

Ancient History Shows How We Can Create a More Equal World

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Most of human history is irreparably lost to us. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has existed for at least 200,000 years, but we have next to no idea what was happening for the majority of that time. In northern Spain, for instance, at the cave of Altamira, paintings and engravings were created over a period of at least 10,000 years, between around 25,000 and 15,000 B.C. Presumably, a lot of dramatic events occurred during that period. We have no way of knowing what most of them were. This is of little consequence to most people, since most people rarely think about the broad sweep of human history anyway. They don't have much reason to. Insofar as the question comes up at all, it's usually when reflecting on why the world seems to be in such a mess and why human beings so often treat each other badly — the reasons for war, greed, exploitation and indifference to others' suffering. Were we always like that, or did something, at some point, go terribly wrong?

One of the first people to ask this question in the modern era was the Swiss-French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in an essay on the origins of social inequality that he submitted to a competition in 1754. Once upon a time, he wrote, we were hunter-gatherers, living in a state of childlike innocence, as equals. These bands of foragers could be egalitarian because they were isolated from one another, and their material needs were simple. According to Rousseau, it was only after the agricultural revolution and the rise of cities that this happy condition came to an end. Urban living meant the appearance of written literature, science and philosophy, but at the same time, almost everything bad in human life: patriarchy, standing armies, mass executions and annoying bureaucrats demanding that we spend much of our lives filling out forms.

Rousseau lost the essay competition, but the story he told went on to become a dominant narrative of human history, laying the foundations upon which contemporary "big history" writers — such as Jared Diamond, Francis Fukuyama and Yuval Noah Harari — built their accounts of how our societies evolved. These writers often talk about inequality as the natural result of living in larger groups with a surplus of resources. For example, Mr. Harari writes in "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind" that, after the advent of agriculture, rulers and elites sprang up "everywhere ... living off the peasants' surplus food and leaving them with only a bare subsistence."

For a long time, the archaeological evidence — from Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica and elsewhere — did appear to confirm this. If you put enough people in one place, the evidence seemed to show, they would start dividing themselves into social classes. You could see inequality emerge in the archaeological record with the appearance of temples and palaces, presided over by rulers and their elite kinsmen, and storehouses and workshops, run by administrators and overseers. Civilization seemed to come as a package: It meant misery and suffering for those who would inevitably be reduced to serfs, slaves or debtors, but it also allowed for the possibility of art, technology, and science.

That makes wistful pessimism about the human condition seem like common sense: Yes, living in a truly egalitarian society might be possible if you're a Pygmy or a Kalahari Bushman. But if you want to live in a city like New York, London or Shanghai

— if you want all the good things that come with concentrations of people and resources — then you have to accept the bad things, too. For generations, such assumptions have formed part of our origin story. The history we learn in school has made us more willing to tolerate a world in which some can turn their wealth into power over others, while others are told their needs are not important and their lives have no intrinsic worth. As a result, we are more likely to believe that inequality is just an inescapable consequence of living in large, complex, urban, technologically sophisticated societies.

We want to offer an entirely different account of human history. We believe that much of what has been discovered in the last few decades, by archaeologists and others in kindred disciplines, cuts against the conventional wisdom propounded by modern “big history” writers. What this new evidence shows is that a surprising number of the world’s earliest cities were organized along robustly egalitarian lines. In some regions, we now know, urban populations governed themselves for centuries without any indication of the temples and palaces that would later emerge; in others, temples and palaces never emerged at all, and there is simply no evidence of a class of administrators or any other sort of ruling stratum. It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any particular form of political organization, and never did. Far from resigning us to inequality, the new picture that is now emerging of humanity’s deep past may open our eyes to egalitarian possibilities we otherwise would have never considered.

Wherever cities emerged, they defined a new phase of world history. Settlements inhabited by tens of thousands of people made their first appearance around 6,000 years ago. The conventional story goes that cities developed largely because of advances in technology: They were a result of the agricultural revolution, which set off a chain of developments that made it possible to support large numbers of people living in one place. But in fact, one of the most populous early cities appeared not in Eurasia — with its many technical and logistical advantages — but in Mesoamerica, which had no wheeled vehicles or sailing ships, no animal-powered transport and much less in the way of metallurgy or literate bureaucracy. In short, it’s easy to overstate the importance of new technologies in setting the overall direction of change.

Almost everywhere, in these early cities, we find grand, self-conscious statements of civic unity, the arrangement of built spaces in harmonious and often beautiful patterns, clearly reflecting some kind of planning at the municipal scale. Where we do have written sources (ancient Mesopotamia, for example), we find large groups of citizens referring to themselves simply as “the people” of a given city (or often its “sons”), united by devotion to its founding ancestors, its gods or heroes, its civic infrastructure and ritual calendar. In China’s Shandong Province, urban settlements were present over a thousand years before the earliest known royal dynasties, and similar findings have emerged from the Maya lowlands, where ceremonial centers of truly enormous size — so far, presenting no evidence of monarchy or stratification — can now be dated back as far as 1000 B.C., long before the rise of Classic Maya kings and dynasties.

What held these early experiments in urbanization together, if not kings, soldiers, and bureaucrats? For answers, we might turn to some other surprising discoveries on the interior grasslands of eastern Europe, north of the Black Sea, where archaeologists have found cities, just as large and ancient as those of Mesopotamia. The earliest date back to around 4100 B.C. While Mesopotamian cities, in what are now the lands of Syria and Iraq, took form initially around temples, and later also royal palaces, the prehistoric cities of Ukraine and Moldova were startling experiments in decentralized urbanization. These sites were planned on the image of a great circle — or series of circles — of houses, with nobody first, nobody last, divided into districts with assembly buildings for public meetings.

If it all sounds a little drab or “simple,” we should bear in mind the ecology of these early Ukrainian cities. Living at the frontier of forest and steppe, the residents were not just cereal farmers and livestock-keepers, but also hunted deer and wild boar, imported salt, flint and copper, and kept gardens within the bounds of the city, consuming apples, pears, cherries, acorns, hazelnuts and apricots — all served on painted ceramics, which are considered among the finest aesthetic creations of the prehistoric world.

Researchers are far from unanimous about what sort of social arrangements all this required, but most would agree the logistical challenges were daunting. Residents definitely produced a surplus, and with it came ample opportunity for some of them to seize control of the stocks and supplies, to lord it over the others or fight for the spoils, but over eight centuries we find little evidence of warfare or the rise of social elites. The true complexity of these early cities lay in the political strategies they adopted to prevent such things. Careful analysis by archaeologists shows how the social freedoms of the Ukrainian city dwellers were maintained through processes of local decision-making, in households and neighborhood assemblies, without any need for centralized control or top-down administration.

Yet, even now, these Ukrainian sites almost never come up in scholarship. When they do, academics tend to call them “mega-sites” rather than cities, a kind of euphemism that signals to a wider audience that they should not be thought of as proper cities but as villages that for some reason had expanded inordinately in size. Some even refer to them outright as “overgrown villages.” How do we account for this reluctance to welcome the Ukrainian mega-sites into the charmed circle of urban origins? Why has anyone with even a passing interest in the origin of cities heard of Uruk or Mohenjodaro, but almost no one of Taljanky or Nebelivka?

It’s hard here not to recall Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” about an imaginary city that also made do without kings, wars, slaves or secret police. We have a tendency, Le Guin notes, to write off such a community as “simple,” but in fact these citizens of Omelas were “not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us.” The trouble is just that we have a bad habit of “considering happiness as something rather stupid.”

Le Guin had a point. Obviously, we have no idea how relatively happy the inhabitants of Ukrainian mega-sites like Maidanetske or Nebelivka were, compared with the steppe-lords who covered nearby landscapes with treasure-filled mounds, or even the servants ritually sacrificed at their funerals (though we can guess). And as anyone who has read the story knows, Omelas had some problems, too.

But the point remains: Why do we assume that people who have figured out a way for a large population to govern and support itself without temples, palaces and military fortifications — that is, without overt displays of arrogance and cruelty — are somehow less complex than those who have not? Why would we hesitate to dignify such a place with the name of “city”? The mega-sites of Ukraine and adjoining regions were inhabited from roughly 4100 to 3300 B.C., which is a considerably longer period of time than most subsequent urban settlements. Eventually, they were abandoned. We still don’t know why. What they offer us, in the meantime, is significant: further proof that a highly egalitarian society has been possible on an urban scale.

Why should these findings from the dim and distant past matter to us today? Since the Great Recession of 2008, the question of inequality — and with it, the long-term history of inequality — have become major topics for debate. Something of a consensus has emerged among intellectuals and even, to some degree, the political classes, that levels of social inequality have gotten out of hand, and that most of the world’s problems result, in one way or another, from an ever-widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots. A very small percentage of the population control the fates of almost everyone else, and they are doing it in an increasingly disastrous fashion. Cities have become emblematic of our predicament. Whether in Cape Town or San Francisco, we are no longer shocked or even that surprised by the sight of ever-expanding slums — sidewalks crammed with makeshift tents or shelters overflowing with the homeless and destitute.

To begin reversing this trajectory is an immense task. But there is historical precedent for that, too. Around the start of the common era, thousands of people came together in the Valley of Mexico to found a city we know today as Teotihuacan. Within a few centuries it became the largest settlement in Mesoamerica. In a colossal feat of civil engineering, its inhabitants diverted the San Juan River to flow through the heart of their new metropolis. Pyramids went up in the central district, associated with ritual killing. What we might expect to see next is the rise of luxurious palaces for warrior-rulers, but the citizens of Teotihuacan chose a different path. Around A.D. 300, the people of Teotihuacan changed course, redirecting their efforts away from the construction of grand monuments and devoting resources instead to the provision of high-quality housing for the majority of residents, who numbered around 100,000.

Of course, the past cannot provide instant solutions for the crises and challenges of the present. The obstacles are daunting, but what our research shows is that we can no longer count the forces of history and evolution among them. This has all sorts of important implications: For one thing, it suggests that we should be much less pessimistic about our future, since the mere fact that much of the world’s population

now lives in cities may not determine how we live, to anything like the extent we might have assumed.

What we need today is another urban revolution to create more just and sustainable ways of living. The technology to support less centralized and greener urban environments — appropriate to modern demographic realities — already exists. Predecessors to our modern cities include not just the proto-megalopolis, but also the proto-garden-city, the proto-superblock, and a cornucopia of other urban forms, waiting for us to reclaim them. In the face of inequality and climate catastrophe, they offer the only viable future for the world's cities, and so for our planet. All we are lacking now is the political imagination to make it happen. But as history teaches us, the brave new world we seek to create has existed before, and could exist again.

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