

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN READING?

I'll go first.

1. *The Constitution Of Knowledge* by Jonathan Rauch. It's a practical discussion of epistemology, the philosophy of how we know stuff. I've discussed it in several posts, notably here. The second half discusses his suggestions for dealing with lies, disinformation, trolls and generally with the Insurrection Party led by TFG. I haven't read it because it seems hopeless. See No. 7 below.

2. *The Dawn Of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow. I've just started this book, and it's fascinating. The story we are taught is that human societies evolve sequentially from small bands of hunter-gatherers to agriculture to small trading towns to cities to states, with more and more complicated governmental structures. This is called progress. The authors say this story comes from Jean Jacques Rousseau, and has colonized our minds.

They claim that we have learned a lot since the early 19th C., and it mostly contradicts this story. They call on extensive research in archaeology, Wengrow's primary area of study, and anthropology, Graeber's, to draw a completely different picture. There are a number of ideas like the following, ideas that offer a different way of imagining the possibilities of an advanced technological society:

Back in the 1960s, the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres suggested that precisely the opposite was the case. What if the sort of people we like to imagine as simple and innocent are free of rulers, governments, bureaucracies, ruling classes and the like, not because they are lacking in imagination, but because they're actually more imaginative than we are?

We find it difficult to picture what a truly free society would be like; perhaps they have no similar trouble picturing what arbitrary power and domination would be like. Perhaps they can not only imagine it, but consciously arrange their society in such a way as to avoid it. As we'll see in the next chapter, Clastres's argument has its limits. But by insisting that the people studied by anthropologists are just as self-conscious, just as imaginative, as the anthropologists themselves, he did more to reverse the damage than anyone before or since. P. 73.

This idea resonates with me. I've seen the art produced by our ancestors from 25,000 years ago, in caves like the Font de Gaume in Southern France. It's near Les Eyzies-du-Tayac-Sireuil, which is home to The National Museum Of Prehistory, and several reconstructions of the living quarters of the Magdalanian culture. From the mouth of the Font-de-Gaume even today you can see walnut trees and, I imagine, wild asparagus, berries, and small game in the underbrush. The Dordogne River is nearby, full of fish. There are large abri, cut-outs high up in the cliffs, which make decent living quarters. I'm not sure what more they needed to live pleasantly. Why would they submit to domination by one of their band? Why would they follow some loudmouth who wants to take over some other abri in some stupid war?

There's a review of the book by William Deresiewicz in the Atlantic. If you need encouragement to read this book, here it is.

3. *Pride, Prejudice, And Other Flavors* by Sonali Dev. This novel centers on a family descended from royalty in India. The parents immigrated to the San Francisco area, and did very well indeed. It's loosely modeled on *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, a particular hero of the author. The "flavors" come from Indian cuisine as practiced by a chef raised in England

and trained in Paris. He comes to the area to take care of his artist sister who has a brain tumor that only the surgeon daughter and protagonist can hope to eradicate, and only at the cost of her sight.

The connections to *Pride and Prejudice* are well adapted to current times. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth forms a prejudice against Mr. Darcy because he rejects her at a dance. Besides that, he behaves like he's better than everybody else, which she attributes to his wealth and his arrogance. Consequently she can easily use him as the object of her wit. In Dal's retelling, this plays out between the surgeon and the chef in a more complex ways, involving both both their histories.

As an aside, I also like the Bollywood flic, *Bride And Prejudice*, which is set in the India of today; it's a lot of fun.

4. *Reputation* by Lex Croucher. This first novel is set in Regency-Era England. It imagines the lives of 20-somethings from the upper class, free from parental supervision, and freed from all constraints by the wealth and power of their families. The protagonist is a well-read, well-educated, and thoughtful young woman of the middle class, caught up into the lives of the rich young. It's a life filled with parties, drugs, liquor and even a bit of sex. For me the sensibility of the novel is so 21st Century that it didn't work as a period piece. It will be published in the US next year.

5, *The Elegance Of The Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery. This is an extraordinary novel. Barbery studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud in Lyon (I think) and taught at Université de Bourgogne. There are a number of themes in the book, but one that stands out for me is the effort to put the ideas of philosophy into action in the lives of the characters. For example, one character is a 12 year old girl of extraordinary intelligence, who has decided that there is no point to living so she plans to commit suicide

on her 13th birthday. The meaninglessness of life is a concern of the main character as well. This is a nod to *The Myth Of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, in which we are asked why we don't commit suicide in the face of the absurd.

There are discussions of some of my favorite things, food, music, and art. As to music, the use of Mozart's *Confutatis* from *The Requiem* is hilarious. I love Dutch still life paintings; here's the subject of that link. I've always liked philosophy, some of which is powerful, and some of which, like Barbery's description of the a philosophy dissertation on William of Ockham, seems ridiculous.

The author doesn't think much of upper middle class French society, and it shows. That's fun. It's fun to think how these criticisms would work in US society.

I refuse to acknowledge any flaws in this book. And the translator, Alison Anderson, is dazzling.

6. *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich. This novel is grounded in the life of Erdrich's grandfather, a Chippewa leader who was instrumental in preserving the reservation and way of life of his Turtle Mountain Band. Most of the book describes the lives of the members of the Band in the mid-50s. Perhaps the most valuable part for me was the way visions work for the characters. At one level it felt like magical realism, but it seems so grounded in their lives that I felt an intuition about how it might work in my own life in our hyper-technical society.

7. *Thinking Fast And Slow* by Daniel Kahneman. I took up this book at the suggestion of commenter Epicurus. I've just started, and perhaps I'll have more to say about it in a future post. In the meantime, two observations. First, the book is beautifully written. It's easy to follow the argument; the examples are clear and precise; and the introduction shows how he came to think about things as he does.

Second, the idea of two systems of cognition is intuitively appealing. Years ago I read a book about epistemology that used the terms intensive and reflexive to describe two separate ways of thinking. I'd guess we've all had the experience of self-checking that goes on when we think of something we might say, or write something, then a separate voice in our heads pipes up with objections. So is the idea that we don't know much about what lies below either of the two systems. Studies of vision show that much of the computation is done before the image reaches the brain, so it seems reasonable to think there's a lot of pre-computation in each of the two systems. Things are happening in our minds we can't perceive.

That's most of what I've read over the last few weeks. So, what have you been reading?

Update: Thanks to everyone for the marvelous array of books and the discussion. I hope everyone found something they're excited to read.

And Happy Holidays to all!

Ed

=====

Image by Janne Poikolainen, creative commons license.