

The origins of human society are more complex than we thought

November 3 2022, by Vivek V. Venkataraman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In many popular accounts of human prehistory, civilization emerged in a linear fashion. Our ancestors started as Paleolithic hunter-gatherers living in small, nomadic and egalitarian bands. Later, they discovered farming and domesticated animals for food and service.

Before long, they progressed to complex societies and the beginnings of the modern nation-state. Social hierarchies became more complex, leading to our current state of affairs.

"We are well and truly stuck and there is really no escape from the institutional cages we've made for ourselves," writes historian Yuval Noah Harari in his bestselling [*Sapiens*](#).

A new book—[The Dawn of Everything](#) by late anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow—challenges this narrative. Rather than being nomadic hunter-gatherers, they argue human societies during the Paleolithic were, in fact, quite diverse.

Today, [increasing inequality](#), [polarized political systems](#) and [climate change](#) threaten our very existence. We need a deeper historical perspective on what kind of political world shaped us, and what kinds are possible today.

Social flexibility

Ice Age hunters in Siberia constructed large circular buildings from [mammoth bones](#). At Göbekli Tepe, a 9,000 year old site in Turkey, hunter-gatherers hoisted megaliths to construct what may be the world's "[first human-built holy place](#)."

In Ukraine, [4,000 year-old cities](#) show little evidence of hierarchy or centralized control. And in modern times, hunter-gatherers [shift between hierarchy and equality](#), depending on the season.

To Graeber and Wengrow, these examples speak to the virtually unlimited social flexibility of humans, undermining Harari's dark assessment about the possibility for social change in the modern world.

As an evolutionary anthropologist and hunter-gatherer specialist, I believe both accounts miss the mark about the course of human prehistory. To see why, it is important to understand how anthropologists today think about nomadic egalitarian bands in the scheme of social evolution.

Human social evolution

In the 19th-century, anthropologists like [Lewis Henry Morgan](#) categorized human social evolution into three stages: [savagery, barbarism and civilization](#). These correspond to hunting and gathering, farming and urban life, respectively. These so-called "stage models" incorrectly view social evolution as a steady march of progress toward civilized life.

Scholars do not take stage models seriously today. There is little [intellectual connection](#) between stage models and modern evolutionary approaches toward studying hunter-gatherers.

Anthropologists developed the nomadic-egalitarian band model during a 1966 conference called *Man the Hunter*. According to this model, [humans, prior to agriculture, lived in isolated nomadic bands of approximately 25 people and subsisted entirely on hunting and gathering](#).

Research since *Man the Hunter* has updated our understanding of hunter-gatherers.

Hunter-gatherers and prehistory

One assumption was that small bands consist of related individuals. In fact, band societies [consist of mostly unrelated individuals](#). And anthropologists now know that hunter-gatherer bands are not closed social units. Rather, they maintain [extensive social ties across space and](#)

[time](#) and [sometimes assemble in large groups](#).

Hunter-gatherers are profoundly [diverse](#) in modern times, and they were in the [past](#) too. This diversity helps anthropologists understand how the environment shapes the scope of social expression in human societies.

Consider nomadic egalitarian hunter-gatherers like the [!Kung in the Kalahari](#) or [the Hadza in Tanzania](#). Being nomadic means it is difficult to store [food](#) or accumulate much material wealth, making [social relations relatively egalitarian](#). Group members have equal decision-making power and don't hold power over others.



Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta was the site of a communal Indigenous hunting practice where bison were driven over a cliff. Credit: V. Venkataraman, Author provided

On the other hand, sedentary societies tend to have more pronounced levels of social inequality and leave material evidence such as [monumental architecture, prestige goods and differential burial treatment](#).

When these markers are not present, [anthropologists can reliably infer](#) that humans were living more [politically egalitarian lives](#).

Paleolithic politics

Human societies have *generally* become larger-scale and more [complex](#) over time. Popular [accounts](#) typically implicate farming in kick-starting the path to "[civilization](#)" and inequality. But the shift to farming was not a single event or a simple linear process. There are many paths toward social complexity and inequality.

"The Dawn of Everything," along with reviews in [cultural evolution](#) and [evolutionary anthropology](#), suggests that complex societies with institutionalized inequality emerged far before the dawn of agriculture, perhaps as far back as the Middle Stone Age (50,000 to 280,000 years ago).

This is a tantalizing possibility. But there is reason to be skeptical.

Complexity on the coastline

[Social complexity](#) emerged among hunter-gatherer populations living in

resource-rich areas like [southern France](#) and the Pacific Northwest Coast of the United States and Canada.

So rich were the salmon runs of the Pacific Northwest Coast, [Indigenous peoples](#) could sustain themselves on wild foods while living a sedentary life, even evolving complex hierarchies dependent on [slave labor](#).

Similarly, complex societies could have arisen in the Paleolithic along rich riverine systems or on [coastlines](#)—now submerged by sea level changes—with plentiful marine resources. But there is no unambiguous evidence for sedentary settlements where marine sources are used in the Middle Stone Age.

Collective hunting

Collective hunting is another pathway toward social complexity. In North America, [hunters cooperated to trap pronghorn antelope, sheep, elk and caribou](#). At "buffalo jumps," ancient Indigenous hunters [drove bison over cliff sides by the hundreds](#). This feat likely required, and fed, several hundred people.

But these examples represent seasonal events that did not lead to full-time sedentary life. Buffalo jumps occurred in the autumn, and success was probably sporadic. Most of the year these populations lived in dispersed bands.

Egalitarian origins

Anatomically modern humans have been around for [roughly 300,000 years](#). There is little evidence of markers of sedentary lifestyles or institutionalized inequality going back more than 30,000 to 40,000 years.

That leaves a big gap. What kind of society did people live in for most of the history of our species?

There is still strong evidence that [humans actually lived in nomadic egalitarian bands](#) for much of that time. Complementing the archaeological evidence, [genetic studies](#) suggest that human population sizes in the Paleolithic were quite low. And the Paleolithic [climate may have been too variable](#) to permit long-term sedentary life, instead [favoring nomadic foraging](#).

This does not mean that humans are naturally egalitarian. Like us, our [ancestors](#) faced complex politics and domineering individuals. Egalitarian social life needs to be [maintained through active and coordinated effort](#).

From these origins, an astonishing variety of human societies emerged. Our politics today reflect a small and unusual slice of that diversity. Prehistory shows us that human political flexibility is far greater than we can imagine.

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