

SOCIAL CHANGE FOR HUMAN PURPOSES

Posts on *The Dawn Of Everything*: [Link](#)

Posts on Pierre Bourdieu and Symbolic Violence: [link](#)

Posts trying to cope with the absurd state of political discourse: [link](#)

Posts on Freedom and Equality. [link](#)

The previous three posts on *The Dawn Of Everything* explore the Indigenous Critique. We saw how the Indigenous Americans perceived the French invaders and how they viewed their own societies, all based on contemporaneous reports by French missionaries, soldiers and merchants. At the end of Chapter 2 David Graeber and David Wengrow argue that these criticisms had a big impact on French readers in the first half of the 18th Century. A number of French writers turned out books like Lahontan's explicating the Indigenous Critique and expanding on them. That led to a backlash from defenders of French society.

One of those defenders was Turgot, a leading French economist and theorist. In 1750, Turgot published *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*, which laid out an evolutionary theory of human progress, from hunters, to pastoralists, to farmers, to the then current apex of commercial civilization. I read a bit of it; it's a fascinating account of human progress from the standpoint of French cultural and intellectual superiority. See Chapters 13 and 14.

It's easy to see how a sense of French superiority could make Turgot's evolutionary theory the dominant theory of the development of human society. The French and other Europeans were thrilled with the progress of early scientific investigations and a host of new ideas about liberty and government. Turgot's theory justified French belligerence towards the Indigenous Americans. It put the savages in

their place, below the French. It justified the rancid inequalities of the French social structure as unpleasant and regrettable, but necessary if the human race is to achieve its full greatness. Freedom and equality are traded for social progress. And thus we are back to Rousseau's stages of social development.

The nub of the Indigenous Critique is that the French were not free because they were controlled by their desperate need for money and property, to survive, or to achieve status or something else. The authors say that for Europeans the concept of freedom is tied to private property. It's oriented towards the freedom to do as one wills with one's possessions. That kind of freedom necessarily means that people without property are less free. That's the price of progress.

The authors assert that the earliest humans had other ideas about how to organize their societies. As we will see in future chapters, over the millennia, they set up different social structures, with varying degrees of freedom and equality. They weren't bound by any artificial principles. They changed back and forth between different social arrangements with the changes of the seasons or for no apparent reason. Research shows that history don't support the theories of Turgot/Rousseau.

The point of this book is explain how our ancestors actually lived, based on the latest research. How did we get from a varied set of experimental social arrangements the apparently rigid and permanent structures of today? Why can't we imagine any future that isn't more of the same? Graeber and Wengrow want to know how we got stuck in this place where "... [a] very small percentage of [the] population do control the fates of almost everyone else, and they are doing it in an increasingly disastrous fashion." P. 76.

Discussion

Turgot and Rousseau propose that there are three

or four stages of development that culminate with the apogee of human perfection, French society of their day. Both give credence to the Bible. Turgot's account begins with Noah's Flood. Rousseau says that we know from Holy Scripture that the first human received the commandments and his understanding directly from God, raising the question as to whether any human ever lived in a state of nature. Both promptly leave the Bible behind, and move to a discussion of speculative ideas about social and individual human development. For both there is progress over time. Both accounts are basically evolutionary. They describe various successive stages, but with only minimal efforts to explain the transitions. The descriptions don't relate to different groups of humans. They assume that it's the same progression everywhere.

This idea of progress took hold as the Industrial Revolution began to change societies. We see it in Hegel's theory of history, driven by Providence which may or may not mean the Almighty. We see it again in Marxist historiography which teaches that there is an end state of human development, a classless society. We see it again in totalitarianism, at least according to Hannah Arendt. *The Origins Of Totalitarianism*, p. 461 ff. She writes:

Totalitarian lawfulness, defying legality and pretending to establish the direct reign of justice on earth, executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior. It applies the law directly to mankind without bothering with the behavior of men. The law of Nature or the law of History, if properly executed, is expected to produce mankind as its end product; and this expectation lies behind the claim to global rule of all totalitarian governments. P. 462.

The idea that there is a single law applicable to everyone is present in US Christian

Nationalism, sometimes called Christian Dominionism. This is from Wikipedia:

An example of dominionism in reformed theology is Christian reconstructionism, which originated with the teachings of R. J. Rushdoony in the 1960s and 1970s. Rushdoony's theology focuses on theonomy (the rule of the Law of God), a belief that all of society should be ordered according to the laws that governed the Israelites in the Old Testament. His system is strongly Calvinistic, emphasizing the sovereignty of God over human freedom and action, and denying the operation of charismatic gifts in the present day (cessationism); both of these aspects are in direct opposition to Kingdom Now theology (see below). Fn omitted.

The idea that there is one ineluctable Law governing the human future has a long history, much longer than this short description. We've seen the horrifying results of that belief. Graeber and Wengrow give us a history that has no place for that misbegotten idea. That is a huge contribution.