

## **A critical appraisal of David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity, 2021***

**by Heide Goettner-Abendroth**

A great title and a great book; the entire history of humankind in a single volume! This arouses curiosity, especially since the two authors are experts in their respective fields: Graeber is an anthropologist and Wengrow an archaeologist. Hence the praise in the general press is not long in coming. Nevertheless, this book also deserves a critical appraisal.

What is valuable about this book is not only the expertise of the two authors, who have incorporated the latest archaeological findings, but also that they fundamentally show that egalitarian societies make up the vast majority of human history and not infrequently re-established themselves by breaking away from societies based on domination. The authors therefore contradict the view that egalitarian societies and democracies are rare exceptions in a history characterised by kingdoms, empires and repressive states. They refute the view that domination has always existed everywhere and forms part of "human nature", so to speak. This view of an endless history written by the victors is overturned by their work and that's a good thing! For if domination from the top down had always existed, it would make no sense to rise up against it - something which is in the interest of those representing the history of the victors.

According to this "history of victors" belief, indigenous peoples and women as a whole fall by the wayside. It is therefore fascinating to read how the authors reverse this view and place the wisdom of Indigenous peoples at the centre, using the example of the political criticism of the Iroquois against the white Europeans, whose society was characterised by egotism, competition and private ownership, lack of individual freedom and arbitrary violence. The authors also emphasise how much the egalitarian constitution of the League of the Five Nations, or the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, influenced the constitution of America's Founding Fathers and later the French Revolution, a fact that is all too readily denied by white Americans and Europeans. Equally revealing is the description by the two authors of how criticism by Indigenous people was answered and counteracted by the European elite. They were degraded to the status of "noble savages" and theories of the unilinear development of history ("stage theories") were invented in which, for instance, the inferior stage of "barbarism" was attributed to their social order while only the Western social order had risen to the level of "civilisation". These stage theories of history were the intellectual ideology used in colonial times to justify the conquest of other peoples and the destruction of their cultures, with noticeable repercussions to this day. With their decisive inclusion of the Indigenous perspective, the authors critically question this Euro-American history of victors and expose its unenlightened arrogance.

But what about the inclusion of women's perspectives? They are generally also the victims of the history of victors because they simply do not exist in it. Although they are far from a marginal group, making up half of humanity, in this "new history of humanity" they only sporadically appear and then in an unrelated context. However, at least they do appear, something which distinguishes this "new history" from other histories written by males. But their significance is not grasped, as if they had not achieved anything throughout the millennia

of human history that would have been worthy of detailed mention and, above all, systematic inclusion. This "new" history is strangely incomplete when it comes to the activities and inventions of women and their shaping of social orders. Yet it is precisely the situation of women, their freedom or lack of freedom, that reflects the state of a society as a whole. This significance of women in the history of humanity is one of the burning questions we want to explore.

The other burning question is: where does humankind's striving for equality and happiness come from? By "equality" here I don't mean egalitarianism or formal equality but an understanding that each individual has the same value in spite of the countless differences between people. When each and every individual has the same value, they are given personal dignity and freedom of choice in acting together with others. This aspiration is deeply rooted in human beings but what is its origin? We learn nothing about this in this book, except that the notion of an original state of equality in human history is rejected as a relic of the old stage theories. Yet the question remains: why do humans strive so intensely for happiness and equality and how have they managed to live egalitarian lives in such long and different periods of history? This seems contradictory, and it has to do with the fact that the fundamental importance of women and mothers does not feature in this work. Consequently, despite the authors' honest attempt at balance, the work remains male-oriented and therefore limited.

For the fundamental importance of women and mothers in the humanisation of *Homo sapiens*, we will only briefly refer to the work of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, who has shown that it's precisely the care, attention and capacity for empathy of mothers that distinguishes the human species from the animal world. This ability was passed on to the whole community as other women and also men adopted this original maternal attitude and empathy with other people and beings and it became a characteristic trait of the human species. Human infants in indigenous societies grew up, and continue to grow up today, in an environment of universal care and empathy that makes them aware of their personal value, no matter how different one child is from another. This means that, from the very beginning, they experience equality as equal value and derive feelings of happiness from this. Childhood is therefore the origin of this striving for happiness and equality and, in human history, this was due to mothers and these maternal values, as is still the case today, individually with every mother who has the same attitude for her children and their needs. For without this no child would grow up healthy or indeed survive at all.

This fundamental fact that maternal behaviour and values have been extremely important for every individual and for humanity as a whole is not seen by the authors. But they can hardly be blamed for this. Such blindness to the huge significance of motherhood, the oppression of and contempt for mothers and the exploitation of their bodily, psychological and social capacities are widespread in today's patriarchal Western societies. Nevertheless, they are quite crucial in a history of humanity. After all, in the normal mother-child relationship we have found the origin of humans striving for happiness and equality, in the sense of all individuals having the same value. Moreover, these abstract concepts become tangible because they are filled to the brim with sensory perceptions as a result of the experiences of childhood.

When a whole community adopts the maternal attitude of care and empathy, as was evidently the case in the process of becoming human, this also signifies a certain social order that arises from the bodily, psychological and social capacities of mothers. Such an order is based on the aforementioned maternal values, to which are added the associated values of mutual help and peacekeeping, for without these a child will not grow up to become an adult. In this way, a

social and cultural model was consciously created from a biological fact, motherhood, which is an extraordinary spiritual achievement of early humanity, especially of mothers. In modern Matriarchal Studies, this social order is called "matriarchy", which has nothing to do with the "domination of women" but rather has something profoundly to do with happiness and equality. It's therefore no coincidence that the few matriarchal societies that still exist today show precisely these values and this insistence on equality.

(See Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York, 2013).

However, I am not immediately claiming that, in the Palaeolithic, humans lived exclusively in this happy state as hunter-gatherers and that "matriarchy" was the general primal state. Graeber and Wengrow use anthropological examples to demonstrate in detail the great diversity of hunter-gatherer societies and conclude that, in this long early epoch, people were not limited to small egalitarian groups but undertook many social experiments that produced a variety of political forms.

This is extremely interesting but two points are irritating. Firstly, this shows the diverse nature of *today's* hunter-gatherer societies which (as is usual in anthropology) are strung together as if they had no history and then projected back to the Palaeolithic as a hypothesis. Secondly, not a single matrilineal hunter-gatherer society appears in this presentation, as if they were completely unimportant. Yet they frequently exist and would lead to quite different conclusions. Instead we read of the more warlike Yanomami and the Tupi chiefs who practise polygyny, both societies in South America. We also hear of the Kwakiutl and other peoples on the northwest coast of North America, where the economy is in the hands of the chiefs, leading to lavish feasts for prestige and dominance as well as the keeping of slaves. We also hear about the industrious but greedy hunter-gatherers in California who are bent on accumulating their money. Also presented are the Nuer in Africa, where women's freedom ends with marriage because they are acquired by means of a bride wealth system, meaning that equality only applies to men. All this sounds very familiar to us and is hardly matriarchal. So, is this selection, which is supposed to reflect the political forms of society in the Palaeolithic, surprising? There is also talk of flexible, seasonal forms of society, the building up and then dismantling of hierarchies, whereby we might ask: what is meant by "hierarchy" here? If such a form can be built up and soon dismantled again, it's not a hierarchy but rather indicates sporadic leadership that comes and goes depending on changing conditions and doesn't represent a change between different forms of society. There is also evidence of this form of sporadic leadership in egalitarian matriarchal societies, indicating its relative insignificance for society.

But why are the well-known hunter-gatherer societies with a mother line left out? Such societies are the San (!Kung), Hadza and Mbuti Pygmies, who practise true equality, i.e. also between the sexes. I don't want discuss here how far the mother line has actually developed among them but would point out that they are missing in the colourful variety of anthropological examples in the Graeber and Wengrow book. Nor does it seem to have been understood what the mother line, when fully developed, actually means in terms of the organisation of a society. It corresponds to the humanisation of *Homo sapiens* and clearly points to the earliest, mother-centred social forms which later developed into agrarian matriarchal societies.

This is not to say that these matrilineal hunter-gatherer societies represent the general primal state in the Palaeolithic. However, one thing does stand out: these peoples still live where their ancestors lived, namely in southern and tropical Africa. Even though they have been

pushed back into the jungle and the semi-desert Kalahari throughout their long history, they have nevertheless remained there, in Africa, where *Homo sapiens*, i.e. the first modern humans, originated but then spread out into the whole world. They are also considered to be the oldest peoples in the world because of the peculiarities of their language.

All the other hunter-gatherer societies listed by the two authors have long since ceased to live where the first modern humans came from. This is significant because over the millennia their ancestors, starting from Africa, have migrated long distances across continents and seas with the corresponding dangers and difficulties, so they have a completely different history from the San and the Pygmies. But these peoples are strung together in their present form like a colourful "carnival procession" (Graeber and Wengrow), as if the history of their long migrations did not exist. Yet their turbulent history may have altered them a great deal and produced male-dominant political forms that no longer correspond to their own early social forms. These changes even reach into the present.

One example of such a change towards male dominance from a previously egalitarian state is represented by the long and dangerous migrations across the ocean as reflected in the pre-Polynesian and later Polynesian settlement of the Pacific. I cannot elaborate on this example here, see (Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies*). Consequently, all the hunter-gatherer societies outside Africa cited by Graeber and Wengrow have each had their own, sometimes dramatic, history that has changed them in particular ways. Even if it is methodologically difficult to find out their history in each case, this is nevertheless a fact that must be included, at least hypothetically. Aside from their biased selection, it's therefore not plausible that the examples given by Graeber and Wengrow should all indiscriminately represent social and political forms in the Palaeolithic just because they are hunter-gatherers. Rather it is a backward projection from their present state into the Palaeolithic.

So much for my comments on the hypotheses of the two authors regarding the Palaeolithic. What about their hypotheses for the Neolithic? Here, there are many points of agreement with modern Matriarchal Studies. Firstly, that this new form of economy was an invention by women, which had far-reaching social consequences, a topic the two authors do not pursue further, however. Secondly, they reject the view, based on the grounds that evidence is lacking, that private ownership arose with agriculture and, as a consequence, inequality, elites, domination and war, with which modern Matriarchal Studies fully agrees. Like Graeber and Wengrow, we acknowledge, in accordance with recent archaeological findings, that Neolithic agrarian societies were free from hierarchies and elites, controlled instead by complex self-government, this extending to the large Neolithic and Bronze Age cities with a matriarchal character, most lately to the Minoan culture of Crete. Like the two authors, in modern Matriarchal Studies we don't equate the size of cities and the higher complexity of societies with hierarchy. In other words, there is no need for elites, rulers or other potentates who would now "plan" cities and exploit society (see Marija Gimbutas on the Danubian cultures, in *The Civilization of the Goddess*). The correlation of size and complexity with hierarchy is a constant topic for many archaeologists but there is no evidence for this and it is a relief to see this old mental block finally being breached.

It also comes as a pleasant surprise that the two authors, supported by the research of Marija Gimbutas, don't reject the possibility of matriarchies in the European Neolithic but consider them to be real. This presupposes a new, adequate definition of "matriarchy" beyond the old prejudices. Gimbutas doesn't provide this definition explicitly but circumscribes its characteristics under the term "matristic". From her, the two authors produce a new idea of "matriarchy" but, unfortunately, as yet they don't have any knowledge of modern Matriarchal

Studies, in which this definition is much more developed. This is also the reason why they see the scope of matriarchies so narrowly, since Gimbutas didn't research them beyond "Old Europe". However, my analyses of some surviving societies of this type in Asia, Africa and the Americas, which are among the oldest indigenous peoples in the areas where they live, show that matriarchies existed and still exist on all these continents and that they have a long history there. This broadens the view considerably and gives rise to a number of new issues for further research.

As an aside, it should be noted that, in Graeber and Wengrow's new history, which focuses on political forms, the realms of world view and religion are completely missing, although these are extremely important in the various forms of mother-centred and matriarchal societies.

The whole topic of egalitarian societies in history needs further research. Matriarchies have so far been excluded from general research into egalitarian societies because of the prejudiced idea of the "domination of women". Yet modern Matriarchal Studies has shown that these societies are fundamentally egalitarian, especially with regard to gender, because of the validity of maternal values, the core of which is equal value, both in personal and social terms. The same is not always true for other so-called "egalitarian" societies when equality applies only among men. Should this link between true equality of both sexes and matriarchy finally be understood, then we'll not only see rare, disparate examples somewhere in these societies that were and are strongly influenced by women, but will also achieve a consistent picture with far-reaching validity. This has numerous consequences because it reveals their significance for later social orders, which are still strongly influenced by them despite conquest and appropriation. This is especially true of the classical matriarchy of the five tribes of the League of Five Nations, whose constitution (as Graeber and Wengrow have pointed out) provided lasting inspiration for the emergence of early American democracy and subsequent European democracies.

In saying this, we are not reintroducing the Victorian hypothesis of matriarchy as a "primordial state", for this was nothing more than romantic speculation. Instead, we are relying on the more recent archaeological finds combined with detailed knowledge of the structure and functioning of living matriarchal societies provided by modern Matriarchal Studies. This results in a completely new perspective on history and in exciting new possibilities for interpretation, this time not seen through a one-sided patriarchal lens but seen from two sides and clearly. Only then will we get a complete history of humankind that does not either exclude the other half or treat it only marginally. (See Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy. West Asia and Europe*, New York, 2022)

Finally, the question remains as to how we "got stuck" where we are now (as the two authors put it), i.e. stuck in patriarchy with its multiple forms of violence and oppression such as class, race, caste, private ownership, enslavement of women, war and genocide. The response of both authors is that this arose from the combination of care and oppression found in the patriarchal household towards women and "uprooted individuals", which was later extended to social institutions. Such an answer, however, is highly unsatisfactory. Surely, we need an explanation as to how the patriarchal household came about, perhaps by creeping up from below? The fact that the patriarchal household is a result rather than a cause of this social upheaval remains entirely obscure.

Ultimately, it is a question of explaining in general how forms of domination arose because stable, matriarchal societies that had existed for thousands of years could only come under pressure and be changed through this. According to our research, this process was triggered

by entire peoples who were uprooted by large-scale, long-term climatic changes and literally "had the ground taken from under their feet". This prevented them from returning to their old way of life, which is why they perished or survived thanks to new inventions. Survival strategies emerged that gave rise to the charismatic leader as the "saviour in need". He was now voluntarily granted certain privileges, which allowed him to develop new, egocentric political forms. Under ecologically extreme circumstances that lasted for millennia, the position of this charismatic leader was consolidated, which gradually led, step by step, to the formation of male alliances and male hierarchies with all the consequential effects on private households and society as a whole. It also led to the irreversible process of land grabbing for survival, with the consequent emergence of systematic conquest and subjugation. In other words, this millennia-long upheaval involved far more people, namely entire societies, and was geographically far more extensive than the mere emergence of patriarchal households. (See Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy*)

In conclusion, I would like to say that a dialogue would be desirable between the exciting research approach of Graeber and Wengrow and modern Matriarchal Studies, firstly because of their similarities and, secondly, in order to truly set the dynamics of a new, more hopeful history of humanity in motion. In such a history, both sexes and their achievements would have equal value, and both could work equally as male and female researchers on its further development.

(Translation by Simone Plaza and Tracy Byrne)