

Gender egalitarianism made us human

A response to David Graeber & David Wengrow's 'How to
change the course of human history'

Camilla Power



2018

Contents

First, evolution.	4
Second, sex and gender	5
Third, Africa	5
Egalitarian bodies and minds	6
Symbolism and language depend on egalitarianism	10
In the beginning was the word, and the word was NO!	11
Gender ambiguity lies at the core of earliest religious ideas	14
Gender egalitarianism made us human: the untold secret	15

In an ambitious recent article in *Eurozine* David Graeber and David Wengrow try to rewrite the narrative of human history. They attack the ‘myth’ that humans had once enjoyed equality and freedom in hunter-gatherer bands, until the invention of farming sent us down the road to social inequality.

They claim that popular writers Francis Fukuyama and Jared Diamond as well as archaeologists Kent Flannery, Joyce Marcus and Ian Morris have swallowed this myth wholesale. As a result, these authors come up with dismal conclusions about social inequality: unless we can transport a small proportion of surviving humans back into a golden age, we can never again achieve political goals of social justice and proper sharing.

Graeber and Wengrow passionately defend the history of civilization as rich in examples of human resistance to tyranny and hierarchy. They provide evidence for the social complexity of Upper Palaeolithic hunters, arguing that the advent of farming was not a ‘major transition’ for most populations but a creeping process. I agree with these assessments. But I find myself confused by their argument, largely because I am not sure whether they are trying to say anything about human origins. Are they trying to replace one myth with another?

In talks, I have clearly heard Graeber and Wengrow deny that they are discussing origins. Yet, the standfirst of the *Eurozine* piece says ‘the story we have been telling ourselves about our origins is wrong...’ OK, was that slipped in by a sub-editor who misinterpreted matters? On the one hand, they assert that we can’t know anything about social life before the Upper Palaeolithic (from ca. 40,000 years ago), there’s just no evidence. On the other hand, they definitively state that the story about our ancestors living in ‘tiny, egalitarian bands’ is wrong. But how do they know it’s wrong if there’s no evidence? And which bit is wrong exactly? That the bands were tiny? That they were egalitarian? So what is the story?

Graeber and Wengrow end their article with unsubstantiated remarks on gender relations among small-scale hunter-gatherers, to the effect that living in nomadic camps necessarily involves ‘painful loss of human freedoms’. They avoid using any modern-day, expert ethnography, in particular the careful studies that show African hunter-gatherer women lose status and freedom from male control as they become more sedentary. This happens when women are less able to move and avail themselves of sophisticated support networks. African hunter-gatherers especially resist the atomization of nuclear families using many mechanisms to create links between far-flung friends and relatives. One diagnostic of truly egalitarian hunter-gatherers is that people can live where they choose.

When discussing Morris’ economic income models of Palaeolithic life, Graeber and Wengrow themselves add in, ‘but what about all the free stuff: security, dispute resolution, primary education, care of the elderly, medicine, music, religion...’. Their list goes on, and yet, significantly, they leave out free collective childcare – probably the single most telling aspect of gender relations among hunter-gatherers, according to modern-day anthropology.

In this response, I first want to establish that Graeber and Wengrow really have nothing to say about human origins. Then I am going to present evidence that beginning with our ancestors in genus *Homo*, and culminating in our recent modern human ancestors, we did live in increasingly egalitarian societies. What's more, gender egalitarianism was pivotal to the evolution of our language-speaking ancestors. Finally I'll ask whether it makes a difference if our modern human bodies and minds evolved through a prolonged period of increasing egalitarianism. Would it help us if it were true that this was our nature? That we were designed by natural and sexual selection to be happy and healthy in egalitarian conditions? If so, then perhaps the positive question that needs asking first is not 'how did we get to be unequal?' but 'how did we first become equal?'

The transitions I focus on occurred 2 million, half a million and 150,000 years ago, a different timescale from Graeber and Wengrow's. The reasons they are disqualified from speaking about human origins are as follows. First, they give no context of evolution. Second, they don't deal with sex and gender. Third, they leave out Africa, the continent on which we evolved as modern humans.

First, evolution.

As an American cultural anthropologist, Graeber comes from a tradition which regards Darwinism with distrust, viewing it as a Trojan horse for capitalist ideology. But the funny thing is that sociobiology, evolutionary ecology, or whatever you want to call it (it keeps changing name because social and cultural scientists are so rude about it) has taken an extraordinary feminist turn this century. The strategies of females have now become central to models of human origins. Forget 'man the hunter', it's hard-working grandmothers, babysitting apes, children with more than one daddy, who are the new Darwinian heroes. Man the mighty hunter comes as a late afterthought. And these are not just lean-in alpha females we are talking about, this involves collectivity in increasingly complex female coalitions, with the idea that the 'social brain is for females' extrapolated from primate studies.

The leading problem in sociobiology today, says evolutionary economist Herbert Gintis, 'is explaining why we have such prosocial emotions'. The outstanding Darwinian feminist Sarah Hrdy cites this at the start of her *Mothers and Others*, the most important book on human evolution written this century. In political meetings, David Graeber argues that capitalism preys upon and parasitizes our instincts for cooperation. Without those instincts to help each other with our problems, it would simply collapse. I agree with him completely.

But isn't Graeber interested in how we got such instincts? In a Darwinian world, they don't come for free. None of our great ape relatives comes close. We regularly do something that no other complex social mammal does. We cooperate with strangers, people we've never seen before and will never see again. This is normal for both egali-

tarian hunter-gatherers and for people on the tube in London. So what made us, one of the African great apes, so different from the others?

Second, sex and gender

About sex and gender relations, Graeber and Wengrow have nothing serious to say. That is wise because if they don't take account of evolution, it's hard to discuss these subjects.

They do offer one tangential passage on gender imagery. They cite female figurines and statues in a neolithic agricultural community (Catalhayuk) as an index of women's power. By contrast, they suggest the rampant genitalia of male animals depicted on monumental hunter-gatherer architecture at Göbekli Tepe implies reduced status for women. For archaeologists and anthropologists, this is very reductive interpretation of gendered iconography. To give a modern example, the huge presence of the Virgin Mary in Catholic churches never gave me much power over my reproductive decisions.

Several Venus figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic are known technically as 'phallic-form'. Look at them one way, you see the tits and arses, look at them another and they're dicks! It's like a gender mutable optical illusion. We need a theory to explain why gender ambiguity features so strongly in hunter-gatherer cosmologies. Female initiates of the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari turn into antelope bulls, while Hadza girls in Tanzania embody a matriarchal heroine who hunts and ties onto herself the genitalia of male zebra. Being initiated into the Congo BaYaka women's secret society Ngoku involves ribald performances mimicking male sexual behaviour with all necessary secretions flowing all over the place. These African hunter-gatherers really are among the most gender egalitarian peoples on earth.

The absence of gender is the big hole in the Graeber and Wengrow article. Can we begin to talk about in/equality without addressing sex and gender? From an evolutionary perspective, it is likely to be central to the entire argument.

Third, Africa

Back in the 1980s to early 1990s, it was possible to write about the revolution which made us human, invoking art, symbolism and language, and only address evidence from the European Upper Palaeolithic. The idea that, while we evolved anatomically in Africa, we only really got smart when we hit Europe, as shown by the beautiful cave paintings and figurines, now looks dated, Eurocentric and borderline racist, relegating our African evolutionary history to purely biological, as opposed to cultural significance.

Since then there has been an intensive focus on the archaeology of modern human origins in Africa reaching back over 200,000 years. We now know that Africa in its diversity was always the cutting edge.

Today, if you write about human origins, you have to write about Africa. The timeline for emergence of modern humans now stretches back 300,000 years, seen in the Moroccan fossils at Jebel Irhoud with modern faces, culminating more than 100,000 years later in the fully modern Ethiopian fossils at Omo Kibish and Herto with their round braincases. We are discovering that modern humans left Africa earlier than we previously thought, but even given this, *Homo sapiens* has been in Africa two to three times longer than on any other continent.

So Graeber and Wengrow are certainly not dealing with human origins. But I will.

What evidence is there for an increasing egalitarian tendency in human evolution, and why did this necessarily have a dimension of gender? There are three main areas to consider: firstly, our species biology, life history and evolved psychology – the evidence of our bodies and minds; secondly, the ethnography of hunters and gatherers, particularly African hunter-gatherers, who give us specific insight into how egalitarianism works in practice; and thirdly, the archaeological record in Africa of art, culture and symbolism stretching back long before 40,000 years.

Egalitarian bodies and minds

Let's begin with the biology. Perhaps the hallmark of our egalitarian nature is seen in the design of our eyes. We are the only one of well over 200 primate species to have evolved eyes with an elongated shape and a bright white sclera background to a dark iris. Known as 'cooperative eyes', they invite anyone we interact with to see easily what we are looking at. By contrast, all great apes have round, dark eyes, making it very difficult to tell from eye direction what they are looking at. Like mafia dons wearing sunglasses, they watch other animal's moves intently, but disguise from others what they are thinking about. This suits a primate world of Machiavellian competition.

Our eyes are adapted for mutual mindreading, also known as intersubjectivity; our closest relatives block this off. To look into each other's eyes, asking 'can you see what I see?' and 'are you thinking what I am thinking?' is completely natural to us, beginning from an early age. Staring into the eyes of other primate species is taken as a threat. This tells us immediately that we evolved along a different path from our closest primate relatives.

In *Mothers and Others*, Hrdy gives the most convincing account of how, why and when this happened. She presents a straightforward argument. We do babysitting in all human societies, mothers being happy to hand over their offspring for others to look after temporarily. African hunter-gatherers are the champions of this collective form of childcare, indicating that it was routine in our heritage. In stark contrast, great ape mothers – chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang utans – simply will not let their

babies go. Because of the risks of harm to their infants, they are hyperpossessive and protective, not daring to take the chance.

This particularly applies to great apes. Monkeys behave differently, being prepared to leave a baby with a trusted relative. The key factor involved is exactly how closely related individuals are. Old World monkey mothers usually live with female relatives; great ape mothers don't. This means ape mothers have no one nearby whom they can trust sufficiently. This is telling us something significant about the social conditions in which we evolved. Our foremothers must have been living close to trusted female relatives, the most reliable in the first place being a young mother's own mother. This 'grandmother hypothesis' has been used to explain our extraordinarily long postreproductive lifespans – the evolution of menopause.

Hrdy explores how multi-parental care shaped the evolution of our species' unique psychological nature. While cooperative childcare may start with the mother-daughter relationship, bonding with grandchildren would quickly lead to the involvement of aunts, sisters, older daughters and other trusted relatives. From the moment when mothers allow others to hold their babies, says Hrdy, selection pressures for new kinds of mind-reading are established. These give rise to an array of novel responses – mutual gazing, babbling, kissfeeding and so forth – to enable this variegated triad of mum, baby and new helper to consolidate bonds while monitoring one another's intentions. Within a few short hours after birth, a baby in an African hunter-gatherer camp will have been introduced to and held by numerous relatives and friends, of both sexes.

Childhood itself is a unique aspect of human life history which coevolved along with those hard-working grandmothers. After weaning and before eruption of adult teeth, children need help with finding food they can process, and that is where grandma steps in. In this role, mother's mother would have had a big impact on a child's survival, while the mother could begin the cycle of having her next baby. This has resulted in the special characteristic of 'stacked' families among humans, where – unlike other great apes – a mum has several dependent offspring at once.

The most salient feature of our anatomy distinguishing us from other apes is the extraordinary size of our brains. While a human and chimp mother have a fairly similar body weight, adult humans today have upwards of three times the brain volume of a chimp. Brain tissue is very expensive in terms of energy requirements. Doing the whole job by themselves, great ape mothers are constrained in the amount of energy they can provide to offspring and so apes cannot expand brains above what is known as a 'gray ceiling' (600 cc). Our ancestors smashed through this ceiling some 1.5-2 million years ago with the emergence of *Homo erectus*, who had brains more than twice the volume of chimps today. This tells us that cooperative childcare was already part of *Homo erectus* society, with concomitant features of evolving cooperative eyes and emergent intersubjectivity.

We can really track the degree of egalitarianism in the societies of descendants of *Homo erectus*, by measuring the size of brains in these early humans, using the fossil record. From 6-700,000 years ago we begin to see cranial values in the modern human

range, three times as large as present day chimps. From half a million years ago, for both African (modern human ancestor) and Eurasian (Neanderthal ancestor) populations, an extraordinary acceleration of brain size is seen. What we find evidenced in the fossil record is materially more energy for females and their offspring. This implies an inevitable gendering of the strategies that enabled this to happen.

Any tendency to male dominance, sexual competition and strategic control of females would have obstructed these unprecedented increases of brain size. While there must have been variability in the degree of dominance or egalitarianism among human groups, we can be confident that those populations where male dominance, sexual conflict and infanticide risks remained high were not the ones who became our ancestors. Our forebears were the ones who somehow solved the problem of great ape male dominance, instead harnessing males into routine support of these extraordinarily large-brained offspring.

One key question is what actually drove the increase of brain size. Brains are wonderful to have if you can afford them. But such large increases of brain size are vanishingly rare in evolution because of the expense. What are these large brains for? One major hypothesis is the Social Brain theory. This relates brain size, specifically the size of the neocortex, across primate species, to the degree of social complexity, the network of relationships that any individual needs to deal with. This can be measured by average group sizes for any particular species, or sizes of coalitions and cliques within social groups. One version of the 'social brain' focuses on specifically female group sizes as most critical in driving the evolution of intelligence.

The original idea behind social brain was called Machiavellian intelligence. Arising in the late 1980s, this switched the focus of understanding the evolution of intelligence from technology and foraging to social relationships. Machiavellian intelligence is a subtle idea that sees animals in complex social groups competing in evolutionary terms by becoming more adept at cooperation, and more capable of negotiating alliances. In this theoretical perspective, then, the significant increases of brain size in the primate order, from monkeys to apes, and then from apes to hominins, result from increasing political complexity and ability to create alliances.

Egalitarianism is difficult to explain using Darwinian theory premised on competition. Andrew Whiten, one of the inventors of Machiavellian intelligence theory, and his student David Erdal saw that Machiavellian intelligence could generate the difference between primate-style dominance hierarchies and typical hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. At a certain point, the ability to operate within alliances exceeds the ability of any single individual, no matter how strong, to dominate others. If the dominant tries, he (assuming 'he' for the moment) will meet an alliance in resistance who together can deal with him. Once that point is reached, the sensible strategy becomes not to try to dominate others, but to use alliances to resist being dominated oneself. This was termed 'counterdominance' by Erdal and Whiten, and they used it to describe what is found regularly in African hunter-gatherer societies, so-called demand-sharing, an attitude of 'don't mess with me', humour as a levelling device, and the impossibility

of coercion since no particular individual is in charge. They saw counterdominance as fundamental to the evolution of human psychology, with competing tendencies for individuals to try to get away with bigger shares where opportunity presents, but, faced with demands from others, to give in and settle for equal shares.

Whiten and Erdal focused on food-sharing as the most visible aspect of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism. But how does sex fit into this model? Whiten and Erdal noted the general hunter-gatherer tendency for monogamy, or serial monogamy, which contrasts with polygyny among propertied farmers and herders. But again we need to go to our biology to see the underlying features of our reproductive physiology that lead to reproductive egalitarianism – the most significant form of egalitarianism from an evolutionary perspective.

Women have evolved a sexual physiology which can be described as levelling and time-wasting. Why? Because if a hominin female really needs extra energy for her hungry offspring, better to give reproductive rewards to males who will hang around and do something useful for those offspring. Our reproductive signals make life hard for males who want to identify fertile females, monopolise the fertile moment and then move on to the next one (a classic strategy for dominant male apes). We have concealed and unpredictable ovulation. A man cannot really tell when his partner is ovulating, and women appear to confuse the issue with all kinds of biochemical signals. On top of that, women are sexually receptive, potentially, for virtually all of their cycle, a much larger proportion than any other primate. The combined effect is to scramble the information for males about exactly when a female is fertile.

From the viewpoint of a dominant male trying to manage a harem of females this is disastrous. While he is guessing about the possible fertility of one cycling female, he has to stay with her, and is missing other opportunities. Meanwhile, other males will be attending to those other sexually receptive females. Continuous sexual receptivity spreads the reproductive opportunities around many males, hence is levelling from an evolutionary perspective.

BaYaka women of the Congo forest have a slogan perfectly expressing their resistance to male philandering: ‘One woman, one penis!’ This serves as their ritual rallying cry against any attempt by a man to form a harem. Basically, hunter-gatherer women are demanding one man each to support their energy requirements and investment in costly offspring.

In farming and herding societies, some men may be able to muster resources, large livestock or land, enabling them to acquire more than one wife, those wives and their children then forming the patriarch’s labour force. This automatically means other men are going without reproductive opportunities. But for immediate-return hunter-gatherers, those who consume all they hunt and gather the same day, men cannot accumulate resources and harem-holding is simply not stable.

Symbolism and language depend on egalitarianism

So far, I have claimed that these features of our biology, life history and evolved psychology provide evidence of an egalitarian past during our evolution: our large brain size; our cooperative eyes; menopause and childhood; our intersubjectivity and Machiavellian counterdominance. These are underpinned by women's evolved sexual physiology which increases equality of reproductive opportunities among men, compared with great ape cousins.

Now I am going to argue that using symbols and speaking language could only have emerged on the basis of a 'platform of trust' afforded by that egalitarianism. I will draw on some famous social anthropologists because they are experts on symbolism in practice. Over fifty years ago, leading US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins made a revealing comparison of nonhuman primates against human hunter-gatherers. Noting egalitarianism as a key difference, he saw culture as 'the oldest "equalizer"'. Among animals capable of symbolic communication' he said, 'the weak can collectively connive to overthrow the strong.' We can reverse the arrow of causality here. Because among Machiavellian and counterdominant humans weaker individuals can connive to overthrow the strong, we are animals capable of symbolic communication.

Only in such conditions is language likely to emerge. The strong have no need of words; they have more direct physical means of persuasion. Here listen to David Graeber himself, discussing the ignorance and lack of imagination of those in power in state administration, but his words apply very well to the evolutionary origins of language as the essence of human creativity:

If you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on, and therefore, generally speaking, you don't. Hence the sure-fire way to simplify social arrangements, to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten to attack anyone who breaks it.

Language as the mutual exploration of each other's minds – 'the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings' as Graeber has it – requires nonviolent safe space and time to be able to work. Conversation as a necessarily consensual process expresses the quintessential opposite of the relations of dominance applied by the big stick. It relies on the ultimate in intersubjective negotiation and ability to look through the eyes of the other. A fundamentally egalitarian matrix is the only possible ground for the evolution of language.

With his anarchist instincts, Graeber associates arbitrary rules with the power of the bureaucratic and bullying state which has no interest in what its subjects actually think since it can apply violence with impunity. All too true. But the first rules ever invented by human beings surely did not come from the minds of dominant individuals. The powerful need only operate by the maxim of 'might is right'.

Rules and taboos observed in hunter-gatherer communities where there is no possibility of coercion follow another dynamic. On first examination, they may appear as random collections of weird customs with no particular logic. Take for example the concept of ekila among the BaYaka. This is an ancient idea found across the Congo basin among diverse groups of forest hunter-gatherers. Untranslatable, it encompasses food taboos, hunting luck, respect for animals, menstrual blood, fertility and the moon. For anthropologist Jerome Lewis, ekila provides a trail of breadcrumbs for any individual as they grow up, teaching them how to ‘do’ their culture. This is thoroughly egalitarian because the authority for these rules does not rest with any single influential person, but with the forest itself. The axiom of ekila is proper sharing, interdependency and respect, between those of different age or sex, between humans and animals. Then the forest provides. We can tell that this was not dreamed up by some dominant male because for a man to maintain his ekila (roughly, his hunting luck), he should not have sex prior to a hunt. A woman preserves her potency or ekila when she goes to the moon, that is menstruates. All those in the same hut as her must follow the same observances and taboos.

Ekila is a very ancient self-organising system of law that may echo the big bang of earliest human culture. It really represents what I claim is the original rule, the rule against rape, ‘No means NO’, a woman’s body is sacred if she says so. And here is my story about how that rule arose in the first place.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was NO!

Women’s bodies evolved over a million years to favour the ‘one woman, one penis’ principle, rewarding males who were willing to share and invest over those who competed for extra females, at the expense of investment. But we’ve got to remember that as we became more Machiavellian in our strategies, so did would-be alpha males. The final steep rise in brain size up to the emergence of modern humans likely reflects an arms race of Machiavellian strategies between the sexes.

As brain sizes increased, mothers needed more regular and reliable contributions from male partners. In African hunter-gatherers this has become a fixed pattern known by anthropologists as ‘bride-service’. A man’s sexual access depends on his success in provisioning and surrendering on demand any game or honey he gets to the family of his bride – mainly his mother-in-law who is effectively his boss. Where women are living with their mothers, this makes it almost impossible for a man to try to dominate by controlling distribution of food.

The problem for early modern human females as they came under the maximum stress of increased brain size would be with males who tried to get away with sex without bride-service. To deal with this threat, mothers of costly offspring needed to



Red ochre from the southern African Middle Stone Age which has been rubbed and striated to produce pigments for body art. Ian Watts.

extend their alliances to include just about everyone against the potential alpha. Men who were relatives of mothers (brothers or mother's brothers) would support those females. In addition, men who willingly invested in offspring would have interests directly opposed to the would-be alpha, who undermined their reproductive efforts. This pits a whole community as a coalition against a would-be dominant individual. Evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm describes this as 'reverse-dominance', a political dynamic that for the first time established a morally regulated community.

So the occasion for reverse-dominant collective – moral – action happens whenever a prospective alpha male tries to abduct a potentially fertile female. Can we describe this in any more detail in terms of actual behaviour?

The alpha male strategy is to find and mate with a fertile female, before moving on to the next one. But how does a male identify fertile females, considering that in human evolution ovulation became progressively concealed? One cue to the human reproductive cycle could not be so easily hidden: menstruation. With no sign for ovulation, menstruation became a highly salient cue to males that a female was near fertility.

For an alpha male, a menstruating female is the obvious target. Guard her and have sex with her until she is pregnant. Then, look for the next one. In nomadic hunter-gatherer camps, women of reproductive age are pregnant or nursing much of the time, making menstruation a relatively rare event. Undermining cooperative childcare, menstruation threatens to trigger male competition for access to an imminently fertile female, and also competition among females, because a pregnant or nursing mother risks losing male support to a cycling female.

Mothers have two possible responses to this problem. Following the logic of concealed ovulation, they might try to hide the menstruant's condition so that males would not know. But because the signal has potential economic value by attracting male attention, females should do the opposite: make a big display advertising imminent fertility. Whenever a coalition member menstruated, the whole coalition joined that female in amplifying her signal to attract males. Females within coalitions would begin to use blood-coloured substances as cosmetics to augment their signals. This has become known as the Female Cosmetic Coalitions model of the origins of art and symbolic culture.

In creating a cosmetic coalition in resistance, females deter alpha males by surrounding a menstrual female and refusing to let anyone near. They are creating the world's first taboo, on menstrual blood or collectively imagined blood, speaking the world's first word: NO!

But even as a negative, this cosmetic display is encouraging to investor males who are willing to go hunting and bring back supplies to the whole female coalition. Those cosmetically decorated females who create a big show of unity and solidarity against alpha males ensure that investor males will get the fitness rewards. It is fully in the interests of investor males to sexually select females belonging to ritual cosmetic coalitions, because they then eliminate competition from the would-be alphas.

The Female Cosmetic Coalition (FCC) model shows us the prototype of a moral order, upheld through those puberty rituals, taboos, and prohibitions that surround menstruation in so many ethnographic accounts. Ekila, discussed above, is a classic example.

The FCC strategy is also the prototype symbolic action, with collective agreement that fake or imaginary ‘blood’ stands for real blood. While it is revolutionary at the level of morality, symbolism and economics, the strategy emerges as an evolutionary adaptation, driven by male sexual selection of female ritual participants. On this basis, through reverse gender dominance, the hunter-gatherer institution of bride-service emerges, with roughly equal chances of reproductive success for all hunters.

Finally, the FCC model is the only evolutionary hypothesis that explains what we find as the earliest symbolic material in the archaeological record. When the theory was first put forward in the mid-1990s, it predicted that the world’s first symbolic media would consist of blood-red cosmetics. It predicted where and when we should find them: in Africa, preceding and during our speciation, in relation to the increases of brain size. This points to a pigment record from 6-700,000 years ago and especially with the rapid growth of brains in the last 300,000 years.

These theoretical predictions have been strikingly confirmed. The evidence which Graeber and Wengrow neglect to mention, coming long before the European Upper Palaeolithic, and pervading the record of the African Middle Stone Age is of blood-red iron oxides, red ochres. These pigments are the first durable materials to be mined, processed, curated and used in design. They date back at least 300,000 years in the East and southern African record, possibly as old as half a million years. From the time of modern humans they are found in every southern African site and rock shelter. They become the hallmark of modern humans as they move out of Africa around the world, found in copious quantities in both the Upper Palaeolithic of Europe, and in Australia from the first entrance of modern humans to those continents.

Gender ambiguity lies at the core of earliest religious ideas

As we know in the era of #metoo, men find it hard to hear women say NO. With that sexual physiology designed by evolution to keep men interested on a fairly continuous basis, women have to work hard to override their signals of attraction. And if they want men to go away and get on with some hunting, they will have to work very hard indeed.

Whispering ‘not right now, darling’ won’t work. They need noise, rude songs, militant dance formations to get men’s attention: ritual. But the clincher is a symbolic overturning of reality. If men are looking for a mate who is female of the right species then change that, collectively act out “We’re actually males, and not even human but

animal!’ Signal ‘Wrong sex, Wrong species, wrong time’. Be a red ochre body-painted coalition pantomiming the rutting behaviour of the animals you want men to hunt. Men with all that Machiavellian intelligence will get the message and understand the world’s first metaphor.

Now we begin to see why hunter-gatherer puberty rituals take the forms they do. Because it is found among so many different Khoisan groups, the Kalahari Eland bull dance is hot favourite to be the world’s oldest living ritual. Women of the camp flash naked buttocks as they dance in playful imitation of mating antelopes. Men can watch but not approach close to the menstrual girl’s seclusion hut. She is identified as the mystically potent Eland Bull, with whom the women pantomime mating.

In the Hadza maitoko ceremony, girls dress as hunters, acting out the story of the matriarch who used to hunt zebra with a bow and arrow and tied their penises onto herself. What first appears inexplicable now makes perfect sense as women’s supernatural construction of taboo – ‘wrong sex, wrong species’. This is telling us about what the first religious concepts looked like and how they were embodied.

Now we can begin to look at the ‘female’ images of the Upper Palaeolithic with a bit more theory. Rather than appear as Palaeolithic sex toys, the Venus figurines can be seen as initiate women in states of ritual taboo, not accessible to mere males. Their ambiguous gender, possessing female and male attributes at once, embodies their taboo state, belonging to another world.

Gender egalitarianism made us human: the untold secret

The Female Cosmetic Coalition hypothesis can help us make sense of the archaeological record of earth pigments, the rock art of ancient hunter-gatherers, their myths and beliefs, and enable us to decode the rituals that some of them still perform to this day. It tells us that, far from revolution being against human nature, everything that is human about our nature was forged in a sexual and social revolution.

But even if you don’t believe this particular story and want to work out another explanation for the red ochre and the origin of the supernatural, we are still left with all the biological and psychological evidence that our ancestors went through a prolonged phase of egalitarianism. Without that, we would not be here as language-speaking modern humans. We might have evolved into a smaller-brained hominin with rounder-shaped eyes, using primate-style gesture/call systems of communication, and the planet would look a very different place.

Does all this matter? Does it matter that women organizing as the revolutionary sex bust through the ‘gray ceiling’ of brain size? That deep social mind gave us the platform of trust for sharing language, rhythm and song? That female political strategies created human symbolic culture? That resistance is at the core of being human? Should we be

telling our children the story of our Paleolithic heritage of gender equality – the untold secret – and how it gave our African ancestors an extraordinary future? If we want that future stretching ahead of us as far as it stretches back into our hunter-gatherer past, I think it does.

We are lingering in the dying days of a clapped-out Neolithic gender system. The more that women all over the world achieve true equality, the more they regain the Palaeolithic birthright of all humans. Through gender egalitarianism, we became language-speaking, artistic, shamanistic, all-singing, all-dancing human beings roughly 200,000 years ago. Against the lifespan of our species, Neolithic patriarchy is a historic blip in time.

The Ted K Archive

Camilla Power

Gender egalitarianism made us human

A response to David Graeber & David Wengrow's 'How to change the course of
human history'

2018

<<https://libcom.org/article/gender-egalitarianism-made-us-human-response-david-graeber-david-wengrows-how-change-course>>

www.thetedkarchive.com