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The dawn of everything: a new history of humanity

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Michiru Nagatsu

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BOOK REVIEWS

The dawn of everything: a new history of humanity, by David Graeber and David Wengrow, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2021, xii plus 692 pp., $35 (hardcover), ISBN:9780374157357

When David Wengrow visited Helsinki in September 2022 for the launching of the Finnish translation of their book, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (DOE henceforth), he told me that about five new reviews had been popping up every week since its publication. He was apparently not bragging, but rather amused. Professor Wengrow pointed out that some of the reviews so blatantly contradicted what they had written that the reviewers had not actually read the book. He described this collection of reviews as 'dark literature' about DOE. Although it is tempting to analyze a phenomenon such as this triggered by a highly popular book, I will focus in this review on the book itself, in fact a very narrow aspect of it. My goal is to convince fellow philosophers of social science that it is relevant to our field, but in what sense? Why do readers of *JEM* need to know about this 'new history of humanity'? My short answer is, because DOE challenges some of our philosophical tool kits for analyzing social-scientific practices and debates. I will briefly introduce the book before making my point.

One of the leitmotifs of DOE is the so-called indigenous critique of European civilization (Chapters 1, 2 and 11). The authors point out a systematic bias in the Western Enlightenment tradition, namely referring to early *homo sapiens*, as well as contemporary indigenous populations, as 'ape-like', in other words, the stupid savage with no real human agency or political consciousness. Granted, they could be either egalitarian or hierarchical by nature, but without having consciously made such a choice. In other words, whatever their human nature is, they are not our political peers from whom we could learn something. The book traces this bias back to the Enlightenment literature concerning the origins of inequality, starting with Rousseau vs. Hobbes, and continues all the way to contemporary versions by Jared Diamond, Steven Pinker, and Yuval Harari, among others. The implication is that it makes Europeans of colonial as well as contemporary times more likely to perceive Enlightenment ideals (such as individual freedom, autonomy and equality, and religious tolerance) as a product of their own intellectual tradition, and Westernized peoples such as the Japanese to perceive them as Western. In fact, it is argued that indigenous critiques of European civilization 'had an enormous impact' (p. 61) on what Europeans thought about those issues, such as through the publication of Lahontan's *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who Has Travelled* (1703). Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that Adario, the indigenous figure in the book, is not a product of Lahontan's imagination, but is modelled modeled closely on the Wendant philosopher-statesman named Kandiaronk (c. 1649–1701), who contributed to the Great Peace of Montreal (1701) involving France, the Iroquois, and the other Indian tribes of the Upper Great Lakes.

DOE emphasizes the indigenous origin of the Enlightenment ideals: it was to neutralize the indigenous critique that some Enlightenment thinkers developed the four-stage theory of social evolution–from evolution – from hunting to pastoralism, farming, and finally to commercialism and urban civilization–which civilization – which many people nowadays accept as a folk historical theory. The authors also refer to this theory, first articulated by A. R. J. Turgot and popularized by his contemporary enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, as reactionary because it allowed the Europeans to deny the attainability of the kind of freedom and equality that some Native American peoples enjoyed and some European thinkers demanded. The basis of the argument was that their social systems were at an early phase of social development (simple), whereas the European system was at a later stage with surplus due to technological advancements and the division of labour (complex).

Much of the rest of DOE is devoted to dismantling this theory of social evolution, providing evidence and argumentation to the effect that such linear and monist development is decisively rejected in recent archaeological and anthropological studies: political arrangements have been diverse from early on in human history (Chapter 3), which were not directly determined by ecological conditions for food production (Chapter 5); pre-agricultural people had complex social arrangements (Chapter 4), and the so-called agricultural revolution took about 5000 years, making it a reluctant process of change rather than an welcomed revolution (Chapters 6 and 7); archaeological studies of large urban settlements (e.g. Ukrainian 'mega-sites' from roughly 4,100 to 3,300 4100 to 3300 BC with populations of many thousands per site) indicate that egalitarian social arrangements with highly complex logistic and social demands are 'scalable' far beyond the so-called Dunbar number 150, which allegedly biologically constrains the size of such societies (Chapters 8 and 9); the current state system consisting of what is referred to in DOE as three elementary principles of domination – sovereign power, bureaucratic administrative power and charismatic political power – has not progressively evolved, but is a contingent and transitory political arrangement with distinct and unrelated origins (Chapter 10).

The book, in other words, is a systematic and sustained critique of various kinds of status quo bias inherent in discourses about the past, present and future of human society, for which historical, behavioral and social sciences are arguably responsible. In addition to making this empirical point, DOE has explicit emancipatory and transformative aspirations. One paragraph in the conclusion reads as follows:

> In developing the scientific means to know our own past, we have exposed the mythical substructure of our 'social science' –what – what once appeared unassailable axioms, the stable points around which our self-knowledge is organized, are scattering like mice. What is the purpose of all this new knowledge, if not to reshape our conceptions of who we are and what we might yet become? If not, in other words, to rediscover the meaning of our third basic freedom: the freedom to create new and different forms of social reality? (p. 525)

What should philosophers of science make of such a call for transformation? Steel (2010) offers a useful starting point. He argues that the naturalism versus interpretivism debate–one debate – one of the most frequently discussed in the philosophy of social science–should science – should be recast as the debate concerning what he calls 'the Enlightenment ideal of social science'. He also argues that the traditional understanding of the debate is misguided not only because both sides assume the unattainably strong unity of scientific methodology, but also because they substantially agree on what Steel calls 'basic standards of good evidence'. In other words, the traditional framing does not capture the divergent points of the opposition in the debate. Given this diagnosis, Steel proposes going back to its historical origin in the Enlightenment. Within this framework, naturalists are committed to 'rational social policy and the betterment of the human condition' (p. 227), whereas interpretivists are skeptical about both the generalizability of causal knowledge of society and the value-neutrality of judgements about what constitute better or worse human conditions.

Is DOE an interpretivist work in these senses, then? Regarding the skepticism about general causal knowledge, it is ambiguous. On the one hand, DOE is skeptical about social-scientific explanations that aspire to be natural scientific, such as behavioral ecology. In one passage, it even makes fun of rational choice theory for being as obscure and useless as the philosophy of Jacques Derrida (p. 474). It also promotes humility among historians and social scientists given how little they know about the 300,000-year history (at least) of the human species. On the other hand, the this book seems to project an aspiration for generality as an epistemic virtue. It proposes a general theory of state power (chapter see Chapter 10), for example, which is highly abstract and theoretical, although it is not framed as a causal theory. Its three-fold categorization of freedom (one of which is mentioned in the above quotation) is also presented in a general form. Moreover, one of the book's key theories, *schismogenesis*, states that different societies develop in such a way as to differentiate from each other mutually and self-consciously – which is a general causal theory. In addition, the

quote above contrasts its 'scientific means to know our own past' with 'mythical' features of social science (with rare quotation marks around social science), which does not map onto the general versus particular well, either. For these reasons, I find it difficult to understand DOE along the general-specific dimension that Steel proposes.

What DOE is rather against is a *deterministic* paradigm, which it considers behavioral ecology and rational choice theory to be. Its emphasis on politically conscious choice and human agency in explaining the patterns and development of social systems is compatible with its interpretation of complexity–a complexity – a key concept throughout the book–along the this book – along the lines of contemporary complexity science. According to such a view, social systems do not become complex through the process of egalitarian systems becoming more hierarchical over time under constraints related to increasing size (the theory of social evolution that the book aims to falsify). It is rather because of other features such as self-organization and the (constrained) creativity of human agency that social systems are more complex. In other words, they are complex from the beginning *qua* social systems. I suggest that such an interpretation is compatible with the claim in DOE that the question about 'the origins of inequality' is misguided as well as uninteresting. In one place, the notion of *heterarchy* from systems theory is used to characterize social complexity as the opposite of hierarchical (see Chapter 12, footnote 15, p. 610). Complex systems in this sense do not behave totally randomly, in which case the explanation of their behavior would be rather straightforward based on stochastic modeling; nor do they behave totally deterministically, in which case the outcomes could be modelled modeled as a result of the interactions among its components (e.g. rational or boundedly rational agents), given some initial conditions. In sum, I interpret DOE as neither naturalistic nor interpretivist in Steel's first sense.

What about Steel's second point of divergence between followers of naturalism and interpretivism, namely the former being implicit about their own social values concerning what constitutes progress in human conditions, and the latter being explicit and reflective about them?[1] Again, DOE is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is apparent awareness that its standpoint is not value-neutral when the authors point out various biases coming from Western, patriarchal and state-centered values, which they counter with indigenous, feminist, and heterarchical perspectives, respectively. This arguably provides epistemically valuable insights into some of the mechanisms underlying current social systems, such as the systematic dismissal of 'political imagination' by mis-representing the past. This is a textbook social epistemological process in which the plurality of non-epistemic values gives rise to epistemic gain. On the other hand, DOE does not characterize its project as that of standpoint epistemology. Rather, the overall narrative is that of state-of-the-art, good evidence and science defeating the obsolete, the irrelevant and the bad. It points out, for example, that some of the authors within the history of humanity mentioned above are not trained in the relevant fields.

Another important feature of DOE in this context is that its value commitment is not stated as partisan. It is implied in the discussion concerning the indigenous critique of European society and the counter-revolutionary character of Enlightenment social-evolutionary theory that the social-scientific ideal of 'the betterment of society' assumes a parochially motivated conception of a good society. Although such a value-laden assumption works in favor of certain groups of people at the expense of others, ultimately the book is not about class or gender struggle, or other conflicts of interest: it is rather focused on the pre-condition for having an interest in any struggle, namely 'who we are and what we might yet become'. In fact, several reviews criticize DOE for not being properly feminist or Marxist, indicating that its main goal is not grounded in partisan values that sufficiently identify what constitutes a good society. In sum, DOE is more like interpretivist than naturalist in Steel's second sense, but I hesitate to follow Steel's terminology here because not calling the book naturalistic just because it is reflective about social values or has emancipatory aspirations seems unnatural.

This review, to understand the nature of DOE as a social-scientific project, draws upon Steel's (2010) proposal to recast the naturalist versus interpretivist debate in the philosophy of social science around the Enlightenment ideal. This exercise implies that even this new framework might need to be updated. First, the question of the generalizability of causal knowledge in DOE

does not concern discrete questions such as '[D]o federal budget deficits inhibit economic growth? Do gun control laws reduce violent crime? What effects would a particular welfare reform policy have upon poverty? What effect does trade liberalization have on global poverty?' (Steel, 2010, p. 234). Aside from the great uncertainties of the answers to such questions (cf. Breznau et al., 2022), the issues are more fundamental and theoretical, concerning how to understand the complexity of social systems. Second, the value question at stake in DOE does not concern which values, or what mix thereof, to choose (i) as the basis of social science (the questions of standpoint epistemology and social epistemology, respectively) or (ii) as the goal of optimization in designing social-science-based causal interventions (the question of policy-oriented social science). The This book rather concerns whether scientific knowledge about societies can motivate the conception of new possibilities and values worth pursuing collectively. In this sense it is instructive concerning the other side of the 'values and science' equation (Anderson, 2004), namely that values are not science-free, just as science is not value-free.

[I thank the students of 'Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Advanced' (the spring 2022), at the University of Helsinki, who read this book with me and shared their insights. Some of them wrote better reviews of the book as term papers.]

Note

1. I use the term implicit, although Steel does not characterize naturalism in this way. Instead, he characterizes 'positivism' as a commitment to the exclusion of non-epistemic values in the assessment of social theories. Given that it is now widely accepted that such exclusion is not attainable in the philosophy of science, viable naturalism should not be characterized by this commitment.

Notes on contributor

Michiru Nagatsu is an associate professor at Practical Philosophy unit, Faculty of the Social Sciences, and Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science, the University of Helsinki. He runs the Economics and Philosophy Lab and the HELSUS Methodology Lab. He uses a range of approaches in his research – including experimental philosophy, interviews, co-creation, integrated history and the philosophy of science – to study conceptual and methodological questions in science and philosophy.

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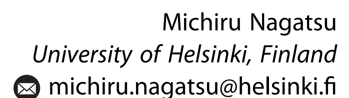

Michiru Nagatsu
University of Helsinki, Finland
michiru.nagatsu@helsinki.fi

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