

Indigenous American's Role in the American Revolution and other provocative ideas in The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity by David Graeber and David Wengrow (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 692 pages.

A short review by John M Repp of parts of the massive book.

Before the French and Indian War, there had been several hundred years of French colonization in the New World around the Great Lakes. Many Jesuit missionaries learned the language of the natives to try and convert them to Christianity, and the missionaries reported back to the educated public in France. Several transcribed dialogues between the Jesuits and native intellectuals became best-selling books in France. This is at the time when the whole French branch of the movement we call the Enlightenment was being born in the intellectual ferment centered around the salons of Paris, with figures like Diderot and Rousseau. It was the "age of Reason". Yes, the breakthroughs of natural science played a big role in the Enlightenment, but the appearance of concepts like **liberty and equality** can be traced to native American intellectuals! That is the fascinating story told by Graeber and Wengrow in The Dawn of Everything.

That means it was not just the idea of the Confederation of the original 13 colonies that was inspired by the native American example of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy as told to us by Ben Franklin. But the ideas of liberty and equality that were at the very heart of the American and French Revolutions came from Native Americans. Freedom and equality were concepts not available in Europe before contact with the New World. This is new knowledge for me, something I was not taught in the graduate courses in European intellectual history and American history 50 years ago.

The Jesuits had met their match in New France. Native American intellectuals like Kandiaronk told the French that they were too competitive, always arguing and fighting, grubbing after money and rank, totally deferent to their "captains" and acted like slaves. Kandiaronk pointed out that the French proclaimed they were Christian, but they had no mercy. The French let some of their people go hungry and without a place to live in the small settlements that were being established in the New World. The French felt they had to respond to this criticism. They asserted that they were more "advanced" than the natives **because they had more material wealth**. Then the intellectuals back home came up with a theory that eventually became one of the ruling assumptions of modern social science.



Kandiaronk

We can call the theory "the evolution of human society" theory. It says humans advanced from bands, to tribes, to chiefdoms and finally civilization. The theory said that at each stage, as the social groups became ever larger, there was more division of labor and complexity. And there was more hierarchy and political power concentrated at the top, all necessary to keep everyone fed and working. By the time human groups were large enough to be living in cities, **it was imperative** to have police, law courts, bureaucracies, taxes, and charismatic leaders to manage such a large society. The egalitarian "state of nature" was long gone. This social evolutionary schema was like a natural law and was said to be driven by technological advances. The problem is it just does not fit the evidence we have now.

Graeber and Wengrow base much of their book on new digs archaeologists have made in the last 50 years. The findings of these new digs have not gotten out to the educated public but remain in academic journals. Using archaeological evidence allows us to reach back further into time, since evidence from writing only goes back a bit more than 5000 years. It also allows us to learn about societies without writing.

A good example of such a dig is the Ukrainian site of Taljanky, an ancient city dated to around 4100 to 3300 BCE, with a population as much as 10,000. There were other cities around them, about 6 to 9 miles apart. Taljanky existed for 800 years in a forested area which the people protected and maintained. They did not cut the forest down. There is very little evidence of warfare or the rise of social elites. The city's shape was circular with a large open area in the middle for what the authors think might have been popular assemblies, ceremonies, and seasonal penning of animals. The houses were rectangular, 16 x 32 feet, of wattle and daub, with stone foundations and attached gardens. Each house was adjacent to a larger assembly house. They kept livestock, cultivated orchards, and hunted and foraged. There is "no evidence of central administration or communal storage facilities." They imported salt and exported ceramics which were made in each household, each with its own style, and considered some of the best of the pre-historic era. "The logistical challenges were daunting" but they managed them "from the bottom-up, through processes of local decision-making" (p. 295). When Wengrow was asked where in the past he would have liked to live, he said in one of the Ukrainian cities like Taljanky.

Our ancestors were not "primitive". They were more intelligent and wiser than we have thought. For instance, the authors show that **while still foragers**, large groups came together seasonally to cooperate and build a monumental stone center in Turkey called Gobekli Tepe, not quite as large as the Stonehenge but 6000 years before. This monumental center took thousands of hours of coordinated labor and planning to build. Such places were thought to be possible only after agriculture was adopted when social groups were larger, there was a surplus of food and labor to allow such extravagant building, and there were strong political leaders with coercive power to direct the building. There have also been found a few very rich burials of foragers, such as Sungir (32,050 to 28,550 BCE), again, long before we expect them, and before there were aristocratic families who paid for such burials.



Taljanky circa 4000 BCE



Gobekli Tepe 9500-8000

Anthropologists before the 1960's described groups of foragers that formed into small hunting parties with a strong leader who had real coercive power over the members during a hunt. Later in the year, the same tribe gathered into much larger groups without obvious authority figures. There may have been ceremonial "ranks and honors" but no coercive political power as we understand it. In effect, our ancestors had more ability to change their social systems and more imagination about ways to do that. Whereas we are "stuck" with nation

states, which claim the only legitimate use of force; moreover, the three large ones (and a few smaller ones) have enough nuclear weapons to destroy us all.

Almost 600 miles south of the Mackinaw Straits where the French met Kandiaronk lies the ruins of

the ancient city Cahokia, now east of St. Louis. In 1050 AD Cahokia was a larger city than London. It was a religious center and later an empire that grew larger in a time of great armed conflict. At one time, Cahokia saw mass executions of captured enemy fighters on an earthen pyramid (today called Monk's Mound in the State Park east of St. Louis), much like the limestone pyramids that were built over two thousand miles to the south in Mexico and Central America. But by 1400 CE, Cahokia and the once fertile area around it was empty of people. The natives left, disobeyed their rulers, and moved away. Maybe the land lost its fertility, or the people became tired of constant warfare and rebelled, or both. The people moving away built a new social world governed by democratic tribal councils. That is the world in which Kandiaronk grew up.

Let's look again at the native American political life in what is now the Midwest that followed the collapse of Cahokia to understand where those ideas about freedom came from. A "chief" had to persuade other members of the tribal council to get agreement on an action he thought was needed. He had to convince his fellows; he could not order them to obey. If he tried, tribal members were free to disobey. It was the custom of the nearly daily discussion in the native societies about all sorts of matters that concerned the whole group that allowed the native "intellectuals" like Kandiaronk to be so eloquent. They were practiced at debate. The French Jesuits were not able to convince many of the tribal leaders they met of the truth of Christianity. And in the Christian world, argumentation was the Jesuit specialty.

Contrary to what many people believe, native American groups were not isolated from each other. They traveled more than most people do today. They were connected over wide areas. There were many spoken languages, but also a universal sign language. There were times and places where hundreds of individuals came together to be with each other, to socialize, conduct rituals, and build places where they could do this. In those societies, there was no obvious way to turn material wealth into political power. They may not have been perfectly egalitarian societies, but many of them were very democratic.

Each tribe had smaller groupings within, two exogamous moieties and 24 clans, often exogamous. The tribes all over North America used many of the same clan names. (p.456) Because of the clan system, individuals were free to travel long distances and settle far away from one's place of birth with the knowledge that they would be accepted by their clan members in another tribe, and taken care of.

These features of some of the native American societies described in the book, as well as the **human closeness** of the relationships in those societies, gave birth to the famous slogan of the French Revolution of 1789: **Liberté, égalité, fraternité**. Before that (we often forget the American Revolution came before the French), there was the American Declaration of Independence of 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".

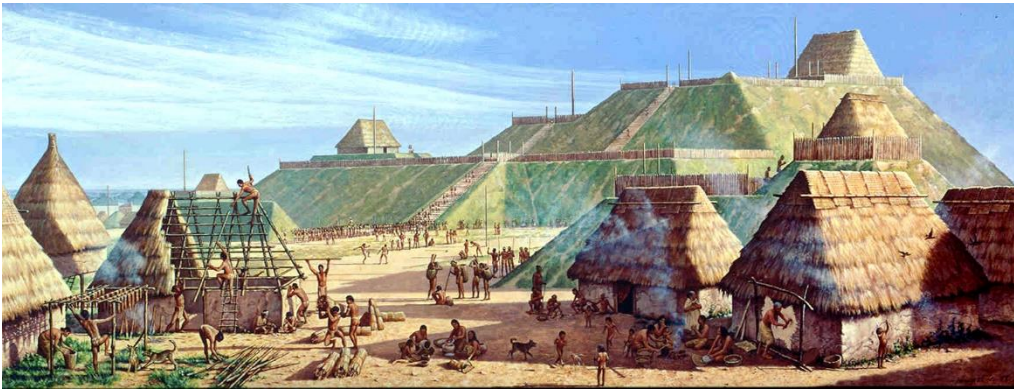
It must be said that not all pre-Columbian native American societies were societies of free individuals. I focused on those that were the source of our modern ideals of liberty and equality. Two thousand miles to the south, there were Mayan societies with tyrannical leadership who sacrificed people on altars atop pyramids. There was Cahokia in its greatest years, when it also sacrificed people. There were the Pacific Northwest societies that had two hereditary classes and as many slaves percentagewise as the cotton plantations in the southern states before 1865. The slaves in the Northwest were originally women and children captured in war. They had no family and had to obey

their master.

Graeber and Wengrow show us some of the amazing diversity of native American societies as well as the diversity of cultures around the world and through the long-time span since the end of the last ice age. [The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity](#) is a book that demands much of the reader; after all it took the two Davids ten years to write it, and we can only guess how many hours of reading and research.

This book can fire up our imaginations, so we can start thinking about how to have a livable future. It can help prepare us for a future better than the usual history of Western Civilization textbook does. Today, climate scientists are telling us we must change how we do things. The rash of unusual weather events should push us into action. The stimulating of our political and social imaginations could not have come at a better time.

Tragically, David Graeber died just a few weeks after this book was published. The two authors planned to write several more books. But I have heard that there are groups of young people who are taking up the work the two started to further expand our ideas of what is possible, in theory and practice. Here is [David Wengrow discussing the book](#) on DemocracyNow. [Graeber wrote just before he died](#): “Why don’t we stop treating it as entirely normal that the more obviously one’s work benefits others, the less one is likely to be paid for it; or insisting that financial markets are the best way to direct long-term investment even as they are propelling us to destroy most life on Earth?”



Cahokia, now just east of St. Louis, was larger than London, at its height, in 1050-1250 CE.