Marcus, and many of the authors who written for this journal.<sup>1</sup> To this latter group, sociocultural evolution is neither linear nor singular (nor always “beneficial”), but displays great diversity in trajectory and pressures leading to many different sorts of outcomes for different communities; precisely what DoE chastises the field for failing to recognize. Nevertheless, Graeber and Wengrow do propose to offer a different way of understanding long-term cultural and sociopolitical change which, at the very least, deserves consideration and response.

To get some clarity on all of the questions and widely different interpretations surrounding DoE, we wanted to hear from some expert voices who have dedicated their careers to exploring many of the themes, regions, and peoples discussed by Graeber and Wengrow, which is how this special issue was born. We therefore

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. (Blanton and Fargher 2008; Boyd and Richerson 1988; 2004; Carballo, Roscoe, and Feinman 2014; Feinman and Marcus 1998).

invited a number of prominent historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists to provide their thoughts on these questions, and more.

## Commentaries in This Special Issue

Like all of the press DoE has garnered, the commentaries in this special issue offer a range of assessments. Readers will find the work praised as “an original and ambitious book, making deep history speak to the larger human condition” (Morris, this issue). For Scheidel (this issue), its authors’ “desire and ability to refresh, augment and rebalance conventional narratives by rescuing neglected millennia and muted experiences is impressive and commendable” (Scheidel, this issue). They “deserve praiseful recognition for directly challenging long-entrenched Occidental frameworks that self-congratulate the advent of ‘modernity’ and the rise of the West” (Feinman, this issue) and largely succeed in their quest to revise “the conventional narrative of human history that is not only wrong, but quite needlessly dull” (Wiessner, this issue).

At the same time, Graeber and Wengrow are criticized for their unconvincing style of argument, for being “more interested in persuasion—pushing a set vision of the past—than in scholarly or scientific analysis and argumentation” (Smith, this issue) and for their “readiness to devise all-or-nothing scenarios in which deviations from simplifying templates are taken to invalidate the templates as such” (Scheidel, this issue). Our commentators note being perplexed by Graeber and Wengrow’s stated disdain for social scientific methods and quantitative reasoning in particular and by the way that they “avoid other well-established methods, such as the historian’s standard tool of continuous narrative. There is just no method here; the arguments do not make sense” (Morris, this issue). They point out DoE’s reliance on “strawperson” arguments where the “views they argue against do not reflect the current state of scholarship” (Scheidel, this issue), presenting their own set of ideas which is “inconsistent and fails to build a convincing new narrative while dispatching the conventional socio-evolutionary one” (Wiessner, this issue). They note also that DoE overlooks potentially critical explanatory factors like “material conditions and environmental or technological incentives and constraints” (Scheidel, this issue) and register surprise at Graeber and Wengrow’s “lack of recognition of the role of environment in the history of humanity” (Wiessner, this issue). Feinman (this issue) expresses disappointment that the authors “dismiss a raft of interdisciplinary research and empirical findings,” documenting the importance of these factors on long-run social development. In the end, several commentators are left feeling dissatisfied, as “frustratingly, *The Dawn of Everything* never transparently lays out even the skeleton of a coherent alternative frame to the perspective they rightfully challenge” (Feinman, this issue) and find the work to be a “frustrating read because

there are quite a few interesting new ideas, but they are poorly supported and not sufficiently contextualized in the literature” (Smith, this issue).

Several commentators also respond to the issue of how “stuck” we are with the large, centrally organized, hierarchical nation-states that currently occupy the majority of the world: one of the major themes of DoE and, arguably, the primary question that Graeber and Wengrow wish their readers to confront. Certainly these are critical points not only for understanding the past, but for righting some of the wrongs that plague contemporary society. And while DoE has garnered rightful praise for raising the issue and refusing to allow the status quo of high inequality and predatory elites to prevail simply because it is or has been common, our commentators suggest that more nuanced argument could make the same points while recognizing the demands and trade-offs that produced our contemporary world to begin with. Several of our commentators note that Graeber and Wengrow struggle to explain their position as they never really offer a clear definitions of concepts like egalitarianism or social freedom. Wiessner, for instance, asks “Did we indeed get stuck? Have we not maintained the freedom to relocate, disobey commands, and shape new social realities? Doesn’t the dance between hierarchy and equality persist as it has throughout human history?” (Wiessner, this issue). She points out that all societies have both hierarchical and coercive elements as well as egalitarian ones, and the trick is to find the right balance between them. Feinman (this issue) similarly asks “might it be more cautiously realistic to recognize that in today’s world, cooperative governance and institutions are essential, these political associations take many forms, and to keep them equitable requires the persistent investments and participation of the citizenry?”

Finally, while so much attention is given to issues of equality, freedom, and social justice, it is worth pointing out that gender, ethnic, and other disparities in access and opportunity that are unfortunately widespread today just as they have been in many past societies do not find much space in DoE or in our commentaries. Perhaps these issues are just too difficult to speak to given our sparse evidence for the distant past, or perhaps this exposes a gap in our understanding of long-run sociocultural evolution and how we evaluate societal outcomes. What is clear is that, despite DoE’s 700+ pages and the raft of responses the work has garnered from this journal and elsewhere, there is still much to be explored.

Ultimately, then, the commentaries in this special issue fail to produce a clear consensus on the work, but they adeptly point out a number of its advantages, oversights, insights, and deficiencies. The only way to determine which of these descriptions is most apt is, of course, for each of us to read through the work ourselves. And certainly DoE is well worth the read and something scholars, students, and the public will need to engage with for years to come.

## Authors' Response

As a final note, we must point out that this special issue does not feature any commentary from the authors themselves. David Graeber passed away suddenly and tragically shortly before the book's publication; we invited David Wengrow to provide a response to the commentaries published in this special issue, but he was unfortunately unable to do so.

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