Planters of Doom and Playful Gardeners
Determinist and Possibilist Narratives of Mankind

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I dedicate this essay to Marina Ovsyannikova, whose courageous action of speaking truth to power on 15 March, 2022 proves that humans have free will.[1]

Introduction

The global economic crisis of the early 2000s marks the beginning of a rush of one-volume "big" histories of "mankind." Offering compact and complete knowledge about the history of the world to be absorbed within the length of an intercontinental flight, these airport bestsellers address an educated and itinerant non-expert audience grateful for having their lives explained as being the meaningful result of a logical and continuous historical development. Following the model of books like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13000 Years* (1997/2017), these popular historical narratives have titles like *A Short History of the World. The Story of Mankind from Prehistory to the Modern Day* (Alex Woolf, 2008); *Origin Story. A Big History of Everything* (David Christian, 2018); *History: From the Dawn of Civilization to the Present Day* (Dorling Kindersley/"DK," 2015); *Big History. From the Big Bang to the*

1 'They're lying to you': Russian TV employee interrupts news broadcast | Russia | The Guardian

Present (Cynthia Stokes Brown, 2007); *Applied Big History. Guide for Entrepreneurs, Investors and Other Living Things* (William Grassie, 2018); Adam Rutherford's volumes *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived. The Story of Our Genes* (2016) and *The Book of Humans. The Story of How We Became Us* (2018); and Bill Bryson's, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003). Next to the anglophone volumes there are also German ones, such as *Die kürzeste Geschichte allen Lebens. Eine Reportage über 13,7 Milliarden Jahre Werden und Vergehen* by Harald Lesch and Harald Zaun (2008). The seriously meant stories of planetary becoming have generated parodies such as Tom Phillips's delightful *Humans: A Brief History of How We F*cked It All Up* (2019). Together, these books offer their readers compact, entertaining, and not too complex reports on how humanity ended up in the bliss, or mess, in which it currently finds itself. They are the jet setter's equivalent to their grandparents' *Readers Digest* volumes, showing how far we have come in the skillful consumer-friendly packaging of world history. What's more, while classic accounts of world history hardly ever got beyond Eurocentric narratives of the period between Greek antiquity and the modern period, today's airport histories cover the whole of mankind's presence on this planet. Their Western-masculinist "we-ism" comes at the sacrifice of the ideals of diversity, complexity, and comprehensiveness.

While the planet heads toward climate catastrophe, then, its mobile cultural elite consumes texts offering a long backward glance at the beginnings of the world, or of the Anthropocene, most of which explain the present disruptive episode of earth history as the result of a long series of unavoidable events. The usual prognosticated future of this deterministic master narrative is doom. Even a book resisting narratives of impending extinction, Robert Kelly's *The Fifth Beginning*, is inappropriately translated as *Warum es normal ist, dass die Welt untergeht* ("Why it is normal that the world goes down") (Kelly 2020). Kelly's argument, formulated on the ground of deep archaeological knowledge, is not that the world will end soon but rather the contrary: that human societies have reached a period of great cultural potential for *beginning* a period of global networking and peace. The mistranslation shows that "deep" historical narratives planting the story of civilizational doom not only enjoy high currency but

have developed an ideological pull difficult to resist. They also contribute to a fatalistic mentality of leaving things as they are. It's easier for these texts and readers to imagine doom than to imagine humans engaged in change.[2]

These histories are not narrative chronicles of pre-human and human events but more or less philosophical reflections on mankind at the point of the "sixth" massive species extinction (Kolbert 2014), enriched with anecdotal information that seemingly confirms the depressing thesis. Most of these "big" narratives follow the logic of the Biblical master narrative of man's fall from divine grace and his subsequent suffering the sad consequences of what is known as the Neolithic "revolutions": the introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals. They also frequently use a narrative mode which Foucault referred to as the history of the present, offering nostalgic views on the deep past (with the earth as pristine, beautiful, and empty) and dystopian future from an explicitly present perspective.

The interest in the early history of mankind is necessarily coupled with a conspicuous amount of speculation as the documentary record for that period is particularly scattered and fragmentary. Much better documented times such as colonial expansion, industrialization, and the Enlightenment, which we should assume to be much more responsible for the present predicament, receive much less attention in these accounts. This asymmetry between bold speculative assertions and the fragmentariness of evidence may cause suspicion. What, we may wonder, is the ideological work of such big histories at the present historical conjunction? This essay interrogates two of these works with a view to their semantic productiveness, and ideological "subversiveness": the first one is Yuval Noah Harari's bestselling *Sapiens. A Brief History of Mankind* (2011) – both the original book and its two graphic versions, called "graphic history" in English while the German translation is announced as "graphic novel." The master narrative used by Harari and most other named writers has recently received a substantial critique from anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow.

2 See Mackenthun 2021a for a more elaborate discussion of this narrative mode.

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity (2021), which will be my second example, is a counternarrative to the hegemonic narrative of doom. *Sapiens* and *Dawn*, though explicitly reviewing the deep past from a present perspective, use different forms of emplotment: while Harari's books aim at infotainment and wildly mix different times and geographical scenes, Graeber/Wengrow offer a more scholarly historical-critical analysis but avoid narrative necessity and closure. In fact, both Harari and the two Davids employ a semantics of *play* that is reinforced by the structure of their texts, but to vastly different ends: while Harari presents human history as an inconsequential postmodernist tale, Graeber and Wengrow are strongly committed to a philosophy of political change. Harari's playfulness is that of a gambler seducing his readers into believing a particular neoliberal version of history while Graeber and Wengrow use "play" conceptually as a space of intellectual freedom from an ideology of inevitability and its hegemonic master narratives. Harari can be seen to subvert the semantics of humanism and political liberalism promoting a libertarian stance, while *Dawn* subverts both the semantics and the narrative structure of *Sapiens*'s historical master narrative. This has significant consequences for each narrative's interpretive power.

1. Determinist and Possibilist Pasts

Harari's original book *Sapiens* (2011, engl. 2014) promises to answer mankind's most pressing questions: where do humans come from? How do humans differ from other animals, i.e. how did consciousness and cognition develop? Are humans originally good or bad, peaceful or fatally aggressive? Did "stone age" humans have more fun and freedom than neolithic ones burdened by agricultural labor? Do humans benefit from cooperativeness? Are our decisions the result of ideas and historical choice or rather conditioned by biological laws? Trained as a military historian with a specialization in the medieval period, Harari assumes expertise as a global *savant* with a very particular message: because of genetic mutations and environmental challenges that happened to

humans in the distant past, social inequality and the impending destruction of life on earth are inevitable. Human life will eventually merge into a digital existence (similar to Zuckerberg's Metaverse) where the world will be reigned by inorganic algorithms while a small human elite will become godlike, as Harari promises in *Homo Deus*. The majority of mankind, however, will continue to wallow in poverty (Harari 2017, 64).

Barack Obama promoted *Sapiens* just like Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates; Ridley Scott wanted to turn it into a TV series and there is a *Sapiens* museum in Israel. Harari himself started a social-impact company called *Sapienship* in 2019, whose function is to increase the distribution of his globally successful story to future decision makers.[3] All of this suggests that Harari's version of world history is striving to become the hegemonic historical narrative for decades to come. With the graphic versions and a version for children it will enter the reading lists of schools. *Sapiens* is the brand name for an educational product whose impact will have to be reckoned with.

Harari's condemnation of agriculture was preceded by other popular "big" historical narratives by Jared Diamond, William Ruddiman, and James Scott which present mankind as having lapsed from a state of original hunter and gatherer bliss to sedentary squalor as a consequence of the Neolithic "revolutions" (Keeler 2021). In *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) Jared Diamond uses a geographical-deterministic framework to explain the inequality between the societies around the world – not as a consequence of colonial and imperial impact but of environmental milieu.[4] Social inequality, rather than being the result of war and con-

3 One of Sapienship's aims is to "learn to distinguish reality from illusions." As the books explain, such "illusions" include the belief in free will and democracy. ht tps://www.sapienship.co.

4 Diamond begins his study with a conversation between himself and an inhabitant of New Guinea who asks him to explain the inequality between their societies since their encounter about 500 years ago. In his answer he reaches out into the poorly documented distant Neolithic past, suggesting that inequality is produced by difference in environmental placement rather than European imperial aggression. Harari follows the same strategy of using "big" history to avoid sustained analysis of the more recent colonial past.

quest, is presented as natural destiny. Both Diamond and Harari offer a crypto-biblical story of a fall from the Garden of Eden all the way to impending apocalypse. The general narrative frame inspiring their accounts is the nineteenth-century story of a linear-teleological cultural development. In different versions – from the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers to the American natural philosopher Lewis Henry Morgan – this model views humanity to have developed in stages usually beginning with the savage stage, progressing to barbarism and pastoralism and then to urban civilization. Later versions of this stadialist model add industrialization and, in Harari's case, digitalization. This master narrative has greatly shaped historical thinking, including Karl Marx's political-historical account of a progression from feudalism to capitalism to socialism. The archaeological timeline invented in Denmark in the mid-nineteenth century, which viewed mankind moving from simple to more complex technological stages (from stone to bronze to iron age), follows the same universalist and unilinear logic. From its beginnings, the optimistic narrative coexisted with a story of decline, inspired by Edward Gibbon's classic account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. When Enlightenment optimism waned under the impact of increasing economic and social inequality, the narrative of cultural decline culminated in what we may call a naturalistic turn: some human groups, it was now promoted, just were not fit enough for joining the common train of progress. This was explained by way of "natural" racial differences and the "natural" inclination of certain "races" to degenerate and to become extinct.

Building on the power of this social-Darwinist master narrative, Harari, as others before him, claims that the growth of communities and increasing social complexity, caused by the introduction of agriculture, inevitably led to inequality and social hierarchies. Like Diamond, he does not dwell on the historical agency of feudalism or colonialism. He rather, as we shall see, regards wheat itself as the originator of inequality. In his sustained critique of Harari's work, Phil Deloria expresses justified doubt about such selective use of historical facts: "There is an obvious danger in widening the chronological frame to the point that human action becomes structural, abstract, and socially

meaningless – even as the supposed lesson remains socially meaningful in the *now*" (Deloria 2021, 234). The philosophy of the *Sapiens* volumes is indeed unresponsive to social questions, as humans are regarded as the result of neurological and chemical processes. Sociality as a realm distinct from nature and its implication of human agency are foreign to Harari's ideological set-up. "Free will" for him is not a reality but a mere "myth" (Harari 2018). In his denial of the "reality" of free will, he does not explain why modern, extremely complex states, global institutions and NGOs came into being and why humans constantly respond creatively to sociopolitical conditions, thereby effecting change. That part of human history is only used for ornamental purposes in a narrative asserting the essential difference between humans while also claiming that "we" did not change significantly since "our" hunter-gatherer state. In fact, the "we"-ism of Harari's and other "big" historians' books denies the significant diversity between human societies and civilizations and their histories. The deceptive collective pronoun also suggests that *all* humans were collectively responsible for the destruction of more-than-human life, such as "our" contribution to species extinctions, climate change, and environmental degradation.

Other recent versions of the doom narrative add an anthropogenic twist to the crypto-biblical narrative, claiming, in the words of Kyle Keeler, that humans have bred greed, created "catastrophic climate change," caused a separation of humanity from nonhuman beings through domination, and fostered "conditions responsible for future Anthropocene markers." This narrative, then, "creates a deterministic worldview that ties agriculture to the conception of private property through subduing the Earth" (Keeler 2021, 5). It arises as the question of the responsibility for climate change takes root in deep history discourse. Tim Beach of Austin University hypothesizes that Maya agriculture may have significantly contributed to global warming (Conellan 2019), while others stress the cooling effects of the massive loss of life in America resulting from the colonial encounter (Koch et al. 2019). In other words, the deepening of the time scale allows for downplaying the historically recent agency of industrial-extractive colonialism while establishing a link between precolonial carbon emissions and Indige-

nous lives: the fewer Native farmers the better for the climate. Dead Indians are good Indians once again. These deep historiographical constructions confirm Philip Deloria's suspicion that large-scale narratives of the human past tend to create more "harm" to Indigenous people (whose ancestors are featured as unecological mass-murderers and destroyers) than explaining through which agency, human and other, climate change and the present loss of biodiversity primarily came into the world (Deloria 2021, 243).

However, Harari's, Diamond's and other determinists' master narrative of agricultural doom does not remain uncontested. Most reviewers and expert scholars regard Harari's books as instances of popular history whose assumptions have long been rejected, all the way down to schoolbook level. Yet the biologist-determinist narrative continues to thrive in the demi-monde of pop science, as a convenient naturalization of the neoliberal economy's tolerance of inequality, by demonstrating its inevitability with a series of illustrious and out-of-context examples from the deep historical past – preferably those periods for which little documentation exists. With the timely publication of David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything*,[5] *Sapiens* and companion volumes have now received a serious rival.

The narrative of *Dawn* contradicts the basic assumption that human history moved from a period of initial hunter and gatherer innocence to a period of endless drudgery as the result of man's fatal turn to agriculture. It also denies the thesis that the existence of social hierarchies was purely imaginary and a matter of "chance" and "accident," as Harari

5 "Timely" not only because of the urgency of a forceful objection to the raconteurs of doom but also because one of its authors, David Graeber, died suddenly just a few weeks after finishing the book at the age of 59. *The Dawn of Everything* is part of his intellectual legacy, after his earlier appraised critiques of neoliberalist capitalism. Graeber was one of the spokespersons of the Occupy movement; his books on debt and "bullshit jobs" have had a huge impact on intellectual debate worldwide. Although *Dawn* deals mostly with the period between the Neolithic Age and early colonial America, Graeber's critique of finance capitalism, cancerous bureaucracy, and widespread intellectual illiberalism pulses throughout the pages of his last, co-authored, book.

writes (Harari et al. 2021, 187, 206).[6] Quite to the contrary, Graeber and Wengrow argue, the archaeological record and anthropological knowledge show that humans at all times took advantage of their faculty of creatively shaping their environment, learning from mistakes, and avoiding the social consequences of an unequal distribution of power and wealth. The history of mankind, they show, did not follow a predetermined teleology but consists of endless variation and experiment. They identify the biblical origins of the determinist master narrative and its reiterations first in Enlightenment stadialism, then social Darwinist racial evolutionism, and the modern imperial developmentalism, to be a powerful construct whose interpretive effectiveness consists in its repetitiveness and its explanatory power for global social inequality. Referring to the arbitrariness of that narrative, they also critique the pop historians' reiteration of anthropological dualisms which have long been abolished by the sciences themselves. They find abundant evidence for human societies and economies having been much more flexible than the dualist doctrine of hunter-gatherer societies vs. sedentary agricultural societies, once established under the impact of Victorian-imperial science, is ready to concede.[7] In other words, Graeber and

6 Racial law in the US is the result of "a bunch of random factors," as Harari's figure Dr. Fiction explains, preceded by the old adage that transatlantic slavery developed out of preexisting African slavery (Harari et al. 2021, 196–97, 206). Confusingly, "economic self-interest" is mentioned as another reason for American slavery in this book of contradictions (197). From an anti-humanist perspective, "self-interest" is probably a random fact.

7 In his book on "the foraging spectrum," the renowned anthropologist Robert Kelly relates the emergence of US anthropology's focus on hunting/gathering and foraging to the 1966 Chicago conference *Man the Hunter* (Kelly 1995, 9). Kelly's discriminating social analysis of foraging societies does not explore to what extent those foraging practices coexisted with horticultural or agricultural ones. But he offers a sustained critique of the theoretical hegemony of the concept of "foraging" as a scientific paradigm preventing more intense study of the murky in-betweenness of "foraging" groups also practicing gardening and field farming. This hegemony must be seen as a late effect of the nineteenth-century (Victorian) reign of the dichotomy of nomadic "foragers" on the one side and sedentary agricultural societies on the other, which is now slowly erod-

Wengrow contest the linear-determinist narrative and dualist semantics both by providing massive counter-evidence and by historicizing the ideological contexts from which these hegemonic narratives and semantics derive: in most cases, the context of late nineteenth-century colonial and imperial science. Unlike Harari's books, *Dawn* views the present predicament of global inequality as a result of colonial capitalism which also produced Harari's own narrative frame. It responds to Harari's individualist libertarianism by pointing out humans' capacity for mutual aid and for saying "no" to authoritarian power, or slipping away from it. Graeber and Wengrow's possibilist message is that, even today, another world is possible if people would just take up action.[8] Indebted to possibilist thinking, *Dawn* does not deny the shaping impact of the environment on human action. But it does not regard humans as being "trapped" by their environment, least of all a grass called wheat (Wengrow 2021).

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ing. Wengrow and Graeber's book contributes to that necessary erosion, empirically supported by ever more refined bioarchaeological methods and more attentive re-readings of historical documents, which show mixtures between hunting, gathering, and various forms of plant management having been the rule rather than the exception (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, chapters 6 and 11; Safier 2015; Doolittle 2000; Mt. Pleasant/Burt 2010).

8 Introduced by the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918), possibilism is a principle of human geography that holds that the geological environment, rather than Naturalism's milieu and heredity, sets "natural" limits to human activity. As history shows, humans have used their creative force to shape the earth since the introduction of agriculture and increasingly since the beginnings of industrialization and extractive capitalism. In emphasizing human creativity, inventiveness, and freedom of choice, possibilism explicitly refutes the geographical determinism of Friedrich Ratzel, who, in accordance with the doctrines of Naturalism and Social Darwinism, regarded human action as being severely inhibited by the natural milieu. Possibilist thinking formed the basis of the field of cultural ecology initiated by Carl Ortwin Sauer and continued by Lucien Febvre and Marshall Sahlins, one of Graeber's teachers (Heineberg 2003: 23–24; Hanks 2011: 83, 262).

2. Planting Doom. Subversive Determinism in Constructions of the Agricultural Past

In my following comparison of Harari's and Graeber/Wengrow's deep histories of the present I will concentrate on Harari's graphic versions, written for an unidentified age group probably ranging from eighth grade to young adult – that age group most likely interested in wooly mammoths and super(wo)men. The cartoon versions are part of a campaign for epistemic hegemony. *Sapiens. A Graphic History. The Birth of Humankind* (Harari et al. 2020) and *Sapiens. A Graphic History. The Pillars of Civilization* (Harari et al. 2021) greatly benefit from Harari's collaboration with the French illustrator Daniel Casanave and the Belgian scriptwriter David Vandermeulen. The graphics facilitate reception and seem to explicitly appeal to young readers, but they also add multiple intertextual layers not available to young adults, thus addressing a mixed-generational, but certainly western-educated, readership.

Sapiens. A Graphic History. The Birth of Humankind presents itself as a story told by Uncle Harari who tells the story of Homo Sapiens to his niece Zoe with the help of various experts and interlocutors: the London-based classification biologist Arya Saraswati, the French-German Benedictine friar and archaeologist Father Klüg, and the superwoman figure Dr. Fiction. The narratives of the *Sapiens* graphic volumes intersect with numerous intertexts such as the story of Prehistoric Bill, a skinny version of the famous US cartoon figure Fred Flintstone: they both drive around in cars (made of stone or trees) and have nuclear families behaving like modern American families. Presented as fictions within the story, the Prehistoric Bill stories are nevertheless used to explain Neolithic reality.

The first graphic book ends with a highly dramatic, and rather silly, criminal investigation and court trial against "Sapiens" for having exterminated all the charismatic Ice Age megafauna. This story is based on a narrative as empirically weak as it is resistant to scientific counter-evidence, initiated in the late sixties and since continued by popular science books and blogs. In spite of major temporal inconsistencies, the Pleistocene overkill hypothesis argues that the first human populations of Australia and America were responsible for the rapid extinction of

these two continents' megafauna (Martin 1967; Diamond 1987). It dismisses the impact of other factors like climate change. There is little hard evidence for such a "blitzkrieg" (as it is called), and the scientific narrative is silent about the fact that mammoths and giant sloths became extinct around the world: the impact of Eurasian hunters did not trigger a similar story of human misdemeanor. The first *Sapiens* graphic volume greatly elaborates on this problematic hypothesis, bringing a "Sapiens" couple to court for their "crime" across many pages while retaining the geographical focus on the two continents whose Indigenous populations later became themselves subjects to extinction policies (Harari 2011, chapter 4; Harari et al. 2021, 224–43). While nominally charging *all* of humankind with the slaughter of Pleistocene megafauna, the brief mention of this mega event in both volumes' initial timeline is reduced to paleo-Australians and paleo-Americans.[9] The effect is twofold: present-day assertions of a heightened Indigenous "ecological" consciousness are weakened by references to the ecocidal behavior of Indigenous ancestors. And it is suggested that, in Vine Deloria, Jr.'s words, "at *no* time were human beings careful of the lands upon which they lived" (Deloria 1997, 97), rendering futile all attempts to mobilize against this human "nature" – be it by fighting the effects of climate change or those of environmental degradation in the present.

For my discussion I will select two historical themes that seem particularly important to Harari: (1) his claim that the agricultural "revolution" imposed a "trap" on humans leading directly to social and material inequality; and (2) his claim that democracy, human equality, and "free will" were politically imposed fictions without any foundation in the real world. In Harari's version of human evolution, the event that decided the triumph of Homo Sapiens over against other early homo groups is what he calls the cognitive revolution or the "Tree of Knowledge mutation," caused by a spontaneous genetic mutation about 70,000 years ago (Harari 2011, 23–24; Harari et al. 2020, 101). Three more revolutions followed on the way to modern man: the Neolithic revolutions in-

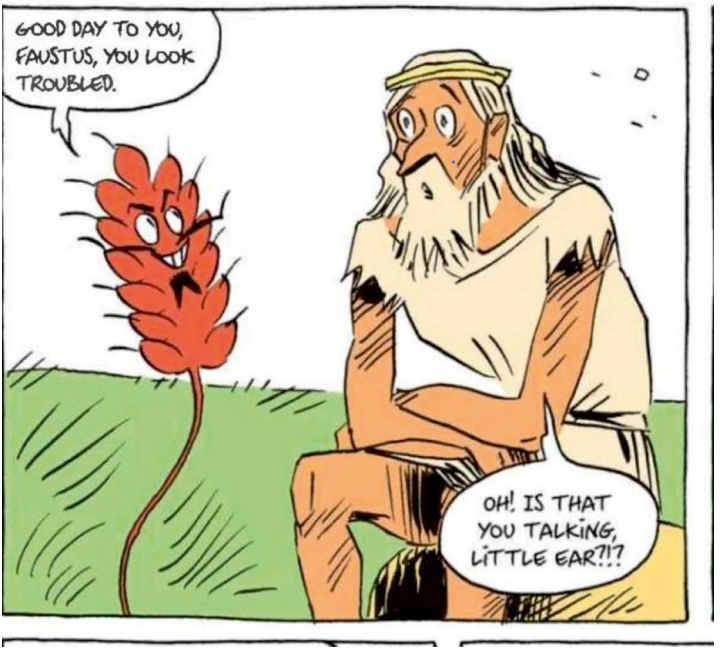
9 See Mackenthun 2021b, chapter 1, and Philip Deloria 2021 for discussions of the colonial subtext of the Pleistocene overkill hypothesis.

troducing sedentary agriculture and the domestication of animals; the scientific revolution c. 500 years ago (discovery of America); and finally the industrial revolution. The graphic versions do not represent this narrative as one linear account; instead they mix the characters' conversations about distant historical events (or theories thereof) with present-day scenes typical of a global-itinerant social elite –visits to the London zoo, to a fancy conference compound, and to the archaeological site of Lascaux in the Dordogne. Figures discuss the history of Sapiens during a performance of *Faust*, undertake an extended trip to Philadelphia (where they discuss the Declaration of Independence with the Founding Fathers) and shorter ones to Paris, New York and Ibiza. The present-day city- and landscapes are blended with historical ones, dependent on the erratic flow of their conversation. The graphics brim with delightful intertextual and intermedial allusions. The storytelling situation is established in the first panel of volume 1, with Uncle Harari lecturing from his armchair. Dr. Fiction delivers lengthy additional lectures on the fictionality of history, adding another postmodernist twist.

The introduction of agriculture was, according to Harari, a "trap" causing human misery and social inequality. Volume 2 of the graphic *Sapiens* begins with Harari and his friends visiting a performance of Goethe' *Faust*. Mephistopheles is dancing on a medievalist stage singing his "little ditty 'Little Crop of Horrors'." The scene merges into his delightfully illustrated retelling of his major triumph about 12,000 years ago when he succeeded to convince "a poor sapiens called Faustus" into adopting agriculture (Harari et al. 2021, 12, 14). (Fig. 1). The serpent of Paradise was in reality an ear of wheat, the story suggests, forcing Faustus and his whole species into the "agricultural revolution" (17). In one of many parallactical leaps (connecting the Neolithic with contemporary events), the Mephistophelian wheat connects the Faustian beginnings with present-day industrial wheat farming (19), triumphantly exclaiming that all of this was the result of the satanic Wheat's original plot. Man's tragic mistake was to exchange the freedom of a hunter-gathering life for the drudgery of farming which, Harari claims as he continues his story, led to a poorer diet, physical ailments and, as the embedded

adventures of the Prehistoric Bill characters suggest, violence and social inequality (Harari et al. 2021, 28–30).

Fig. 1: A Mephistophelian grain of wheat laying the agricultural trap for Faustus.



Harari, Yuval Noah, David Vandermeulen, and Daniel Casanave (2021). *Sapiens. A Graphic History, Vol. 2. The Pillars of Civilization*. London: Jonathan Cape. P. 15.

After planting in readers' minds anthropomorphized Wheat's colorful story of its exceptional historical seduction of Sapiens – a remarkable agency considering that wheat is genetically a mere grass while Sapiens had already been cognitively revolutionized 60,000 years prior to that fateful event –, Harari has Prof. Saraswati explain to his niece that the agricultural revolution was no single or sudden event but "took thou-

sands of years" (Harari et al. 2021, 25). Yet elsewhere the same figure explains, "Over time, a lot of small changes accumulated into a big revolution" (33). Such temporal-terminological haziness and semantic uncertainties abound in the graphic books, giving them the character of fictional stories, not graphic "histories," as the English versions contend.

All three books are strongly dedicated to a roundabout dismissal of agricultural society which Harari regards as "history's biggest fraud" (Harari 2011, chapter 11). Asked whether he thinks that hunter-gatherers had a more comfortable and gratifying life than farmers, "Harari" answers: "Most people who 'came after them' were impoverished peasants rather than people like us flying to conferences and eating in snazzy restaurants" (Harari et al. 2020, 155). There are several problems with this sweeping claim: (1) Harari gives no systematic account of how Sapiens developed from freedom-loving "foragers" to impoverished peasants to the jet-setting "us" of his frame narrative; (2) he does not elaborate the real reasons why most peasants were (and still are) so poor; (3) he insinuates that the societies of the present are no longer agricultural: the wholesome food served in his "snazzy restaurants" is not traced back to its human producers. The snobbish cartoon discussion about the deficient nutritious value of their pasta dishes, combined with their similarly simplistic discussion of man as the slave of a plant, disguises the real – both historical and contemporary – reasons for peasant poverty. The most recent chapter of that real-life story can presently be observed in India where farmers were killed in violent opposition to a corporatization of agriculture destroying their markets,[10] or the United States where farmers are "trapped" by the GMO industry and opiods. One does not have to be an expert in agricultural history to know that peasant poverty was and is less the result of field labor than of feudal slavery and, since the beginnings of the twentieth century, of farmers' dependency on big corporate landowners and chemical companies which are indeed depriving them of any agency – even the freedom to choose their own seeds. In spite of its nominal emphasis on

10 See the very detailed Wikipedia entry: 2020–2021 Indian farmers' protest - Wikipedia. The harmful farm laws were repealed in December 2021.

agriculture, the second graphic volume skips the history of feudalism and agricultural corporatism and the social inequality they involve.

As other adherents of biodeterminist big histories, Harari looks at the Neolithic period for answers about man's essential "character" as needed for grasping, or legitimizing, the present socio-economic conjunction. Aided by the popular graphic genre, *Sapiens* does not present a social-economic history connecting the Neolithic with our own time. In its longue durée perspective, colonial capitalism is an insignificant episode, as it is in most other big historical accountsn-made past. A second effect of the "big" picture is that it downplays, or altogether eliminates, human diversity – a problem that also frequently occurs in discussions about the Anthropocene. As several scholars have emphasized, not "man" or "Sapiens" in general are responsible for the present precarity but identifiable groups of humans involved in establishing, shaping, and defending the existing global constellation marked by growing social inequality and environmental degradation.

Agriculture, Harari's story goes, forced humans to live in settlements, causing human inequality, a poorer diet (too much gluten: one delightful panel shows the devilish wheat head jump, snakelike, from Zoe's pasta dish), an increase of epidemics, and general misery (Harari 2021 et al., 27–39). His hostility to agriculture can in part be explained by his condemnation of modern industrialized meat production, the abuse and pain imposed on "farmyard" animals.[11] But the volumes also contain a fair amount of paleo-hunter-gatherer nostalgia – at least as long as the hunters are not indigenous to Australia or the Americas.

In his *second* overall argument, Harari precludes the expectable humanist objection to his bio-determinist theory – proof of human agency throughout modern history – by making extensive claims about the *fictionality of equality* and of human rights. Human rights, democracy, and other liberal values are claimed to be mere fictions and "myths."

11 The original book contains a photo of a calf separated from its mother and bound for slaughter, looking into the camera with doleful eyes (Harari 2011, 108). Here indeed might rest the serious core of Harari's nihilist cynicism: a vegetarian's deep compassion for the captive fellow creature.

In his graphic versions he introduces a specific character to promote that message, a superwoman figure called Dr. Fiction. Using the same irresistible didactic tone as "Uncle Harari," Dr. Fiction presents the radical constructivist thesis that psychologically, humans have not changed much since the early days of mankind: they are still more or less gullible primitives capable of cognition but easily manipulated by fancy fictions – QED, we have to admit with a view to *Sapiens*' publishing success. As most commentators of the books note, their biologism amounts to a complete dismissal of humanism, the Enlightenment, the innovations they produced, and social theories built on them – most importantly the conviction of human beings' ability to intellectual growth if exposed to a feasible education. Mankind for Harari consists of smart elites telling the less educated population what to believe – a thesis reminiscent of Arnold Toynbee's old theory of a charismatic "intelligentsia" manipulating the "internal proletariat" of force-assimilated societies, keeping the uneducated masses in awe with their stories.[12] The imagined communication situation he describes resembles what Eric Cheyfitz calls a "scene of primal education," by which a colonial power imagines superimposing its "superior" values on another culture, thereby explaining and promoting social inequality (Cheyfitz 1991, 113). Colonial realities were often less didactically refined.

In addition to her theory about manipulating gullible majorities, Dr. Fiction and the Indian biologist Prof. Saraswati join forces in explaining to the stunned American Founding Fathers that their Declaration of Independence was no more than a list of fictions. Over ten pages, Harari's friends explain that men were not "created equal," that they there were not endowed with any rights by a "creator," and that in effect the DI is indistinguishable from the old-testamentarian lex talionis of the brutal Babylonian ruler Hammurabi in claiming universally valid applicability. While Hammurabi's code fixed punishments for the destruction of property, including slaves and women, the DI and the US Constitution exclude these groups from the defined rights. In fact, they were still regarded as property at the time these documents were drafted (Harari

12 Toynbee calls this enforced mission civilisatrice "mimesis" (Toynbee 1939).

et al. 2021, 92–101).[13] A philosophical statement of political revolution against authoritarian rule is compared with a criminal code of just such a tyrannical rule. The Declaration of Independence is misrepresented as a scientific definition of the human species rather than a statement of political will.[14] Harari's denial of the "biological" existence of equality caters to the idea that social inequality is naturally determined and therefore unavoidable. Madame Saraswati's "scientific", i.e. biologist, mutilation of the DI has its humorous effects,[15] but the consequence of her deconstruction is to invite a willing and politically naive readership to a position that denies the efficacy of the principles of human rights, rule of law, and a state striving for social equity – the moral foundation of modern democratic states. Both figures, Saraswati the biologist and Dr. Fiction the radical constructivist, function to convince readers that such statements of political will are insubstantial fictions. In spite of the leisure-

13 Volume 2 also contains a long treatment of American slavery, which it downplays to a mere "bunch of random factors" – joining the reactionary historical claim that the transatlantic slave-based system, which produced the foundation of Europe's and America's present wealth, was the accidental continuation of preexisting African human trafficking (Harari et al. 2021, 197, 206). Harari's declaration of slavery as a "chance historical event" raises the suspicion that "chance" and "mutation" are always evoked when historical explanation is too difficult or inconvenient.

14 The historical context of the DI is ignored, as is the extended critical literature on the document, whose spirit has since influenced all modern democratic-republican constitutions worldwide (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

15 Including the vicious-malicious comparison of the development of inequality between humans with the lengthening of the necks of giraffes (Harari et al. 2021, 97). Yet, there are no short-necked giraffes; and their long necks have developed over millennia. In addition to the fake comparison, humans possess the power of reason enabling them to avoid social inequality. The *Sapiens* volumes deny that ability. They are saturated with similar limping comparisons which certainly find their adherents among readers who, like Andrew Carnegie, are grateful for great inequality among men because it is "essential for the future progress of the race" to have clearly separated classes of rulers and laborers (Carnegie 2006, 3).

liness with which Harari's figures travel through the world, the books' message is that humanist idealism is a dispensable lie.[16]

Later, Dr. Fiction intervenes into a sixteenth-century Spanish inquisition court at Valladolid by charging both inquisitor and victim with being blinded by fictions. With apodictic certainty – "no human society has ever cornered the market on absolute truth" – she sweeps away all hermeneutic struggle about *relative* truths as well. The impressed torture victim wonders whether Dr. Fiction's statement was not itself "some new revelation." Leaving through the window, the superwoman figure exclaims that truth and "identities" are constantly changing, depending on the "stories" which people believe (Harari et al. 2021, 242–43).

Valladolid was the place where Bartolomé de las Casas defended the human rights of Indigenous Americans against the fundamentalist cynic Luís de Sepúlveda in 1550–51. This was a major intellectual event during the early phase of European imperial expansion which shaped later discourses on international law (Hanke 1965). A sad result of Las Casas' activism was that Africans were used instead of Native Americans as plantation slaves. But the widespread claim that he was responsible for slavery itself is as cynical as Dr. Fiction's nihilism because it shows a similar

16 Having "deconstructed" the political-philosophical principle of universal human rights, *Sapiens* offer an extended series of statements on the need for an ideology (called "imagined orders," "beliefs" or "fictions"). "Gravity will still be there tomorrow morning, but human rights and the dollar, who knows…," we read, followed by the assertion that it often takes armies and police to force people into complying with the imagined order. But for "some people" more than violence is required to sustain an imagined order; they "have to really believe in it." Even "the elite" have to believe in "something" to be able to cooperate, like "God, money, … or honor, patriotism, manliness." These sociologically sloppy statements merge into an appreciation of cynicism as a general position, as "real cynics" rarely ever try to "reach the top" of a society. "Empires", Uncle Harari lectures to his smart niece (who indeed does believe that cynics can take power), "are far more likely to be built by true believers than cynics" (Harari et al. 2021, 104–5). The formulation is for once precise: the "builders" of empires are indeed often common laborers blinded by the named ideologies; their leaders, as innumerable examples show, are often cynics only interested in their own power.

resistance toward historical analysis of the political and discursive forces at play during that formative period.[17]

With the foundations of humanist legal thought being reduced to a vapid fantasy, the biologist narrative reigns supreme. The Valladolid scene is followed by a silly conversation between Margaret Thatcher and John Lennon on the beach if Ibiza about the existence of contradictory stories without any mature reflection on the relationship between stories and the real.[18] The plausibility of the theory that the majority of humans react to the stories of convincing elites finally dissolves when Dr. Fiction turns her previous assertion upside-down, now claiming that "the world isn't inevitable, you can change the story. It's up to you" (Harari et al. 2021, 251). Banks, religions and governments are indeed not the work of nature, heaven, or biology but just "human inventions". This final subversion is itself merely the last statement in a confusing, and – for those enjoying the spread of confusion – delightful shadow play about truth and fiction, to be continued in two more volumes promising to explain, as the preview announces, the historical interactions between money, empire, and religion (Harari et al. 2021, 251–53).

Harari's books expose their readers to stunningly contradictory positions, reiterating the epistemic and intellectual confusion currently at large in the social media and beyond, amplified by the intentional spread

17 Spanish jurists laid the basis for modern international law, in the Valladolid debates and other debates to follow. No contemporary English or US court or law faculty ever went to any lengths to determine the legality of colonial activities in America before the Marshall Court of the Removal era.

18 The bottom line is that stories are created for "people" (by whom?) to manipulate them. Harari suggests the existence of a conscious apparatus for the dissemination of state ideologies, e.g. through the educational system, architecture, images and the like (Harari et al. 2021, 108, 187–93). This simple cybernetic model of the authoritarian implantation of beliefs cannot readily explain social and political change. For Dr. Fiction, change – such as the "feminist revolution" – comes about because someone decided to change the story (Harari et al. 2021, 249), without adding which power position ascertains the success of such interventions. Essential questions about cultural communication, the dissemination of ideology, and the emergence of counterdiscourses remain unresolved.

of fake "truths" and "alternative facts". Certainly, at the end of the second graphic volume, all claims to historical truth have evaporated: historiography is merely a colorful story, told by Uncle Harari from his armchair. It is not a responsible and pedagogically useful approximation of the truth about the past. *Sapiens* owes its popularity to its intelligent use of implicit knowledge and beliefs, expressed in the form of postmodern play and pastiche. Its narrative creatively employs various fallacies, such as confusing correlation with causation, anachronistic representation, generalization, logical monocausality, and an anecdotal-parallactical method linking its modern humans with decontextualized fictional scenes from much earlier times without accounting for the historical process of centuries and millennia. There is especially little mention of the history of colonial capitalism immediately preceding, and indeed continuing in, the present period. The books' argument builds on the fact that our access to the real is regulated by ideology and belief systems imposed by an intelligent elite on the less intelligent majority. Their own position is an amoral one: that of the cynical and mentally superior observer of the affairs of the human rabble with their actions unredeemably trapped by petty beliefs. In other words, it is based on dividing "Sapiens" into the many who go about their daily work and the few who can afford to look down upon them, arranging the figures of world history as in a sideshow for their entertainment. Harari's superior observer in fact occupies a god-like position, *Homo Deus* being one of his titles declaring the elite's future state. Or that of the devil, as the case may be.[19] For an Americanist reader, Uncle Harari is reminiscent of Mark Twain's mysterious stranger, who calls himself "Satan" and visits Earth to entertain three Austrian boys by creating five hundred miniature people whom he then kills off at his pleasure in wars and catastrophes. While snuffing out a peasant's life, he comforts the boys not to worry: "they were of no consequence, and we could make more, some time or other, if we needed them" (Twain 1980, 173). In terms of the little value attributed to common humanity, "homo deus" becomes indistinguishable from "homo diaboli".

19 After all, "homo deus" – the promise to become godlike – is the serpent's promise to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3, 5).

3. Sedentariness Without Social Hierarchy

Next to the drudgery of a sedentary lifestyle, agriculture, according to the biodeterminist narrative promoted by Harari, also brought about social inequality and an increase of human violence. Then again even the mass killings of the twentieth century seem statistically small compared to the percentage of violent deaths found in selected ancient graves (Harari et al. 2020, 184–88).[20] As David Graeber and David Wengrow remind us, the argument that agriculture brought about social inequality and a raise of human violence can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur les origines et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755; Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 27–28; 63–67). However, it is by no means clear that Rousseau draws a causal connection between agriculture and inequality:

> The first man who, having fenced off a plot of land, thought of saying 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, how many miseries and horrors might the human race have been spared by the one who, upon pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had shouted to his fellow men 'Beware of listening to this impostor, you are lost, *if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to all and that the earth belongs to no one.' But by that time, things had very probably already come to the point where they could no longer go on as they were, for this idea of property*, depending upon many prior ideas which could only have arisen successively, *did not suddenly take shape in the human*

20 In a breathtaking arithmetic tour de force, the first graphic "history" calculates, on the basis of scant finds in ancient graves and a lot of speculation, that "forager" societies were probably less violent than sedentary ones. The calculations are methodically questionable, as in the statement "So ancient Kentucky may have been as violent as the 20th century!" (Harari et al. 2020, 185). The absurdity of such a comparison (we have a handful of skulls from the archaeological site of Indian Knoll, Kentucky, but hard evidence of the violence of the whole last century) gets lost in assertive self-praise on having "explained all that so clearly" (186) although "we really don't know much about the lives of ancient foragers" (187).

> *mind*. It was necessary to make much progress, to acquire considerable ingenuity and knowledge, and to transmit and increase them from age to age, before arriving at this last stage of the *state of nature*. (Rousseau 1988, 34; emphasis added)

If I read him correctly, Rousseau here regards the invention of private property as occurring at the last stage of the state of nature, later extending to the privatization of land, which was formerly used in common ("the fruit of the earth" belonging "to all"). The fence comes to represent the beginnings of private property rather than the beginnings of agriculture: Rousseau distinguishes between the dividing up of land in consequence of its cultivation and the emergence of private property: "From the cultivation of lands necessarily followed their division, and from property, once recognized, the first rules of justice," he writes, followed by a confirmation of John Locke's theory of property by labor (Rousseau 1988, 41). The *Discours*, which is a piece of political theory rather than a historically precise account of the emergence of agriculture, assumes a concurrence of land cultivation and private property, without claiming a causality. Rousseau's reflections must have been inspired by observing the fencing off of common land and its transformation into private property, which he would have been able to witness in Europe at the time: the violent enclosure of land and its transfer into private manorial estates. Less interested in farming than in the sociological causes of inequality and moral decline, Rousseau stresses the presence, or lack of, "talent" and "ambition" to increase wealth among men as a decisive factor rather than agricultural practices (Rousseau 1988, 41, 42).[21]

Graeber and Wengrow spend a large part of their book demonstrating, on the basis of archaeological reconstruction and anthropological

21 I find confirmation for my reading from Kyle Keeler who critiques what he calls the Early Anthropocene Narrative. Agriculture, greed, "and eventually private property", Keeler writes, "do not follow one another in a linear fashion. Instead, commodified land and private property arise from colonialism rather than agriculture" (Keeler 2021).

field study, that agricultural-sedentary societies were not inevitably hierarchical, just as non-agricultural societies can be shown to have hierarchical structures responsible for social inequality. The standard historical narrative that regards the introduction of agriculture, rather than the introduction of private property, as the beginning of inequality, is to them unfeasible. They regard agriculture as a matter of human choice, to be adopted and later neglected for long periods of time. Instead of speaking of a monolithic concept they regard agriculture as a vast spectrum of activities, knowledge, and skills developed over many centuries – knowledges and inventions that "we are likely to be benefiting from" and are grateful for every morning when "we sit down to breakfast" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 499). *The Dawn of Everything*, subtitled "A New History of Humanity," is both a history of mankind and a historically substantiated assessment of human agency and creativity. It is also a counterhistory to the biologist-determinist historical narrative discussed above. *Dawn* confronts that narrative on many grounds, of which I would like to focus on those two examples already selected for my reading of *Sapiens*: the role of cognition and of agriculture, subject to Harari's two "revolutions".

There was no agricultural revolution, Graeber and Wegrow argue. For many centuries, if not millennia, as they demonstrate, agricultural practices were included by human groups in their portfolio of food production, without replacing hunting and gathering practices, and without forcing humans into permanent settlement. In addition, their book contains a running critique of the stadialist-developmentalist narrative (described above), whose teleology they find to be incompatible with historical evidence, and of the colonial-capitalist economic structure that produced both the technocratic-Enlightenment narrative of progress and the well-known semantics of cultural inequality explaining particular human groups' success and other groups' disaster. At the same time, the humanist-Enlightenment ideals of human rights, deliberative democracy, and altruistic reciprocity, they argue, are at least partially indebted to the cultural encounter in the Americas. This is not a new argument, of course, and the authors may be charged with a too indiscriminate reading of the semantically complex colonial sources (seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of Jesuits and travelers

like the Baron de Lahontan).[22] However, it is indisputable that the encounter between critical European intellectuals and Indigenous peoples did cause a process of intellectual alternation and that Enlightenment, and especially Romantic thinking was influenced by these epistemic exchanges.[23] Plant knowledge is only one of many transcultural epistemic contact zones between European and American societies. For reasons deserving further analysis, this botanical transculturation is still only partially understood.[24]

David Wengrow and David Graeber offer a richly researched synthesis of the past decades' research into Neolithic and Indigenous societies, which forcefully demonstrates that the simplistic dualism between "hunter-gatherer" or "foraging" societies on the one hand and "agricultural" societies on the other is not tenable. According to their evidence, humans were much more flexible than the dichotomy allows, adjusting their mode of production according to environmental and social needs. Historical societies' flexibility, *Dawn* shows, confounds the determinist narratives' smooth assertions. Rather than being sullenly

22 They do refer to Anthony Pagden's important essay on the philosophical figure of the "savage critic" in which Pagden argues that narratives of encounters with wise representatives of Indigenous people, whether partially or fully fictional, served above all rhetorical purposes (Pagden 1983). Based on several extended encounters between Lahontan and the Wendat (Huron) leader Kandiaronk (Adario), Lahontan's conversations are semi-fictional, heteroglossic texts not easily available as factual historical evidence.

23 I'm borrowing Jack Goody's term "alternation". In *Theft of History*, Goody makes a similar argument about the influence of Oriental thought on classical Mediterranean philosophy and critiques the erasure of that indebtedness by Western historiography (Goody 2006).

24 There is a massive literature on botanical exchange during the expansion of Europe (e.g. Drayton 2005; Schiebinger 2007). But there is very little analysis of the interactions between settlers and Indigenous agriculturalists and gardeners. This is in part owing to the fact that destruction of crops was part of colonial warfare, that Indigenous agriculture was ideologically incompatible with European constructions of cultural identity and alterity (thus rendered invisible), and that in the United States the eastern, agricultural tribes were forcefully removed in the 1830s.

driven by conditions not of their making, Wengrow and Graeber show in an impressive number of cases, our ancestors have always made choices, responded intelligently and creatively to changing situations, and, if the social structure became too hierarchical or too centrist, "walked away". Neither were humans cognitively incapable of making at times radical changes. This insight, well known from the study of recent history but here demonstrated for pre-modern societies, is confirmed by innumerable cases of colonized societies which show(ed) incredible resilience in securing their survival in spite of dispossession, deculturation, and the destruction of their natural source of subsistence.

While for Harari free will is a myth, then, Graeber and Wengrow regard the "agricultural revolution" and the denial of human choice as a myth. Human beings had "tens of thousands of years to experiment with different ways of life, long before any of them turned their hands to agriculture" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 140). In fact, they claim, the "'Agricultural Argument' … has played a major role in the displacement of untold thousands of indigenous peoples from ancestral land in Australia, New Zealand, sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas." The assertion that the people to be dispossessed lacked knowledge of agriculture formed the legal basis for dispossession (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 148–49). They present overwhelming evidence that because Indigenous ways of land use differed from European-style farming they were invisible to the newcomers: what "to a settler's eye seemed savage, untouched wilderness usually turns out to be landscapes actively managed by indigenous populations for thousands of years" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 150). What differed was the concept of land ownership informing human relations to the earth, with the European, Lockean, concept of property being of a relatively recent date and extremely narrow in its admission of different kinds of labor (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 149). Ultimately, this concept of property stems from Roman Law and its tripartite definition of property as *usus*, *fructus*, and *abusus*, with only those enjoying all three rights being regarded as true legal proprietors. Usufruct alone did not provide absolute property. "The defining feature of true legal property, then, is that one has the option of *not* taking care of it, or even destroying it at will" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 161). The *right to destroy* land (*abusus*) gave

absolute property according to Roman Law, not skillful and creative land stewardship.

In the chapter "The Gardens of Adonis", Wengrow and Graeber make an impressive, richly documented case for the coexistence of agricultural and non-agricultural practices of food production in the ancient Fertile Crescent. They report scientific evidence for humans living in areas of annual flooding to having been employed in various mixtures of food production. The fact that it took at least three millennia for humans to become fully sedentary confounds Harari's and other popular historians' thesis of an agricultural revolution, no matter how flippantly "Professor Saraswati" deals with long time sequences (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 233).

As in the Fertile Crescent, according to *Dawn* and other expert studies, agricultural food production in different parts of the world coexisted with other forms both on a seasonal level or as a mixed economy. Similar kinds of "play farming" have been reconstructed by archaeobotanists, e.g. for the Amazon Basin (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 266–72; Safier 2021). The thesis of the very gradual and slow transition toward more and more solid forms of plant cultivation is supported by archaeological evidence on the emergence of agricultural practices in America. In *Children of Aataentsic*, Bruce Trigger reconstructs the period leading to the formation of both the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Wendat (Huron) confederacies before or around AD 1500. A gradual shift toward sedentary horticulture and then agriculture, Trigger assumes, already began around AD 500 (Trigger 1987, 131). For the Late Owasco phase, from c. AD 1230 to AD 1375, there is evidence of a hybrid form of food production, including the cultivation of corn, beans and squash (the Three Sisters) (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 487). A warmer stretch of the climate, Trigger assumes, might have encouraged the adoption of corn and beans even in this northern latitude around Lake Ontario. There is no evidence of an increase of social conflict as a result of agriculture; rather, growing population numbers were concurrent with the formation of peace alliances. Trigger makes a case for greater social density having been desired by those people, who preferred to spend more time together in the plant growing season while moving apart for the hunting season after the harvest was brought in (Trigger 1987, 133–34).

There is good evidence that the proto-Iroquoians took the advantage of horticulture, which enabled them to stay together all year round, because they actually valued sociability. Trigger's argument is a complete inversion of Harari's who assumes that population density inevitably leads to conflict. The reason for the difference is that Trigger, Graeber and Wengrow go about scientifically: they find evidence for a tribal kinship structure quite unlike that assumed by Harari, who projects a modern competitive nuclear family structure on to "prehistorical" times ("Prehistoric Bill"). The experts thus differ from Harari both in their assessment of the historical practice of plant cultivation and in their emphasis on humans' desire for mutual aid and cooperation. *Sapiens* suggests that cooperation was coercive practice; it favors competition as the natural form of social interaction (e.g., Harari 2021, 29, 65–76, 86). Graeber, Wengrow, and Trigger find that cooperativeness and alliance-making were actively sought.

Just like Graeber and Wengrow, Bruce Trigger finds evidence for the emergence of matrilineality and a strengthening of women's social roles as a consequence of sedentariness, as life was increasingly organized around female horticultural work groups (Trigger 1987, 135). In one of their rare direct critiques of the narrative of agriculture as trap, Graeber and Wengrow ask the question of who precisely domesticated whom or what. The flippant thesis that humans were domesticated by wheat, they write, obscures the view of who actually did "all the intellectual and practical work of manipulating wild plants: exploring their properties in different soils and water regimes, experimenting with harvesting techniques, accumulating observations about the effects these all have on growth, reproduction and nutrition; debating the social implications … Consciously or not, it is the contributions of women that get written out of such accounts" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 236–37). They call attention to the "gendered assumptions" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 238) behind dominant concepts of agriculture, domestication, and cultivation – epitomized in the term "husbandry". They refer to the neglect of women's work, especially their artificial and often temporary creation of garden plots: "Instead of fixed fields," these female gardeners "exploited alluvial soils on the margins of lakes and springs, which shifted

location from year to year. And instead of hewing wood, tilling fields and carrying water," Graeber and Wengrow write, "they found ways of 'persuading' nature to do much of this labor for them. Theirs was not a science of domination and classification, but one of bending and coaxing, nurturing and cajoling, or even tricking the forces of nature." They find evidence for the high social standing of women, based on their horticultural and soil expertise, in female figurines and statues found at Neolithic sites (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 239–40).

Other scholars confirm the distinction between two forms of agricultural practice along gender differences. This distinction, as Kyle Keeler writes in his critique of the agricultural "trap" narrative, is one between an extractive, "masculine" agricultural practice, and a relational, "feminine" "system of partnerships between humans and other-than-human beings over centuries" (Keeler 2021, 1). His assessment is confirmed by Indigenous scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer who stresses the symbiotic partnership between Indigenous planters and their food plants (Kimmerer 2013, 139–40). Innovation in early agricultural societies, Graber and Wengrow concur, was not based on "some male genius realizing his solitary vision" but rather "on a collective body of knowledge accumulated over centuries, largely by women, in an endless series of apparently humble but in fact enormously significant discoveries" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 499).

The story that emerges from these studies is that of a non-extractive but rather companion species-oriented practice of plant cultivation that developed in the Americas and elsewhere in conjunction with more or less sedentary forms of social organization. Instead of a vicious agricultural "trap", the scholars observe an increase of female social status. Graeber and Wengrow give other examples of the well-known prestige of women in Iroquoian societies, including the Wendat which they particularly studied. In addition, they produce evidence for Indigenous Americans' ability to escape from situations of political centralization, hierarchy, and inequality. For example, they argue that the formation of confederacies by both the Haudenosaunee and Wendat may be a late lesson from the collective historical experience of the flowering and decline of Cahokia (c. AD 1050–1350), one of the cultural centers on the banks

of the Mississippi. That metropole's maximum population size is calculated to have been 15,000, with a peak around 40,000 for the surrounding area called the American Bottom (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 452, 465). After the decline of Cahokia, the cultivated area up the Ohio River became a depopulated zone – a "haunted wilderness of overgrown pyramids," as the two Davids romanticize the demographic vacuum. They assume that the experience of Cahokia's disintegration left "extremely unpleasant [collective] memories" which may have "erased" it from "oral tradition" yet left an impact on social practice. For centuries to come and over a large geographical area extending from the Ohio to Ontario,[25] they speculate, future communities sought to avoid the trap of social inequality (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 468). When European settlers arrived in Iroquoia and Huronia, they encountered societies acting on their knowledge of their own political history, who "saw their own social orders as self-conscious creations, designed as a barrier against all that Cahokia might have represented – or indeed, all those qualities they were later to find so objectionable in the French" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 482). The European newcomers encountered peoples who had learned their historical lesson.

4. Social and Communicative Competence

This is an admittedly speculative account,[26] but a more plausible and evidence-based one than the popular imperial narratives of imploding ancient American civilizations, or their destruction by intruding enemies. Ancient settlements, in Wengrow and Graeber's reading, rather dissolved gradually for ecological or sociological reasons or both. Those who "walked away" from Tikal and Cahokia did not disappear; they just

25 This would make its geography to roughly coincide with the earlier Hopewell Interaction Sphere c. 100 BC – AD 500.

26 Graeber and Wengrow also pussyfoot around the excessive violence between the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat, which led to the latter confederacy's disintegration under the pressure of European settlement.

left no archaeological trace.[27] The dissolution of these states confirms evolutionary theory's thesis of nature's, and thus humans', power of adaptation as a prerequisite of survival – a knowledge that fits into no linear, developmental, or teleological narrative. That narrative is a human invention rather than a fact of nature.[28] The narratives of hostile destruction are most likely projections of the displacement which imperial nations themselves enacted upon the descendants of the ancient populations. They derive their plausibility from the knowledge of more

27 I adopt Graeber and Wengrow's use of the semantics of "walking away", which is influenced by Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). The metaphor of walking away continues to enjoy literary popularity, e.g. in Cory Doctorow's novel *Walkaway* (2017) whose sympathetic urbanite group walk away from an increasingly oppressive state starting their own communities with the help of digital inventions. Graeber and Wengrow explicitly refer to Ursula Le Guin's tale (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 290), a bleak ethnographic parable of a fictional society whose comfort and joy is dependent on the living sacrifice of a child scapegoat. The fictional population is not without knowledge or compassion for the terrible suffering of the child, but it sadly accepts it as inevitable: "Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science" (Le Guin 1973, 283). Inspired by a conversation in Fjodor Dostyevsky's *The Brothers Karamasov* (1880), it is Le Guin's version of the Christian sacrifice ethic, as well as of Walter Benjamin's famous phrase that there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. But every now and then, the story continues, individual members of the imaginative city leave, never to return. We do not learn where they go or whether they will start a community of their own. Le Guin's resistance to simple utopianism is idiosyncratic: it breathes ethnographic and psychological wisdom but is deeply discomforting.

28 It is well to remember Johannes Fabian's splendid critique of the superimposition of the imperial narrative of development onto Darwin's theory (Fabian 2002, chapter 1). Time itself is as irrelevant to the theory of evolutionary adaptation as narrative.

recent imperial routines which they naturalize, not from the scientific analysis of the archaeological and anthropological evidence.

To read the forging of political federations as a response to the failures of earlier social formations is to regard Indigenous Americans to be as capable as seemingly more "civilized" people of learning from past mistakes and preferring peaceful interaction to warfare, democracy to authoritarian rule, freedom of will to tyranny. In fact, as Keeler argues following Daniel Wildcat, the ability to learn from mistakes is uppermost among social qualities in Native American cultures, as is testified in Indigenous story traditions (Keeler 2021, 7). In their similar emphasis on the social and pedagogical competence of Indigenous Americans (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 45–48), Wengrow and Graeber contest the romantic colonial celebration of Indigenous eloquence as merely ornamental and as remaining blind to the implications: indeed, Indigenous enthusiasm for extensive oral communication is an indicator of what we call deliberative democracy. A result not of genetic essence but of training and patient practice, the competence to communicate has proven the only feasible means of conflict solution.

The existence of large ancient settlements – Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico and the Trypillian mega-sites in today's Ukraine and Moldova – suggest that sedentariness did not automatically lead to conflict and inequality (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 328–45; 288–94). As archaeological analysis suggests, these large urban centers were organized around "flat" political and administrative structures. Building on earlier readings of these "invisible cities", Wengrow and Graeber show their settlement patterns to lack all evidence of centralization or a social elite (like palaces) while showing remnants of neighborhoods with homes organized around larger meeting places not unlike the longhouses of Native North America. Agriculture in these societies was not responsible for inequality. Consequently, the source of inequality must be sought in the social and property structures of societies, not their food economy.

5. On Cognitive Freedom

Wengrow and Graeber's book, then, is a full-fledged subversion of the imperial providential-determinist narrative. Human history in their account is not moving along an arrow of time from savagism to perfection and off into the posthumanoid metaverse but is rather the result of constant negotiation and adaptation, trial and error. *Dawn* regards human events and human interactions with the more-than-human world as evolutionary in that term's original meaning, formulated as a law of adaptation by Charles Darwin – not evolutionist as in social Darwinism, which integrated Darwin's theory into the existing linear-determinist plot. This tragic crypto-biblical narrative of man's fall from Paradise is the real trap, not least because of its popularity with billionaires (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 493). While the doom narrative semantically adheres to the suspense-driven plot of Aristotelian tragedy with its very strong sense of closure, *Dawn* promotes an open-ended historical narrative by insisting on the indeterminacy of events. It also *performs* that episodic and indeterminate plot form by engaging the reader in a cyclical narrative that runs its main arguments through a series of empirical scenarios.[29]

In other words, *Dawn* radically contradicts *Sapiens*'s assertion of humans' cognitive captivity and susceptibility to elite fictions. Against the pervasive neoliberal dogma that populations are easily nudged into all kinds of beliefs and ideologies, Graeber and Wengrow make a forceful argument for humans' ability for intellectual freedom.[30] People are capable of listening to other humans' fictions, their book suggests; but they are just as capable of rejecting them. Both *Sapiens* and *Dawn* attempt to find an answer to the question why humanity ended up in the mess in

29 The plot structure of tragedy is well known; my understanding of episodic plot rests on Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67), whose narrator at one point sketches for his readers the chaotic plot structure of the novel.

30 Harari's sweeping claim of cognitive unfreedom is probably more dangerous than his particular constructions of the distant past.

which it presently finds itself – with itself and the rest of creation threatened by mass extinctions and climate change, and increasingly threatened by authoritarian regimes ready to bomb their own populations and their neighbors back into the stone age. Wengrow and Graeber suspect a causality between this self-destructiveness and the imaginative incompetence of too many humans: "If something did go terribly wrong in human history – and given the current state of the world, it's hard to deny something did – then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence," together with the memory of that loss (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 502). Collective amnesia and an extremely narrow conception of the past, after all, are the foundation of an increasingly privatized and consumerized educational system.

In claiming history to be messy and open-ended and the human mind to be flexible and adaptable, Wengrow and Graeber subvert Harari's subversions of humans as an unthinking crowd marching to its predetermined end. They counter a pop history of common humanity's doom and godlike elite with a historical narrative of possibility and repair; and a "history" based on the imagined agency of wheat with a history of human agency and companion-species resilience. Human inequality, in this reading, is not the inevitable result of a process of civilization (or cultivation) but of a very particular kind of civilization, one based on the irresponsible and profitable extraction of nature and other humans.

6. Romantic Foraging and Invisible Gardens

Sapiens and *Dawn* conspicuously differ in their use of visuals. While Harari fully exploits the potential of graphic images by hiring two excellent cartoon artists, Graeber and Wengrow are puritanically abstinent when it comes to visuals. The graphics of the illustrated *Sapiens* volumes deserve appreciation in their own right for their intelligent metaleptical intertextuality, mixing the disappearance of the Neanderthals with Guernica, illustrating a discussion on the ills of modern society with the

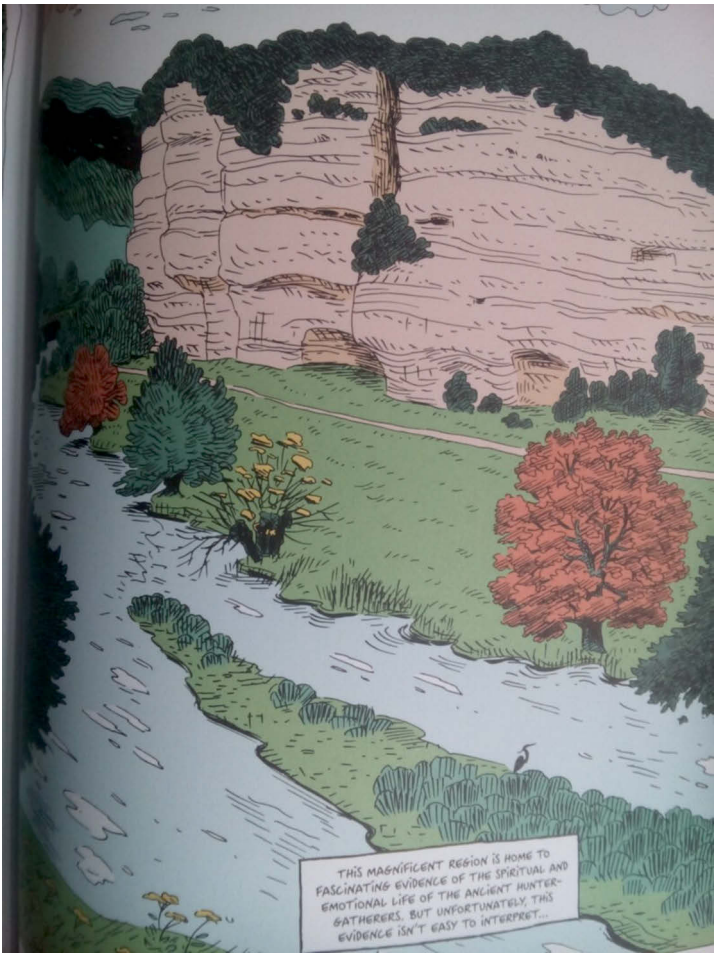
iconic image of Charlie Chaplin being machine-fed in *Modern Times*, or integrating Franz Kafka's absurd experiences with modern bureaucracy into the narrative. The image of the Faustian wheat is very funny and therefore effective. But the historical messages of such extravagances mostly remain unclear. A sketch of Harari as Caspar David Friedrich's wanderer in the mountains – the last man? – reveals a trace of self-irony. The impressive Dordogne landscapes devoid of human inhabitants imitate colonial travelers' "discoveries" in empty lands (Figure 2). The figures are presented as romantic foragers in pristine landscapes, enjoying the imperial dream of being alone in the world and having it laid out before them. *Dawn*, conversely, demonstrates an almost ghostly resistance to images. The map of one of the reconstructed ancient Ukrainian settlements (Figure 3) can be read as a statement *against* nonverbal representation, underscoring the scientific rigor used in the volume.[31]

But visibility features on a second level as well. In reconstructing ancient agriculture, Graeber and Wengrow provide an explanation for the invisibility of gardens as a form of food production: they were predominantly worked by women, a group of "Sapiens" that hardly features in Western patriarchal historiography. This principal sociological invisibility, however, is reinforced by the material transience of gardens, which, unlike larger fields, hardly leave a lasting geomorphological trace (Doolittle 2000, 82–117).[32] *Dawn*'s refutation of the pop narrative, then, is also a refutation of an illustrated and essentially masculine story, which they replace with a much more sober reconstruction of the emergence of agriculture as a very complex and longue durée process which significantly involved the intellectual and creative input of women.

31 Visual reproductions of these sites do exist; see, e.g. this popular-scientific one: The Cucuteni-Trypillian culture and the mysterious burning of the buildings | Ancient Origins (ancient-origins.net).

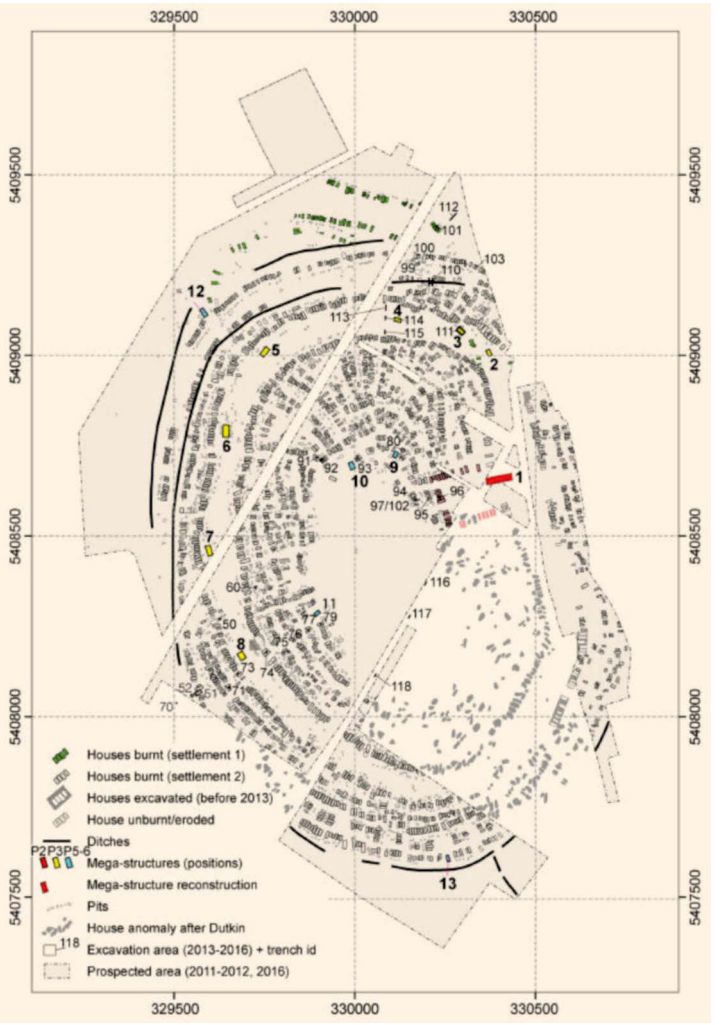
32 William Doolittle exemplifies the ideological invisibility of female-run gardens by referring to an archaeological report's silence about gardens in a Mississippi site while the report's title page artwork clearly shows three gardens (Doolittle 2000, 102).

Fig. 2: Pleistocene Dordogne landscape.



Harari, Yuval Noah, David Vandermeulen, and Daniel Casanave (2020). *Sapiens. A Graphic History. The Birth of Humankind*. London: Jonathan Cape. P. 167

Fig 3: Reconstruction of the ancient (c. 5000 BC) settlement of Maidanetske, Ukraine.



Credit: Robert Hofmann. Institute of Pre- and Protohistoric Archaeology, Kiel University (Hofmann et al. 2019).

The process of invisibilization which *Dawn* discloses and verbally "repairs" is indeed pervasive in Western discourse about female food production. Women's work in general, and female vegetable garden labor more particularly, have received next to no attention in representations of food and gardens, with a few remarkable exceptions among impressionist painters like Camille Pissarro. Only recently does this topic begin to receive the attention it deserves, in the context of a growing interest in food sovereignty and alternative methods of food production, ones less ecologically damaging than the extractive and highly subsidized industrial agriculture which is still destroying small farming around the world.[33] As the work of scholars and activists like Silvia Federici, Vandana Shiva, and Robin Wall Kimmerer shows, a gender-sensitive perspective on the history of agriculture entails a significant rewriting of the process of western colonialism, whose testosterone-heavy evocations of "virgin" landscapes all but obscure the displacement of female land ownership and stewardship.

Indeed it is tempting to formulate the difference between the doom narrative and the narrative of creative gardening in gender terms, with the tragic "masculine" plot centering on destruction while the "feminine" plot is much more episodic – "playful" in Graeber and Wengrow's terms – in that it concentrates on care, procreation, and transspecies companionship, productively interacting with the more-than human world with a view to survival. Again, the "trap" is not agriculture but a specific politics of land management and the tragic master tale (or the masters' tragic tale) that makes it invisible.

33 I again evoke the massive protest in India in 2021 against the loss of community-based small farming in favor of larger private landholders using industrial methods. The enclosure policy, which started in Europe in the late Middle Ages, has never really ended; it continues today in the global south, especially India, Africa, and Latin America.

7. Thomas Cole's Barbarians

Speaking of visibility. The narrative of progress was subverted by Romantic intellectuals right at its inception. In his painting cycle *The Course of Empire* (1833–36), inspired by Edward Gibbon's classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), the British-American painter Thomas Cole gave aesthetic expression to the first three stages of "civilization" – in his version the savage stage, the pastoral or arcadian stage, and what Cole calls "Consummation": a Mediterranean-style imperial city; the foreground shows a triumphal march of a conqueror returning with foreign spoil and captives. But in the last two paintings his visual narrative shifts direction: the empire is destroyed by barbarian hordes (then the common view of the end of ancient Rome), and in the last painting all traces of any human presence are gone. Nature has repossessed the monumental ruins, and a bird has built its nest on top of one of the triumphal pillars. This is not the end of the world; only the end of humanity. Contrary to more recent re-inscriptors of the stadialist narrative (the planters of doom and/or the metaverse), Cole also names the real force of misery: not "nature" but "empire". The greatest leap in his cycle is between the second and third painting: while the pastoral or arcadian stage is modeled on romantic views of Greek antiquity and includes a farmer pushing an oxen-drawn plow over a field, "Consummation" surprises the viewer who may wonder how this triumphant empire – both its arts and architecture and its foreign aggressiveness – was able to leap into being.

Cole's empire cycle subverts his contemporaries' optimistic narrative of empire in a way that still resonates with our own time. In his romantic critique, modern civilization is built on inequality and exploitation, and therefore doomed. Although he could not have anticipated climate change and species extinction, Cole's cycle is a cautionary tale that subverts the American national narrative of Manifest Destiny. It would be interesting to know more about Cole's barbarians: perhaps some of them were playful gardeners providing the urban elite with tasty vegetables while being held in social dependency and having their fields trampled over by imperial armies. Destroying crops and harvests in addition to

all other life, after all, is what imperial armies prided themselves with throughout human history.

Conclusion

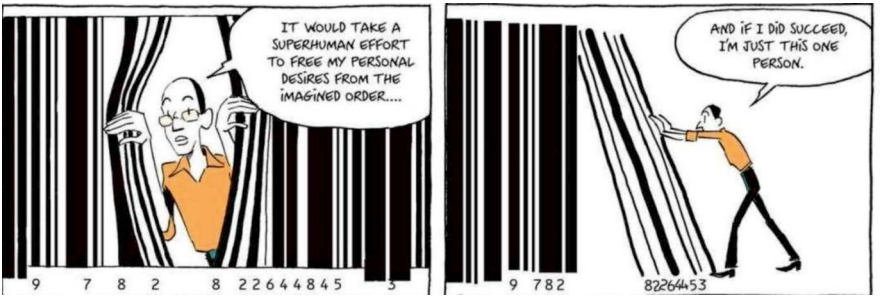
Sapiens and *Dawn of Everything* share a strong desire to explain current human affairs as resulting from the long durée of human history. Yet they represent two irreconcilable views on history and human nature: the first as biologically determined and illiberal; the second as open and intellectually flexible.[34] The popular master narrative of agricultural doom is grafted on earlier narratives – the providential-apocalyptic narrative of Christianity, the optimistic narrative of progress and successive stages, and the social Darwinist narrative of "natural" selection developed in response to the incompatibility of capitalism with the humanistic ideal of social equality. This biodeterminist version, popularized among that part of humanity benefitting from being born into the right milieu, combines a disdain for the non-elite producers of food with a denial of their intellectual equality.[35] It ultimately reiterates the Aristotelian position that humanity is divided into born masters and born slaves. Next to its protean quality – its shapeshifting adoption of various disguises throughout modern Western intellectual history – it is also Panglossian in its narrow and simplistic message that the world "we" inhabit is the best of all possible worlds. With its charismatic presentation it *performs* its semantic message of the impressionability of humans to the fictions of their mental superiors. In fact, it *produces* the non-thinking human beings which it claims already exist. As humanity embarks on probably its most ambitious collective effort to save both

34 They are also widely divergent concerning the depth of scholarship: *Dawn* has a 63-page bibliography and 83 pages of notes; *Sapiens* has a meager thirteen pages of notes.

35 Another essay could be written on the pervasive mode of contempt and ridicule used with reference to agricultural laborers – those who bend their backs and dirty their hands to produce our food.

humanity and the planet itself, as even the global elite congregating at Davos has accepted this truth, the Panglossian tale's denial of humans' power to effect such change already appears out of date – a perverse reminder of a neoliberalist doctrine proven wrong by the course of events. *Dawn*'s response to this gamble is to emphasize the human power of creative "play" – quite in the sense of Friedrich Schiller and Johan Huizinga – as that which makes humans truly human (Lewis 2021). In Graeber and Wengrow's hands, "play", a force they associate with carnival, stands for the freedom to relocate, the freedom to disobey commands, and "to shape entirely new social realities" (Graeber/Wengrow 2021, 117, 503) – in other words the power to imagine a world beyond the confines of the present social, economic, and cultural constellation.

Fig. 4



Harari, Yuval Noah, David Vandermeulen, and Daniel Casanave (2021) *Sapiens. A Graphic History, Vol. 2. The Pillars of Civilization*. London: Jonathan Cape. P. 115.

"It would take a superhuman effort to free my personal desires from the imagined order," Yuval Harari speaks, dividing the lines of a bar code as if spreading the curtain of a theater stage, or the bars of a prison window (Figure 4). "And if I did succeed, I'm just this one person" (Harari et al. 2021, 115). The "one person" story is one of capitalism's most successful traps – evoking mythical tales of heroism while denying the effects of individual and collective agency. Graeber and Wengrow confront

this inherently contradictory position with innumerable examples of individuals and groups of humans having done just that: walk away from monocultural prison-houses physically and intellectually – to find out that they were not alone.

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