

SIMPLICITY IS COMPLICATED: ON THE EFFORT OF CREATING AND MAINTAINING EQUALITY

A key point David Graeber and David Wengrow make in their mammoth work, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), is that we humans are not by default predisposed to hierarchy or equality, but are first and foremost a socially creative species. The authors note that throughout history humans have experimented with a wide variety of social and political arrangements. This is of course empirically evident, since different human societies have, indeed, organised themselves in various forms, from authoritarian states to egalitarian communities and everything in between. Even within a specific spatial and historical context, people have deliberately shifted from one way of organising their affairs to another and back again or fled to a new order entirely. This, I imagine, is accepted wisdom to most anthropologists. It is, however, also an important point to repeat. More so, Graeber and Wengrow have done a good job in formulating this point particularly elegantly and based on anthropological and archaeological evidence in the form of a ‘grand narrative’ (or, in their case, an ‘anti-grand narrative’). Especially valuable, at least for an anthropologist like myself, is the archaeological evidence in this book, which shows how particular forms and scales of human social organisation such as cities do not determine an authoritarian social order. Or, conversely, a relatively small-scale non-state community is not necessarily free from coercive power relations.

In this essay, I take up Wengrow and Graeber’s notion that humans are ‘by default’ neither authoritarian nor egalitarian, but creative, noting that egalitarian forms of social organisation are complex, complicated, and require much work and effort. They are, in short, social and political achievements in their own right and manifestations of human social creativity. The work and effort that goes into an egalitarian social organisation is easily dismissed, and small-scale egalitarian societies, for example, are often referred to as ‘simple societies’ within popular discourse. In fact, during the launch of the Finnish translation of *The Dawn of Everything* in Helsinki on 23 March 2023, one of the panelists, a professor of global politics, insisted that societies have grown ‘more complex’ over time. This view has its parallel in the sphere of economics, such that commodity relations are viewed as the most sophisticated, elaborate, and complex forms of exchange, whilst modes such as sharing are viewed as the archaic baseline of exchange and, at worst, ‘simple’.

There are, I argue, two reasons for this. The first lies in the legacy of evolutionist thinking, which claimed that human forms of organisation and behaviour progressed from ‘simple’ to more complex. In terms of political organisation, this evolution moved from ‘bands’ via ‘tribes’ to ‘states’, from chieftains via kingdoms to bureaucratic states, whilst in terms of their economies, societies moved from sharing via barter to market exchanges. Despite

anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists long criticising simplistic evolutionary notions, the idea of a progression from ‘simple’ to more ‘complex’ lives on—both in scholarship and amongst the general public. For example, in economics the myth about the origin of money persists (Graeber 2001; Kallinen 2020). According to this myth, in archaic times humans were constricted to cumbersome barter until they ‘invented’ money, a generalised medium of exchange which made exchange run more smoothly (Kallinen 2020).

These myths also live on in progressive and anarchist politics. As commodity exchange and state organisation have been regarded as results of human evolution (or devolution), ‘primitive communism’ and egalitarianism represented naturalised baselines. The evolutionist narrative has provided both proponents and opponents of capitalism, commodification, and state organisation with naturalistic arguments. On the one hand, proponents of capitalism argue that the market economy and commodity exchanges are merely a natural and evolved form of exchange, whilst, on the other hand, anarchists and leftists argue that humans are naturally egalitarian and sharing. Seminal works in anthropology, such as Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* (1974) and Pierre Clastres’ *Society Against the State* (1987 [1974]), have inadvertently supported this view. By—correctly—showing that capitalist economic or political formations are not necessary outcomes of human nature, they are often read as evidence to the contrary, that humans were ‘originally’ organised against states or a capitalist market economy. This is understandable, even though both books sought to show that non-capitalist and non-state societies have economic and political formations of their own.

SHARING IS CARING... AND COMPLICATED

In his article on sharing as a form of exchange, Thomas Widlok (2013: 11) notes that sharing is often viewed either as a covert form of market exchange or ultimately a form of generalised reciprocity. In these accounts of sharing, the role of expected reciprocity is often highlighted, not least because of the pervasiveness of rational choice theory (Widlok 2013: 13). Similarly, Widlok (2013: 17) notes, sharing is often considered a baseline for other forms of transfer and exchange. At times, this argument takes a temporal form, in as much as sharing is seen as the most archaic form of exchange, from which other forms evolved (Widlok 2013: 17). I assume that this stems in no small part from the fact that sharing is often associated with communities engaged in hunting and gathering, which again are often regarded as archaic societies on the evolutionary trajectory. This is, of course, erroneous, because, as we well know, contemporary hunter-gatherers are not remnants of an evolutionary past, but have just as dynamic and manifold histories as any other specific group of people engaged in a particular livelihood strategy. Moreover, as Widlok (2013: 14) continues, sharing as a practice is not specific to a particular mode of subsistence.

Rather than an archaic baseline of other types of transfer, sharing is a form of transfer in its own right, and—as Widlok (2013: 14, 18, 27) shows—a complex and nuanced one at that. Sharing, which allows others to take what is valued and give without an expectation of return, is the product of a complex social interaction, which may be initiated either by giver or receiver. In addition, sharing is based on the relatedness or co-present mutuality of the two parties, on specific semiotic practices such as statements of not having, or a mediated co-presence such

as children used as intermediaries to initiate sharing (Widlök 2013: 19–20). In terms of value, sharing decouples differences between giver and receiver in as much as it ensures the transfer of objects that make a difference, but it is intended to create as little difference as possible in the relationship between giver and receiver. Similarly, sharing does not presuppose a willingness to give in order for value to emerge, but creates value in the unwillingness to cling on to a particular possession in the face of social pressure based on (kin) ties, talk, or bodily co-presence (Widlök 2013: 23–25). As Widlök (2013: 24) notes, these are no small cultural achievements.

Widlök's empirical work on the practices of sharing raises an important point I want to address. Practices such as sharing are not simple and do not by default exist as baselines. Even well-meaning naturalising accounts, which portray sharing in romanticising terms as the most 'natural' form of exchange, displace from the picture the social effort and skill they require. In fact, forms of transfer such as gift-giving as well as various forms of reciprocity and sharing, involve much more complex and complicated social practices than commodity exchanges. A key defining feature of commodity transactions in fact is that they do *not* create qualitative relations between those engaging in exchanges, individuals who remain reciprocally independent, but rather quantitative relations between the commodities exchanged (Gregory 1982: 12). Commodity exchanges are, or should be, effortless and simple. In his book, Ira Bashkow (2006) notes how the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea regard commodity relations as 'light' precisely because of this: they are seemingly effortless and they do not create relations between the exchangers. The Orokaiva contrast this with their kin and exchange relations that are 'heavy', rooted in

and requiring constant effort and maintenance. Similarly, for the North Mungen of New Britain, Papua New Guinea, creating and maintaining valued social relations between people and between people and the land is called 'hard work' (Tammisto 2018). In contrast, wage labour or cash cropping—despite the obvious physical effort—are not automatically 'hard work'. Only when their products are channelled into creating relations of care and nurturing and maintaining inter-relations between people and kin groups are they 'hard work'.

POLITICAL COMPLEXITY

This discussion has its parallels in the realm of politics. Just like sharing is not a natural baseline but a form of exchange in its own right, so are egalitarian forms of organisation. Rather than something that exists by default, egalitarian forms of politics and organisation are achievements in their own right. Jane Fajans (1997: 275) makes this point in relation to the Qaqet of Papua New Guinea, noting that in their social organisation they were, at the time of Fajans' research, deeply and morally committed to egalitarianism. As Fajans' (1997: 275) work shows, this does not come effortlessly, but the egalitarian values of the Qaqet are constantly enacted through relations of care and nurturing as well as ingrained in their conception of personhood. In short, the egalitarian organisation of the Qaqet results from effort. The same goes for the North Mungen, who similarly organise their social life in an egalitarian fashion. Communal enterprises, such as feasts, clearing gardens, deciding on land use, or solving disputes, require coordination, much discussion, and social effort.

David Graeber (2007: 9) made a similar argument in the introduction to his essay collection *Possibilities*, where he notes the

consensus-based politics of the Direct Action Network (DAN) in which he was involved. This required much trial and error, because people were not accustomed to it. Indeed, I suspect that everybody who has been involved in organising of any kind can agree that it takes a lot of work and effort. Or, as a courier union organiser noted to me once, it resembles herding cats. Graeber goes on to note that the egalitarian and consensus-based practices of the DAN activists were rather similar to those he had seen when conducting research in Madagascar, with the exception that people in Madagascar were much more experienced in it. Egalitarian politics and consensus-based practices in Madagascar, or amongst the Mengen, often run smoothly and seemingly effortlessly, because people are skilled in it, not because they come naturally or represent 'simple' forms of politics. On the contrary, as Widlok (2013: 24) notes about sharing, these are sociocultural achievements.

In egalitarian settings and consensus-based politics, social relations and power structures are continually negotiated, re-negotiated, and settled. Or, viewed from another perspective, the lack of fixed power relations is the entire point of egalitarian concepts. Social relations are complex and their ongoing renegotiation is complicated, as Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita (2017: 7–8) point out. In their critique of simplistic and linear narratives of increased infrastructural and technological progress, Harvey, Jensen, and Morita (2017: 8) note that sometimes technologies and infrastructures fold together heterogeneous elements allowing for their temporary simplification. Or, as my colleague Mira Käkönen (personal communication 2023) noted, objectified and routinised power relations are simpler in as much as they reduce complexity (see also Käkönen 2020: 23). This

same point was also made by anthropologist Thiago Oppermann, who noted that, indeed, maybe life in state formation is easy, whilst non-state formations are hard and require much effort (personal communication 2023).

What smooth-running consensus-based practices, state structures, and well-functioning technological arrangements may have in common is precisely that they seem simple, *because* they fold—in very different ways—together complex and complicated relations. State structures or infrastructural arrangements objectify and materialise complex relations into a given form, whilst consensus-based practices rely on the skill of practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS

Human social life is always complex and complicated. As I have suggested in this essay, evolutionist assumptions underlie narratives that describe increasing complexity and linear progress. This manifests in, for example, portraying modes of transfer such as sharing as a simple baseline from which more complicated forms like commodity exchange evolve. Such narratives also portray state societies as 'complex' and having evolved from more 'simple' forms, such as egalitarian kin-based forms of social organisation. These narratives exist and are repeated, even though ample historical, anthropological, and archaeological evidence exists showing that this is not the case. What I find particularly valuable about Graeber and Wengrow's book, *The Dawn of Everything*, is that the authors displace questions of whether humans are by nature egalitarian or hierarchical, whether social life in small-scale or large-scale societies is simple or complicated, and note that we humans have always been socially incredibly creative.

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