# MYTHSTAKES BOOK TEN: OF LOST FREEDOMS AND NON-REVOLUTIONS

## CHAPTER ONE

Comparative mythology and the Electric Star hypothesis  have a lot more to say about the largely forgotten history of humankind's relationship to the primordial sun and the story of how the archaic gods that once featured so prominently in our daily lives became the remote planets. There is more evidence supporting this idea but I am going to save that for the next book. What I want to do in this book is return to the question of what happened to human groupings such that they went from flexible, shifting arrangements in which humans acted like playful creatures experimenting with alternative ways of living, to people stuck in essentially one kind of society, along with the assumption that it's "human nature" that is responsible for this lack of choice regarding how we live.

### Our Widely Travelled Ancestors

Many things had to fall into place before such a profound transformation of imagination could occur, and one of these was a paradoxical effect of expanding populations. As we saw in "Forgive Us Our Debts" (Book Six in this series), it is wrong to assume that people have always known exactly what nation they belong to. Indeed, the latest evidence suggests that, back in the time of the Upper Paleolithic, it would be inaccurate to describe people as living in anything one could reasonably call a discrete 'society'.

In order to arrive at that conclusion we must have learned something about how people typically lived back then. Archeology did leave some clues for us to find. Those doing field work across a vast region of the Earth ("from the Swiss Alps to Outer Mongolia", according to Graeber and Wengrow) have found our ancestors were using remarkably similar tools, wearing remarkably similar ornaments, conducting similar funeral rites, and many other examples of cultural practices done in essentially the same way across continents.

Now, some of that similarity could be attributed to the primitive nature of Upper Paleolithic technology. Maybe people from the Swiss Alps to Outer Mongolia were playing remarkably similar musical instruments because there's only a few such instruments you can create with Stone-Age tools? But why would carvings or funeral rites remain essentially the same? Why would different societies living in different habitats not make up a great diversity of art and ceremonial practice as their cultures evolved in isolation to what was going on thousands of miles away?

The answer is that we are not really dealing with discrete societies at all, but rather forms of regional organisation that made it relatively easy for people to travel huge distances.

Through studying contemporary forager societies, such as the Martu of Australia or the Hadza of East Africa, we have determined that most members of such groups are not at all closely biologically related. Such ties apply only to about ten percent of members. As for the other ninety percent, they consist of folk drawn from a much wider pool, many of whom had birthplaces far, far away and don't even speak the same first languages.

Membership could be drawn from such a wide pool, because these were people whose forms of regional organisation spread over thousands of miles. A few centuries ago, if you were an Aboriginal Australian, you could travel halfway across the continent and feel quite at home among the groups you encountered, for while they spoke entirely different languages the camps they had established were divided into the same kinds of totemic moieties you were familiar with.

Similarly, Wengrow and Graeber said of the tribespeople of North America five hundred years ago that a person could “travel from the shores of the Great Lakes to the Louisiana Bayous and still find settlements- speaking languages entirely unrelated to their own- with members of their own Bear, Elk, or Beaver clans who were obliged to host and feed them”.

Growing Populations/ Shrinking Societies

The reason why I spoke of the “paradoxical effect of expanding populations” is that all this talk of Stone-Age people maintaining ‘societies’ that stretched across thousands of miles seems counterintuitive. This is because the common assumption is that our ancient ancestors could hardly have travelled at all, for they had no means of transport to rely on in a time before horses were domesticated and the wheel invented. There’s only so far you can travel via your own two feet, and what else can you do when confronted by a body of water so large the land on the other side cannot be seen, but turn back? But once we learned how to ride horses and, even better, harness them to wagons, the world must have seemed smaller than it once was. And once boats were invented, it became smaller still.

But while improvements to modes of transport did make it physically easier to travel, as populations increased, ever-diminishing proportions of people actually did bother to travel very far from home, or at least that was the case for much of human history. As Wengrow and Graeber explained, “If we survey what happens over time, the scale on which social relations operate doesn’t get bigger and bigger; it actually gets smaller and smaller”.

This shrinking of the scale of social relations is probably something that contributed to human groupings forming something we would more easily recognise as discrete societies. Up until about 12,000 BCE, the only clues still remaining are fossilised bones and stone tools, but after that, in the periods following the Upper Paleolithic, we can sketch out the outlines of separate cultures with more than just that. Whereas some foragers still retained a nomadic way of life, following large animal herds, others became fisherfolk. Others found they could make a living for themselves foraging for small game, and berries, nuts and herbs in forests.

Those different foodstuffs led to technological innovation, as dealing with the diversity of benefits and challenges that comes with procuring and preparing big game, or fish, or woodland nuts and fruit, meant different ways of turning raw organic materials into foodstuff had to be found, and tools invented that facilitated such processes.

That, in turn, paved the way for cuisine, as methods for making stews and broths; for curing meats; for preparing fish; for rendering acorns fit for human consumption, spread from place to place.

That was an important factor for the establishment of discrete societies because cuisines are used as markers of difference no matter where you look, and there is every reason to suppose that was just as true during the Mesolithic period. As Graeber and Wengrow remarked, “people who wake up to fish stews each morning tend to see themselves as a different sort of people from those who breakfast on a porridge of berries and wild oats”.

Mesolithic cultural areas might have been smaller than the Upper Paleolithic ones that preceded them, but they were still enormous by our standards. We are, after all, talking about cultural areas spanning territories a good deal larger than most modern states.

Micro-differentiation took a great deal longer to be established. By that, I mean the sort of situation familiar to contemporary anthropology, where you can cross a small expanse (a single river valley, say) and there you will encounter what are truly discrete societies, comprised of people speaking entirely different languages, practicing their own kind of economic systems, and many other forms of cultural practice that all serve as ways and means for people to set themselves off from other people. The result of this was the dismantling of those vast regional networks of hospitality, because even if no fences were physically erected, nevertheless strangers encountered plenty of cultural barriers that reminded them they were, indeed, strangers and not part of that community at all. According to Graeber and Wengrow, “overall ... what we observe is not so much the world as a whole growing smaller, but most peoples’ social worlds growing more parochial, their lives and passions more likely to be circumscribed by boundaries of culture, class, and language”.

This gradual establishment of a great many separate social and cultural universes must have had a negative effect on one of the fundamental freedoms- the freedom to travel. When you have such freedom (which always necessitates the assumption you’ll find hospitality wherever you move to) you have a literal escape route from any situation you do not like. That’s one reason why tribal leaders could only ever be play kings and not exercise any real domination over the groups they led. Any member who did not like how his ‘boss’ was running things could just laugh in the chief’s face and declare “enough of you, mate, I’m off”.

But once there was a multiplication of cultural boundaries and such boundaries were a good deal more well-defined compared to prior times, it became a lot harder to escape from unsatisfactory conditions, because you were much less sure there was anywhere welcoming for you to run away to. This, in turn, resulted in the unsatisfactory conditions you were currently stuck in further degenerating into durable and intransigent forms of domination and hierarchy.

# CHAPTER TWO

In the last chapter we saw how we have gone from living within vast cultural boundaries that greatly facilitated the fundamental freedom of movement, to a great many smaller, discrete societies. We also saw how this contributed to the development of dominance hierarchies.

A hierarchical society is one in which people are definitely not equal, and so we can say ‘equality’ must have diminished. But what do we mean when we say people are ‘equal’?

## The Many Ways of Being Equal

This leads us to another paradox: People are all different and yet we’re all the same.

Clearly we are all different. That is why you can pick your friend out when they are among a crowd of people. She does not look or sound or act quite like anybody else. At the same time, though, there are similarities she, like all of us, share with other people. If that were not the case, if each person was truly unique and different, then every time we encountered a stranger we would regard it as an alien being the likes of which we had never encountered before. But no, for the most part we can instantly label individuals as belonging to certain groups. “This is a white male from California. I can tell from his appearance and accent”.

So when we claim “We’re all the same” or “we’re all different”, in either case there is always that unspoken qualification: “in some sense”. Neither statement can be taken literally, because to do so is obviously absurd.

Any statement that must be qualified in such a way is almost certainly dealing in terms and labels that are slippery and not sharply definable. ‘Equality’ is a good case in point and so is its polar opposite, ‘inequality’.

Since that is so, it’s hard to say precisely what we mean when we talk of ‘egalitarian societies’. The simplest way to define such a society is negatively, i.e, “an egalitarian society is defined by an absence of hierarchies”. We might also say societies without relations of domination or exploitation are egalitarian. But none of these vague descriptions really tell us much at all.

And here we are talking about a particular hypothetical ‘egalitarian’ society. If a single example is hard to define, then the label under which all such societies could be pigeonholed- ‘egalitarianism’- is much more so.

One reason why is because there are a great many ways in which a people could be said to have brought about egalitarianism. Nobody ever imagines that people in an egalitarian society are literally all alike, only that there is some sort of ideal that applies to most if not all of them. Put another way, an egalitarian society is one in which people agree on what the most important values are, and arrange things such that everybody (or nearly everybody) meets those ideals in practice.

But what are the most important values? There are a great many aspects of human life that could be prioritised as the paramount virtue and, almost certainly, different groups will favour

different ideals. That being the case, what is deemed most important to one society that thinks of itself as ‘egalitarian’ will likely be dismissed as having nothing to do with a society in which all are equal by other people for whom quite different values should apply.

It’s all very messy and complex, really. For those who prefer everything to be well-defined and quantifiable, such as economists, it’s much preferable for there to be some sort of objective, universal standard by which ‘equality’ can be measured. Since the discipline of economics began with the likes of Adam Smith, the search for such a standard has looked to private property. The less of it there is, the assumption goes, the more equal a people will be. Probably not in a good way (“all equally poor”) but still ‘equal’.

This has clearly become a common assumption, for don’t we all assume any people lacking the productive assets of land and livestock and without the ability to stockpile surpluses necessarily lack the material basis by which some get to lord it over the rest? Hence, foragers who have never discovered farming must live in egalitarian societies because poverty leaves little choice but not allow anyone to rise.

It is also commonly assumed that an egalitarian society is a fragile thing, surely only a temporary arrangement. It’s bound to end as soon as any technical efficiency makes material surplus possible, because you can bet the moment conditions of surplus are brought about, you’ll soon have fulltime craft specialists, priests and warriors laying claim to it. And what sort of people are bound to follow close behind? Why, merchants, lawyers and politicians who will conspire to turn what were once arbitrary forms of appropriation into formal rules and laws regarding what classes have rightful access to what and why. At which point, egalitarianism is well and truly a thing of the past and one finds oneself living in the shadow of the State.

Now, broadly speaking, it is the case that bureaucratic regimes like Pharaonic Egypt were only made possible because cereal farming and grain storage provided a surplus that could support so many non-productive specialists. The problem is that, as an ‘explanation’ for how hierarchy came about, it is so broad as to have very little explanatory power. As Graeber and Wengrow said, “to say that cereal farming was responsible for the rise of such states is a little like saying the development of calculus in Medieval Persia is responsible for the atom bomb”. In both cases there clearly is some kind of link, since once is not possible without the other, but there’s no way you can simplify history by saying “Al-Tusi’s work on polynomials is what caused the destruction of Hiroshima” as if that explains everything. Nor can you just assert that planting crops led to the emergence of the state, particularly given the fact that, in many parts of the world, farming led to no such thing.

Equality Through Freedom

“Surplus” might be too broad to serve as an adequate explanation for how we lost the fundamental freedoms, but it serves very well in showing another way in which humans are unique animals.

The reason why is because the human being is the only animal that feels a need to pursue a surplus of material goods. This is not something we observe in other animals. They are naturally constrained to desire only exactly what they need. For humans, though, there is a

need to break free of current material constraints and to seek out new needs, wants and desires. This is simultaneously a blessing and a curse, both for us humans and the world we inhabit, because this drive to produce more is what makes us, by far, the most creative and the most destructive species.

Some thinkers conclude that the innate drive to seek out more means we inevitably trap ourselves in dominance hierarchies from which there can be no escape. So, whereas Marx believed Capitalism would bring about conditions in which the sheer ease of producing material abundance would bring about the ways and means to administer that surplus collectively in an equitable fashion (probably after a revolution had forcibly removed the means of production from those in charge of the prior hierarchy) that's not the assumption most contemporary anthropologists adopt. Instead, they tend to believe there's only one way in which egalitarian societies can be maintained, and that is to ensure no surplus of any kind can ever be accumulated.

In fact, so far as most anthropologists are concerned, the very term 'egalitarian society' is not useful. Be that as it may, it's a term that lingers on, as does the hope that we could achieve greater equality than is currently the norm. If we are genetically predisposed to move away from equality, though, why would the dream of establishing an egalitarian society be so alluring? Why would any animal yearn for something diametrically opposed to its 'nature'?

Feminist anthropology has an answer to that. According to Eleanor Leacock (1922-1987) there is something people aspire to, but we've latched onto an inappropriate term to describe what that is. Actually, people do not want to be equal; they want 'autonomy'.

Take the principle aim of the Feminist movement itself. It's pretty much always said to be "equality between the sexes", but when Leacock did research into the lives of Montagnais-Naskoi women, she determined the womenfolk actually weren't much interested in achieving equal status with men, but instead just wanted to live their lives, independently or collectively, making decisions without menfolk interfering.

Now, one could still say that this shows there is a value that these women feel should have equal distribution, in this case 'freedom'. The ideal society, then, is not one in which everybody is 'equal' but rather one in which everybody is 'free'.

Such a society need not be one in which nobody can hold positions of authority. The Wendat tribe that Kandiaronk was a member of is a great case in point. It would be difficult to argue the case that this was a truly egalitarian society because, after all, it had a pretty elaborate constitutional structure of office holders. But we should also recall that no authority figure, not even the chief, had the power to compel anyone to do anything, which meant they were not really chiefs but play chiefs, since one cannot seriously claim to be a ruler if one has no way of enforcing one's commands. At the same time, even though they lived in a society that appeared to have hierarchical structure, the high degree of individual autonomy every member of the Wendat enjoyed meant they did live in what was, by any practical definition, an egalitarian society. Equality, in other words, is a direct consequence of individual liberty.

Lost Freedoms

Of course, humans can never be completely free, not constrained by anything whatsoever. That would make us gods rather than human. But we can have certain basic freedoms which, if realised, do enable that autonomy/equality we crave.

We've mentioned one such 'freedom' already: the freedom to abandon your current community or situation, confident that you will be welcomed wherever you end up settling once more. We've seen how the forms of regional organisation that once existed meant our ancestors could wander across thousands of miles and be sure of a welcoming community at journey's end, but can we honestly say this is a 'freedom' that exists for most people today? How far could you journey with no means to pay for travel, and how long would it be before you encountered some sort of bureaucracy insisting you can go no further without the necessary authorisation? Also, what are the chances that, rather than finding welcoming communities, you'll instead encounter hostile strangers, secure in their private fortresses, who don't want you to do anything but go away?

Yes, some people have the financial freedom to travel anywhere, and can produce the paperwork needed to gain entry (or bribe those officials if that is an option). And yes, welcoming communities and charitable individuals do still exist, but we've all seen how badly refugees are treated as they attempt to exercise the freedom to run away from an intolerable situation. Centuries ago, they would have been able to cross the equivalent distance of continents and meet no restrictions in their ability to do so.

Another fundamental freedom is the ability to disobey authorities without consequence. One thing that all human languages share in common is an imperative form. In other words, regardless of what tongue you speak, it's possible to issue a command. But, we have also seen, from examples such as Wendat society, how it's quite possible to arrange things such that no-one can give another person orders systematically. I would argue that there is a universal human trait that shows that the theoretical possibility to compel someone to do something, but the society is set up to prevent that, was the default state in which Homo sapiens sapiens evolved. It is the fact that, while every person, from the most egalitarian society to the most authoritarian dictatorship, is familiar with the concept of the command, none of us really like being told what to do.

Again, how many of us can seriously claim to have the freedom to disobey an order? Wendat people were confident in their right to laugh at their chiefs and tell him to get lost if he ever tried to get them to do something they did not want to do, but how many people today would respond to a command from their boss by laughing in his face and doing whatever they feel like doing? And while it's common to complain about some jobsworth enforcing idiotic bureaucracy, we feel the only choice is to comply or give up trying to do whatever it was we were trying to do. Precious few of us act like we can just go ahead and do it, damn the rules. But that feeling that we should be able to laugh at authority figures and exercise autonomy shows that we evolved in environments where that was once taken for granted. As Graeber and Wengrow argued, "the real question is not when chiefs, or even kings and queens, first appeared, but rather when it was no longer possible to simply laugh them out of court".

What We Are Good At

One can only conclude from all this that we are not really a ‘free’ people because, after all, liberties are not really liberties if you cannot act on them. Nevertheless, we claim to be a ‘free’ people living in ‘free’ societies.

Notice, though, that it’s a pretty narrow form of ‘freedom’ we’re talking about. The attitude of contemporary society is that one  is ‘free’ if the society you live in lacks political overlords like dictators, warlords or emperors. But it’s also fair to say that most people spend the majority time in places that are not organised around ‘freedom’ at all, but rather ‘efficiency’. Furthermore, it’s assumed that the way to bring about greater efficiency is by organising humans into strict chains of command. Hence, whenever we enter the workplace we grit our teeth and put up with being bossed about, because the economy seeks ‘efficiency’ rather than ‘freedom’.

If one wanted to know how it came to be that control of property could so easily be converted into power over others, the world of paid employment would seem the most obvious place to start. But we should also acknowledge that those like Turgot or Adam Smith originally focused on employment and the ‘economy’ for quite different reasons. What they wanted to establish was the superiority of their society over any other. But what evidence could they point to which would agree with their belief? Standards of hygiene and public health? No, those were appalling in the 18th century, much worse than anything those so-called ‘savages’ put up with. What about the superiority of the legal system? No, that would not do either, for there were no democratic institutions at the time, and the legal systems could only be described as barbaric by world standards (only Europeans had a history of imprisoning heretics and burning witches, practices that occurred almost nowhere else in the world untouched by Europe’s influence). As for standards of living or de facto wage levels, those in Europe were lower than India, China or the Ottoman Empire until circa 1830.

In other words, there really was very little to commend the European way of life in the 18th century. But the founding fathers of economics did believe we Europeans excelled at one thing, and that this one thing would surely have a positive effect on much else in society. They claimed Europeans excelled at productive labour.

Little wonder, then, that thinkers like Turgot held up commercial society as  the very apex of human achievement. Through productive labour we would discover new and improved ways to run industries, and the productive output of each progressively superior form of division of labour created would lift the People out of poverty and into prosperity and freedom.

Actually, even as late as the 1880s, Capitalism and the factory system did the exact opposite. As John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) pointed out, “all the labour-saving machinery that has hitherto been invented has not lessened the toil of a single human being”. No indeed: worker collectives were fighting for the right to reduce the work week to something they could tolerate, but which a medieval barron would have considered an outrageous level of work to expect from his serfs.

But such points were ignored or dismissed by the early promoters of Capitalism, for they had another story they wished to tell. At the dawn of humanity, they insisted, our primitive

ancestors had been engaged in a constant struggle for existence, working hard just to secure the absolute basics. But, whereas our ancestors toiled from dawn to dusk just so as to sustain subsistence living, the improvements to productive labour meant that, however appalling the work regimes of Dickensian factories may appear, we should still consider our lives as being better compared to our ancestors. One could, they argued, quibble over exactly how rapidly things were improving, but there was simply no arguing over the fact that humanity had never had it so good.

You can tell this was a particularly persuasive argument by the way that, by the early 20th century, it had become almost universally accepted as common sense. Pretty much everybody agreed we had pulled ourselves up by our collective bootstraps, rising from the primitive state of subsistence living and constant toil, to a modern age of industrial abundance and consumer freedom.

But then, in 1968, an essay was published that undermined the very foundations of this ‘common sense’.

# CHAPTER THREE

The person referred to at the close of the last chapter was Marshall Sahlins (1930-2021) and the essay he wrote was called ‘The Original Affluent Society’. Readers can probably tell from that title that he presented an argument that directly opposed the common sense belief surrounding historical progress.

What Sahlins argued is that we had it all backwards, at least as far as working hours were concerned. He argued that the evidence did not fit this narrative. Looking back over the course of history, one did not observe the overall number of hours most people worked going down; instead, they tended to increase.

## Living In Abundance

A lot of work we do is not an end in and of itself, but merely a means to an end. There is something we hope to achieve through our labours. Now, previously, it was argued that humans are animals uniquely driven to seek out more, but Sahlins' essay argued there was something else we’re looking for, and that is ‘abundance’.

The most important thing to understand about abundance is that it is not an absolute measure but another one of those relative terms. People can only be said to have- or lack- abundance when compared with other people. For example, President Trump once remarked that he was not all that wealthy, which, given that he is a billionaire, would probably strike most of us as absurd. Of course he’s wealthy, stupendously so. But, at the time, he was in the Oval Office with the wealthiest businessmen in the world, the likes of Geoff Bezos and Elon Musk, and if they are the standard by which you measure wealth then, yes, in comparison to them Trump is not all that rich.

The question is, though, is that really a fair standard by which to measure one’s own level of abundance? And, getting back to forager societies and ‘primitive man’, what would be an unfair standard of comparison to use in that case?

According to Sahlins, it would be ridiculous to compare the basic standards of living we have today with those of forager societies. Of course, when we do use such standards as the means of measuring how affluent such people are, they come across as being very poor indeed. But there is no way forager peoples or ancestors from the Mesolithic Period could have used our standards as the basis of comparison by which their own material standards could be judged.

Another important thing to understand about abundance is that, since it is not an absolute measure, one cannot really define precisely what it is or when one has definitely acquired it. In fact, although it is obviously related to material things, ‘abundance’ is more of a state of mind than physical. ‘Abundance’ refers to any situation in which one feels they have easy access to everything necessary for maintaining a comfortable, happy life.

So what happens when you use that- “access to the necessities required for a happy life- as your standard? When Sahlins used that standard, he found our ancestors and contemporary foragers barely had to work at all to secure everything they felt they needed.

The roboticist, Hans Moravec (b. 1948) drew the conclusion that comes from Sahlins' findings. "Contrary to fears of some enmeshed in civilisation's work ethic, our tribal past prepares us well for lives as idle rich. In a good climate and location the hunter-gatherers' lot can be pleasant indeed. An afternoon's outing picking berries or catching fish- what we civilised types would recognise as a recreational weekend- provides life's needs for several days. The rest of the time can be spent…socialising or simply resting".

As was pointed out in Book Two, humans obviously evolved to work. That's why we have such big brains running such creative minds, extremely dextrous hands and why we need to stay active in order to stay healthy. But the sort of work regime we evolved to best suit was short periods of intense activity when situations really require us to take advantage of an opportunity (like it's berry season again so get out there and harvest before they are gone) followed by an extended period of leisure in which we slowly recharge our batteries ready for the next time our capacity to work intensely is called upon.

But the ideal work ethic of contemporary life is that one ought to be working hard pretty much all the time. Notice, though, that this attitude is most strongly felt among those who are in a position to compel others to do their work for them, so it's not really a work ethic at all but a 'slave' ethic. And it's not just 'the boss' we're enslaved to but our consumerist desires, which have been amplified through generations of propaganda to the point where 'abundance'- easy access to what we feel we must have if we are to be happy- is forever out of reach.

For our ancestors, though, none of that was true. By the standards of 'abundance' that applied back then, they were rich. Hence, the dawn of humanity was the "original affluent society". This would have been even more so if the world really was the Eden the Purple Dawn or the Golden Age (see Book Nine) seem to have been.

Sahlins' Fall

In the Biblical tale, it is the serpent's tempting promise of knowledge that results in Man's banishment from Eden. But what did Sahlins think brought about the Original Affluent Society's end? Just like Rousseau, he assumed we were fated to be banished from Eden the moment we settled down and began to farm.

The one difference was that by the 1960s it was impossible to agree with Rousseau that our ancestors had "run blindly to their chains", not able to imagine the trap that agriculture was. This was because research had shown that foragers, thanks to their intimate familiarity with how plants grow and reproduce, knew perfectly well how one could go about farming rather than foraging. It was not that they were ignorant of the technical skills needed to get farming started, it was just that they consciously rejected that way of life in preference for the one they had.

Sahlins argued that a people who consciously reject a thing must also consciously adopt it. Just as Eve chose to eat forbidden fruit, our ancestors chose to start farming and so started down that path that led to private property and real chiefs rather than play ones.

## The Flaw

So, basically, Sahlins'argument rests on the idea that we can treat the domestication of wild grasses for purposes of farming as the 'snake' in a variation on the Biblical myth of the Fall of Man. But there is a flaw, or at least a weakness in Sahlins' argument which, to be fair to him, he was aware of.

But what was that flaw? It was the fact that his entire 'original affluent society' argument rested on the assumption that the tribes he used as a stand-in for our ancestors- the Bushmen of the Kalahari- really do represent how most prehistoric people had actually lived. It is not the case, though, that all hunter-gatherers prize leisure over hard work. As Graeber and Wengrow explained, "foragers in northwestern California, for instance, were notorious for their cupidity, organising much of their lives around the accumulation of shell money and sacred treasures and adhering to a stringent work ethic in order to do so". And foragers on the northwest coast lived in societies with famously industrious commoners and slaves. So we cannot say for sure that the "original affluent society" really did consist of people like the egalitarian, leisure-loving !Kung or Hadza.

If Sahlins was aware of these counter-examples, though, why did he nevertheless draw the conclusion he did? The reason he did so, was because he did not believe those other examples of how hunter-gatherers organise their societies debunked the premise of an "original affluent society" because, just as there are many ways for a people to be 'equal', maybe there is also more than one way in which the original affluent society could have been 'affluent'.

But if that is true (and all evidence suggests it is) then this belief in "the original affluent society" (if by that we mean one way in which our ancestors lived rather than a wide range of possible lifestyles they could have adopted) never existed and to believe it ever did is to believe in a myth. For tens of thousands of years, long before agriculture got started, human beings, that most playful and experimental of animals, were engaged in all of the fundamental freedoms: The freedom to move, the freedom to disobey, and the freedom to remake society. If we want to understand how we lost those freedoms, the evidence we have shows it is futile to suppose some single cause must be behind that loss. Instead, we have to consider the overall direction of change over those tens of thousands of years.

## Land Management Through The Eyes of the Colonists

A good way to start shedding light on how the freedoms mentioned in the last chapter were lost is to examine the bogus ways in which that straightforward tale of societal progress, told by the likes of Turgot, keeps on being repeated even though the more we learn about our past, the less plausible such a sequence looks.

One such assumption that is absolutely refuted by evidence is the idea that civilization proper cannot get underway unless a people have first discovered farming. In the popular way of thinking, the discovery of agriculture is a pre-requisite for the development of towns and people with specialised skills in craft and knowledge. Absent farming, popular opinion insists, access to food is simply neither reliable nor abundant enough to support any activity

beyond a perpetual search for basic material needs, and consequently there can be no development of additional skills needed to, say, build monumental structures. And yet, as we have seen, pre-agricultural people did build such structures.

Why do we commonly assume proper civilisation would be impossible without farming? It turns out that the roots of this belief lie in the colonial intentions of Europeans as they set about staking claims in the ‘New World’.

Having arrived on a hitherto ‘undiscovered’ continent, those early explorers subsequently found such lands were not really without a human presence, for there were already indigenous people living there. If such land was to be colonised, therefore, the new arrivals could not simply declare “this land belongs to us”, any more than you could walk into some other family’s home and say, “this house belongs to me”. Or rather, you can’t and not expect the original occupants to say something to the contrary.

So, since the land was already inhabited, those wannabe colonialists needed some convenient excuse to say those indigenous people were occupying territory they had no legal right to call their own, and in order to establish that ‘fact’, they turned to the core argument of John Locke.

Readers of Book Five will recall how, in his ‘Second Treatise on Government’, Locke linked property rights with work. By working the land, he told us, an individual or a people “mix their labour” with it, and thus it becomes an extension of themselves.

But those natives, it was believed, were not doing anything that could be thought of as a properly productive use of the territory they were occupying. That meant they were basically squatters, inhabiting land they had no legal right to. So, legally, the New World could be considered vacant land.

James Tully (b. 1946) who is an authority on indigenous rights, laid out the implications of this way of thinking. “If the aboriginal peoples attempted to subject the Europeans to their laws and customs or to defend the territories that they had mistakenly believed to be their property for thousands of years, then it is they who violate natural law and may be punished or ‘destroyed’ like savage beasts”.

Another thing this colonialist way of thinking led to was the stereotype of the hunter-gatherer as a carefree, idle group who are coasting through life, lazily subsisting on whatever fruits nature provides, even to those who have little to no work ethic. Now, to be fair to those colonialists, it looked to their eyes as though the people they found already inhabiting the New World had done nothing to turn such wilderness into properly maintained landscapes. After all, the Wild West and other lands of the Americas looked very much like a completely untamed environment. No labour had been mixed with any of that land, evidently, and therefore its current occupants had no more claim to it than did the wild beasts who also lived there before Europeans showed up.

But this assumption that such land really was untamed was based on a false premise, namely that European-style farming is the only way in which land can be cared for and its productive capacity improved. We now understand, though, that there are many ways for a

population to actively manage their land, and that what may appear to be a savage, untamed wilderness is really nothing of the sort.

And not only are such practices as controlled burning, weeding and coppicing oftimes labour-intensive work, those undertaking such labours are also often not free to work in an entirely anarchic way, but are instead subject to laws regulating who can access what territory or exploit which species of animal. In other words, it's entirely wrong to say these were people living in wild, savage lands who had never established any property rights. It's just that they worked those lands in a manner not recognisable to an 18th-century European conqueror, and they had developed property systems that worked in a different way to Roman Law or English Common Law.

King Carlos

Now, we saw in the case of the Wendat tribe how their laws were formulated in such a way as to prevent inequality growing to the point where obvious class distinctions formed. But we can see, from the example of one of the first North American societies described by 16th century European explorers, that not all people of the New World organised themselves in this way.

The people just mentioned were the Calusa. The land they inhabited was the West coast of Florida, and there they built a kingdom that was ruled from a capital town called Calos. The man who ruled the kingdom of Calusa was known as 'Carlos'. While some historians prefer not to describe him as a king (they say 'paramount chief' is a more appropriate term) all descriptions of him and his powers make him seem just like a European monarch.

For one thing, he wore a gold diadem and he sat on a wooden throne, and was the only Calusa allowed to do so. 'Carlos' was also vested with absolute legal powers, much like monarchs who once answered only to God. His will was law, and the penalty for breaking it, was death. Furthermore, when 'Carlos' travelled around his kingdom, he never went alone. Instead, he was typically accompanied by the usual entourage of warrior nobles and priests. Also, as per usual with deeply hierarchical societies, those representatives were, just like the leader they answered to, devoted mostly to the business of government, and the lower orders beneath this group of elite rulers were expected to demonstrate that they knew their place in Calusa society through displays of humbling themselves before 'Carlos' and his entourage.

In other words, the people of Calusa were ruled by a leader who had all the attributes of a king. "By all accounts, then", reckoned Graeber and Wengrow, "the Calusa had indeed 'got stuck' in a single economic and political mode that allowed extreme forms of inequality to emerge".

How did the kingdom of Calusa come about? Were we to adhere to the sequence of events established by Turgot and imagined by Rousseau, we would say that, some time in the past, they had discovered agriculture and that had set them on the road toward class inequality.

But there is one obvious problem with that assertion, which is the fact that the Calusa did not practice any form of agriculture. They had not planted a single seed or domesticated or

tethered a single animal. They were a foraging people, not farmers, and so they represent proof that, whatever it is that is a necessary foundation for the emergence of durable inequalities, agriculture is not it.

And yet, the assumption that it is remains a prevalent one. Evidence to the contrary is either ignored or a tactic known in philosophical circles as an 'Informal Fallacy' is employed to dismiss counterexamples as not really relevant. Those who insist foragers cannot establish kingdoms say of people like the Calusa- who are stockpiling wealth (the basis of that wealth was complex systems of access to extremely rich coastal fishing grounds) sending off warriors to defend their own territory and grab more of their neighbours', and where priests act out elaborate court ceremonials- that they are not really a foraging people.

In other words, it is what logicians call "the Ad-hoc Rescue Procedure", in which a proposition is constantly protected from counter evidence through a continual change to its definition. Just as defenders of Communism or Capitalism have always claimed "ah but, you see, those were not true communists (or capitalists)" when the evils that went along with the history of either system are mentioned, those who insist kingdoms simply cannot arise in societies without farming say of the Calusa that they are not really, truly foragers.

In truth, a 'foraging people' are defined by one simple thing: They do not rely on biologically domesticated plants and animals as their primary food source. If they are found to be doing other things, such as practicing slavery, stockpiling wealth, constructing monuments, worshipping kings or running complex systems of land tenure, none of that means we should either stop calling them 'gatherers' or that we should invent new sub-categories of hunter-gatherers ('complex hunter-gatherers', 'delayed-return hunter gatherers'...) so we can carry on believing human history can and should consist of people being defined and circumscribed by their mode of subsistence.

"Atypical" Environment?

So: One bad way of perpetuating belief in the 'agricultural revolution' is to claim that people like the Calusa are atypical of how a foraging people should, by definition, behave. Another bad argument put forward by those who want to perpetuate the mythstake that the evolution of civilisation must follow Turgot's sequence is even sillier: It is to claim that these counterexamples are people living in atypical environments.

By 'Atypical Environment', they mean "not the sort of places hunter-gatherers typically occupy today". Contemporary tribes are found in rain forests, the fringes of deserts, and the Arctic Circle, all of which are environments that are not particularly suited to human beings. Why would a People choose to live somewhere nobody really wants to live? Why not choose to live by coasts, or river valleys, where conditions for human beings are ideal?

You would think the answer was obvious: 'Choice' did not come into it. By the 20th Century, people occupying desirable territory were forced off such land by European invaders with their legal rights and overwhelming military force with which to back it up. But what options would gatherers have exercised in the millennia before the Old World collided with the New?

In calling the land that people like the Calusa inhabited ‘atypical’, because it was not the sort of environment people like the Kalahari Bushmen or the Inuit inhabit, the unspoken assumption is that our foraging ancestors, free to choose without the impositions of New World conquerors, would still have chosen to settle in deserts, rain forests, or around the Arctic Circle, only moving to aquatic environments when they had run out of places hunter-gatherers ‘typically’ live in.

The truth is, most of human history has been one of a foraging people free to move whenever and wherever they pleased, since there were no expansive empires to contend with; no weaponised bureaucrats to deny such freedom. As archeological evidence is increasingly showing, given a choice foragers will colonise aquatic environments like coasts and river valleys. As for eking out a living on the fringes of deserts etc, well, that was only done as a last resort.

Far from being ‘atypical’, then, the Calusa were one of many people who made a home for themselves around the Straits of Florida and other places ideal for human habitation. But how did those first settlers get there? By what manner did humans, whose origins were in Africa, first colonise what was once a genuinely undiscovered country?

They Came By Boat

The standard answer, one which seeks to perpetuate the idea that people like the Calusa were somehow ‘atypical’, is to suppose the first settlers came to the Americas via an arduous land crossing over a land-bridge called Beringa that once linked Russia and Alaska. But why take such a route (one that involved crossing glaciers and mountains) when a much more easy route involving following the coast by boat was available? Because, or so it was long claimed, only ‘atypical’ people build boats and learn how to navigate waters. Since hunter-gatherers don’t normally do that sort of thing, they must surely have arrived in the New World via the only route open to an animal travelling by foot from the Old World.

What became of the Calusa? Kingdoms like theirs were the first to be encountered by Europeans because, as they were situated along coasts and estuaries, they were the first people conquerors who came to the New World by boat happened to come across. One reason why the idea that gatherers would never have thought to travel by boat became such a popular one is because evidence of how they had lived and of their origins was soon wiped out by the conquerors who destroyed their kingdoms, and also by the rising sea levels that erased whatever traces remained.

But, as new evidence is making clear, people did not first enter the Americas via the Beringa land bridge some 13,000 years ago. They arrived some 4000 years earlier than that and, what is more, they came by boat. We cannot say for sure that most of these people, upon encountering incredibly resource rich coastal or river valley habitats, didn’t quickly abandon them in favour of ‘typical’ deserts or flyblown jungle, but surely the most reasonable thing to assume is that they stayed right where the living was good?

Having arrived and staked the original claim on such land, what did these people do then? Well, they were a great diversity of people who developed all kinds of societies, including

some that fitted the stereotype of the carefree savage, and others like the aforementioned Calusa, who established kingdoms and definite class hierarchies.

The fact that the Americas of 17,000 years ago had such a diversity of social arrangements shows that the idea that civilisation proper cannot get started unless an agricultural revolution first takes place, is simply wrong. Archeology has now revealed dozens of hitherto unknown societies, built along resource-rich coasts, estuaries and river valleys, where people experimented with new industries, with the development of new cuisines, and with the building of monumental structures, and all while remaining in the hunter-gatherer mode of living.

The Real Origin Point of Private Property

As well as doing all that, some of these societies also developed a material infrastructure that was capable of supporting royal courts and standing armies. A few such societies like the Calusa or the Natches then went on to build kingdoms and definite hierarchies of rule, but in most cases we find no clear evidence that the capability of establishing class divisions leads to such hierarchical societies. So, for example, one can survey thousands of years-worth of archeological evidence from Japanese Jomon sites, find clear evidence that monuments were built and that specialised labour could create a great many treasures. But one will find no evidence of any sort of aristocracy or ruling elite monopolising ownership of that bounty.

What all this means is that to believe civilisation proper has to wait for agriculture before it can be established and that once farming has begun civilisation proper with all the perils that come with it must swiftly and inevitably follow is just wrong. Once again we are confronted with a conclusion that seems so startling when you have been brought up to believe the standard narrative of how human societies must have evolved: Whatever was the trigger for private property, it certainly wasn't farming.

What, then, could it have been? A clue can be found by looking at the work of an anthropologist called James Woodburn (1934-2022). In the postwar decades he earned the reputation of being the premier authority on hunter-gatherer egalitarianism, thanks to his fieldwork on the Hadza, which was a forager society of Tanzania. He also conducted research into the Pandarana of South India and the Malaysian Batak.

There was a reason why he selected those particular societies. Woodburn wanted to study people who practiced egalitarianism as widely as possible, because then the question of what is and isn't being equalised could be sidestepped. People like the Hadza fitted the bill, because in that society the principles of equality extended to gender relations and relations between young and old. In fact, this was a people who applied egalitarian principles to just about every material and social aspect of life, behaviour Woodburn attributed to a self-conscious ethos that relations of ongoing dependency were not something anyone should ever fall into.

They did not, however, apply the principle of egalitarianism to literally all aspects of life. Obviously, equality between the generations could not have been applied literally, because it's not practical to treat infants just as you would an adult. More significantly, Woodburn also

found that, for all their assertive egalitarianism, there was one aspect of life in which even a people like the Hadza deemed it right and proper that orders should be given and claims to private property made, and such things not be treated with scorn, but taken very seriously indeed.

So what was this exceptional aspect of life in which the general principle of egalitarianism was set aside? It was the sphere of the sacred. When it came to the various forms of ritual and intellectual property people dream up while operating in this sphere, Woodburn noted, all such rituals are protected by secrecy, deception and often (but not always) ultimately backing all that up with threats of violence.

To make his point, Woodburn highlighted a certain ritualistic practice of Pygmy groups. In such groups, and also in the Hadza tribe, it was possible to become initiated into cults that made all sorts of claims to ownership, such as exclusive ritual privileges. So, for example, whereas usually everything was shared equally and was communally owned, those Pygmy groups had sacred trumpets, kept in secret, hidden places that out-group members were forbidden to know about. Woe be to any male who would spy on cult members in order to learn where these sacred objects were kept, because following an initiated tribal member as he performed his sacred duty of returning the trumpet to its hiding spot would result in a beating and maybe even rape.

As for women and children, a complex system of theatrics developed to keep them in check, which involved the initiated men using scare tactics in which they pretended to be evil spirits, malevolent forces of the forest that kept women and children too frightened to dare venture far into the forest.

One can imagine small children being duped into believing in the existence of evil spirits, but were the women also unaware that it was just a group of their own men dressing up and making spooky noises? Seeing as they were adults, it's much more likely they knew it was really men pretending to be evil spirits, and that the men knew that they knew, but all parties ultimately agreed that such rituals and games of deception were a necessary part of preserving the realm of the sacred, so all played along in a complex game of superstition.

The extent to which women secretly knew these alleged spirits were really just men impersonating such things is a good deal less noteworthy than the fact that here, in the realm of the sacred, we have a situation in which life is arranged in a way that is diametrically opposed to the usual ideals of egalitarianism and freedom. Here, relations of command are the paramount virtue, not relations of equality, and knowledge becomes secrets only some are permitted to know and most are forbidden from learning.

Absolute Property=Private Property

Most importantly of all, given our current area of concern, all of this results in some things (certain objects, certain forms of knowledge) becoming what one might call 'Absolute Property'.

This can perhaps be most clearly seen in Emile Durkheim's way of defining the 'Sacred'. That which is sacred, he pointed out, is always that which is set apart, untouchable. It may

be put on a physical pedestal and it may not, but anything deemed sacred is always on a figurative pedestal, in the sense that it's treated as having some relation to a higher force or being that makes it far too important to ever be treated as in any way mundane.

For Durkheim, the one word that provided the clearest expression of what 'sacred' means is a Polynesian term, 'Tabu'. To say something is 'Tabu' is to say it's not to be touched. That's the clue we've been looking for because, as Graeber and Wengrow explained, 'Absolute property', treated as 'tabu', becomes something indistinguishable from private property. "In such societies, there turns out to be a profound formal similarity between the notion of private property and the notion of the sacred. Both are, essentially, structures of exclusion".

Of course, one can invent all the sacred or legal concepts of absolute or private property one wants, but if other people do not behave as though such rules apply to them as well, such concepts are meaningless. So, for absolute or private property to originate among people who normally consider themselves free and under no command whatsoever, must have required some serious behavioural changes.

Switching to a ritual concept not only explains how commonly owned stuff could have boundaries drawn around it so as to create a zone of exclusion, but also how the requisite behavioural changes were brought about, too. This is because it is in ritual contexts where we find life taking the opposite form to the free and equal relations that were the norm in the cultures we've been discussing.

Consider the words of T.G.H Strehlow (1908-1978) who, as an anthropologist, spent many a year among the Aranda:

"Native children are usually spoiled by their parents. Mothers gratify every whim of their offspring, and fathers do not bother about any disciplinary measures. The deliberate cruelty with which the traditional initiation rites are carried out at a later age is carefully calculated to punish insolent and lawless boys for their past impudence, to train them into obedient, dutiful 'citizens' who will obey their elders without a murmur, and be fit heirs to the ancient sacred traditions of their clan".

So, for the Aranda, one becomes an adult by learning, through initiation trials that employ torture and humiliation that, while the individual is mostly free, the ritual context and the realm of the sacred are one area of life where property is exclusive, where orders are dutifully obeyed and where top-down hierarchies are strictly enforced.

That the sphere of the sacred and ritualistic practices surrounding it may well have been the origin point for private property is reinforced by recalling how all the examples of monumental construction or stockpiling of treasures concerned sacred places. According to Graeber and Wengrow, "such carefully coordinated ritual theatres, often laid out with geometric precision, were exactly the kinds of places were exclusive claims to rights over property- together with strict demands for unquestioning obedience- were likely to be made, among otherwise free people".

That last point about "otherwise free people" adds a cautionary note for anyone who might conclude from all this that hierarchy, the ability to give orders that must be obeyed and

private property were all inevitable. Today, it is quite common to hear ‘human nature’ being defined in terms of greed and selfish acquisition. But, if that were so, then once private property was brought into existence in sacred contexts, and hierarchies and unquestioning obedience were brought about through ritualistic practices, then all that should have resulted in society quickly abandoning egalitarianism and developing class society.

But, as we have seen, none of the places where forager societies built monuments or stockpiled treasures show evidence of top-down, centralised power structures. Instead, all evidence shows that absolute property and the assumption of command remained restricted to the sphere of the sacred, while in any other context people were as free as they ever were. It would take tens of thousands of years for civilisations with monumental building, stockpiling of wealth and a definite hierarchy of lordly rulers commanding empires to emerge, which seems far too long if all that aligns with our ‘human nature’.

But what we can say is that the origins of private property almost certainly don’t lie in any economic practicality, but in the search for the holy; in treating certain aspects of life or the world as sacred.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## The Agricultural Revolution

While many historians doubt that the Purple Dawn or  Saturnian Golden Age is something appropriate to their field of expertise (leave it to scholars of myth to argue over its symbolisms, it has nothing to do with past reality) nearly every expert in humanity's past believes the trigger point for the emergence of civilization proper was the adoption of ways of life based around farming.

It is also almost universally agreed that the transition from a life of hunter-gathering to a life of farming happened thanks to an 'Agricultural Revolution'. What had to happen during this 'revolution' to make farming possible? Well, such a transformation in lifestyles would have required a change in how humans related to Nature. A process of domestication would have had to have taken place among certain wild animals, so as to turn them into farmable commodities. Agricultural practices that transformed wild plants into harvestable crops would have been required, too.

It's also pointed out that the switch to agriculture also changed humans, both socially and biologically. Where the latter change was concerned, our bodies had to adapt to handle foodstuffs we had never consumed before, such as grass crops and milk. Of course, as babies humans have always consumed their mother's milk, that's what defines us as mammals. But every other animal is weaned off its mothers milk and drinks not a drop of the stuff in its adult life. Indeed they cannot because they become intolerant to the lactose in milk and would suffer pains were they to ingest any.

But as humans set off down that agricultural revolution, we built up tolerances to lactose and also tolerances to wheat and grain, until we could comfortably include them in our main diets. Having said that, some people have remained intolerant to milk and wheat. For obvious reasons, such allergies are most commonly found in peoples whose ancestors did not make a living through milking herds or farming wheat crops.

As stated before, in order to switch to a life of farming there had to be social and cultural changes too. Some thinkers like to ponder on what such changes might have felt like. Readers of Book Eight will recall that Yuval Harari rather dismissively wrote off early man as being no different, behaviourally, from chimps and bonobos. He once again lumped humanity in with the apes when writing about the switch to farming. "This ape had been living a fairly comfortable life hunting and gathering until about 10,000 years ago, but then began to invest more and more effort in cultivating wheat".

## Wheat, the Serpent in Eden

Why did our ancestors abandon a "fairly comfortable" life for one that necessitated the investment of more and more effort? What was in it for us? Some thinkers, Harari included, like to raise the possibility that, in posing such a question we have things the wrong way around. "Ask not what was in it for us", they say, "ask what was in it for the crops".

When Earth is viewed from space, it becomes obvious how crops such as wheat and barley benefitted from farming. It helped what was once just another species of grass spread around the globe until such crops covered so much land they became the most visible sign of humanity's impact on the planet. The wild grasses that became our main food crops could never have spread so abundantly without human assistance, and thinkers like Harari insist that we should think in terms of such grasses coaxing us into working for them, as much (if not more) than we should think of humans coaxing grasses into becoming crops that feed us.

Just think of the work involved in farming without modern machinery. Crops get thirsty, and so people found they had to fetch water, or dig canals so the plants got the water they demanded. They found that crops did not get along with certain other plants, and since wheat etc did not like such 'weeds' (as those other plants were now classified) it fell to their human assistants to labour in all weathers, clearing the land of any flora their crops would not tolerate. The crops disfavoured the ground they were planted in, people discovered. If the soil was too stony, crops required people to engage in the backbreaking work of clearing them from the fields. If, as Harari suggested, we think about "the agricultural revolution from the viewpoint of wheat", doesn't all that extra work humans needed to do to make farming viable seem like the grasses manipulated us into becoming their slaves?

Other symbiotic relationships exist in Nature. Pollinating insects collect foodstuffs from flowering plants, and flowering plants get pollinated by insects. One might say that flowers evolved the capacity to affect the behaviour of such insects in a way that has had bees and such working for the benefit of plants for hundreds of millions of years. Why not also say crops have done the same with regards to humans, over the last 10,000 years?

In Book Eight we gave one reason why we should not compare humans to apes, let alone insects. Ours is the only animal with actuarial intelligence, or the ability to imagine a hypothetical scenario or event, and then act in a way that either encourages or impedes such a possibility from coming true. Bees literally could not imagine the work they had to do in order to produce honey, but humans could have consciously pondered the risk/rewards associated with becoming farmers. So it really doesn't make sense to try and see the agricultural revolution from the perspective of grass rather than a species equipped with the largest brain and the most imaginative mind in all of Nature.

Despite this seemingly obvious fact, though, those who say we should perhaps see things from wheat's point of view have managed to present scenarios that seem plausible. Maybe we were unwittingly coaxed into becoming servants to crops that extracted "more and more effort" from us. Maybe it's a bit too implausible that "ape men" could have foreseen how planting seeds would lead to all the difficulties farming entails, and by the time those hardships became clear, it was too late to change course?

But such persuasion comes not from evidence pointing to things turning out this way. Indeed, no evidence is presented in these just-so tales of grasses manipulating people. Really, such scenarios seem plausible because we've been brought up on a story that is a variation on this theme of humans being manipulated into doing something that would result in banishment from what was once a comfortable life. For "a fairly comfortable life of hunting and gathering" read, "Eden". All you need do is write the serpent out of this narrative.

There's no need for him, since it was the crops themselves that lured us with the temptations of surplus and luxury. "Just tamper with Nature so as to bring farming about, and you'll no longer live as other animals do, but in ways more befitting gods". A life of even greater ease was possible, and all we had to do to realise it was to unlock the productive capacity of farmable crops and to domesticate herds of wild animals. We heeded the seductive promise of wheat, only to discover too late that we had been tricked into becoming the slaves of the very crops that had promised abundance, luxury, and ease.

The Revolution That Never Was

Ok, it may only be a story, but that does not mean to say it cannot be a true one. Maybe something like humans unwittingly becoming enslaved to crops and tethered to the land really did happen? In fact, in some ways, this did indeed happen. Modern civilization is so dependent on certain staple food crops, it's fair to say we do devote enormous time and resources in order to ensure the breadbasket of the world keeps on sustaining a human family with billions of members.

But that's now, that's what the combination of fossil fuel-based fertilisers and machinery have done to and for us. But what about 10,000 years ago when farming began? Did we, after all, run "blindly to our chains", as Rousseau put it?

Well, here's the thing. Not only does the evidence not support this variant of the Eden myth, the evidence we do have shows things did not develop this way at all. Not only that, but the evidence also shows we are almost certainly wrong to speak of "the Agricultural Revolution" like it's beyond question such an event happened.

What evidence am I referring to? Normally, when it comes to events said to have occurred thousands of years ago, if not further back in time, none of the actors involved in such dramas exist to tell us about what actually happened. All they left us were fossilised bones, buried objects, or art and writings that survived the ravages of time. Those scattered fragments of the past are all we have to go on as we attempt to reconstruct a picture of life in the Neolithic, or during the period of the Old Kingdom in Egypt.

However, in the case of agriculture one of the main characters in the story of its emergence is still around, still able to inform us about what did- and what did not- plausibly happen as we went from being hunter-gatherers to being farmers. I am referring to the wild varieties of grasses that became staple crops like wheat and barley.

Originally, the process of transforming such grasses into farmable crops occurred in various parts of a region of the Earth known as the Fertile Crescent. This Middle Eastern setting is also where the mythical Garden of Eden was said to have been located, and if one goes there, one can find wild varieties of our staple food crops.

So, in a manner of speaking, we can consult the 'serpent' in the Turgot/ Rousseau version of the Fall of Man, to see if the evidence aligns with such a tale.

The key to such 'consultation' lies in what was the most important evolutionary adaptation needed, if wild grass was to become a farmable crop. Wild grasses evolved not to require

any human assistance. This wholly independent way of life is due to the fact that these grasses keep their seeds in ‘Spikelets’, which are little capsules with spiky ends (hence the name). The spikelets are attached to the stem via a connection known as the ‘Rachis’ and, in wild grasses, as wheat ripens the rachis shatters, the capsules containing the seeds fall to the ground, the spiky ends penetrate the soil, and that deposits at least some seeds deep enough into the ground for them to stand a chance of becoming the next generation of wild wheat.

The most important genetic mutation for transforming wild wheat into the domestic variety, was one that switched off the mechanisms for seed dispersal to happen without any assistance from people or animals. In domestic crops, the rachis never shatters. Instead it just keeps ensuring the spikelets stay fixed to the ‘ear’ (ie the top part of the stem). There the seed capsules stay until the wheat rots, or animals feast on them, or humans come along and harvest them.

Here, then, is how wild grasses can be ‘consulted’ about the transition to farming. We set about domesticating those wild varieties using methods similar to ones plausibly available to Neolithic people. Then we run a comparison. Do the way we find domestication playing out, and what happened in prehistoric times, agree with one another?

Such experiments have been going on since the 1980s and it’s pretty clear that the two don’t agree at all. Think about the term ‘agricultural revolution’ and what it implies about the transition to farming. Such a term implies that when we go looking for evidence of this switch to farming, we ought to find a quick transition from wild to domestic forms of cereals, or at least a transition from one to the other that was relatively continuous.

It is true that the key genetic change from brittle to tough rachis happens quickly. It’s just that, when experimenters set about harvesting wild varieties using Neolithic methods such as uprooting the plants by hand or reaping with flint sickles, the key changes happen way too quickly.

Thanks to evidence we’ll get into later, we know that, in prehistory, the key change from grasses that disperse their own seeds to wheat that has to be harvested took three thousand years to come about. But, when we repeat those methods we find the key genetic changes happen ten times faster compared to when our ancestors got farming started. The experimenters who have been repeating the first steps on the road to farming found the key genetic change could be brought about in, at most, two hundred years. Indeed, they often found it only took about three decades.

See the discrepancy? A result that we know can be achieved in thirty years and certainly should not require longer than a couple of centuries, took our ancestors three millennia to accomplish. Put another way, if our ancestors had begun uprooting grasses by hand, reaping with flint sickles and other methods of basic farming when the Trojan wars were taking place, the key switch from brittle rachis to one that keeps the spikelet attached to the stem would not have happened until the 20th century.

Doesn’t that seem too long a wait to call that transition a ‘revolution’? Let’s be clear that this extraordinarily long period of time in between the cultivation of wild grasses and their

domestication had nothing to do with our ancestors' inability to bring about such changes as quickly as modern day experimenters, replicating Neolithic methods, routinely do.

## Grass as Building Material

Actually, our ancestors didn't wait until cereals were a major part of their diet before settling in permanent villages. The process of settling happened long before we had incorporated cereals into our menus. There is every reason to suppose that our ancestors first became familiar with grasses, not because they produced food, but rather because they supplied what we would later come to think of as a by-product of cereal farming: Straw.

Straw came to play an important role in building the first settlements because it had so many functions that aided in that process. For one thing, it enabled our ancestors to build their own shelters. Adding straw to clay and mud transformed what was usually friable matter into suitable building material from which homes and other permanent structures like ovens or storage bins could be built. Clothing could be made from straw, as could baskets. Straw could be used as fuel for lighting fires.

So, people had many reasons to turn cereal crops into straw as they went about building the first permanent settlements. The way to turn cereal crops into straw would have been to harvest grasses with a sickle, so even if people at first had no idea that straw-producing crops also provided a rich source of nutritious grains, simply by harvesting such crops by sickle (or by uprooting them by hand) they were bound to have been doing what needed to be done in order to bring about that genetic change.

## Lessons Easily Learned

Uprooting by hand or cutting stems using a sickle are pretty simple harvesting techniques, and ensuring the harvesting of such crops led to a food source as well as a useful building material required only that our ancestors followed cues provided by the plants themselves. They just needed to learn to harvest those crops after they began to ripen, to harvest those crops in ways that left the grain on the stem (achievable by uprooting the plant by hand or cutting the stem with a blade, actions they would have taken in order to get the straw they needed) and other simple things like sowing the seeds for next harvest's crop in virgin soil, keeping it away from competing wild crops. None of this would have been too hard to learn for a people who had a long and intimate relationship with those plants, so if there is a reason why it took our ancestors thousands of years to bring about the key genetic change required for domestication, ignorance on their part had nothing to do with that long, long delay.

We can also be sure that cereal crops were not setting the pace, rather than humans, as people like Harari like to imagine. Had that been the case, then no more than decades would have been required for the domestication of large-seeded grasses. As Graeber and Wengrow explained, "wheat would have gained its human handmaidens, and humans would have gained a plant resource that could be efficiently harvested with little loss of seed and that was eminently storable but that also required much greater outlays of labour in the form of land management and the post-harvesting work of threshing and winnowing". Had the plants been in charge while people experimented with growing and harvesting straw/food

crops, Graeber and Wengrow tell us, “within a few generations, the Faustian pact between people and crops would have been sealed”.

As we have seen, though, it was not a small generational gap between the time when the cultivation of wild cereals began and the completion of the process of plant domestication. It was a gap of roughly 150 generations. Such an extraordinarily long time cries out for an explanation that simply cannot be found by assuming crops set the pace, or by supposing humans knew so little about the plants they were cultivating it took millennia for the first stage on the road to farming to be reached.

Archeobotany

As we have seen, millennia ago there was a long period of time in which humans were doing cultivation without that leading to clear changes in the way wild grasses reproduced. But, if so, we have to wonder, how can experts know that cultivation was going on during this time?

The reason why it’s possible to know is because, while the key genetic changes that brought about the domestication of grasses did not happen, other identifiable changes did occur. Whenever humans engage in cultivation, they are striving to improve the life chances of favoured crops. That always entails doing at least a little work, and some of the work that always needs to be done involves soil preparation. The ground needs to be tilled and cleared of unwanted debris your favoured crop doesn’t like.

Whenever the soil is disturbed, that brings about changes that experts in a sub-branch of archeology, known as ‘Archeobotany’, are able to identify. Certain kinds of flora do better than others when the soil is disturbed, and soil preparation induces changes in wild cereal grains, affecting their size and shape.

Therefore, archeobotanical experts interested in ‘pre-domestication cultivation’ can go around prehistoric sites in the Middle East and accumulate statistical evidence which can be analysed so as to see whether those tell-tale indicators of grain size and proportions of arable weed flora show up. Such work has been going on since the 1980s, and has gathered tens of thousands of samples to analyse, and it is from such research that we know, in certain parts of the Middle East, cultivation dates back to 10,000BCE at least. Such investigations also show how, in the same regions, it is not until 7,000 BCE that the switch from brittle to tough rachis and other necessary changes required to change wild grass into domestic crops, occurs.

As we have seen, we know that, simply by using primitive ‘Stone Age’ methods, it should be possible to bring about such changes ten times more rapidly than archeobotanical studies show they actually happened. Surely, the more rapid path to domestication would have happened if agriculture was something our ancestors blindly stumbled upon, and then set down a path whose direction was directed by changes in their crops, as if wheat was directing human activity at least as much as human activity was domesticating wheat?

## A Misunderstanding of Evolution

Whenever we talk about evolutionary developments taking too long to transition from one ‘stage’ to the next, we are misunderstanding how evolution works. Whenever prehistory is talked about, it’s typically framed in terms of beginning with the origins of life, and culminating with the emergence of our own species. Various ‘stages’ are identified along the way, such as the “conquest of the land”, the transition from walking on all fours to bipedal locomotion, and the development of language, all clearly indicating that the eventual development of Homo sapiens sapiens was what natural selection was aiming at all along.

When one assumes a teleological direction to evolutionary development, any delay in transitioning from one stage to the next comes across as a mystery in need of explanation. Suppose, for instance, we found the physiological adaptations that enabled marine animals to drag themselves into land took ten times longer to come about than such changes could have taken. We would wonder: why the delay? Why weren’t fish trying to become land-based creatures that would eventually evolve into us, but instead stuck in an earlier developmental stage?

But this is a fallacious way of thinking, because Natural Selection has no ‘direction’ or aim; no particular species it is trying to bring into existence. As for any particular species and what it ‘wants’, it just wants to survive. It is driven to perpetuate its own species, not to bring new species into existence. It’s just that environmental factors will ensure new species emerge, albeit with no particular species marked out as ‘special’ and no particular time when the next species is due to make its entrance.

Similarly, we really should not think of human history in terms of a teleological journey toward commercial, urban living, or wonder why our ancestors were unnecessarily delayed in making it to another stage in progress towards that ultimate goal. Instead of being puzzled over what took our ancestors so long to discover farming (as if that’s what they should have been trying to do) we should consider this ‘pre-domestication cultivation’ period as an important phase in the story of our species.

## Playful Preagricultural Scientists

Evolution by natural selection is a completely ‘blind’ process in that it plays out with absolutely no anticipation of the future. But humans, as we have seen, are somewhat different. We have ‘actuarial intelligence’ and, since that is so, we are able, at least to some extent, to imagine what might result from any course of action and adjust the course we’re on so as to head in favourable directions and avoid those anticipated at not being so great. Of course we’re not exactly infallible in our ability to predict what will result from the things we do today. History is rife with unintended consequences. But we do have some capacity to run simulations in our minds, debate those imagined costs and benefits, and guide ourselves rather than evolve in a haphazard, random way.

In the case of that 3000 year period we’re now discussing, people were flirting, experimenting, playing with farming, and doing so in ways that enabled them to move in and out of cultivation without ever becoming overly dependent on a few staple crops. We’ve already seen how there’s nothing unusual or anomalous about playing around with farming

or hierarchies, organising life around such things at certain times, only to dismantle such structures later. If we were to assign an attitude to our ancestors, one that would account for this phase that lasted three millennia, it would be one that saw cultivation as one among many possible methods for managing environments conducive for early settlements, and worth doing so long as it did not take too much time away from other practical and social activities people deemed to be just as, or more more, important.

The trouble with serious farming is that, particularly when it is being practiced without tame beasts to pull your plough, it's damned hard work for humans to have to do. When one is out in the fields all day, ploughing fields, clearing weeds, removing stones, watering crops, fighting off pests, one's labour costs and dietary needs are going to see the farming life getting in the way of other activities you might rather be doing, such as hunting wild game, engaging in storytelling with your companions, preparing a marriage ceremony for your daughter, and so on and so on.

Assuming our ancestors really could have foreseen what hard work serious farming would be, why should we suppose they could do much about it? We've already seen how our ancestors had to have been clearing and tilling the soil, as this is work that absolutely needs to be done in order to get cultivation started.

Yes but it turns out it's not necessarily work that humans have to do. There are actually ways of doing cultivation whereby nature is coaxed into doing much of the work for you. Cultivation of this kind takes place on the margins of lakes or rivers subject to seasonal flooding. In wetland conditions such as these, one may rely on 'Flood Retreat Farming'. When such a practice is adopted, people don't need to manually sift and refresh the soil, because the work of tillage is handled by the waters themselves, which leave behind a fertile, nutrient rich soil every time they recede. Nor is there any need to weed your fields or carry out irrigation, because the flood waters take care of those duties, too. Just about the only work flood retreat farmers may have to do involves the construction of 'bunds', which are stone or earthen barriers that nudge the distribution of water in ways favourable to the results you want. Other than that, though, this farming method is, as Graeber and Wengrow commented, "a distinctly lackadaisical way to raise crops".

Flood-retreat farming may have been great for early cultivators who wanted to free up as much time as possible for other activities, but it was no good at all for the development of private property. Practicing this method of farming required little in the way of central management, and in fact was resistant to the enclosure and measurement of land. There would have been no point in claiming ownership of any particular parcel of land, because who would want to permanently own a bit of land that was fertile one year, but maybe flooded or arid the next? And what sense did it make to set up boundaries? This was a style of farming which caused the very ground to shift underneath you, so the idea of fixed enclosures made absolutely no sense. "If anything", Graeber and Wengrow argued, "flood-retreat farming was practically oriented towards the collective holding of land, or at least flexible systems of field allocation".

So then: 'Serious Farming' was delayed by some three thousand years because people had other priorities, other ways of spending their time, and so when they found environments that did much of the work of cultivation for them, they coaxed nature into doing exactly that. In

doing so, they were adopting strategically chosen practices that worked against both the establishment of private property and the morphological changes required for plant domestication and the need to turn farming into an existential, full-time occupation.

A Scientist Called Eve

When viewed through the perspective of an ethic that valorises ‘hard work’, such as that which prevails today, there may seem something wrong with the idea of Man actively going about implementing strategies that enabled them to reduce work to a minimum so they could play and socialise. And, yes, there is indeed something wrong here. Only, it is not how ‘lazy’ the first cultivators were, but rather the assumption that they were men.

It is also wrong to assume one needs to do little work in order to become a ‘flood-retreat’ farmer. In order to bring about a situation in which the environment takes care of much of the requirements of cultivation, our ancestors would have had to acquire practical knowledge of how different species of plants thrived or struggled in different sorts of water regimes. They would have had to have tried out a variety of harvesting techniques while making sure to keep track of how each method affected the growth, reproduction, and nutrition of plants and their edible parts.

Also, ‘plant-based knowledge’ is concerned with much more than discovering new ways of working with flora so as to replenish or add to inventories of food. Plants, after all, provide so much more: Medicines, poisons, and pigments, all of which required understanding if a community was to extract such uses from the flora around them.

We have also earlier pondered on the inspiration of creation myths, supposing they were inspired, at least to some extent, by the challenges of establishing the first permanent settlements in mud-based environments such as swamps or lake margins (see Book Nine). No wonder such myths talk of a constant struggle against the forces of chaos; they were told by people searching for stories that helped make sense of living somewhere which, on the plus side, was incredibly fertile and provided an easy life if managed properly, but also came with the threat of washing everything away or causing the collapse of structures when the swampy, muddy ground they were built on shifted.

Just building structures out of mud-based materials entailed deep knowledge of the tectonic properties of soil and clay. We’ve already seen how, by mixing the straw and chaff obtained by harvesting grasses with sickles, friable substances like clays become basic materials for building permanent structures.

But the plastic qualities of clay almost certainly led to our ancestors modelling different kinds of relationships between themselves and animals, or between the two genders, as well as between people and plants. We may suppose this was going on, because archeologists have found many small geometric tokens made out of clay, and these are seen by many experts as precursors to later systems of mathematical notation developed so as to further aid in the figuring out of mental problems. It may also be very significant that tokens like these are found in direct association with figurines of herd animals and women. According to Graeber and Wengrow, these are “the kind of miniatures that stimulate so much modern

speculation about Neolithic spirituality, and which find later echoes in myths about the demiurgic, life-giving properties of clay".

One such myth is, of course, the story of Man's creation as told in the Bible. Now, think of what is missing from all those speculations based on the idea that wheat domesticated humans. When framed that way, there is no need to investigate the many forms of practical work our ancestors did, or contemporary people living close to wild nature still do, and nor is there any need to consider what intellectual debates might have taken place as such people thought through the implications of such work (as they must have done, if actuarial intelligence avoided falling into dependency on domesticated crops for three thousand years). No, all such speculations can be dispensed with in favour of tales full of poetic imagery of the temptations of wily grasses and the planting of a single seed as the act that leads inexorably to peasants tied to the land, slaving away to build the agricultural base of industrial, commercial centres full of people slaving away to earn the money accumulating in the bank accounts of the high and mighty.

In the version of the Fall of Man myth, told by those who think the adoption of farming had us "running to our chains", the snake is not the only main character written out of this version of the tale. This is because, in replacing the concrete, scientific work of understanding Nature so its environments work to assist in the development of higher human values with something more mystical, it is 'Eve' that is being written out of this version of the Eden myth. Just about the closest you can get to an anthropological universal is the observation that, wherever plant-based knowledge is being practiced- work that involves harvesting plants for materials that can be transformed into medicines or foods or pigments or clothing or complex structures like baskets- such work will be carried out by women. Even if such work is something the males in such societies also occasionally do, it will very likely be work that is gendered 'female'.

As Graeber and Wengrow explained, "where evidence exists, it points to strong associations between women and plant-based knowledge as far back as we can trace such things…women's association with such knowledge extends back to some of the earliest surviving depictions of the human form; the ubiquitous sculpted female figurines of the last Ice Age with their woven head-gear, string skirts and belts made of cord".

But somehow, even though anthropological studies and archeological findings indicate that women played an important and probably primary role in developing plant-based knowledge, the fact that such work was so often done by women as to lead to 'plant-based knowledge' being gendered female is not treated as in any way important. In Book Eight we talked about Levis-Strauss's argument, put forward in 'The Savage Mind', in which he suggested there were two modes of scientific thought, one more abstract and concerned with an intellectual search for general 'laws of nature' and mathematical theorems, and one that originated in practical ways of working with Nature.

Today, when we think of scientists doing 'science', it's easy to think of such work as removed from the everyday, real world the rest of us inhabit, even if we also hope (or fear) that the fruits of such scientific endeavours will have an effect on our way of life. Scientists work in laboratories, or at facilities like CERN, where the rest of us don't go. There, they use specialist equipment like X-ray telescopes or particle accelerators or electron microscopes

the rest of us are not trained to use, and when they write up their findings, they do so using a language of symbols and equations the rest of us don't understand.

But scientific innovation in prehistoric times was not like this. Back then, scientific laboratories were not rare places only those with the requisite formal training were permitted to be, they were potentially everywhere and anywhere. One reason why we fail to see it was mainly women who did the scientific work of understanding nature sufficiently well to get Neolithic farming started is because, when we think of 'farming', we tend to use decidedly male-gendered words. What, after all, are the main kinds of activity one does while 'farming'? Mostly, we consider it to involve 'agriculture' and 'domestication'. The latter term implies domination or control over a nature that would otherwise run as wild as slaves would, unfettered from the mechanisms of coercion, and the former strips away all but one of the myriad ways in which plant-based knowledge could be turned to practical effect (work almost always done by women, remember) and reduces it to essentially nothing but the production of food. Oh, and straw which is good only as a bi-product that can feed your livestock. In both cases, the contributions women made to the plant-based knowledge that forms the very foundations upon which all subsequent civilizations are still built, just gets ignored.

Writing 'Eve' back into the story requires a shift away from thinking about 'farming' in prehistoric times in terms that imply domination over Nature, or a single-minded determination to squeeze ever more calories from the land, were all that were going on. Instead, we should think of such work as being more botanical, more like gardening. It did not entail dividing the land up into enclosed fields or the separation of plant species into 'food', 'herbs', 'drugs' and 'weeds'; it involved creating temporary habitats and growing all kinds of plants side by side, all while applying practical knowledge that would tip the ecological scales in ways actuarial intelligence deemed favourable.

Male Leaders Are Historical; Female Leaders Are Mythical (and the Complex Reality)

Another way in which the work of women tends to be written out of ancient history can be seen in the way art is interpreted. One way in which we can tell a society has shifted away from egalitarianism to one built around definite hierarchies, is because the ruling men of such civilisations love it when artistic works that emphasise their greatness, get commissioned. So when archeologists discover paintings or statues showing larger-than-life men towering over their lesser subjects, they know these to be artistic renderings of great and powerful male leaders. We can be assured that these were a people ruled by kings, pharaohs or emperors.

'Kings', 'pharaohs' and 'emperors' are all historical characters. Sometimes, archeology also discovers artwork featuring larger-than-life female figures, only when such discoveries are made, these tend to be interpreted as images of goddesses, which is to say characters that exist only in fantasy.

So, when we think about the origins of farming, we tend to assume it was primarily built from the male-gendered work of agriculture and domestication, when all evidence suggests it really developed from female-gendered botanical and gardening work, and then when we find art honouring the work of those ancient female scientists, we dismissively interpret such images as mythological rather than historical.

Indeed, this whole female-led period of prehistory tends to be written off as not particularly important; just a pause, a social catch of breath, before humanity took the step it was preordained to take on the way to Capitalism, urban living and commercial markets.

But three millennia is way too long a pause. We really can't talk about a 'switch' from paleolithic forager to Neolithic farmer when we know this was a transition that took three thousand years (ten times longer than necessary). Nor can we assert that once a people start to farm they are locked into a simple route heading straight for hierarchy and concentrations of power and wealth. At best, we can only say this is one possible outcome among a variety of alternatives.

As Graeber and Wengrow pointed out, "clearly, it no longer makes any sense to use phrases like 'the agricultural revolution' when dealing with processes of such inordinate length and complexity. And since there was no Eden-like state from which the first farmers could take their first steps on the road to inequality, it makes even less sense to talk about agriculture as marking the origins of social rank, inequality, or private property".

Other than Europe itself, there is no region on Earth that has been subjected to more intense archeological study than the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East. Given its assumed place in human history, fascination with this part of the world is hardly surprising. The legendary people and events found in Abrahamic religions were said to have happened here and it has long been recognised as the place where humans first set off down the road toward plant and animal domestication.

In fact, the Fertile Crescent has been studied so intensely, we need not rely only on available evidence as we attempt to reconstruct the transition to farming and how that changed the way humans lived. We can also use lack of evidence as a guide. For example, one is on fairly solid ground if one asserts that warfare was not a significant feature of early Middle Eastern farming societies. If critics were to demand evidence backing up such a position, it can be pointed out that lack of evidence surely counts. After all, had warfare been going on, evidence of some kind pointing to this fact would have been uncovered by now.

The evidence also shows that humanity's transition to farming was much more complex than a question such as "what were the social implications of the transition to farming?" would seem to imply. Such a question implies one transition, one set of implications, and we now know for a fact that the thousands' year history of development was way more complex than that.

We should also know (if we're basing our beliefs on evidence) that there is no necessary link between the planting of seeds and the domestication of animals, and the development of unequal social arrangements. For some reason, it's quite common to assume a "tragedy of the commons" must result unless we accept the privatisation of land and relinquishment of some of our freedoms to classes of overseers assigned management roles. This is an odd assumption, given that there's nothing particularly exceptional about methods of sustainably expanding agriculture without privatisation or centralised management. We know that it's quite possible to establish communal tenure, the co-operative management of pasture, 'open field' principles and periodic redistribution of plots, all of which work against individualistic

private ownership. After all, we have examples of such systems being in operation over the whole of Europe, often being practiced for centuries.

To sum up, then, the idea that, by planting seeds one is somehow inevitably laying down the roots of dominance hierarchies, private land ownership, and basically set on a fairly rapid move away from egalitarianism never to return, can no longer be treated as the default assumption, the way human history must have played out. Maybe, sometimes, people did set about domesticating plants that lead to all that, but it's by no means the case that playing around with agriculture puts people on a one-way journey toward "Assyrian charioteers, Confuscian Bureaucrats, Inca Sun-Kings or Aztec priests carrying away a significant chunk of your grain" (as Graber and Wengrow summed up the default assumption).

Instead, in many places, people first took to farming rather reluctantly, as though the potential for food production it promised was not always something that looked to foragers, fishers and hunters as an obviously superior way to live.

Also, people didn't "run blindly to their chains"; they thought about and debated the logical implications of agriculture, modelled the possible outcomes and social arrangements using clay figurines and geometric tokens, and actively worked to avoid any major commitment to a life dependent on the domestication of wild Nature.

Ice Ages and Golden Ages

Actuarial Intelligence is not the only reason why agriculture did not develop sooner than experiments in Neolithic farming practices suggest it should have spread. There is another reason, and it has to do with human population levels and the climate.

In order for an agricultural economy to leave traces in the archeological record, there needs to be periods of warm climate that last long enough for this to happen. We know that, since the human species came into existence, there have been two such warm periods. The first, known as the 'Eemian Intergalacial', happened roughly 130,000 years ago. Thanks to the restricted geographical range of our species back then, the impact this warm period had on human populations was limited.

The second Intergalacial period began roughly 12,000 years ago and it is named the Holocene, from the Greek Holos Kainos ('Entire New'). Unlike 130,000 years ago, human populations at the start of the Holocene were present on all the world's continents, so there was much more chance that some populations would discover and adopt farming in some noticeable way once the conditions for agriculture's origins were made climatically possible.

However, those same conditions also created ideal conditions for foragers in many parts of the world, and it's important to remember that the first farmers were trying to establish their way of life amidst what was a Golden Age for foragers. They did not set off at a running pace that quickly left the previous stage of hunter-gathering far behind; they were, at the onset of farming, the cultural underdogs.

Now, those who have read Book Nine might be wondering:  how does the existence of Ice Ages reconcile with the image of Earth presented by the Purple Dawn epoch which,

Comparative Mythologists and Electric Star proponents insisted, were the conditions under which humans evolved? Wasn't there supposed to be sub-tropical temperatures everywhere back then? Surely there cannot have been any ice ages if that was so and, consequently, compelling evidence showing the last Ice Age did happen fatally undermines the Purple Dawn hypothesis?

Actually, no. One of the curious things about the last Ice Age was the way the glacial ice sheets formed and spread. Going by the standard model of the Earth's ancient climate, one would expect the glacial sheets to form in the northern polar regions and spread down from there. But that's not what happened. Instead, the glacial ice sheets started as a ring around the lower latitudes of the Arctic Circle.

The Purple Dawn actually explains this as a side effect of Saturn's approach to Sol. During the long period of that approach, the Saturnian system caused the periodic appearance of dark and dense aurora, and what that did was cast a semi-permanent shadow on the surface of the Earth, underneath what was essentially an impenetrable opaque atmospheric ring.

Within the bounds of that ring of shadow, the temperature dropped sufficiently to cause the water droplets misting down from Saturn to freeze. So, the ice sheets started as a ring around the lower latitudes of the Arctic circle, right where that shadow was, and spread both north and south at their heights. That is what produced the last Ice Age, the end of which came some 12,000 years ago when contact with the Sun's heliosphere caused the Saturnian system to lose its opaque plasma sheath.

Another one of those paradoxes in mainstream science is the fact that Siberia and Northern Alaska were largely ice free during the last Ice Age. The Purple Dawn explanation for this curious fact is that the ring of auroral activity encompassed much of North America, Northern Europe and much of Russia. But, inside this ring, Saturn's glow maintained a more comfortable environment. Both the warming influence of Saturn and its glowing Birkeland current around such regions converted large parts of Siberia into lush environments, which explains how big mammals like mammoths could sustain such vast herds. Inside the ring of ice there was a sanctuary warm enough for an abundance of plant life, which supported them.

Then, 12,000 years ago, contact was made with Sol's heliosphere and the Saturnian system's plasma sheath turned transparent, and as a consequence what was once a northern paradise turned cold. Then, as the Saturnian system's spiralling journey caused it to head toward the sun once more, the combined warmth of flared Saturn and the approaching sun melted the ring of ice and conditions ripe for a Golden Age was established.

As the Ice sheets receded, environments that could be colonised were opened up. Since the earliest forms of human society were foragers, those were the first peoples to set about inhabiting these lands and, naturally, they prioritised settling in territories that were most fertile, most able to sustain their way of life with minimal expenditure or effort on less important practical concerns.

When Europeans arrived thousands of years later, they would come with superior military technology and were thus able to force indigenous populations away from the choicest estates. The first farmers, however, had no such martial strength and so the only spaces they could fill were those considered undesirable by foraging people.

It would be wrong, then, to suppose that when agriculture began it soon unlocked a bounty of material resources. The first farmers did not rush to adopt a way of life that seemed an obvious economic bonanza. Instead, oftentimes farming was something that started out as an economy of deprivation.

But, for those populations not forced to eke out a living coaxing productivity from the land, but instead living in places where nature could be manipulated to support all kinds of socialising and pursuits of higher spiritual values, there was no need to either live a miserable life scratching around for basic material necessities, nor to turn into a sort of peasantry, existentially involved in cultivation. Farming, for such people, was something to play around with, experimenting to see what likely effects the results had on society, and using such knowledge in a concrete, scientific way that led to the discovery of gardening and botanical techniques that ensured the food web that supported these peoples was broad enough to ensure cultivation never became a matter of utter dependence on a few crops.

Why Does Any Of This Matter, If Hierarchy Had To Ultimately Triumph?

It is true to say that, locked away inside grasses that, with the right kind of encouragement from Neolithic scientists, could evolve into a few staple crops that require the logical rigours of sustaining monocultures, there were ways of sustaining cities the likes of which ‘play farming’ simply could not support. One might therefore be inclined to say it really doesn’t matter if, how, or why farming took so long to show its potential. That potential was bound to happen, and indeed had to happen if populations measuring in the billions were ever to come about. So why not just skip over this period of three millennia when there was a Golden Age of foraging and an economy of deprivation for farmers, and just jump straight to the point where farming allowed for the development of great cities, and great cities with their huge populations necessitated chains of command, formal offices of leadership, and administrators of the threat of violence (soldiers and police) who are there to keep the masses in check?

The answer is that it’s just too historically inaccurate to just disregard thousands of years of human history. And for what reason? Just so we can keep on believing society evolved through the straightforward stages outlined by Turgot? We pay a price if we prefer to stick to this inaccurate, simplified version of human history, because by adopting this version of events we slip back into that myth that says environmental conditions force us down that straightforward path that leads to dominance hierarchies and commercial markets, as if the most playful, artistic, imaginative species ever to have evolved so far, has no capacity to reflect on the direction society is heading in, and steer it in other directions. A less abridged version of human history shows just how wrong that assumption is.

Hopefully this book has succeeded in showing how many of our assumptions of the past are wrong. In the next book, we return to that very fringe idea that mythical thought and religious practice originated from a witnessed celestial transformation of Saturn from a brown dwarf

star to the distant ringed planet we know so well today, presenting further evidence to support this seemingly very bizarre idea.

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