

The Dawn of Everything

Session 6

Chapter 12 – Conclusion

The Dawn of Everything

OLLI Discussion Group
Donald Fournier



Chapter 12 – The Dawn of Everything

- In this chapter, the authors summarize their primary arguments and continue to counter long-standing assumptions in archeology and anthropology.
- The authors work to dispel the myths that pre-Enlightenment societies and early hunter-gatherer societies were necessarily simple and in thrall to supernatural superstitions and entrenched customs.



Chapter 12 – The Dawn of Everything

- The authors contend that these societies were extraordinarily diverse, complex, and self-consciously experimental.
- The authors also contend that we could have been living under radically different conceptions of what human society is actually about.




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- This means that mass enslavement, genocide, prison camps, even patriarchy or regimes of wage labor never had to happen.
- When we examine the assumption that there was some ‘original’ form of human society and that ‘civilization’ and ‘complexity’ always come at the price of human freedoms, we find this is not true.



Chapter 12 – The Dawn of Everything

- ▶ Throughout the book the authors make statements about the establishment of freedoms, power, cultures, cities, and states.
 - ▶ We'll examine these and discuss our views on their conjectures.
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Important Concepts – 1

- The authors make the decision to treat early humans and their societies as if they were distinct, specific, and rational beings.
- This is as opposed to undifferentiated mass of apolitical groups who possessed no agency in how they determined to build their societies.



Important Concepts – 2

- ▶ There is no reason to assume that small-scale groups were more likely to be equalitarian or the converse that large groups must have hierarchy and even bureaucracy to function.
- ▶ This is a rebuttal to the concept of the conventional narrative (hunter-gatherers, agrarian societies, cities, states, and empires).



Important Concepts – 3

- ▶ European traders, missionaries, and settlers engaged in prolonged conversations with peoples of the New World. From this comes the Indigenous critique of European culture having a profound influence on European thinking.
- ▶ The indigenous people are more than noble savages and simply innocent and primitive.




Important Concepts – 4

- Our earliest ancestors were far more physically diverse than humans are today and their social differences even more so.
- There is no 'original' form of human society and searching for one is an exercise in myth-making.



Important Concepts – 5

- Early societies practiced ‘seasonal dualism’. They moved fluidly between different forms of social organization at different times of the year.
 - With such institutional flexibility comes the capacity to step outside the boundaries of any given structure and to both make and unmake the political worlds they lived in.
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Important Concepts – 6

- The 'legacy of European colonial expansion' played a significant role in how the concept of private property, particularly involving land ownership, was transported to the colonies.
- Along with this concept came the use of bureaucratic terror to force local people to work (outright enslavement, punitive tax regimes, corvee labor, and debt peonage).



Important Concepts – 7

- Agriculture represents a choice about how humans decide to organize their respective societies.
- This choice reflected questions about values, about what humans really are, or consider themselves to be, and how they should relate to one another.



Important Concepts – 8

- The authors consider this 3,000-year period an important phase of human history. A phase marked by foragers of moving in and out of 'civilization.'
- So long as it did not become too onerous, cultivation was just one of many ways in which settled communities managed their environments.

Important Concepts – 9

- The contributions of women have been consistently undervalued in the development of human civilization.
- The harvesting of wild plants and turning them into food, medicine, and complex products like baskets and clothing were almost everywhere a female activity.



Important Concepts – 10

- We know much less about the prehistory of other regions than we do about the Fertile Crescent.
- None followed a linear trajectory from food production to state formation.
- Food production did not always present itself to foragers, fishers, and hunters as an obvious beneficial thing.



Important Concepts – 11

- Increasing the number of people living in one place can vastly increase the range of social possibilities.
- In no sense does it predetermine which of those possibilities will ultimately be realized.
- The hierarchical form of social organization is not necessary or inevitable.



Important Concepts – 12

- Historians misinterpret the tenor of conversations between Europeans – including the French and Spanish – and the indigenous peoples of the Americas.
- The authors claim that indigenous ideas about equality and democratic rule were transported back to Europe, providing a significant spark for the Enlightenment rather than the other way around.



Important Concepts – 13

- Urban populations seem to have a remarkable capacity for self-governance in ways which, while usually not quite ‘egalitarian,’ were likely a good deal more participatory than almost any urban government today.
- The archeological record reveals systems that resemble democracies, town councils, and local meeting places.



Important Concepts – 14

- Instead of some male genius realizing his solitary vision, innovation in Neolithic societies was based on a collective body of knowledge accumulated over centuries, largely by women, in an endless series of humble but, in fact, enormously significant discoveries.
- Many of those Neolithic discoveries had the cumulative effect of reshaping everyday life.



Important Concepts – 15

- There are three basic forms of social liberty that might actually be put into practice:
 - The freedom to move away or relocate from ones surroundings,
 - The freedom to ignore or disobey commands issued by others,
 - The freedom to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones.



Important Concepts – 16

- Modern states are an amalgam of elements that happen to have come together at a certain point in human history – and, arguably, are now in the process of coming apart again.
- New forms of social organization and governance are arising considering technological changes in communication, travel, and financial systems.
- States are no more inevitable than they are eternal.