

# The Dawn of Anarchism

Some bittersweet thoughts inspired by David Graeber & David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*.

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Some bittersweet thoughts inspired by David Graeber & David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*.

Let's start with a very plausible, almost mundane scene. A young mother is pushing a buggy on the canal path. It's a cool autumn day with a light breeze creating shimmering patterns on the surface of the dark water. The woman has a phone in her right hand, which occupies much of her attention. The attention of the two-year-old in the buggy is on the orange leaves above and the bumpiness of the path below. But above all – as always – it is on his mother. He wants her to see the duck. A duck!

'Ma-ma. Ma-ma.'

'What's up baba?' But she isn't present and rather than be nagged into bringing her scrolling to an end, she fishes out a toy plastic phone and puts it into the boy's eager hands.

Duck forgotten, the boy presses the glowing buttons and triggers familiar jingles. He's content. He's like mama.

Homo sapiens has become phono-sapiens and there's something sad about this.

What does it mean to be alive at this time? It's still 2024 as I write this, but I mean more broadly. Let's say to be alive in the period 2010 – 2040? It's a weird time to be alive, perhaps weirder than most thirty-year periods because a lot of narratives established over centuries have collapsed like melting ice sheets. In particular, it's no longer common sense to assume that humanity has a future in which prosperity, longevity, happiness and technology all advance. The sense that – for all the faults, injustices and inequalities – human progress was assured has gone. It's like we were all once riding a roller coaster that was ascending, ascending, ascending. And suddenly it's dark, there's an uncomfortable feeling in our stomach that suggests we might be descending, and threats to our safety are everywhere.

The woman is reading posts about Gaza. She's unable to enjoy the day with her son because she's haunted by the image of a child just like him, covered in dust, unconscious and soon to be dead.

For five hundred years (the first five hundred of the Christian era) a city existed close to modern day Mexico City that with tens of thousands of inhabitants – peaking at about 125,000 – was the largest in the Americas.

Multi-ethnic, immensely larger than any contemporary European settlement and enduring for longer than has, say, the USA, what was it like to live in Teotihuacan? There are no historical records to help answer that question but the archaeology points to some interesting – surprising even – answers.

The walls of the buildings have thousands of pictures, most concerned with human activity. And none of them show figures that are above the masses: there is an equality of size and dress. No kings, no aristocrats.

The layout of the buildings makes the same point. No excavations have found anything like a palace for a king. In fact, the opposite. From about 300 CE, the city stopped building pyramid temples, ceased human sacrifice rituals and built comfortable stone houses for everyone. Communities of about a hundred people existed in nuclear families in apartments around a common square, whose walls were often brightly painted murals. An integrated drainage system served them all. Standards of living were uniform and seemed to be pleasant. All apartments had imported goods as well as a staple diet of corn tortillas, eggs, turkey and rabbit meat, as well as an alcoholic drink fermented from the spiky agave.

Reading about this city and especially its playful art, with depictions of the joys of hallucinogenic drug taking, challenges assumptions that run very deep in our current culture. Would you trade places with someone from that city? The answer would once have been obvious. Of course not. We now have advanced medicine. We have incredible technologies for entertainment and for the production of essentials such as food.

Yet our medicine is racing to stay ahead of the evolution of antimicrobial resistance diseases; our food supply is made precarious by global warming; our Netflix subscriptions won't seem that attractive when your city is under water or in the hands of fascists.

To wake up feeling safe and free. To know that safety and freedom has existed for centuries. To be happy.

Maybe the people of Teotihuacan are to be envied.

## **Çatalhöyük**

There was a settlement in what is now central Turkey around 7,400 BCE, one that was populated for 1,500 years. Çatalhöyük was a community of around 5,000 people, who lived with beliefs that are hard to fathom but which were certainly very different to our own. The archaeology of their houses shows many strange rooms, where skulls and horns of cattle and other animals protrude from walls, where underneath platforms are the remains of dead people (as many as sixty), and where there were bright wall paintings. To have lived in that town would have meant being a resident in a world that interfaced with an afterworld in a much more vivid and tangible way than our own. Oh, and they had cats as companions.

There is no sign of a divide between an elite group and commoners over the centuries that Çatalhöyük existed. The houses are more or less equivalent in size and in the value of their contents. Men and women shared the same diet and presence in burials, although, curiously, the many figurines that the people of Çatalhöyük produced were all women, perhaps elderly women.

## **Taljanky, Maidenetske, Nebelivka**

From about 4,100 to 3,300 BCE several early cities – dozens – existed in what is now (unless conquered by Russia) Ukraine and Moldova, grouped together just seven-to-ten kilometres apart. The largest discovered so far, Taljanky, covered over 300 hectares. For eight hundred years, the inhabitants of these cities did without a ruling elite, to judge by the fact that in contrast to ancient cities with rulers, there were no palaces, no walled fortifications, not even central administrative buildings or stores. Mostly, the settlements consist of hundreds of houses, arranged in great rings with spaces between each ring.

The citizens lived off a mixed and varied diet, keeping livestock as well as cultivating fruit, wheat, barley and pulses. This was supplemented by foraging and hunting. Salt was brought in bulk from hundreds of kilometres away, as were flints. The residents of these cities had excellent pottery skills and also used imported copper. There is no doubt at all that these people had a surplus to their immediate needs. Remember this fact, we'll need it later.

Again, these people favoured women in their art and culture. Many female clay figurines survive; some of the art on the pottery depicts women. Each of the homes was similar in size and

content to its neighbours, yet each had its own variation of multi-coloured tools and household items.

## **Taosi**

Between 2,300 and 1,800 BCE in north China a modest sized fortified town of sixty hectares expanded to cover 300 hectares. In the early period of its growth, the first three hundred years, Taosi had a very systematic social division between an elite group of people and the commoners. A type of palace with an observatory existed; certain areas of the town were sealed off and protected, including an area for rituals; housing and burials showed the elite had much greater control over the town's wealth.

Then came a dramatic change. Around the year 2,000 BCE the city wall was razed and the internal boundaries were also destroyed. Workshops replaced elite residences. Trash pits were put in the palace area.

And Taosi put on a spurt of growth. This looks like the first evidence for a popular revolution of commoners against their elites. And the likelihood of this being the case is reinforced by how the elite cemetery was suddenly used for commoner graves as well as a mass burial at the palace, with bodies of people which had suffered grotesque violations. Whatever the exact story, Taosi testifies to the fact that people living in ancient cities could dramatically re-organise themselves. Probably, this happened a lot and it might well have happened peacefully in some cases, so that we don't get the same archaeological evidence for an outburst of violence.

## **Mohenjo-Daro**

Another great early city, built in modern-day southern Pakistan, is Mohenjo-Daro. Founded about 2,600 BCE it lasted for some 700 years. Again, take note. Most of the city consists of brick houses along a grid of streets, with sanitation provided by terracotta sewage pipes as well as private and public toilets and bathrooms. Above the mass of comfortable housing was a raised civic centre, encased in a wall of bricks which would have offered protection from the flooding of the Indus. Estimates of the size of the population here go as high as 40,000 people.

Surprising the early archaeologists, the wealth distribution of the town's precious items did not show that the raised centre of the town was for elites. Just the opposite was true, metals, gemstones and worked shell can be found all over the lower town, along with terracotta figures of people wearing costly adornments. But contract, these don't appear in the civic centre. What is found there are places for bathing and ritual.

Some residents seem to have had routines that included daily bathing. Beyond them, wealthy merchants had homes. Some kind of social division seems to have existed. But the wealth distribution suggests that it wasn't one that allowed a small elite to command others.

## **Road to Somewhere?**

In the Dawn of Everything there are dozens more examples of large cities existing in the ancient past. This evidence is really important for where humanity finds itself at the time we

write this essay. Why? Because it gets us to stop and really think, properly think, about the trajectory of history.

Until recently, the people of the modern world had a feeling that they were on a journey of progress. That their children had a future. There is a right-flavoured version of this: the market will deliver scientific advance, which in turn will innovate business and continually improve our lives. And there is a left-flavoured version. Progress is unfair and fettered by capitalism; we need a Marxist revolution to deliver the potential that exists for all to progress.

If you looked more deeply into this story about the future and asked how it related to the past, you would get the same-ish answer from right and left. Once there was a time when early humans lived in small bands of hunter gatherers. They were equals but egalitarian values could not last because to make scientific and economic progress, a surplus had to be developed from which a small number of people could be supported to advance knowledge. This surplus became available thanks to an agricultural revolution. Thus class division was a necessary step (lamentably, in the left-version) and it allowed for the appearance of large settlements. Everything then plays out through various stages of history until recently, when you either thought that nothing other than a few tweaks was necessary to keep on advancing, or you thought a major, revolutionary change was needed. In both cases though, your story of the past provided you with a connection between the present and a belief in an improved future for humanity.

The evidence presented in Dawn shows that this account of the progressive stages of history is just a fanciful story. For eight centuries, as you recall from above, the residents of Taljanky lived with a surplus and without an elite forming to control that surplus. That's just one of dozens of examples of large cities lasting centuries, many with cultivation. The evidence for large cities as far back as 10,000 BCE means the idea of a transition from hunter-gatherer to class society via an agricultural revolution is entirely refuted. And with the collapse of their model of how we got to this particular present, comes uncertainty about what will happen next.

Every day climate change, Russia's war on Ukraine, and Israel's genocide against Palestinians create datapoints that were on no-one's bingo card. With a complacent model of the future, you can tell yourself that these are aberrations. That the ship will right itself or could be righted by the revolutionary party taking command. There comes a point, though, where even the most loyal party member, feeling the ship tremble as it slides off the iceberg, has to ask whether reality is matching the predictions they made. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to support Brexit. Or refuse to support Ukraine. Or animal rights.

What makes anarchism different is that it is not trying to invent a story of progress to justify itself. That's why David Wengrow and David Graeber can look at the evidence from the past with curiosity, playful imagination, insight and an openness to re-evaluating their own views. They are not obliged to make it conform to a self-serving model. For decades, important knowledge about the past, available right under our noses, was not visible by either left or right because their current political practice and their projected goals depended on ignoring it.

What do Teotihuacan, Çatalhöyük, Taljanky, Taosi, Mohenjo-Daro and the many other examples presented in Dawn mean? We are not saying these cities were utopias and we want to recreate their ways of living. Some of them sound quite pleasant all right. But if a utopia once existed then why did it end? What law about population size, complexity, or environmental degradation brought it down? If a utopia existed, we are doomed to fail if we try to emulate it again. The anarchist fantasy writer Michael Moorcock depicted Tanelorn, a city where heroes could rest from their world-saving efforts for a while and put their feet up. But to search among

the ancient cities of the past for a Tanelorn would be to fall into the same labyrinth as the other political philosophies.

To imagine a utopia existed in the past is to become demoralised in the present. To imagine a utopia might exist in the future, though, now that's liberating. And what is required from the past that allows for a possible utopian future? Plasticity. If the past embodies not laws of history, but variation, invention and imagination, if it demonstrates that humans have lived in all kinds of ways, including non-hierarchical ones, then it allows us freedom to invent our own futures. If people have re-organised themselves dramatically in the past, not in accordance to laws external to themselves but by desire, then a consciously designed future utopia can be created, even out of this dark moment. To reconnect to a future with hope and love, we must have arrived at where we are not by fate but by ferment.

It falls to anarchism to offer some light in the darkness. Our connection to the future is not based on laws that inhibit understanding the past. We can look into the deep past and see hope in the way that very large communities made choices about how to live together. Let us not talk falsely (the hour's getting late): some of these people had practices that were far from utopian, such as human sacrifice. Crucially, though, the variations of social practices in early human settlements testifies to the openness of the future. To believe in the possibility of a world without class, war, and oppression; to imagine a global community of humans who feel love towards each other and who welcome, rather than fear, the stranger; to use tools like mobile phones to connect us and be present for each other, rather than to alienate ourselves even from our loved ones, this, the past whispers to us, is not naïve, wishful thinking. It does feel so, because the decoherence of the stages theory of history happens in slow motion and with a great deal of noise that almost drowns out the signal. Fortunately, Dawn helps rescue that signal and is one of a network of lights that inspires hope that our current mindset can be flipped.

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