

OLLI Discussion Group

The Dawn of Everything

A New History of Humanity

By:

David Graeber & David Wengrow



David Wengrow

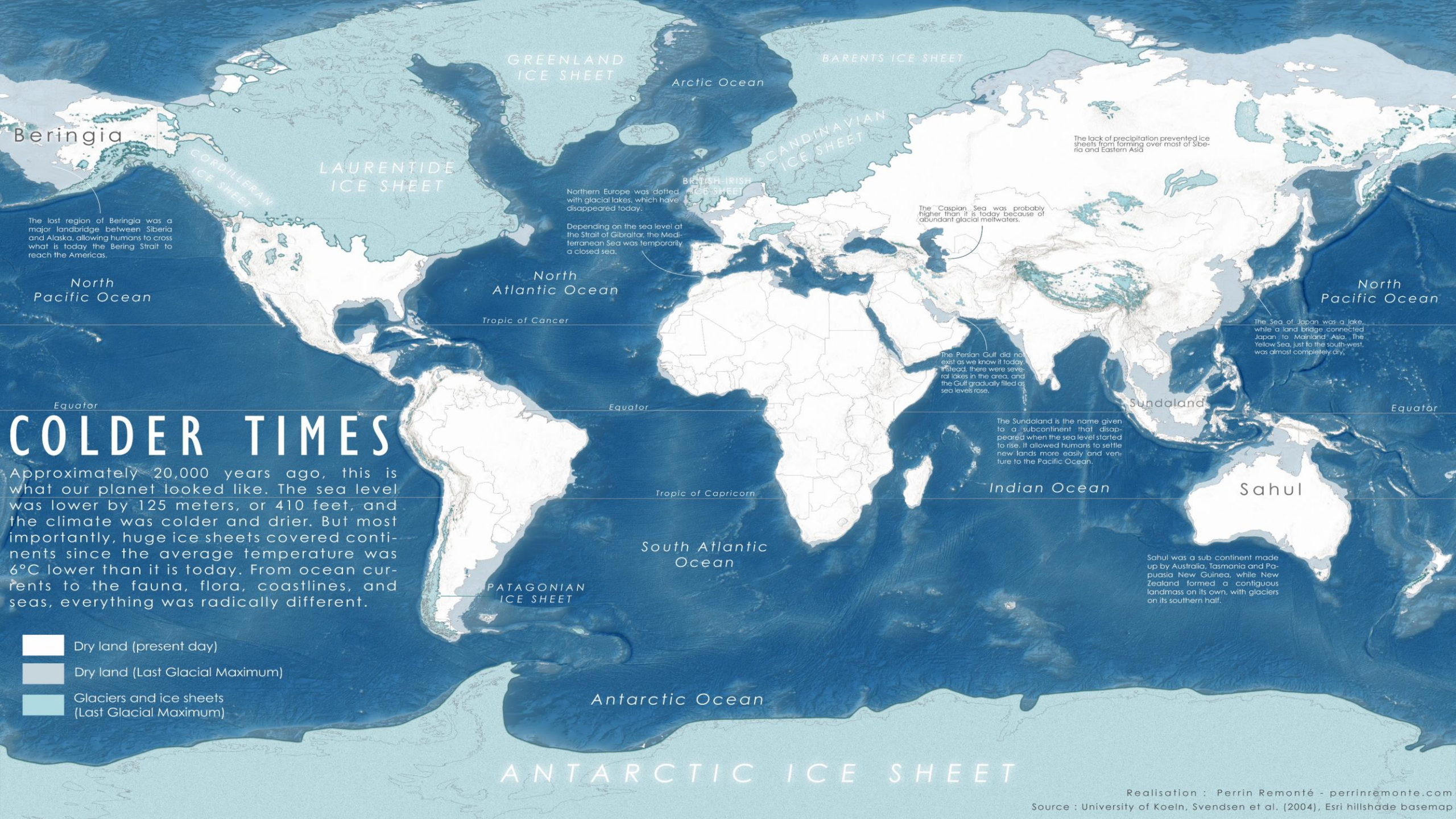
- David Wengrow trained in archaeology and anthropology at the University of Oxford, and he believes that these two fields might just hold new ways to think about the ways society and culture have developed.
- He makes the case that archaeological research is the only reliable way to reconstruct most of our species' history.
- https://www.ted.com/talks/david_wengrow_a_new_understanding_of_human_history_and_the_roots_of_inequality



Population Bottleneck



- ▶ Experts have suggested that 74,000 years ago one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in earth's history took place, causing the human population to sharply decline.
- ▶ The eruption, which occurred at Indonesia's Mount Toba, led to a volcanic winter that lasted between six and 10 years and in turn, likely sparked a bottleneck in human evolution about 70,000 years ago.
- ▶ To give some context of just how catastrophic this event was, the total population of *Homo sapiens* went from around 300,000 to just 3,000-10,000 survivors!



Beringia

The last region of Beringia was a major landbridge between Siberia and Alaska, allowing humans to cross what is today the Bering Strait to reach the Americas.

Northern Europe was dotted with glacial lakes, which have disappeared today.

Depending on the sea level at the Strait of Gibraltar, the Mediterranean Sea was temporarily a closed sea.

The Caspian Sea was probably higher than it is today because of abundant glacial meltwaters.

The lack of precipitation prevented ice sheets from forming over most of Siberia and Eastern Asia.

The Persian Gulf did not exist as we know it today. Instead, there were several lakes in the area, and the Gulf gradually filled as sea levels rose.

The Sea of Japan was a lake, while a land bridge connected Japan to Mainland Asia. The Yellow Sea, just to the south-west, was almost completely dry.

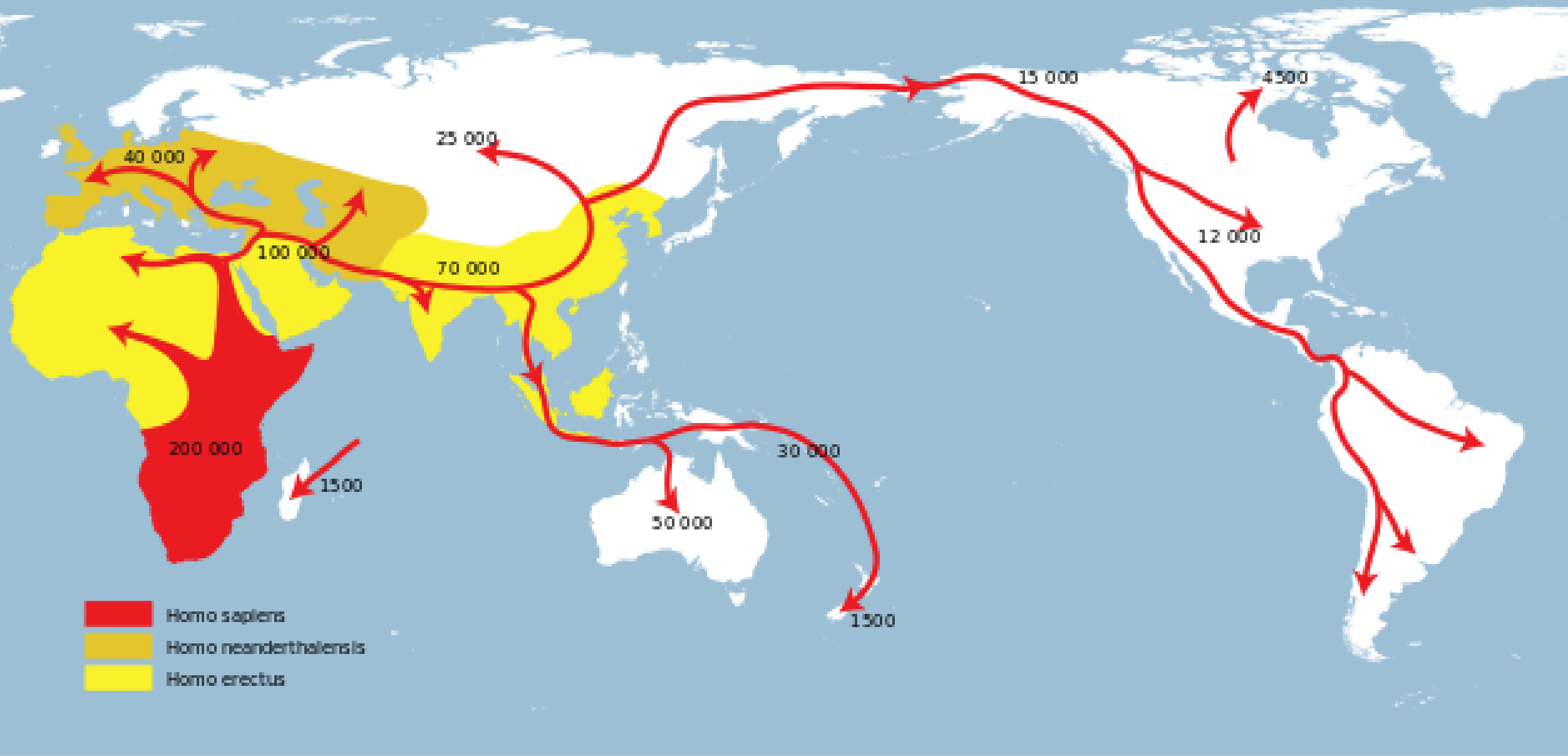
The Sundaland is the name given to a subcontinent that disappeared when the sea level started to rise. It allowed humans to settle new lands more easily and venture to the Pacific Ocean.

Sahul was a sub continent made up by Australia, Tasmania and Papua New Guinea, while New Zealand formed a contiguous landmass on its own, with glaciers on its southern half.

COLDER TIMES

Approximately 20,000 years ago, this is what our planet looked like. The sea level was lower by 125 meters, or 410 feet, and the climate was colder and drier. But most importantly, huge ice sheets covered continents since the average temperature was 6°C lower than it is today. From ocean currents to the fauna, flora, coastlines, and seas, everything was radically different.

- Dry land (present day)
- Dry land (Last Glacial Maximum)
- Glaciers and ice sheets (Last Glacial Maximum)



Source: Kahn Academy



- Researchers believe that the Upper Paleolithic, which dates back 50,000 to 12,000 years, is the period during which humans began engaging in modern behavior, meaning that suddenly we had things like cave art, organized settlements, fishing, and complex social networks.



- The act of socializing increased early humans' chances of survival. As our brains continued to grow in size and complexity, they required more and more nurturing in order to mature to their full potential. As such, these early humans began building social bonds and communities, and sharing food and tools with one another.
- Surviving the hardships of early human life such as the glacial climate would've been vastly easier with a community and social interactions.



- Some experts believe that war and conflict in our modern world is the result of culture and not human nature,
- There is evidence to suggest that violence is intrinsically part of our DNA and always has been. We now know that warfare and weapons existed in primitive cultures and that violence was a leading cause of death among men.

The Spread of Agriculture



Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)


- He argued in his book *Leviathan* that, without government, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”
- During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that conditions called war; and such a war, as if of every man, against every man.
- Some people would attack you because they need your resources to survive. Others would attack you because they want to be more powerful than everyone else. Even those who don't need or want to attack you are a danger, because they can't trust that you will leave them alone, so to be safe, they must attack you first.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

- Rousseau looked to a hypothetical "state of nature" as a normative guide. In the original condition, humans would have had "no moral relations with or determinate obligations to one another". Because of their rare contact with each other, differences between individuals would have been of little significance. Living separately, there would have been no feelings of envy or distrust, and no existence of property or conflict.
- He did not believe humans to be innately superior to other species. However, human beings did have the unique ability to change their nature through free choice, instead of being confined to natural instincts.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

- ▶ As long as differences in wealth and status among families were minimal, the first coming together in groups was accompanied by a fleeting golden age of human flourishing.
- ▶ The development of agriculture, metallurgy, private property, and the division of labor and resulting dependency on one another, however, led to economic inequality and conflict.
- ▶ As population pressures forced them to associate more and more closely, they underwent a psychological transformation: they began to see themselves through the eyes of others and came to value the good opinion of others as essential to their self-esteem.



Neo-evolutionists (1950s and 1960s)

- Discrete stages of political organization: bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states.
 - They held that these stages of political development mapped roughly to similar stages of economic development: hunter-gatherers, gardeners, farmers, industrial civilization.
 - This did not fit for many indigenous groups who were available to study.
 - The highly seasonal environments of the last glacial period lead to alternative social arrangements.
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Chapters 4&5 for Next Week

