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The Dawn of Everything  
*A New History of Humanity*



PENGUIN BOOKS

# I

## Farewell to Humanity's Childhood

*Or, why this is not a book about  
the origins of inequality*

*'This mood makes itself felt everywhere, politically, socially, and philosophically. We are living in what the Greeks called the καιρός (Kairos) – the right time – for a "metamorphosis of the gods," i.e. of the fundamental principles and symbols.'*

C. G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (1958)

Most of human history is irreparably lost to us. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has existed for at least 200,000 years, but for most of that time we have next to no idea what was happening. 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 BC. Presumably, a lot of dramatic events occurred during this 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, systematic indifference to others' suffering. Were we always like that, or did something, at some point, go terribly wrong?

It is basically a theological debate. Essentially the question is: are humans innately good or innately evil? But if you think about it, the question, framed in these terms, makes very little sense. 'Good' and 'evil' are purely human concepts. It would never occur to anyone to



argue about whether a fish, or a tree, were good or evil, because 'good' and 'evil' are concepts humans made up in order to compare ourselves with one another. It follows that arguing about whether humans are fundamentally good or evil makes about as much sense as arguing about whether humans are fundamentally fat or thin.

Nonetheless, on those occasions when people do reflect on the lessons of prehistory, they almost invariably come back to questions of this kind. We are all familiar with the Christian answer: people once lived in a state of innocence, yet were tainted by original sin. We desired to be godlike and have been punished for it; now we live in a fallen state while hoping for future redemption. Today, the popular version of this story is typically some updated variation on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*, which he wrote in 1754. Once upon a time, the story goes, we were hunter-gatherers, living in a prolonged state of childlike innocence, in tiny bands. These bands were egalitarian; they could be for the very reason that they were so small. It was only after the 'Agricultural Revolution', and then still more the rise of cities, that this happy condition came to an end, ushering in 'civilization' and 'the state' – which also 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 in forms.

Of course, this is a very crude simplification, but it really does seem to be the foundational story that rises to the surface whenever anyone, from industrial psychologists to revolutionary theorists, says something like 'but of course human beings spent most of their evolutionary history living in groups of ten or twenty people,' or 'agriculture was perhaps humanity's worst mistake.' And as we'll see, many popular writers make the argument quite explicitly. The problem is that anyone seeking an alternative to this rather depressing view of history will quickly find that the only one on offer is actually even worse: if not Rousseau, then Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes's *Leviathan*, published in 1651, is in many ways the founding text of modern political theory. It held that, humans being the selfish creatures they are, life in an original State of Nature was in no



sense innocent; it must instead have been 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' – basically, a state of war, with everybody fighting against everybody else. Insofar as there has been any progress from this benighted state of affairs, a Hobbesian would argue, it has been largely due to exactly those repressive mechanisms that Rousseau was complaining about: governments, courts, bureaucracies, police. This view of things has been around for a very long time as well. There's a reason why, in English, the words 'politics' 'polite' and 'police' all sound the same – they're all derived from the Greek word *polis*, or city, the Latin equivalent of which is *civitas*, which also gives us 'civility,' 'civic' and a certain modern understanding of 'civilization'.

Human society, in this view, is founded on the collective repression of our baser instincts, which becomes all the more necessary when humans are living in large numbers in the same place. The modern-day Hobbesian, then, would argue that, yes, we did live most of our evolutionary history in tiny bands, who could get along mainly because they shared a common interest in the survival of their offspring ('parental investment', as evolutionary biologists call it). But even these were in no sense founded on equality. There was always, in this version, some 'alpha-male' leader. Hierarchy and domination, and cynical self-interest, have always been the basis of human society. It's just that, collectively, we have learned it's to our advantage to prioritize our long-term interests over our short-term instincts; or, better, to create laws that force us to confine our worst impulses to socially useful areas like the economy, while forbidding them everywhere else.

As the reader can probably detect from our tone, we don't much like the choice between these two alternatives. Our objections can be classified into three broad categories. As accounts of the general course of human history, they:

1. simply aren't true;
2. have dire political implications;
3. make the past needlessly dull.

This book is an attempt to begin to tell another, more hopeful and more interesting story; one which, at the same time, takes better account of what the last few decades of research have taught us. Partly, this is a matter of bringing together evidence that has



accumulated in archaeology, anthropology and kindred disciplines; evidence that points towards a completely new account of how human societies developed over roughly the last 30,000 years. Almost all of this research goes against the familiar narrative, but too often the most remarkable discoveries remain confined to the work of specialists, or have to be teased out by reading between the lines of scientific publications.

To give just a sense of how different the emerging picture is: it is clear now that human societies before the advent of farming were not confined to small, egalitarian bands. On the contrary, the world of hunter-gatherers as it existed before the coming of agriculture was one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms, far more than it does the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory. Agriculture, in turn, did not mean the inception of private property, nor did it mark an irreversible step towards inequality. In fact, many of the first farming communities were relatively free of ranks and hierarchies. And far from setting class differences in stone, a surprising number of the world's earliest cities were organized on robustly egalitarian lines, with no need for authoritarian rulers, ambitious warrior-politicians, or even bossy administrators.

Information bearing on such issues has been pouring in from every quarter of the globe. As a result, researchers around the world have also been examining ethnographic and historical material in a new light. The pieces now exist to create an entirely different world history – but so far, they remain hidden to all but a few privileged experts (and even the experts tend to hesitate before abandoning their own tiny part of the puzzle, to compare notes with others outside their specific subfield). Our aim in this book is to start putting some of the pieces of the puzzle together, in full awareness that nobody yet has anything like a complete set. The task is immense, and the issues so important, that it will take years of research and debate even to begin to understand the real implications of the picture we're starting to see. But it's crucial that we set the process in motion. One thing that will quickly become clear is that the prevalent 'big picture' of history – shared by modern-day followers of Hobbes and Rousseau alike – has almost nothing to do with the



facts. But to begin making sense of the new information that's now before our eyes, it is not enough to compile and sift vast quantities of data. A conceptual shift is also required.

To make that shift means retracing some of the initial steps that led to our modern notion of social evolution: the idea that human societies could be arranged according to stages of development, each with their own characteristic technologies and forms of organization (hunter-gatherers, farmers, urban-industrial society, and so on). As we will see, such notions have their roots in a conservative backlash against critiques of European civilization, which began to gain ground in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The origins of that critique, however, lie not with the philosophers of the Enlightenment (much though they initially admired and imitated it), but with indigenous commentators and observers of European society, such as the Native American (Huron-Wendat) statesman Kandiaronk, of whom we will learn much more in the next chapter.

Revisiting what we will call the 'indigenous critique' means taking seriously contributions to social thought that come from outside the European canon, and in particular from those indigenous peoples whom Western philosophers tend to cast either in the role of history's angels or its devils. Both positions preclude any real possibility of intellectual exchange, or even dialogue: it's just as hard to debate someone who is considered diabolical as someone considered divine, as almost anything they think or say is likely to be deemed either irrelevant or deeply profound. Most of the people we will be considering in this book are long since dead. It is no longer possible to have any sort of conversation with them. We are nonetheless determined to write prehistory as if it consisted of people one would have been able to talk to, when they were still alive – who don't just exist as paragons, specimens, sock-puppets or playthings of some inexorable law of history.

There are, certainly, tendencies in history. Some are powerful; currents so strong that they are very difficult to swim against (though there always seem to be some who manage to do it anyway). But the only 'laws' are those we make up ourselves. Which brings us on to our second objection.



## WHY BOTH THE HOBBSIAN AND ROUSSEAUIAN VERSIONS OF HUMAN HISTORY HAVE DIRE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The political implications of the Hobbesian model need little elaboration. It is a foundational assumption of our economic system that humans are at base somewhat nasty and selfish creatures, basing their decisions on cynical, egoistic calculation rather than altruism or cooperation; in which case, the best we can hope for are more sophisticated internal and external controls on our supposedly innate drive towards accumulation and self-aggrandizement. Rousseau's story about how humankind descended into inequality from an original state of egalitarian innocence seems more optimistic (at least there was somewhere better to fall from), but nowadays it's mostly deployed to convince us that while the system we live under might be unjust, the most we can realistically aim for is a bit of modest tinkering. The term 'inequality' is itself very telling in this regard.

Since the financial crash of 2008, and the upheavals that followed, 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 got 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. Pointing this out is in itself a challenge to global power structures; at the same time, though, it frames the issue in a way that people who benefit from those structures can still find ultimately reassuring, since it implies no meaningful solution to the problem would ever be possible.

After all, imagine we framed the problem differently, the way it might have been fifty or 100 years ago: as the concentration of capital, or oligopoly, or class power. Compared to any of these, a word like 'inequality' sounds like it's practically designed to encourage half-measures and compromise. It's possible to imagine overthrowing capitalism or breaking the power of the state, but it's not clear what



eliminating inequality would even mean. (Which kind of inequality? Wealth? Opportunity? Exactly how equal would people have to be in order for us to be able to say we've 'eliminated inequality'?) The term 'inequality' is a way of framing social problems appropriate to an age of technocratic reformers, who assume from the outset that no real vision of social transformation is even on the table.

Debating inequality allows one to tinker with the numbers, argue about Gini coefficients and thresholds of dysfunction, readjust tax regimes or social welfare mechanisms, even shock the public with figures showing just how bad things have become ('Can you imagine? The richest 1 per cent of the world's population own 44 per cent of the world's wealth!') – but it also allows one to do all this without addressing any of the factors that people actually object to about such 'unequal' social arrangements: for instance, that some manage to turn their wealth into power over others; or that other people end up being told their needs are not important, and their lives have no intrinsic worth. The last, we are supposed to believe, is just the inevitable effect of inequality; and inequality, the inevitable result of living in any large, complex, urban, technologically sophisticated society. Presumably it will always be with us. It's just a matter of degree.

Today, there is a veritable boom of thinking about inequality: since 2011, 'global inequality' has regularly featured as a top item for debate in the World Economic Forum at Davos. There are inequality indexes, institutes for the study of inequality, and a relentless stream of publications trying to project the current obsession with property distribution back into the Stone Age. There have even been attempts to calculate income levels and Gini coefficients for Palaeolithic mammoth hunters (they both turn out to be very low).<sup>1</sup> It's almost as if we feel some need to come up with mathematical formulae justifying the expression, already popular in the days of Rousseau, that in such societies 'everyone was equal, because they were all equally poor.'

The ultimate effect of all these stories about an original state of innocence and equality, like the use of the term 'inequality' itself, is to make wistful pessimism about the human condition seem like common sense: the natural result of viewing ourselves through history's broad lens. Yes, living in a truly egalitarian society might be possible if you're a Pygmy or a Kalahari Bushman. But if you want to create a



society of true equality today, you're going to have to figure out a way to go back to becoming tiny bands of foragers again with no significant personal property. Since foragers require a pretty extensive territory to forage in, this would mean having to reduce the world's population by something like 99.9 per cent. Otherwise, the best we can hope for is to adjust the size of the boot that will forever be stomping on our faces; or, perhaps, to wangle a bit more wiggle room in which some of us can temporarily duck out of its way.

A first step towards a more accurate, and hopeful, picture of world history might be to abandon the Garden of Eden once and for all, and simply do away with the notion that for hundreds of thousands of years, everyone on earth shared the same idyllic form of social organization. Strangely enough, though, this is often seen as a reactionary move. 'So are you saying true equality has never been achieved? That it's therefore impossible?' It seems to us that such objections are both counterproductive and frankly unrealistic.

First of all, it's bizarre to imagine that, say, during the roughly 10,000 (some would say more like 20,000) years in which people painted on the walls of Altamira, no one – not only in Altamira, but anywhere on earth – experimented with alternative forms of social organization. What's the chance of that? Second of all, is not the capacity to experiment with different forms of social organization itself a quintessential part of what makes us human? That is, beings with the capacity for self-creation, even freedom? The ultimate question of human history, as we'll see, is not our equal access to material resources (land, calories, means of production), much though these things are obviously important, but our equal capacity to contribute to decisions about how to live together. Of course, to exercise that capacity implies that there should be something meaningful to decide in the first place.

If, as many are suggesting, our species' future now hinges on our capacity to create something different (say, a system in which wealth cannot be freely transformed into power, or where some people are not told their needs are unimportant, or that their lives have no intrinsic worth), then what ultimately matters is whether we can rediscover the freedoms that make us human in the first place. As long ago as 1936, the prehistorian V. Gordon Childe wrote a book called *Man*



*Makes Himself.* Apart from the sexist language, this is the spirit we wish to invoke. We are projects of collective self-creation. What if we approached human history that way? What if we treat people, from the beginning, as imaginative, intelligent, playful creatures who deserve to be understood as such? What if, instead of telling a story about how our species fell from some idyllic state of equality, we ask how we came to be trapped in such tight conceptual shackles that we can no longer even imagine the possibility of reinventing ourselves?

SOME BRIEF EXAMPLES OF WHY  
RECEIVED UNDERSTANDINGS OF  
THE BROAD SWEEP OF HUMAN  
HISTORY ARE MOSTLY WRONG (OR,  
THE ETERNAL RETURN OF JEAN-  
JACQUES ROUSSEAU)

When we first embarked on this book, our intention was to seek new answers to questions about the origins of social inequality. It didn't take long before we realized this simply wasn't a very good approach. Framing human history in this way – which necessarily means assuming humanity once existed in an idyllic state, and that a specific point can be identified at which everything started to go wrong – made it almost impossible to ask any of the questions we felt were genuinely interesting. It felt like almost everyone else seemed to be caught in the same trap. Specialists were refusing to generalize. Those few willing to stick their necks out almost invariably reproduced some variation on Rousseau.

Let's consider a fairly random example of one of these generalist accounts, Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (2011). Here is Fukuyama on what he feels can be taken as received wisdom about early human societies: 'In its early stages human political organization is similar to the band-level society observed in higher primates like chimpanzees,' which Fukuyama suggests can be regarded as 'a default form of social organization'. He then goes on to assert that Rousseau was largely correct in pointing out that the origin of political inequality lay in the