

Forget ‘Liberté’

17th-Century Indigenous Americans Knew a Lot More About Freedom Than Their French Colonisers

David Graeber and David Wengrow

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10 years ago, over a bowl of ramen near Times Square, David Graeber gave me a copy of his book Debt: the first 5000 years. Inside, was a typically generous dedication: “For David Wengrow, who has gotten me excited about the past in a way no one has since I can barely remember.”

It was the start of a project that would absorb us for the next 10 years, as an anthropologist and an archaeologist sought to revive a style of grand dialogue about human history that once was common, but this time with modern scientific evidence. We wrote without rules or deadlines, and finished as we’d started, with discoveries and debates into the small hours.

As you know, David was far more than a brilliant intellectual: he actually tried to live his ideas about social justice and liberation in a world that often seemed set against them, against him. To me, this book is a lasting testament, not just to an irreplaceable friendship, but to the strength of those ideas, and their great might, reaching back over the millennia.

What you now have before you, then, is an extract from our small attempt to change the course of human history (at least, the part that’s already happened), our new book, The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.

The ‘Age of Reason’ was an age of debate. The Enlightenment was rooted in conversation; it took place largely in cafés and salons. Many classic Enlightenment texts took the form of dialogues; most cultivated an easy, transparent, conversational style clearly inspired by the salon. (It was the Germans, back then, who tended to write in the obscure style for which French intellectuals have since become famous.) Appeal to ‘reason’ was above all a style of argument. The ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – took the form they did in the course of just such a long series of debates and conversations. All we’re going to suggest here is that those conversations stretched back further than Enlightenment historians assume.

Let’s begin by asking: what did the inhabitants of New France make of the Europeans who began to arrive on their shores in the sixteenth century?

At that time, the region that came to be known as New France was inhabited largely by speakers of Montagnais-Naskapi, Algonkian and Iroquoian languages. Those closer to the coast were fishers, foresters and hunters, though most also practised horticulture; the Wendat (Huron) concentrated in major river valleys further inland, growing maize, squash and beans around fortified towns.

Interestingly, early French observers attached little importance to such economic distinctions, especially since foraging or farming was, in either case, largely women's work. The men, they noted, were primarily occupied in hunting and, occasionally, war, which meant they could in a sense be considered natural aristocrats. The idea of the 'noble savage' can be traced back to such estimations. Originally, it didn't refer to nobility of character but simply to the fact that the Indian men concerned themselves with hunting and fighting, which back at home were largely the business of noblemen.

But if French assessments of the character of 'savages' tended to be decidedly mixed, the indigenous assessment of French character was distinctly less so.

Father Pierre Biard, for example, was a former theology professor assigned in 1608 to evangelize the Algonkian-speaking Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, who had lived for some time next to a French fort. Biard did not think much of the Mi'kmaq, but reported that the feeling was mutual:

"They consider themselves better than the French: 'For,' they say, 'you are always fighting and quarrelling among yourselves; we live peaceably. You are envious and are all the time slandering each other; you are thieves and deceivers; you are covetous, and are neither generous nor kind; as for us, if we have a morsel of bread we share it with our neighbour.' They are saying these and like things continually."

What seemed to irritate Biard the most was that the Mi'kmaq would constantly assert that they were, as a result, "richer" than the French. The French had more material possessions, the Mi'kmaq conceded; but they had other, greater assets: ease, comfort and time. 20 years later Brother Gabriel Sagard, a recollect friar, wrote similar things of the Wendat nation.

Sagard was at first highly critical of Wendat life, which he described as inherently sinful (he was obsessed with the idea that Wendat women were all intent on seducing him), but by the end of his sojourn he had come to the conclusion their social arrangements were in many ways superior to those at home in France. In the following passages, he was clearly echoing Wendat opinion:

"They have no lawsuits and take little pains to acquire the goods of this life, for which we Christians torment ourselves so much, and for our excessive and insatiable greed in acquiring them we are justly and with reason reproved by their quiet life and tranquil dispositions."

Much like Biard's Mi'kmaq, the Wendat were particularly offended by the French lack of generosity to one another:

"They reciprocate hospitality and give such assistance to one another that the necessities of all are provided for without there being any indigent beggar in their towns and villages; and they considered it a very bad thing when they heard it said that there were in France a great many of these needy beggars, and thought that this was for lack of charity in us, and blamed us for it severely."

Wendat cast a similarly jaundiced eye at French habits of conversation. Sagard was surprised and impressed by his hosts' eloquence and powers of reasoned argument, skills honed by near-daily public discussions of communal affairs; his hosts, in contrast, when they did get to see a group of Frenchmen gathered together, often remarked on the way they seemed to be constantly scrambling over each other and cutting each other off in conversation, employing weak arguments, and overall (or so the subtext seemed to be) not showing themselves to be particularly bright.

People who tried to grab the stage, denying others the means to present their arguments, were acting in much the same way as those who grabbed the material means of subsistence and refused to share it; it is hard to avoid the impression that Americans saw the French as existing in a kind of Hobbesian state of "war of all against all". (It's probably worthy of remark that especially in this early contact period, Americans were likely to have known Europeans largely through missionaries, trappers, merchants and soldiers – that is, groups almost entirely composed of men. There were at first very few French women in the colonies, and fewer children. This probably had the effect of making the competitiveness and lack of mutual care among them seem all the more extreme.)

Sagard's account of his stay among the Wendat became an influential bestseller in France and across Europe: both Locke and Voltaire cited *Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons* as a principal source for their descriptions of American societies. The multi-authored and much more extensive *Jesuit Relations*, which appeared between 1633 and 1673, were also widely read and debated in Europe, and include many a similar remonstrance aimed at the French by Wendat observers.

One of the most striking things about these 71 volumes of missionary field reports is that neither the Americans, nor their French interlocutors, appear to have had very much to say about 'equality' per se – for example, the words *égal* or *égalité* barely appear, and on those very few occasions when they do it's almost always in reference to "equality of the sexes" (something the Jesuits found particularly scandalous).

This appears to be the case, irrespective of whether the Jesuits in question were arguing with the Wendat – who might not seem egalitarian in anthropological terms, since they had formal political offices and a stratum of war captives whom the Jesuits, at least, referred to as "slaves" – or the Mi'kmaq or Montagnais-Naskapi, who were organized into what later anthropologists would consider egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers.

Instead, we hear a multiplicity of American voices complaining about the competitiveness and selfishness of the French – and even more, perhaps, about their hostility to freedom. That indigenous Americans lived in generally free societies, and that Europeans did not, was never really a matter of debate in these exchanges: both sides agreed this was the case. What they differed on was whether or not individual liberty was desirable. This is one area in which early missionary or travellers' accounts of the Americas pose a genuine conceptual challenge to most readers today.

Most of us simply take it for granted that 'Western' observers, even 17th-century ones, are simply an earlier version of ourselves; unlike indigenous Americans, who represent an essentially alien, perhaps even unknowable Other. But in fact, in many ways, the authors of these texts were nothing like us. When it came to questions of personal freedom, the equality of men and women, sexual mores or popular sovereignty – or even, for that matter, theories of depth psychology – indigenous American attitudes are likely to be far closer to the reader's own than 17th-century European ones.

These differing views on individual liberty are especially striking. Nowadays, it's almost impossible for anyone living in a liberal democracy to say they are against freedom – at least in the abstract (in practice, of course, our ideas are usually much more nuanced). This is one of the lasting legacies of the Enlightenment and of the American and French Revolutions. Personal freedom, we tend to believe, is inherently good (even if some of us also feel that a society based on total individual liberty – one which took it so far as to eliminate police, prisons or any sort of apparatus of coercion – would instantly collapse into violent chaos). 17th-century Jesuits most certainly did not share this assumption. They tended to view individual liberty as animalistic.

In 1642, the Jesuit missionary Le Jeune wrote of the Montagnais-Naskapi:

“They imagine that they ought by right of birth, to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts, rendering no homage to any one whomsoever, except when they like. They have reproached me a hundred times because we fear our Captains, while they laugh at and make sport of theirs. All the authority of their chief is in his tongue's end; for he is powerful in so far as he is eloquent; and, even if he kills himself talking and haranguing, he will not be obeyed unless he pleases the Savages.”

In the considered opinion of the Montagnais-Naskapi, however, the French were little better than slaves, living in constant terror of their superiors. Such criticism appears regularly in Jesuit accounts; what's more, it comes not just from those who lived in nomadic bands, but equally from townsfolk like the Wendat. The missionaries, moreover, were willing to concede that this wasn't all just rhetoric on the Americans' part. Even Wendat statesmen couldn't compel anyone to do anything they didn't wish to do.

As Father Lallemand, whose correspondence provided an initial model for *The Jesuit Relations*, noted of the Wendat in 1644:

“I do not believe that there is any people on earth freer than they, and less able to allow the subjection of their wills to any power whatever – so much so that Fathers here have no control over their children, or Captains over their subjects, or the Laws of the country over any of them, except in so far as each is pleased to submit to them. There is no punishment which is inflicted on the guilty, and no criminal who is not sure that his life and property are in no danger...”

Lallemand's account gives a sense of just how politically challenging some of the material to be found in *The Jesuit Relations* must have been to European audiences of the time, and why so many found it fascinating.

After expanding on how scandalous it was that even murderers should get off scot-free, the good father did admit that, when considered as a means of keeping the peace, the Wendat system of justice was not ineffective. Actually, it worked surprisingly well.

Rather than punish culprits, the Wendat insisted the culprit's entire lineage or clan pay compensation. This made it everyone's responsibility to keep their kindred under control. “It is not the guilty who suffer the penalty,” Lallemand explains, but rather “the public that must make amends for the offences of individuals.” If a Huron had killed an Algonquin or another Huron, the whole country assembled to agree the number of gifts due to the grieving relatives, “to stay the vengeance that they might take”.

Wendat ‘captains’, as Lallemand then goes on to describe, ‘urge their subjects to provide what is needed; no one is compelled to it, but those who are willing bring publicly what they wish to contribute; it seems as if they vied with one another according to the amount of their wealth, and as the desire of glory and of appearing solicitous for the public welfare urges them to do on like occasions.’

More remarkable still, he concedes: “this form of justice restrains all these peoples, and seems more effectually to repress disorders than the personal punishment of criminals does in France,” despite being “a very mild proceeding, which leaves individuals in such a spirit of liberty that they never submit to any Laws and obey no other impulse than that of their own will”.

There are a number of things worth noting here. One is that it makes clear that some people were indeed considered wealthy. Wendat society was not ‘economically egalitarian’ in that sense. However, there was a difference between what we’d consider economic resources – like land, which was owned by families, worked by women, and whose products were largely disposed of by women’s collectives – and the kind of ‘wealth’ being referred to here, such as wampum (a word applied to strings and belts of beads, manufactured from the shells of Long Island’s quahog clam) or other treasures, which largely existed for political purposes.

Wealthy Wendat men hoarded such precious things largely to be able to give them away on dramatic occasions like these. Neither in the case of land and agricultural products, nor that of wampum and similar valuables, was there any way to transform access to material resources into power – at least, not the kind of power that might allow one to make others work for you, or compel them to do anything they did not wish to do.

At best, the accumulation and adroit distribution of riches might make a man more likely to aspire to political office (to become a ‘chief’ or ‘captain’ – the French sources tend to use these terms in an indiscriminate fashion); but as the Jesuits all continually emphasized, merely holding political office did not give anyone the right to give anybody orders either. Or, to be completely accurate, an office holder could give all the orders he or she liked, but no one was under any particular obligation to follow them.

To the Jesuits, of course, all this was outrageous. In fact, their attitude towards indigenous ideals of liberty is the exact opposite of the attitude most French people or Canadians tend to hold today: that, in principle, freedom is an altogether admirable ideal. Father Lallemand, though, was willing to admit that in practice such a system worked quite well; it created “much less disorder than there is in France” – but, as he noted, the Jesuits were opposed to freedom in principle:

“This, without doubt, is a disposition quite contrary to the spirit of the Faith, which requires us to submit not only our wills, but our minds, our judgments, and all the sentiments of man to a power unknown to our senses, to a Law that is not of earth, and that is entirely opposed to the laws and sentiments of corrupt nature. Add to this that the laws of the Country, which to them seem most just, attack the purity of the Christian life in a thousand ways, especially as regards their marriages...”

The Jesuit Relations are full of this sort of thing: scandalized missionaries frequently reported that American women were considered to have full control over their own bodies, and that therefore unmarried women had sexual liberty and married women could divorce at will. This, for the Jesuits, was an outrage. Such sinful conduct, they believed, was just the extension of a more general principle of freedom, rooted in natural dispositions, which they saw as inherently pernicious. The “wicked liberty of the savages”, one insisted, was the single greatest impediment to

their “submitting to the yoke of the law of God”. Even finding terms to translate concepts like ‘lord’, ‘commandment’ or ‘obedience’ into indigenous languages was extremely difficult; explaining the underlying theological concepts, well-nigh impossible.

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Excerpt from chapter 2 of *The Dawn of Everything*, from the section entitled IN WHICH WE CONSIDER WHAT THE INHABITANTS OF NEW FRANCE MADE OF THEIR EUROPEAN INVADERS, ESPECIALLY IN MATTERS OF GENEROSITY, SOCIABILITY, MATERIAL WEALTH, CRIME, PUNISHMENT AND LIBERTY.

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