



**Georgetown University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Karl Widerquist**

---

Fall 2022

# Socio-Economic Inequality in the Pleistocene and the Present, Part 1: Why it Matters

Karl Widerquist

Grant S. McCall, *Tulane University of Louisiana*



---

Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/widerquist/143/>

# Socio-Economic Inequality in the Pleistocene and the

## Present, Part 1: Why it Matters

Karl Widerquist <karl@widerquist.com>  
Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University-Qatar  
and

Grant S. McCall <gmccall@tulane.edu>  
Associate Professor of Anthropology at Tulane University

*This is an early version of a paper that was later submitted to a journal. If you want to cite or quote it, please cite and quote from the published version.*

David Graeber and David Wengrow's (2021) book, *the Dawn of Everything* (DOE), and our books, *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy* and *the Prehistory of Private Property*, are part of a growing body of literature debunking dubious beliefs about prehistoric, nonliterate, and stateless peoples. Prehistoric myths and paleofantasies are so common in academic literature, and empirical evidence is coming out so rapidly, that it could take decades of back-and-forth for common understanding to catch up. This respectful criticism is in that back-and-forth spirit.

This essay does three things. Part 1 attempts to clarify what Graeber and Wengrow are trying to say and how it relates to what we are trying to say on related issues. Part 2 criticizes their discussion of contractarian and liberal theories that stem from the work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Part 3 discusses their effort to paint Jean-Jacques Rousseau with the same brush as more conventional contractarian and liberal theorists. Part 4 criticizes their discussion of whether the circumstances in which people live tend to influence political outcomes.

### 1. Two contrasting approaches to similar problems

Reading this book, we've often found it hard to determine when and whether we agree or disagree with it. Part of that difficulty comes from the different issues we address. DOE primarily criticizes contemporary anthropology. Our work uses contemporary anthropology (however imperfect) to criticize contemporary philosophers, political theorists, and economists, who have consistently ignored anthropological evidence as they make pronouncements about anthropological issues. Part of the difficulty in understanding comes from DOE's need for greater clarity about what philosophical and economic debates it enters and what exactly says about their subjects' conclusions. Graeber and Wengrow (2021) summarize their intentions in three hard-to-interpret phrases, "farewell to humanity's childhood," "inequality has no origin," and "the state has no origin."

Although the phrase, "farewell to humanity's childhood," is awkward and hard to understand, the point that we should bid "farewell to" *the concept of* "humanity's childhood" is well-taken. This concept originated in the early days of 19<sup>th</sup>-century evolutionary anthropology and, for a variety of historical reasons, has been hard for the field to shake (see McCall and

Widerquist, this volume). The core of this idea is that, in terms of cultural evolution, ontogeny somehow recapitulates phylogeny—which has been an obsolete concept in the field of evolutionary biology for more than a century (Gould, 1985). A related belief is that societies with less complex technologies, economies, social systems, etc.—what the field used to call “primitive societies”—were populated by people whose individual minds were less sophisticated than our own. This is clearly fatuous. A logical equivalent here would be something like the personal belief that we are smarter than Einstein because we can use smartphones and he didn’t. In this respect, we strongly agree with Graeber and Wengrow (2021) that people in the deep past were intellectually capable of possessing social inequality in the exact same way that we are today, and that humanity had no such “childhood” in which people were essentially incapable of social inequality.

Where we diverge from Graeber and Wengrow (2021), however, is in terms of capacity and expression. The statements that inequality and the state have no origin appear to deny the truism that *there’s a first time for everything*. When our ancestors were single-celled organisms living in the “primordial ooze,” they were extremely equal and they did not live in states. At some point, there was a first state and a first stratified society. The formative periods of the first states and first stratified society—short or long, together or separate—could reasonably be called the *origins* of states and inequality. Although DOE doesn’t head off this interpretation, it can’t possibly be what they mean.

The use of these two phrases in DOE appears to work on two levels.

On one level, the terms “equality,” “inequality,” “the state,” and “stateless” are extremely vague. No human societies are ever completely equal in every way (Boehm, 1993). There are no societies with the complete absence of power and no societies with one structure that completely dominates all other forms of power or that is universally seen as legitimate (the characteristics usually used to define a “sovereign state”). There are many separable forms of power, domination, and inequality. Not all of them appear at once or in any particular order. If we are going to discuss the “origins” of “inequality,” then we are in profound need of further semantic clarity in terms of what we mean by “origins” and “inequality.”

While our books (Widerquist and McCall, 2017, 2021) also suffer to a certain extent from this set of semantic issues, our burden is reduced by the fact that political philosophers have tended to use terms like “equality,” “states,” and “private property” in limited ways with definitions bounded by modern political-economic institutions. State and stateless societies are understood as ranges on a continuum or even a spectrum from societies with more and less centralized power. Any example that falls outside of those modern political-economic contexts, such as the manifold diversity represented by both prehistoric and modern indigenous societies, is germane to our goals in criticizing traditional philosophical justifications of the state, private property, and high levels of social, economic, and political inequality. In contrast, to the field of anthropology, it is much more complicated “can of worms.”

Obviously, simplistic dichotomies like equality/inequality, states/small-scale societies don’t really exist. Treating them as gradated spectra, as do Graeber and Wengrow and others like Kelly (1995), is perhaps a step in the right direction but, even then, this way of thinking is inadequate given the fact that concepts like “inequality” and “states” subsumed a vast number of features, some of which are related and others of which aren’t. Our books could succeed with the simple contrast between the characteristics of specific modern political-economic systems and everything else. Unfortunately, productive anthropological theory-building requires atomizing concepts like “inequality” and “states” into more meaningful operational units.

Our books speak in the language of these dichotomies not because we are committed to seeing the world through those lenses, but because we debunk ideas that are expressed in those terms. People often invoke the state/state-of-nature and equality/inequality dichotomies to justify existing levels of socio-economic and political inequality. Societies with less authority and/or more equality than these writers want to see do exist, and evidence shows life in most societies at the end of the spectrum isn't as horrible as contemporary philosophers so often claim (Widerquist and McCall 2017; 2021).

*Prehistoric Myths* debunks the claim we dub “the Hobbesian hypothesis:” the belief that states and/or a high unequal private property system achieve mutual advantage relative to societies that lack either or both of those institutions. *The Prehistory of Private Property* debunks three more claims, one of which we call the “natural-inequality hypothesis:” the belief that significant, persistent inequality (socio-economic stratification) is natural and inevitable. Although people often employ these terms vaguely, there are communities with and without the hierarchical structures these hypotheses supposedly justify. Despite the difference of approach and focus, this effort has no conflict with DOE's effort.

The second level on which DOE claims inequality and the state had no “origin” is an application of its rejection of humanity's childhood: there was never a period in which biologically modern humans existed but had such childlike, primitive ways that they unthinkingly followed, unchanging “traditional” lifestyles and were *incapable* of establishing states and/or unequal societies. There was no period of equality that suddenly and irreversibly transformed into the present period of inequality and no period of anarchic chaos that suddenly transformed into ordered statehood when someone invented socio-economic-political hierarchy. All peoples are equally capable of experimenting with different ways to live together. In this sense, we agree with the main claims of DOE.

Our criticism of it involves both the extent to which an argument rejecting the primitive still needs to be made and DOE's lack of clarity about exactly what the rejection of origins questions is supposed to imply about which contemporary debates and existing theories.

During European colonial expansion, many Western philosophers believed in a dichotomy between “civilized man” and “natural” or “savage man.” They supposed that a true uniform “human nature” existed and could be seen in people without the socializing influence of civilization (Hampsher-Monk, 1992, pp. 2, 117–119; Hoekstra, 2007). Once civilization begins, the diverse flowering of human culture begins to develop. During the colonial period, popular belief held that many indigenous peoples were still in that uniform natural state or very close to it, and this belief was one of many used to justify European aggression against indigenous peoples (Taylor, 1991 is a typical example).

This idea has been long rejected by serious students of prehistoric and indigenous peoples. Although some legacies of this set of beliefs persist, we doubt that any social scientists or philosophers today believe humans once lived in a child-like, primitive state, to which we would all return if separated from the guiding influence of civilization.

To the extent that vestiges of this belief remain in our thinking, DOE's thorough effort to debunk it can only help, but the book also attempts to debunk a large number of related ideas used in many diverse theories past and present across several disciplines including philosophy, politics, economics, sociology, anthropology, and more. The book is not fully clear which ideas in these fields it rejects, what role those ideas play in which theories, and whether the theories being addressed should be reformulated or rejected once the debunked claims are removed.

Ideas that DOE criticizes appear in the Hobbesian (social-contract-based) justification for the state, Lockean (liberal and libertarian) justifications for private property, and the Rousseauian response to shoe theories—as well as structural-functionalism, economic determinism, socio-cultural evolutionary theory, and a host of other theories. Some of these theories remain extant. However, the book’s criticism seems most directly aimed at theoretical beliefs that were already discarded long ago. DOE sometimes neglects the point of the debate it enters and sometimes implies it has debunked much more than it has.

DOE seems to oppose anything that appears to them as a “Garden of Eden” narrative, but Graeber and Wengrow (2021) are trying to have it both ways. The book ends up concluding that, although inequality had no origin, we (unlike our ancestors) have become “stuck” with inequality—a claim that can plausibly be construed as yet another Garden of Eden narrative. DOE rejects generalizing about 200,000-year period of Pleistocene foraging from Holocene examples, but it generalizes about the same period from terminal Pleistocene and Holocene examples, none of which are older than 26,000 years. The book ridicules archaeologists who focus on the very end of hunter-gather periods in their respective areas of study for acting as if nothing very interesting happened in the lengthy earlier periods. Yet it is likely that these authors focus on the latter years for the same reason Graeber and Wengrow focus on the last 26,000 years—because the various manifestations of the archaeological record grow more abundant and complex in more recent time frames.

Now that we’ve address our differences in approach, the next three sections discuss three specific issues over which we have the greatest disagreement.

## **2. The state of nature and the social contract**

DOE heavily criticizes Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and their contemporary followers for making pronouncements about the origin of inequality and the state. But in all that criticism, DOE neglects the role of claims made about prehistoric, nonliterate, and/or stateless peoples played in these philosophers’ arguments, and therefore, it doesn’t show a sufficient understanding what these philosophers were ultimately trying to say.

DOE argues that European philosophers of the colonial era started talking about the origins of inequality and the state as a response to the “indigenous critique” of European political systems. We don’t address that issue here, although we would need more textual evidence to be convinced.

Instead, we consider the colonial-era discussion of the origin of inequality as an effort to rescue the natural-inequality hypothesis (which had been around for millennia) in the face of growing evidence that many stateless indigenous societies were far more egalitarian than people invoking the natural-inequality hypothesis wanted to accept. The attempted rescue worked by adding a caveat to the hypothesis: inequality is natural and inevitable in any society *a reasonable person would want to live in*.

Hobbes (1996) used the natural-inequality hypothesis along with (what we call) the Hobbesian hypothesis in his “social contract” justification of state sovereignty. He defined the state of nature as the absence of a sovereign government capable of making and enforcing rules and argued that such circumstances always degenerated into a war of all against all. Because sovereigns save their people from intolerable violence and thereby make progress and prosperity possible, Hobbes argued every reasonable person would accept their place in whatever socio-economic-political hierarchy they find themselves. Political dissent is irrational except for people who like chaos and the constant fear of violent death.

Locke (1960) used similar state-of-nature-based reasoning to justify limits on the state's power over property owners. To get the outcome he wanted, he argued the state of nature would not necessarily be violent but without secure private property rights, it would necessarily be poor. On this basis, he rejected Hobbes's idea that people should accept virtually any leader, and argued that people only need to respect governments that protect individual rights, including highly unequal rights of wealth and landownership.

Hobbes and Locke believed that there was something "natural" about statelessness, and therefore, their stories had something to do with origins. Yet, beliefs about origins were ancillary to their goal, which in both cases was to justify highly unequal political, social, and economic power by arguing that "natural man" was savage and our institutions were civilizing. The talk of origins and "natural man" are inconsequential. The operative premise is the supposedly civilizing and wealth-generating nature of contemporary institutions compared to available alternatives.

DOE mistakenly claims that Hobbes's state of nature was purely hypothetical: "The closest Hobbes himself came to suggesting this state really existed was when he noted the only people who weren't under the ultimate authority of some king were the kings themselves" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, 12). In fact, both Hobbes and Locke repeatedly assert the empirical reality of the state of nature and used prejudice-filled colonialist observations of Native Americans as examples of people living in it. Hobbes (1996, 101) wrote, "[S]avage people in many places of America ... have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner." Locke (1960, §41) wrote, "[Native] Americans ... are rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life. ... [A] king of a large and fruitful territory there, feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day-labourer in England."

Hobbes (1996, 100) presented armchair psychology about how he thought people would behave in the absence of a state with police power, as if it were a logic proof of his claim that, "[o]ut of civil states, there is always war of every one against every one"—not sometimes, *always*; not only among non-Europeans, "primitive" peoples, but among everyone. Bolstered his theoretical argument empirical examples not only of indigenous peoples but also of Europe states during various civil wars—especially the English Civil War that he experienced personally.

Although talk about the origin of the state no longer plays much role in contemporary political philosophy, empirical claims about the poverty and misery of stateless people with common landownership systems remain prominent in contemporary social contract theory (as we describe and criticize in Widerquist and McCall, 2017).

Social contract theorists cannot relegate the state of nature to pure theory or to the distant past because, if the state of nature is anything other than the real alternative to existing arrangements, telling people how bad it is does nothing to justify existing arrangements. If a *complete* absence of political authority or private property is not to be found, it is because—Hobbesians and Lockeans are forced to assert—as you move closer to a full-on state of nature, things get so bad that even "savages" avoid moving farther in that direction.

For the most part, DOE's attacks on Hobbesian and Lockean theory address versions that have been discarded long ago. No contemporary philosophers or social scientists we know of actually assert that all human cultures stem from a single, common root in which people were child-like, unthinking, primitive, or savage. The term "state of nature" is a historical artifact that no longer refers to anything more "natural" than any other state in which humans might find themselves. Today, "state of nature" means the absence of some institution: the state, the private property system, morality, society, or whatever the writer is attempting to justify. The operative claim is not about what came first but what works best.

Social contract theorists or property rights advocates do not argue that we are “stuck” with the institutions they advocate. They argue instead that we all have good reason to choose them. Supposedly existing institutions such as state sovereignty and the highly unequal private property system benefit everyone—even people at the bottom of or socio-economic and political hierarchy—relative to what they could reasonably expect in a stateless society with common access to land and resources. We can give up the state, Hobbesians say, but we’ll get violence. We can give up the highly unequal property system, Lockeans say, but we’ll get more poverty for everyone, even those who are already poor.

*Prehistoric Myths* debunks these claims by using extensive anthropological evidence to show that many societies reject these institutions and life in those societies is neither intolerably poor nor intolerably violent. Our argument might superficially appear to be a Garden of Eden narrative of humanity’s childhood, because we use small-scale stateless societies as our primary example of the kind of society Hobbesians and Lockeans claim is intolerable, but our argument is, in fact, a criticism of existing institutions.

Our point is not that all societies used to be anything. Most of our examples come from societies that exist now or have existed in the last few decades or centuries. Our point is that anthropology has found many examples of thriving societies without state sovereignty, a private property system, or the pronounced socio-political-economic stratification that so many philosophers argue is necessary to maintain peace and prosperity. The least advantage people in capitalist states today are worse off than they could reasonably expect to be in societies that meet Hobbesian and Lockean definitions of the state of nature. The Hobbesian hypothesis is false. Our system fails to meet the criteria its advocates have used to justify it for the last 350 years. We are not stuck with the system we have. We can and we must change it—radically if necessary—to ensure that genuinely benefits everyone (Widerquist and McCall, 2017).

### **3. Rousseau as a state-of-nature theorist**

DOE unfairly puts Rousseau in the same category as Hobbes and Locke and even treats him as the prime purveyor of the belief humanity’s childhood. Part of the misunderstanding of Rousseau (1994) is his own fault because his writing is unclear. For example, although at times he clearly states that indigenous peoples do not live in his state of nature, at other times, he uses them as examples of people who are close to it.

But some of the blame for the belief that Rousseau promotes the idea that indigenous peoples live in a state of childlike innocence belongs to caricatures that have been made of him by people who wanted to discredit anything sounding like a positive portrayal of the peoples Europeans were colonizing at the time. Terms he never used, like “the noble savage,” were pinned on him a century after he wrote even though his views of actual indigenous people were as racist as most other European philosophers of the time. DOE seems to react more to the caricatures that have been made of Rousseau than to Rousseau himself (Rousseau, 1994; Widerquist and McCall, 2017).

Despite Rousseau’s (1994) lack of clarity, we believe we do understand his response to Hobbes. By Rousseau’s time, social contract theory was a century old and it had become the prevailing theory justifying the state. He attempted to debunk Hobbes’s portrayal of “natural man” as savage and modern institutions as civilizing by arguing that “natural man” is innocent and modern institutions are corrupting.

Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau's (1994) central concern was not about human origins. He could drop any reference to "natural man" and go with the part about contemporary institutions being corrupting, and that part of his arguments holds up pretty well today.

Rousseau's (1994) "natural man" was a person who literally had *no* socialization at all, living a completely solitary life, as Rousseau well knew, unlike any actually observed adult humans including indigenous peoples. His version of "natural man" might have been a metaphor for the innocence of childhood. We will never know for sure, but his argument makes most sense if it's read that way.

Rousseau's (1994) methodology is unlike that of virtually all other social contract theories, which is to describe how bad the state of nature is; give credit to some institution for saving us from it; and then say that's why we must maintain this institution. Rousseau's use of the state of nature is to say that existing institutions are harmful and need to be changed.

Rousseau (1994) argues that if we were in a true state of nature with zero socialization, we would have childlike innocence, equality, and freedom, but we would lack all the opportunities of social interaction. Contemporary civilization has given us those opportunities along with severe inequality that corrupts rich and poor alike and makes us all slaves to our political masters.

Rousseau (1994) is the one philosopher who actually believes we're "stuck," but not in the sense DOE accuses him. He believes neither European nor indigenous people can go back to the childlike innocence they experienced in the state of nature (infancy?), but he does not believe we are stuck with the enormous inequality of power and wealth contemporary institutions foster. He believes the corrupting nature of our existing system demands radical changes toward real democracy and far more equality of wealth and power. If humanity can do that, he believes we can all be as free as we were in the state of nature (if in a different way) while we enjoy the opportunities that society makes available. His use of state-of-nature theory may have been no more than window dressing to put his arguments into the contractarian language of his times—which sadly remains largely the language of our times.

If we interpret Rousseau (1994) correctly, which we admit is always questionable, his political prescription is probably not very far from Graeber and Wengrow's (2021). If so, he's not nearly as guilty of making pronouncements about stateless, small-scale, or prehistoric peoples as Locke or Hobbes, and he is innocent of saying that humanity is now stuck in its current mode. That was the very idea he was trying to debunk.

Yet, DOE consistently treats him as the champion state-of-nature theories, even repeatedly attributing to him the idea that private property begins with agriculture. Although Rousseau did say this, it was inconsequential to his argument, and he was merely repeating Locke, who used the claim that property begins with agriculture to justify enormously unequal landownership—an institution of which Graeber, Wengrow, and Rousseau are all skeptical.

That said, in some cases Hobbes, Locke, and perhaps Rousseau really were making pronouncements about human origins and stateless peoples. For example, Locke and Adam Smith's discussions of the origin of property and money (neither one discussed here) were meant to say something empirically relevant about the origins of those institutions—even if not every word of their just-so stories were meant to be taken literally (Widerquist and McCall, 2017, 2021).

We should also admit that these philosophers' armchair musings about the state of nature have had an outsized affect anthropology, archaeology, and popular perceptions of indigenous peoples of the past and present. Sadly, philosophy's influence over anthropology is almost entirely one-way. Hobbesian state-of-nature theory is still taught in its original form and still used in barely modified form by respected philosophers who remain blissfully (and perhaps intentionally)



ignorant of all the contradictory evidence that the field of anthropology has uncovered in the last three centuries (Widerquist and McCall, 2017, 2021).

#### **4. The extent to which technology, geography, climate, and scale of socio-political organization influence political outcomes**

DOE makes great effort to show that human ancestors were not stuck in their circumstances, most especially that people have always been capable of establishing and moving between large- or small-scale societies and hierarchical or egalitarian forms of social organization. It is not always as clear what theories these arguments oppose.

One theory DOE's arguments clearly oppose is economic or technological determinism—the belief that technology fully determines political and social structures. The belief that all foragers are and must be egalitarian is one example. Closely connected with economic determinism is cultural evolutionary theory: the belief that societies pass through a necessary set of stages as their technology advances. As Karl Marx explains this idea, “the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steam mill society with the industrial capitalist” (as quoted by Cohen, 1978, 144).

Economic determinism and cultural evolutionism are already discarded theories. The belief that technology or any other factor *fully determines* socio-political arrangements is no longer taken seriously. The idea that remains alive is that human agency is only one of many factors that *influence* political outcomes. Others include but are not limited to technology, geography, ecology, population density, scale of political organization, subsistence strategy, the choice between nomadism or sedentism, and so on.

In the effort to emphasize the mental capacity of early humans to choose how they wanted to live, DOE seems to deny the possibility that any factors aside from human agency have any influence at all over political outcomes. Yet, its arguments are only genuinely effective against the already-discarded theory that some factor(s) fully determine political outcomes.

Graeber and Wengrow's (2021) desire to illustrate that past peoples were always *capable* of deciding how they live leads them to imply that peoples who eventually became subjects of despots all “ran headlong into their chains,” to use a phrase they ridicule when Rousseau uses it. Consider a question that anthropology can help answer: if people resist domination when they can, which economic and geographical conditions tend to favor equality and which tend to favor domination? DOE never seems to ask this question or to do more than ridicule those who say that larger-scale societies and/or greater population density tend to favor domination. The book continually attacks the long-discredited ideas all agricultural societies are unequal and all foraging societies are equal, but it doesn't seriously address the possibility that scale might have some influence on the ability for dominators to maintain their hierarchical position.

DOE provides detailed examples of a few states that were more equal than commonly believed possible. The presentation disproves the idea that all large-scale societies are necessarily stratified, but against the massive historical and archaeological evidence that the vast majority of known states have been horrible tyrannies, it does nothing to refute the claim that large-scale societies are relatively favorable to dominators and therefore to high levels of socio-economic and political inequality. This omission would not be a problem if DOE avoided the implication that it refutes both ideas.

DOE also discusses some detailed, and fairly well-known, examples of relatively large-scale foraging societies, such as the Pacific Northwest fishing societies, that had significant socio-economic and political stratification. These examples refute the already-discarded idea that all foraging societies are egalitarian, but it does nothing to address the existing belief that “immediate-return societies” (small-scale, nomadic, foraging societies that do not store food (Woodburn, 1982) tend to be highly egalitarian. DOE accuses this idea of being an ad hoc rescue of the belief all foraging societies are egalitarian by portraying immediate-return societies as being “true” foragers. We can drop the notion that any type of foraging society is truer than any other, but we should take seriously the question of whether this social arrangement is favorable to people who resist domination and whether we can draw any lessons from their success.

Christopher Boehm (2001) has just such an analysis. Although Graeber and Wengrow (2021, 86-87) recognize value in it, they write, “confusingly, Boehm assumes that all human beings until very recently chose ... to follow exactly the same arrangements ... thereby casually tossing early humans back into the Garden of Eden.” Boehm (2001) doesn’t assume anything of the kind. He has a sophisticated analysis of strategies that how and why people in observed immediate-return societies have consistently been able to resist domination. Boehm combines his strategic analysis with the widely believed empirical hypothesis that, until the late Pleistocene, population density was very low and most people lived in small-scale, nomadic foraging groups that do not store food. Either his theory or the empirical hypothesis could be wrong, but he does not “confusingly” or “oddly” draw conclusions. His ideas are free from any Garden-of-Eden-like narrative and from any illusions that nomadic foragers were unthinking childlike innocents.

To do more than ridicule Boehm’s conclusions, DOE would have had to make one of two empirical arguments demonstrating: (1) that small-scale, nomadic foragers living in low-population-density areas can and do form pronounced dominance hierarchies, or (2) that people lived at higher population densities and/or formed large-scale polities before the late Pleistocene. Our second article in this issue addresses DOE’s contention that large-scale societies with pronounced hierarchies existed throughout the Pleistocene. DOE doesn’t attempt the first argument at all. It includes very little about small-scale, nomadic foragers at all.

Many modern peoples meeting the definition of an immediate-return society have been observed by anthropologists, and they have overwhelmingly if not entirely tended to maintain freedom from domination. Boehm (2001) has a convincing argument why we should expect levelling strategies to work particularly well in such societies. The most important aspects of those levelling strategies and that context overlap heavily with DOE’s three primordial freedoms: to move, disobey, and transform social relationships (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). It’s very easy for nomadic foragers living in groups of a few dozen adults to exercise these freedoms, and not much more difficult for swidden agriculturalists living with a few hundred adults to do the same. It’s far more difficult to exercise these freedoms in a society of thousands of people all of whom are dependent on stored food from a once-a-year salmon run or crop harvest.

If people in the deep past knew that larger-scale societies favored dominators, and if plentiful game made nomadic hunting attractive, it is possible that egalitarian, nomadic foraging might have been the norm—or at least one of several common modes of existence—throughout most of the Pleistocene.

To suggest that small-scale nomadism favors resisters and large-scale sedentism favors dominators is not to say that the emergence of large-scale, settled communities *determines* that we will become stuck in stratified hierarchies as soon as we reach a certain scale. It means we’re going to have to work harder to preserve our freedom.

The most important lessons of anthropology are not about who did what when but about what we can learn from all the things people have tried. We should look at the societies that have successfully resisted domination, whether they be the Ju/'hoansi or the Norwegians, and build on the strategies that worked for them. The particular 25 people in a mid-twentieth-century band in the Central Kalahari might have been able to walk into the desert to avoid dominators. The 35 million people in contemporary Tokyo can't do that, and so—at the risk of sounding like neo-structural functionalists—we suggest that maintaining freedom from domination is inherently more difficult for them, but it's not impossible. If they can't walk away from potential dominators, they can make laws that restrain powerful people in ways that help protect the “primordial” freedom of disadvantaged people.

If the small-scale, nomadic foragers, who seem to have dominated human social arrangements for most of the Pleistocene, tended to maintain a high level of social, economic, and political equality, they did it because they could. They did not live in any child-like state of primitive innocence; they didn't “run headlong into their chains.” The preponderance of evidence indicates that most people during the Pleistocene lived in circumstances that were particularly favorable to strategies for resisting dominators, and probably most of them were smart enough to figure out those strategies. Present circumstances around most of the globe seem to be less favorable to resisting domination, but with examples from anthropology and history, we may well yet figure it out.

## Bibliography

- Boehm, C., 2001. *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Boehm, C., 1993. Egalitarian behavior and reverse dominance hierarchy. *Curr. Anthropol.* 34, 227–254.
- Cohen, G.A., 1978. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Oxford University Press.
- Gould, S.J., 1985. *Ontogeny and phylogeny*. Harvard University Press.
- Graeber, D., Wengrow, D., 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A new history of humanity*. Penguin UK.
- Hampsher-Monk, I., 1992. *A History of Modern Political Thought: major political thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Hobbes, T., 1996. *Leviathan*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hoekstra, K., 2007. Hobbes on the Natural Condition of Mankind, in: Springborg, P. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*. pp. 109–127.
- Locke, J., 1960. *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Rousseau, J.-J., 1994. *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Taylor, C., 1991. What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?, in: Miller, D.L. (Ed.), *Liberty*. Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 141–162.
- Widerquist, K., McCall, G., 2017. *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Widerquist, K., McCall, G.S., 2021. *The Prehistory of Private Property: Implications for Modern Political Theory*. Edinburgh University Press.

Woodburn, J., 1982. Egalitarian Societies. *Man* 17, 431–451.