

'Cancelling' hunter-gatherers for the cause of twenty-first-century urbanism

The Dawn of Everything's left/right divide in prehistory

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Abstract: A prominent theme of *The Dawn of Everything* is Graeber and Wengrow's effort to knock down what they believe is the 'Edenic' original human innocence component of 'modern social theory'. To support this position, *The Dawn of Everything* relies on examples from numerous materially and administratively complex societies. Here I suggest that Graeber and Wengrow are motivated to associate anyone advocating for human arrangements which are less materially or administratively complex as effectively right-wing in psychological and political outlook. Although Graeber and Wengrow never directly say this, it is a theme which can be discerned throughout *The Dawn of Everything*. They promote a model that anything other than progressivist thought is not only 'childlike' and 'primitive', but also that such 'primitivist' tendencies are effectively politically right. Driven by this logic, *The Dawn of Everything* attempts to situate a prehistoric left/right divide, with certain hunter-gatherers representing the right and settled agriculture societies representing the left. They do this mainly through their total avoidance of ever making any distinction between two separate adaptations that were alternative to evolving urban civilisation and its politics. One of these adaptations is what Graeber and Wengrow refer to as the 'heroic societies'. The other is that of people pursuing small-in-scale, non-resource-intensified subsistence lifeways, for the agent-based purposes of maintaining actual autonomy.

Keywords: resource intensification, subsistence, rural/urban, left/right, transegalitarian

Introduction

In this article I argue that *The Dawn of Everything* (hereafter *DoE*) projects contemporary political divisions onto prehistory. It does so through these aspects of its story: seeing farming as 'the ecology of freedom' (2021:248–249); and claiming that early cities were not authoritarian but instead egalitarian (2021:276–327). Any disruption of this original democratic and peaceful 'urban egalitarianism' is blamed on bucolic, male-dominated 'heroic societies' persistently raiding from the hinterlands (2021:310–313). The earliest 'egalitarian

cities' on the Mesopotamian plains were constantly at odds with such 'heroic' peoples who, coming from upland areas, had little dependence on agriculture and instead were hunters (2021:226–229, 248, 312–313, 367).

Compared to the agricultural urbanists developing in the lowlands, tells *DoE*, these hunting people were highly stratified, male-dominated and violent. The following can serve as a summarising quote for *DoE*'s positioning:

In the Fertile Crescent it is – if anything – among upland groups, furthest removed from a dependence on agriculture, that we find stratification and violence becoming entrenched; while their lowland counterparts, who link the production of crops to important social rituals, come out looking decidedly more egalitarian. (2021:248)

The *DoE* story continues that, as the situation evolved across Eurasia, steppe nomads of the 'heroic' type developed into aristocratic warrior cultures who persistently attacked, both physically and politically, the supposedly 'egalitarian' urban cultures. These raiding societies were run by aristocrats foundationally against any notion of democratic politics and instead focused on competition for hereditary status and wealth. Commenting on ancient Mesopotamia, for example, Graeber and Wengrow (hereafter GW) (2021:312) state that 'heroic burials [...] feasting, drinking, the beauty and fame of the individual male warrior [...] appear time and time again around the fringes of urban life'.

For GW, dominance hierarchies are not influenced by broader historic patterns of expanding economic intensification and sociopolitical complexity. Rather, hierarchy is rooted merely in the ancient male hunter's drive for status. In promoting this narrative, they note that the 'heroic societies' of early civilisational Eurasia showed very similar traits to the various complex hunter-gatherers (Ames 2003; Fitzhugh 2003; Hayden 2014; Sassaman 2004) given mention in *DoE*, for example, the Pacific Northwest Coast Nootka, Haida and Tlingit. According to GW, 'egalitarian cities' initially rise in rebellion against such stratified hunter-gatherers. Although GW don't say this verbatim, they appear to place the fundamental responsibility for an evolving turmoil between rural and urban ultimately onto the politics and ethos of complex hunter-gatherers. GW's brute hunter-gatherer heroes are those who will not cede their elite warrior status, characterised as wild-animal worshipping, trophy head-taking, entrepreneurial libertarians. This cultural ethos is diametrically opposed to the peacefully organised, social justice-oriented, collectivist, democratic, female-inspired political formations of the agricultural cities. This latter trajectory, GW say (2021:248–249), represents an 'ecology of freedom' in which the development of large-scale agricultural settlements 'actually set

humanity [...] on a course *away* from violent domination' by, one can infer, wayward hunter-gatherers.

As part of this story, GW adopt a position that governmental administration is a necessary safeguard. Bureaucracies are meant to rein in these dangerous hunter 'heroes'. Referring to an ideology of the power of kings being held by 'the people', it follows that 'bureaucracies exist for the benefit of said "people"' (2021:431). This theme emerges as the reader travels through *DoE*. Crucially, GW (2021:312) are keen to emphasise that 'hero' cultures are largely 'without any centralized authority'. 'State bureaucracy', suggest GW (2021:427), promises a 'principle of care' but ends up corrupting 'one of the most fundamental building blocks of social life'. For GW, while administrative rule must save us from the 'savage' country-loving, hunter-gatherer rebels, it has been 'corrupted by a confluence of maths and violence'.

A vital thing to notice within this narrative is GW's problematic attempt to substitute the idea of egalitarian hunter-gatherers with predominantly male-controlled and violent complex hunter-gatherer forms. The *DoE* authors never discuss any alternative lifeway with less economic intensification. When GW argue 'farming is the ecology of freedom', beginning largely in Chapter 8 of *DoE*, small-band non-intensifying and immediate-return hunter-gatherers have been removed from GW's 'New History', as if these lifeways have been inconsequential to the human story and should be ignored.

Complex hunter-gatherers as a root of elite-driven economic intensification

In making this argument, GW's main attention is Southwest Asia and the eventual development of Mesopotamian cities. GW's thesis is that farming – first as a component of mixed-foraging economies and then leading into development of full-blown agriculture and agriculturally dependent cities – originally appeared as a downriver, lowlander rebellion against upland-residing hunting lifeways. These are modelled after the general cultural patterns of Göbekli Tepe and other early Neolithic hunter-gatherer megalithic sites in the region.

Göbekli Tepe is a Pre-Pottery Neolithic A site (PPNA 12,000–10,300 BP), but it contains occupation levels that extend into the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB 10,300–8700 BP). PPNA-PPNB megalithic sites are noteworthy because they are associated with hunter-gatherers not reliant to any significant degree on food cultivation. However, food cultivation was surely emerging in the region during

this time. The PPNB eventually becomes a marker for settled communities, intensified cultivation and animal domestication (Byrd 2005; Colledge et al 2018; Edwards 2016; Frangipane 2007).

PPNA-PPNB megalithic sites are representative of large-game hunting and wild cereal grain-based religious centres where ritual feasting, mortuary activities, and perhaps human sacrifice occurred in order to appease ranked ancestor deities and animal spirits (Dietrich et al 2019; Gresky et al 2017; Mithen 2022; Mithen et al 2023; Rollefson 2005; Schmidt 2012; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW (2021:242) emphasise that the stone pillars at Göbekli Tepe are carved with 'an imagery dominated by wild and venomous animals; scavengers and predators, almost exclusively sexed to male'. They highlight reliefs depicting raptors taking human heads, totem pole-like pillars with depictions of 'victims and predators: disembodied souls and sharp-eyed birds of prey [...] flesh eating birds and other carnivores are shown grasping, tossing about or otherwise playing with their catch of human crania', on one pillar there is 'a headless man with an erect penis'.

GW also highlight the 'house of skulls' at the PPNB site of Çayönü Tepesi with over 450 human remains, 90 of which are headless. Çayönü seems to have contained a sacrifice altar, located in a public square. GW desire to establish a connection between decapitation rituals and what they think are simultaneous rituals of butchering wild game. GW (2021:244) link this to a type of patriarchal hunting ideology, connecting human trophy-taking and decapitation with 'hunting as predation, shifting suddenly from a mode of subsistence to a way of modelling and enacting dominance over other human beings'. They imply that sacrificial victims at these hunter-gatherer sites were female victims of an established male dominance. For example, they emphasise one Göbekli Tepe burial consisting of a 'splayed skeleton (again a woman) still lying inside a burned down building prone and missing her head' (2021:243).

GW's purpose is to promote a perspective that, as a method of rebellion against these obstinate, male-dominant hunting cultures, it was women who piloted the way towards incipient grain cultivation and then ultimately to agriculture. In making this contrast, GW's agenda is to promote that it was hunter-gatherers who were pursuing the more hierarchical sociopolitical pathway, not early farmers.

DoE provides very little detailed information about Southwest Asia's 23,000–12,000 BP Epipaleolithic, the period of large-scale climactic and socioeconomic change critically important to understanding the transition from hunter-gatherer to settled agricultural life in the region. *DoE* provides no assessment of this epoch's cultural formations, which would require an overview of the

PPNA and PPNB evolutionary trajectories and the preceding Natufian complex (14,900–11,750 BP) to explain the deeper processes of social and ideological change occurring (Bar-Yosef 1998; Byrd 2005; Finlayson 2020a; Grosman & Munro 2017; Hayden 2004; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020).

A review of this material shows that much of the sociopolitically problematic ethos GW assign to Southwest Asian hunter-gatherers had been arising among these populations starting at least from the Epipaleolithic Natufian and then further throughout this era of change (Byrd 2005; Clark & Wasse 2019; Finlayson 2020a; Hayden 2004; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). The socioecological changes we are concerned with originate with the emergence of complex hunter-gatherers specialising in the intensified procurement of large-game and wild cereals. Subsequent overexploitation of these resources arose for the purposes of a sociopolitically stratified adaptation and its economic expansion (Byrd 2005; Snir et al 2015; Starkovich & Stiner 2009; Villanueva & Hayden 2020; Weiss et al 2004).

While the Natufian originated in the Mediterranean Levant, by the PPNA its features had extended into the upper Tigris and Euphrates watersheds, representing an expansion of the sociopolitical, ideological and economic complexity which had arisen among Southwest Asian hunter-gatherers (Byrd 2005; Mithen et al 2023). The Natufian correlates with the first evidence for granaries and food storage by hunter-gatherers in the Jordan Valley starting around 11,000 years BP (Grosman & Munro 2017; Kuijij & Finlayson 2009). Although remaining small-scale (Finlayson 2020b), this escalates in the PPNA, where, compared to the Natufian, 'sites are much larger [...] With storage bins for grains, ceremonial structures, and a rich lithic industry' (Gowdy 2021:69; Finlayson et al 2011; Wilcox & Stordeur 2012). Both a Holocene climate and the eventual widespread emergence of settled villages with plant cultivation were critical features of the PPNB (Clark & Wasse 2019; Edwards 2016; Finlayson 2020a; Richerson & Boyd 2001).

From the broad view, archaeological interpretations of the PPN align with ethnographically known traits of economically and politically complex groups around the world, both complex hunter-gatherers and cultivators. These traits include being sedentary or semi-sedentary; mound, megalith and/or longhouse construction; elaborate elite burials, food storage, property, ritual feasts, trophy head-taking, shamanic-led sacrifice ritual, intensifying trade and commodification of procured goods (Ames 2003; 2007; Feinman 2013; Frangipane 2007; Hayden 2004; 2011; 2014; Mithen et al 2023; Sassaman 2004; Testart 1982; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). While there was diversity (Finlayson 2020a), it was ultimately these types of cultural arrangements which evolved during the

6000-year-plus timeframe represented by the Natufian and the succeeding PPNA-PPNB.

In Hayden's (2004:265) assessment, Natufian sites 'exhibit a range of strategies commonly used by aggrandizers'. While Finlayson (2020a) argues that this social stratification was not repeated during a more 'egalitarian' PPNA, Hayden (2004:280; 2020) contends that the subsequent occurrence of great tombs at Göbekli Tepe and other PPNA-PPNB sites 'indicate powerful competitive dynamics and struggles for domination between different communities and different corporate groups'. He assigns 'heterarchy' – 'a number of independent groups living together, some being more powerful than others' (Hayden 2004:280) – as the operating political arrangement among these complex hunter-gatherers. Note that GW's (2021:610) characterisation of the operating politic of initial farming communities, as well as 'many of the societies [...] focused on [in *DoE*]', is 'heterarchy'. Like Finalyson (2020a), GW attempt to frame the heterarchical systems of early farmers as 'egalitarian'.

Hayden (2004:298) summarises the evolutionary relationship between the enhancement of these ritual sites and the ongoing trajectory towards sedentary agricultural societies:

Given the strong dynamic forces present in the more complex transegalitarian societies to increase production, especially for feasts, it seems inevitable that these societies would eventually develop domesticated food production at least in locations where the environment and species were suitable. Thus, complex hunter/gatherers tended to be short lived, 'unstable', phenomena in most of the world, lasting only a few thousand years.

The generalised pattern is one where sedentary hunter-gatherer lifeways based on resource intensification emerge, and, over the course of 3500 years evolve into village life organised around food production (Byrd 2005; Finlayson 2020a; Frangipane 2007; Grosman & Munro 2017; Hayden 2004; Hodder 2018; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). This occurred particularly in areas with the most favourable environmental conditions for cereal cultivation, such as the floodplains of the lower Tigris and Euphrates (Scott 2017). However, the critical role and socioevolutionary outcome of intensified uses of wild cereals among PPNA-PPNB complex hunter-gatherers receives no attention in *DoE*.

What really seems to have happened is that in response to more favourable Holocene environmental conditions specific hunting societies of Southwest Asia intensified and expanded, leading not only to overhunting and resource depletion but to enhanced sociopolitical complexity and population growth (Legge & Rowley-Conwy 2000; Mithen 1997; Munro 2004; Richerson & Boyd

2001). While resource stress does not seem to have been present during the Natufian, it emerges among complex hunter-gatherers during the PPNA, escalating into the PPNB (Clarke & Wasse 2019; Frangipane 2007; Hayden 2004). As the Holocene continued, game populations were increasingly depleted as their habitats concomitantly declined in quality.

An important part of the story not mentioned by GW is that with the onset of a Holocene environment and related pressure on resources, particularly the overhunting of large game, farming begins to rise while complex hunter-gatherer adaptations begin to collapse. As Tainter (1988:191) points out, peripheral populations often 'rise to prominence' after the older societies collapse. This elucidates why the original Fertile Crescent farming adaptations were 'revolutionary' and perhaps incipiently more 'egalitarian' and thus that these changes cannot be explained merely by a rebellion of women against male hunting prestige, as GW claim.

The situation was more complicated than GW attest, and the generalised changes were not uniform. Considerable regional variation was present in respect to changing subsistence adaptations and political organisation (Clark & Wasse 2019). Both Byrd (2005) and Hayden (2004) point out that, perhaps even in the PPNB, but certainly during the Natufian and PPNA, some hunter-gatherer communities continued to rely on older non-intensified band-level strategies. Hayden (2004:291) writes that:

Environmental stress [for complex hunter-gatherers] may have been very different from generalized hunter/gatherers [...] who reduced populations or moved away [...] transegalitarian communities tended to struggle to maintain resource production levels through increased intensification of labor, technology and transport.

GW (2021:226) claim that 'in the uplands, there was a striking turn towards hierarchy among settled hunter-foragers, most dramatically attested at the megalithic center of Göbekli Tepe and at nearby sites like [...] Karahan Tepe'. GW try to frame this occurrence as a 'striking turn', but fail to acknowledge what I've now described – that this was instead a slowly evolving process rooted in the pathways of intensified economic and political development.

Instead of dealing with these material evolutionary realities, GW (2021:410) attempt to let resource intensification and progressive development off the hook and blame the problem on what they call schismogenesis: 'a dynamic tension between two principles [...] in opposition to one another: the administrative order of the river valleys and the heroic, individualistic politics of the surrounding highlands'.

Rather than invoking cultural relativism, we should consider trade and the role of expanding trade networks among complex hunter-gatherers and early cultivators during the early Neolithic (Byrd 2005; Frangipane 2007; Mithen et al 2023; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW (2021:227) describe how Southwest Asia lowland cultivators and upland complex hunter-gatherers were ‘well acquainted [...] because they traded durable materials with each other over long distances’. Thus, vitally, we have the evolving development of trade as a cultural focus, a critical precedent for the emergence of an increasingly extractive globalised civilisation to come.

Evolved dependency on trade, especially for elite prestige goods rather than for communal basic needs, is a core factor in the initial development of a warrior-raider ethos among both complex hunter-gatherers and later ‘heroic societies’. It can thus be ascertained that ‘the heroic, individualistic politics’ GW are concerned with originate first materially with the commodification of wild resources by stratified hunter-gatherers to support symbolic and political complexity (Hayden 2004; 2011; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020).

The imperative story here is of specific hunter-gatherers that travelled down the pathway of resource intensification. Yet vitally, this is not what non-intensifying band-level hunter-gatherers ever created, and GW fail to mention this essential piece of information. Rather, most of the indigenous cultures *DoE* idolises, for example, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Osage, are mixed farming-foraging cultures which share many similar sociopolitical traits with complex hunter-gatherers (Knight 2024).

Paralleling their story describing the emergence of agriculture in Southwest Asia, GW (2021:487) emphasise that, in North America, Haudenosaunee culture experienced a phase during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries where women developed more sedentary agricultural and matriarchal organisation as rebellion ‘against defenders of an older male-dominated order where prestige was entirely based in war and hunting’. This provides another example of where GW attempt to situate hunting as a driver of male dominance and the ‘hero culture’ ideology.

In sum, rather than reveal resource intensification as the underlying issue, GW seem to argue that our sociopolitical problems ultimately originate with life organised around what they view as male-dominated big-game hunting, that it is ‘here we have the very beginnings of an aristocratic ethos’. Yet in respect to indigenous hunting cultures, this narrative only fits what we know about complex hunter-gatherers and horticulturalist-hunters and does not align with evidence we have for non-intensifying hunter-gatherers (Villeneuve & Hayden 2020). GW’s omission of this variation is, in my view, intentional.

The prehistoric-to-contemporary left/right divide: summarising *DoE's* political agenda

Why does *DoE* refuse to discuss in detail band-level hunter-gatherers? The reality is that *GW* cannot talk about this aspect of human history in tandem with the 'alternative' history they wish to present. Instead of dealing adequately with hunter-gatherer variability, *GW* situate hunting culture itself as effectively the baseline origin of the political right. Band-level hunter-gatherers get relegated to myth in *DoE* – written off as 'Edenic narrative' – and the only thing important about human history for *GW* becomes the very recent progressively complex societies of all types, where anything that is rural and subsistence-based is not sophisticated or progressive enough to be representative of a proper contemporary left politic.

For *GW*, reflecting how this political division is framed geographically today, at least in the USA, it is the prehistoric trajectory of a clash between rural and urban which frames the prestige-focused 'heroic' rebellion against urban democratic socialism. Under *GW's* framing, no ideological resistance to socioeconomic equality ever occurs among the urban political or administrative elite class. Rather, resistance to equality originates only from one source—the violent big-game hunters of the rural hinterlands.

GW (2021:445) admit that the 'hero societies' they are so apt to situate as the problem 'existed in a largely symbiotic relation with' the urban political economy. Most certainly, both the early Neolithic urbanites and complex hunter-gatherers were societies engaged in competition between aggrandisers (Feinman 2013; Hayden 2020), a dynamic resembling the economic stratification associated with modern commercial free-market capitalism (Kulchyski 2023). For Hayden (2004), the operating ethos among complex hunter-gatherers is 'entrepreneurialism', which is, essentially, the right-wing libertarian commercialist ideal. The foundational tenet of this politic is a belief in liberty for the individual to become personally affluent, and hostility toward any attempts by centralised or collectivist politics towards levelling the individual entrepreneur.

Hayden (2004:298) argues that early agricultural development was an outcome of the positive feedback mechanisms ultimately spawned by an initial 'scramble after enhanced power and wealth'. This 'scramble' was occurring among certain complex hunter-gatherers via the entrepreneurialism described by Hayden, well before any existence of established centralised government. As such, *GW's* (2021:426) proposal that the fundamental elements of authoritarian constraint can simply reduce to a lack of 'freedom to move [...] to disobey and [...] to create or transform social relationships' is misdirected. Primary is a need

to accentuate how an ethos of aggrandisement tends to evolve in the first place. This requires that we start with hunter-gatherer studies and the conceptual distinction between immediate and delayed-return hunter-gatherer societies (Woodburn 1982; Finlayson 2020a; Villeneuve & Hayden 2020), a metric GW (2021:128–130) say should be discarded.

As delayed-return aggrandisers, GW's 'heroes' would naturally take full advantage of the broad-reaching social and material power building up within the evolving larger settlements and rebel against any notion of 'democracy' or 'equality' arising therein. As civilisations evolve, GW's 'heroes' are simply competitors for the unprecedented economic and political power amassing among the expanding urban elite (Frangipane 2007). Cities, by their nature, are large-scale systems of resource extraction, accumulation and control. In this material reality, it is naïve to claim, as GW do throughout Chapter 8 of *DoE*, that cities were ever exclusively egalitarian. Even if elite leveraging of human basic needs wasn't apparent from the start, it all led to the conditions of land circumscription and material dependencies with which we are familiar today (Algaze 2001; Hayden 2020; Kulchyski 2023).

Despite GW's claims, cities have never been innocent. Just as aristocratic 'barbarian' raiders and 'heroic' males have always terrorised urban populations and their satellites, city economics have always simultaneously destabilised egalitarian structure for smaller-in-scale rural communities near urban peripheries, and beyond.

DoE calls for social justice, yet it fails to see that the political purposes of their so-called 'heroes' are not only status-seeking, but also resisting resource appropriation from the rural hinterlands by cities – the hijacking of formerly small-scale rural trading markets by monopolising urban economic powers. The 'heroes' rebellion is to attack the extractive empire-building commercialism of the cities and sift off their own portions of wealth from it.

Cities generate environments that are opportune for aggrandising agents to grow their power, just as economic intensification by complex hunter-gatherers had done, but at much larger scales. Disruption of peripheral small-scale self-reliant communities and appropriation of the natural resources they depend on for obtaining their basic material needs is an ongoing result of urban political economies. This extraction has resulted in the phenomena of globalised urban-driven resource extraction that continually harms existing non-economically intensifying hunter-gatherers (Lewis 2016) and which propels our planetary crises at large.

Rather than deal with material reality, GW situate prehistoric hunter-gatherers as the initiators of processes leading to the global emergence of

powerful aristocracies, monarchies and overall centralised authoritarian control. They describe the 'barbarian' raider situation in Eurasia as it had evolved several thousand years *after* the PPNB, well into both agricultural states and the Bronze Age, continuing to compare this to hunter-gatherers. GW do this without ever adequately qualifying the 'sharp contrast [between] nomadic hunter-gatherers' and the Pacific Northwest Coast groups they cite, which are 'the type-case for "warlike" complex hunter-gatherers' and thus 'cannot be taken as typifying hunter-gatherers throughout prehistory' (Ferguson 2009:119, 121). GW write (2021:310–311 [my emphasis]):

From 3100 BC, across the hilly country of what's now Eastern Turkey, and then in other places on the edge of urban civilization, we see evidence for the rise of a warrior aristocracy, heavily armed with metal spears and swords, living in what appeared to be hill forts and small palaces. All traces of bureaucracy disappear. In their place we find [...] aristocratic households – *reminiscent of [...] the Pacific Northwest Coast* in the nineteenth century...

And then:

[W]hen top-down rule does emerge [...] it's not in the 'complex' metropolises [...] but among the small, 'heroic' societies of the surrounding foothills [...] If there is a good ethnographic parallel for these latter groups it might be *the societies of the Northwest Coast*, since there too political leadership lay in the hands of a boastful and vainglorious warrior aristocracy, competing in extravagant contests over titles, treasurers, the allegiance of commoners and the ownership of slaves. Recall here that *Haida, Tlingit and the rest* not only lacked anything that could be called the state apparatus: they lack any kind of formal governmental institutions. (2021:361[my emphasis])

Early in *DoE* (2021:190) we see GW subtly formulating their narrative that to be against 'progress' (and agricultural civilisation, and consequent bureaucratic governance, and managed commerce), means to be both a believer and promoter of 'the myth of the Noble Savage' and a right-winger. GW (2021:69) say 'right-wing thought has from the beginning been suspicious not just about ideas of progress, but also the entire tradition that emerges from the indigenous critique'.

If one reads carefully between the lines, we can see that in the final analysis GW appear to blame our current problems on aggrandising hunter-gatherer-like individual thinkers identified in their minds with contemporary right-wing libertarians. *DoE's* counter to this is the celebration of the collectivist-minded urban left who have, according to GW's framing of 'the indigenous critique', from the Upper Palaeolithic forward been evolving to become increasingly

‘enlightened’ and thereby have ushered in utopian social progress; arts, writing, specialisation, labour guilds, domestication, agriculture, government, technology, mass-society – essentially, the ‘civilised’ value system.

The subsistence-based alternative

Omitted from *DoE*’s framing of ‘indigenous critique’ are actual egalitarians. At one point GW briefly mention Scott’s (2009) highly important analysis of numerous Southeast Asian hill tribes, who are considered ‘barbarians’ by neighbouring civilisers in agricultural valleys, and who have effectively created and maintained non-intensifying, anti-authoritarian, anarchist lifeways. But Scott’s insightful work on this topic receives no significant emphasis in *DoE* as a viable historical alternative to either ‘heroic’ aristocratic warlordism or progressivist technocratic social-democratic-capitalist urbanism. Instead, Scott’s anarchists are reduced to ‘another example of cultural schismogenesis – [which] could also give rise to “heroic societies”’(GW 2021:445), continuing *DoE*’s tale that egalitarianism has only ever occurred in progressively advanced formations.

Many contemporary urbanites would like to see things this way, which is why *DoE* is such a marketable book – it tells the urban bourgeoisie what it wants to hear: egalitarianism and women’s liberation can exist only in economically and administratively complex settled societies, and lesser-developed rural people have commonly lived under the aristocracy of powerful individualistic male patriarchs. Today’s status-quo Left already views rural men who are hunters and who are antagonistic towards urban bureaucracy as the same type of wannabe ‘heroic’ alpha-male types described by GW as agents of 8000-plus years of human political divisions. Through a revisionist anthropological and archaeological lens, the amended message becomes: if you’re one of these resistant, rurally minded men who is against assimilationist mass-formation governmental bureaucracy then you are an anti-social-progress ‘warrior hero’.

Yet, as Scott (2009) makes clear, not all rural and upland people are representative of GW’s described ‘heroic societies’. Many such societies on the fringes of civilisation are not driven by desire for economic growth and the opportunity to increase elite status, but instead are guided by an ethos of rejecting the destruction of human social, physical and mental well-being imposed by civilisational progress, its authoritarian governance and its socioecologically alienating growth-oriented economics at large (Van Lanen 2024). The rural people described by Scott (2009; 2017) are humans who have a sustained

history of rejecting the despotism of elite-driven economic growth-based societies. Gowdy (2021:105–106) provides an apt summary:

[M]ost of the world's population prior to 1500 to 1600 CE did not live in state societies. Most of the Earth's population were what [Scott 2017] calls 'free barbarians', people living in the periphery of the state but not within it. They typically lived in areas hard to penetrate and hard to cultivate – dense forest swamps and marshes. They could be shifting cultivators, hunter-gatherers, or anything in between. Barbarians were the original 'deplorables', eating meat instead of grains, living in the hills, forests, and swamps instead of within city walls [...] To be a barbarian was a viable alternative to being a peasant.

This represents Scott's main characterisation of actual anarchists in history, not the fake 'anarchy' on offer from Graeber in *DoE*.

Among anarchists a long tradition exists of rejecting bureaucracy, and unlike both the status-quo Left and Right, anarchists maintain longstanding aversions to commodification, mass-production, commerce and industrialism, instead promoting local gift economies reminiscent of immediate-return hunter-gatherer practices. Meanwhile, Graeber, spent his career snubbing known egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Instead, his pattern was to frequently cite as 'egalitarian' societies that are far more hierarchical (Bitton 2021a). *DoE* is a culmination of that pattern.

DoE provides no mention that African and Asian immediate-return hunter-gatherers (Lye 2005; Woodburn 1982), and forager-horticulturalists such as 'voluntarily isolated' Amazonians (Ricardo & Gongora 2019) and Scott's (2009) Zomians – all non-progressive rural peoples – provide legitimate examples of cultures which have avoided creating authoritarianism, monarchy, war and socioecological destruction. GW ignore their existence.

Just as some Southwest Asia specialists reframe the heterarchical conditions of early settled societies as 'egalitarianism' (Finlayson 2020a; Frangipane 2007), GW hijack the term 'egalitarian' as used traditionally by hunter-gatherer ethnographers for their own political ends, thereby generating among their popular audience ambiguity and confusion about what egalitarian societies are.

Above I discussed GW's claim that both Native American and Fertile Crescent farming was initiated by women rejecting hunting. The *DoE* story says that women were the main holders of plant knowledge and thus they were easily able to transform that knowledge into cultivation practices as an insurrectionary food alternative to male obtained, and supposedly controlled, game meat. GW avoid documentation of significant gender egalitarianism among band-level hunter-gatherers and instead choose to assign agricultural civilisation as the

sole producer of gender equality. Once this argument is introduced in Chapter 6 of *DoE*, GW continue to use it to imply that any resistance to agricultural development is primarily a patriarchal, violent alpha-male phenomena. Essentially, since women created agriculture, if one is opposed to agriculture, if one is critical of agriculture's ultimate impacts on planetary ecology and its usurpation of billions of hectares of land from indigenous societies and wildlife, then such a critic is effectively undermining women.

To be deemed accurate, GW would need to provide a comprehensive, cross-cultural comparison among hunter-gatherers, mixed-economy and agricultural societies to demonstrate that farming is the consistent marker for women's liberation. In their claims about 'farming' being 'the ecology of freedom', I ask GW to contemplate the many thousands of hunter-gatherer women and their children that have been blocked from continuing hunter-gatherer lifeways, driven into poverty, dispossession and discrimination because of agricultural expansionism. This is a serious issue for GW.

GW (2021:487) lump war and hunting into an 'older' prestige-driven system/ideology. But hunter's social prestige should not be conjoined imprudently with a politics of war. Certainly, hunting prestige is a sociopolitic that is 'older' than patriarchally driven war (Ferguson 2009). I surmise that hunting prestige is likely as old as *H. sapiens*, and possibly *Homo*. It is undoubtedly as old as human arrival in Europe, Asia, and the New World, and, with some exceptions, most hunting cultures likely channelled this prestige into highly social, legitimately egalitarian, communally beneficial formats, not as a mechanism for the enhancement of warring ideologies. Yet apparently, according to GW's logic, for tens of thousands of years humans were supposedly despotically subjugated by this supposed 'male-dominated order' and then suddenly, with agriculture, an ongoing hunter's tyranny was finally put in check.

If, for example, GW had done the important work of providing an in-depth account of the African hunter-gatherer record as a component of their so-called 'new history of humanity', they would have been forced to write about the immensely important relationship between men's hunting and women's solidarity and cooperative childcare. Among African hunter-gatherers it is women's political organisation that has traditionally encouraged men to hunt cooperatively and bring meat back to camp so to provide the most calorically dense foods for nourishing babies, children, elders and pregnant women, all of whom do the bulk of childcare (Biesele 1993; Chaudary et al 2023; Jang et al 2022). In fact, it is likely that a key driver of our evolution was women's formation of coalitions to motivate men to cooperate in big-game hunting so to become providers at both the group and sex-partner levels (Hrdy 2009;

Power 2017; 2019; 2024; Boyd & Richerson 2022; Watts 2022). *DoE* (2021:82) barely mentions this. Instead, by the end of the book GW have made hunting the scapegoat for our contemporary pathologies and claim that the Neolithic revolution was a women's rebellion against it. Meanwhile, successful male hunters among egalitarian hunter-gatherers are well-known for their modesty and lack of boastfulness (Lee 2013; Lewis 2021; Sellato 1994). They don't at all fit the alpha-male mould described by GW.

DoE never analyses the emergence of aggrandising agents in the form of hereditary elites that arise when hunting cultures evolve away from a subsistence-focused immediate-return ethos and develop resource intensified delayed-return political economies. I suspect that GW avoided developing any balanced analysis of hunter-gatherer diversity in the anthropological record because it would lead them to admit that hierarchy is usually associated with progressive socioeconomic complexity. Hunting is not to blame. *Homo sapiens* could not have evolved without a massive input of animal foods, and particularly animal foods that were harvested by direction of a specific egalitarian sociopolitical context generating fundamental positive feedback between social cooperation and encephalisation (Power 2024).

It is vital that this story about our speciation as cooperative hunters be told, and crucial for understanding human sociopolitical history. Representative of peoples who purposefully stayed out of the prehistoric war between cities and 'heroes' that *DoE* describes, immediate-return and other non-intensifying indigenous peoples never participated in GW's battle between left and right. As socially conservative peoples (Marlowe 2010; Scott 2009), they instead chose to maintain subsistence-based cultures intentionally removed from progressive development. As peoples who emphasise both individual autonomy and group interdependence, they cooperatively provisioned their members a generally equal share of basic human needs, and they successfully struck down anyone who tried to manipulate the situation to have more. It is these cultures that GW attempt to delegitimise in their so-called 'new history of humanity' (Kulchyski 2023).

We are reminded here of Wolfe's (1982) classic articulation that the small-scale and marginalised indigenous peoples of the world are 'the people without history'. Likewise, for GW, our most proven sustainable human societies, who are the most 'undeveloped', non-progressive, and, in respect to material conditions, temporally stable – both hunter-gatherer and forager-horticulturalist – are not worthy of history. For GW, if one is to look towards such marginal and 'unsophisticated' lifeways as a model for what sustainable human arrangements look like then one is engaging in 'Edenic' mythology. In peddling

this narrative and writing only about the history of cultures which align with it, GW are repeating the same logic of privileging ‘high’ culture that colonialist adherents of ‘manifest destiny’ have promoted over the last 500 years.

In this view, *DoE* advocates a twenty-first-century urban politic, which is – irrespective of class – one that cares little for non-progressive, nonindustrial ways of life. It effectively promotes a globally extractive way of life as the only human path forward, one that depends ultimately on continued elite-driven resource extraction from rural peripheries to support an unskilled (in respect to land-based physical skill), ecologically alienated urban populace. Tainter (1988:198) offers a good explanation for such ‘civilised’ motivations towards upholding the dominant system and disliking the more independent rural people who stand in opposition to it: ‘It may only be among those members of a society who have neither the opportunity nor the ability to produce primary food resources that the collapse of administrative hierarchies is a clear disaster’.

DoE’s underlying messages are clear; contemporary people who remain the most independent and free, such as the Amazonian isolates (Ricardo & Gongora 2019), are, in the postmodernist bourgeois subconscious, still ‘savages’. Such ‘savages’, and any legitimately autonomous rural people, are in the way of progress. Westerners who have an interest in pursuing more self-reliant, and thus earthly, ways of life, can now be labelled as uneducated, unsophisticated wannabe ‘warrior heroes’ who are against women because they resist mass industrial agriculture and control by governmental bureaucracy. Essentially, implies *DoE*, if you oppose sophisticated, high-minded civilisation and its institutions you must be part of the extreme right.

Bitton’s (2021b) remark that the ‘powers that be’ are very good at ‘taking Left-wing sentiment, egalitarian sentiment, and poison pilling it with ideas that turn those sentiments into hierarchical practice’ is apt for assessing *DoE*’s advancement of this type of political propaganda. What we see in *DoE* is an overt example of how a cadre of elite bourgeois intellectuals attempts to use identity politics and political correctness to divide and distract ordinary people from dealing adequately with their twenty-first-century material conditions and the socioecological crises being perpetuated by them (Van Lanen 2024).

Socioecological sanity means not continually ramping up scale, and not furthering economic intensification and extractivism. GW (2021:148) want to discredit and denounce any idea of simplicity (see Knight 2024, this volume), but socioeconomic simplicity – life within simple, subsistence-based communities – has always been the antithesis of the conditions that have generated the tragic situation we and the planet are in now, including our divisive left and right politics. Instead of helping to increase global awareness of humanity’s

best examples of long-range sustainable culture and economies, *DoE* eliminates these cultures from world history, and by doing this I assert that not only is *DoE* 'scholarly malpractice' (Bell 2021), it risks being both ethnocidal and ecocidal.

Conclusion

In contemporary America at least, the majority, both politically left and right, thoroughly occupies the trap of globalisation-dependent, extractive economic growth. The exception however is among some rural populations that attempt to uphold much more local self-reliance and far less dependency on globalised corporate techno-industrialism. Small-scale community self-sufficiency and thus liberty from governmental and corporate control is a core part of the rural identity and politic among many indigenous and settler populations. Left-leaning people who elect to abandon the dominant economy and become back-to-the-land, rural folk – organic growers, goat tenders, foragers, permaculturalists, fishers and hunters – inevitably take on a more conservative politic as part of the process, because they quickly learn that governmental bureaucracy and globalised supply-chain dependency is actual dominance hierarchy. This rural politic recognises that it is the resource extraction and market demands of the urban masses and their corporate overlords which perpetuate colonialism and obliterate the capacity for actualised human autonomy (Van Lanen 2024). As such, this contemporary politic of rural resistance, which is neither strictly left or right, should be considered the politic of today that is most effectively attempting to put into practice the ethos of the 'indigenous critique' put forward in *DoE* (2021:5).

It's time to do away with the dead ends that both left and right politics have become and turn towards deep anthropological learning about economically and politically non-intensifying human lifeways with proven track records of enduring social and ecological sustainability and human well-being. While *DoE* offers humanity little productive in this regard, hunter-gatherer studies continue to offer us possibilities.

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