

'GROUNDBREAKING'
RUTGER BREGMAN

THE DAWN OF EVERYTHING

'AN INTELLECTUAL FEAST'
NASSIM NICHOLAS TALEB

A NEW HISTORY OF HUMANITY

'THE RADICAL REVISION OF EVERYTHING'
REBECCA SOLNIT

DAVID GRAEBER **AND**
DAVID WENGROW

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About the Authors

David Graeber was a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, and was a contributor to *Harper's Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and *The Baffler*. An iconic thinker and renowned activist, his early efforts helped to make Occupy Wall Street an era-defining movement. He died on 2 September 2020.

David Wengrow is a professor of comparative archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, and has been a visiting professor at New York University. He is the author of three books, including *What Makes Civilization?*. Wengrow conducts archaeological fieldwork in various parts of Africa and the Middle East.

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David Graeber:

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Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology

Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar

Direct Action: An Ethnography

Debt: The First 5,000 Years

The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement

The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy

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Foreword and Dedication (by David Wengrow)

David Rolfe Graeber died aged fifty-nine on 2 September 2020, just over three weeks after we finished writing this book, which had absorbed us for more than ten years. It began as a diversion from our more ‘serious’ academic duties: an experiment, a game almost, in which an anthropologist and an archaeologist tried to reconstruct the sort of grand dialogue about human history that was once quite common in our fields, but this time with modern evidence. There were no rules or deadlines. We wrote as and when we felt like it, which increasingly became a daily occurrence. In the final years before its completion, as the project gained momentum, it was not uncommon for us to talk two or three times a day. We would often lose track of who came up with what idea or which new set of facts and examples; it all went into ‘the archive’, which quickly outgrew the scope of a single book. The result is not a patchwork but a true synthesis. We could sense our styles of writing and thought converging by increments into what eventually became a single stream. Realizing we didn’t want to end the intellectual journey we’d embarked on, and that many of the concepts introduced in this book would benefit from further development and exemplification, we planned to write sequels: no less than three. But this first book had to finish somewhere, and at 9.18 p.m. on 6 August David Graeber announced, with characteristic Twitter-flair (and loosely citing Jim Morrison), that it was done: ‘My brain feels bruised with numb surprise.’ We got to the end just as we’d started, in dialogue, with drafts passing constantly back and forth between us as we read, shared and discussed the same sources, often into the small hours of the night. David was far more than an anthropologist. He was an activist and public intellectual of international repute who tried to live his ideas about social justice and liberation, giving hope to the oppressed and inspiring countless others to follow suit. The book is dedicated to the fond memory of David Graeber (1961–2020) and, as he wished, to the memory of his parents, Ruth Rubinstein Graeber (1917–2006) and Kenneth Graeber (1914–1996). May they rest together in peace.

Acknowledgements

Sad circumstances oblige me (David Wengrow) to write these acknowledgements in David Graeber's absence. He is survived by his wife Nika. David's passing was marked by an extraordinary outpouring of grief, which united people across continents, social classes and ideological boundaries. Ten years of writing and thinking together is a long time, and it is not for me to guess whom David would have wished to thank in this particular context. His co-travellers along the pathways that led to this book will already know who they are, and how much he treasured their support, care and advice. Of one thing I am certain: this book would not have happened – or at least not in anything remotely like its present form – without the inspiration and energy of Melissa Flashman, our wise counsel at all times in all things literary. In Eric Chinski of Farrar, Straus and Giroux and Thomas Penn of Penguin UK we found a superb editorial team and true intellectual partners. For their passionate engagements with and interventions in our thinking over many years, heartfelt thanks to Debbie Bookchin, Alpa Shah, Erhard Schüttpelz and Andrea Luka Zimmerman. For generous, expert guidance on different aspects of the book thanks to: Manuel Arroyo-Kalin, Elizabeth Baquedano, Nora Bateson, Stephen Berquist, Nurit Bird-David, Maurice Bloch, David Carballo, John Chapman, Luiz Costa, Philippe Descola, Aleksandr Diachenko, Kevan Edinborough, Dorian Fuller, Bisserka Gaydarska, Colin Grier, Thomas Grisaffi, Chris Hann, Wendy James, Megan Laws, Patricia McAnany, Barbara Alice Mann, Simon Martin, Jens Notroff, José R. Oliver, Mike Parker Pearson, Timothy Pauketat, Matthew Pope, Karen Radner, Natasha Reynolds, Marshall Sahlins, James C. Scott, Stephen Shennan and Michele Wollstonecroft.

A number of the arguments in this book were first presented as named lectures and in scholarly journals: an earlier version of Chapter Two appeared in French as 'La sagesse de Kandiaronk: la critique indigène, le mythe du progrès et la naissance de la Gauche' (*La Revue du MAUSS*); parts of Chapter Three were first presented as 'Farewell to the childhood of man: ritual, seasonality, and the origins of inequality' (The 2014 Henry Myers Lecture, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*); of Chapter Four as 'Many seasons ago: slavery and its rejection among foragers on the Pacific Coast of North America' (*American Anthropologist*); and of Chapter Eight as 'Cities before the state in early Eurasia' (The 2015 Jack Goody Lecture, *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*).

Thanks to the various academic institutions and research groups that welcomed us to speak and debate on topics relating to this book, and especially to Enzo Rossi and Philippe Descola for memorable occasions at the University of Amsterdam and the Collège de France. James Thomson (formerly editor-in-chief at *Eurozine*) first helped us get our ideas out into the wider world with the essay 'How to change the course of human history (at least, the part that's already happened)', which he adopted with conviction when other publishing venues shied away; thanks also to

the many translators who have extended its audience since; and to Kelly Burdick of *Lapham's Quarterly* for inviting our contribution to a special issue on the theme of democracy, where we aired some of the ideas to be found here in Chapter Nine.

From the very beginning, both David and I incorporated our work on this book into our teaching, respectively at the LSE Department of Anthropology and the UCL Institute of Archaeology, so on behalf of both of us I wish to thank our students of the last ten years for their many insights and reflections. Martin, Judy, Abigail and Jack Wengrow were by my side every step of the way. My last and deepest thanks to Ewa Domaradzka for providing both the sharpest criticism and the most devoted support a partner could wish for; you came into my life, much as David and this book did: 'Rain riding suddenly out of the air, Battering the bare walls of the sun ... Rain, rain on dry ground!'



Farewell to Humanity's Childhood

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

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

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

Most of human history is irreparably lost to us. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has existed for at least 200,000 years, but for most of that time we have next to no idea what was happening. In northern Spain, for instance, at the cave of Altamira, paintings and engravings were created over a period of at least 10,000 years, between around 25,000 and 15,000 BC. Presumably, a lot of dramatic events occurred during this period. We have no way of knowing what most of them were.

This is of little consequence to most people, since most people rarely think about the broad sweep of human history anyway. They don't have much reason to. Insofar as the question comes up at all, it's usually when reflecting on why the world seems to be in such a mess and why human beings so often treat each other badly - the reasons for war, greed, exploitation, systematic indifference to others' suffering. Were we always like that, or did something, at some point, go terribly wrong?

It is basically a theological debate. Essentially the question is: are humans innately good or innately evil? But if you think about it, the question, framed in these terms, makes very little sense. 'Good' and 'evil' are purely human concepts. It would never occur to anyone to argue about whether a fish, or a tree, were good or evil, because 'good' and 'evil' are concepts humans made up in order to compare ourselves with one another. It follows that arguing about whether humans are fundamentally good or evil makes about as much sense as arguing about whether humans are fundamentally fat or thin.

Nonetheless, on those occasions when people do reflect on the lessons of prehistory, they almost invariably come back to questions of this kind. We are all familiar with the Christian answer: people once lived in a state of innocence, yet were tainted by original sin. We desired to be godlike and have been punished for it; now we live in a fallen state while hoping for future redemption. Today, the popular version of this story is typically some updated variation on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*, which he wrote in

1754. Once upon a time, the story goes, we were hunter-gatherers, living in a prolonged state of childlike innocence, in tiny bands. These bands were egalitarian; they could be for the very reason that they were so small. It was only after the 'Agricultural Revolution', and then still more the rise of cities, that this happy condition came to an end, ushering in 'civilization' and 'the state' – which also meant the appearance of written literature, science and philosophy, but at the same time, almost everything bad in human life: patriarchy, standing armies, mass executions and annoying bureaucrats demanding that we spend much of our lives filling in forms.

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

Hobbes's *Leviathan*, published in 1651, is in many ways the founding text of modern political theory. It held that, humans being the selfish creatures they are, life in an original State of Nature was in no sense innocent; it must instead have been 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' – basically, a state of war, with everybody fighting against everybody else. Insofar as there has been any progress from this benighted state of affairs, a Hobbesian would argue, it has been largely due to exactly those repressive mechanisms that Rousseau was complaining about: governments, courts, bureaucracies, police. This view of things has been around for a very long time as well. There's a reason why, in English, the words 'politics' 'polite' and 'police' all sound the same – they're all derived from the Greek word *polis*, or city, the Latin equivalent of which is *civitas*, which also gives us 'civility,' 'civic' and a certain modern understanding of 'civilization'.

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

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

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

This book is an attempt to begin to tell another, more hopeful and more interesting story; one which, at the same time, takes better account of what the last few decades of research have taught us. Partly, this is a matter of bringing together evidence that has accumulated in archaeology, anthropology and kindred disciplines; evidence that points towards a completely new account of how human societies developed over roughly the last 30,000 years. Almost all of this research goes against the familiar narrative, but too often the most remarkable discoveries remain confined to the work of specialists, or have to be teased out by reading between the lines of scientific publications.

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

Information bearing on such issues has been pouring in from every quarter of the globe. As a result, researchers around the world have also been examining ethnographic and historical material in a new light. The pieces now exist to create an entirely different world history – but so far, they remain hidden to all but a few privileged experts (and even the experts tend to hesitate before abandoning their own tiny part of the puzzle, to compare notes with others outside their specific subfield). Our aim in this book is to start putting some of the pieces of the puzzle together, in full awareness that nobody yet has anything like a complete set. The task is immense, and the issues so important, that it will take years of research and debate even to begin to understand the real implications of the picture we're starting to see. But it's crucial that we set the process in motion. One thing that will quickly become clear is that the prevalent 'big picture' of history – shared by modern-day followers of Hobbes and Rousseau alike – has almost nothing to do with the facts. But to begin making sense of the new information that's now before our eyes, it is not enough to compile and sift vast quantities of data. A conceptual shift is also required.

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

Revisiting what we will call the 'indigenous critique' means taking seriously contributions to social thought that come from outside the European canon, and in particular from those indigenous peoples whom Western philosophers tend to cast

either in the role of history's angels or its devils. Both positions preclude any real possibility of intellectual exchange, or even dialogue: it's just as hard to debate someone who is considered diabolical as someone considered divine, as almost anything they think or say is likely to be deemed either irrelevant or deeply profound. Most of the people we will be considering in this book are long since dead. It is no longer possible to have any sort of conversation with them. We are nonetheless determined to write prehistory as if it consisted of people one would have been able to talk to, when they were still alive – who don't just exist as paragons, specimens, sock-puppets or playthings of some inexorable law of history.

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

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

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

Since the financial crash of 2008, and the upheavals that followed, the question of inequality – and with it, the long-term history of inequality – have become major topics for debate. Something of a consensus has emerged among intellectuals and even, to some degree, the political classes that levels of social inequality have got out of hand, and that most of the world's problems result, in one way or another, from an ever-widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Pointing this out is in itself a challenge to global power structures; at the same time, though, it frames the issue in a way that people who benefit from those structures can still find ultimately reassuring, since it implies no meaningful solution to the problem would ever be possible.

After all, imagine we framed the problem differently, the way it might have been fifty or 100 years ago: as the concentration of capital, or oligopoly, or class power. Compared to any of these, a word like 'inequality' sounds like it's practically designed to encourage half-measures and compromise. It's possible to imagine overthrowing capitalism or breaking the power of the state, but it's not clear what eliminating inequality would even mean. (Which kind of inequality? Wealth? Opportunity? Exactly how equal would people have to be in order for us to be able to say we've 'eliminated inequality'?) The term 'inequality' is a way of framing social problems appropriate to an age of technocratic reformers, who assume from the outset that no real vision of social transformation is even on the table.

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

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

The ultimate effect of all these stories about an original state of innocence and equality, like the use of the term 'inequality' itself, is to make wistful pessimism about the human condition seem like common sense: the natural result of viewing ourselves through history's broad lens. Yes, living in a truly egalitarian society might be possible if you're a Pygmy or a Kalahari Bushman. But if you want to create a society of true equality today, you're going to have to figure out a way to go back to becoming tiny bands of foragers again with no significant personal property. Since foragers require a pretty extensive territory to forage in, this would mean having to reduce the world's population by something like 99.9 per cent. Otherwise, the best we can hope for is to adjust the size of the boot that will forever be stomping on our faces; or, perhaps, to wangle a bit more wiggle room in which some of us can temporarily duck out of its way.

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

First of all, it's bizarre to imagine that, say, during the roughly 10,000 (some would say more like 20,000) years in which people painted on the walls of Altamira, no one – not only in Altamira, but anywhere on earth – experimented with alternative forms of social organization. What's the chance of that? Second of all, is not the capacity to experiment with different forms of social organization itself a quintessential part of what makes us human? That is, beings with the capacity for self-creation, even freedom? The ultimate question of human history, as we'll see, is not our equal access to material resources (land, calories, means of production),

much though these things are obviously important, but our equal capacity to contribute to decisions about how to live together. Of course, to exercise that capacity implies that there should be something meaningful to decide in the first place.

If, as many are suggesting, our species' future now hinges on our capacity to create something different (say, a system in which wealth cannot be freely transformed into power, or where some people are not told their needs are unimportant, or that their lives have no intrinsic worth), then what ultimately matters is whether we can rediscover the freedoms that make us human in the first place. As long ago as 1936, the prehistorian V. Gordon Childe wrote a book called *Man Makes Himself*. Apart from the sexist language, this is the spirit we wish to invoke. We are projects of collective self-creation. What if we approached human history that way? What if we treat people, from the beginning, as imaginative, intelligent, playful creatures who deserve to be understood as such? What if, instead of telling a story about how our species fell from some idyllic state of equality, we ask how we came to be trapped in such tight conceptual shackles that we can no longer even imagine the possibility of reinventing ourselves?

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

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

Let's consider a fairly random example of one of these generalist accounts, Francis Fukuyama's *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (2011). Here is Fukuyama on what he feels can be taken as received wisdom about early human societies: 'In its early stages human political organization is similar to the band-level society observed in higher primates like chimpanzees,' which Fukuyama suggests can be regarded as 'a default form of social organization'. He then goes on to assert that Rousseau was largely correct in pointing out that the origin of political inequality lay in the development of agriculture, since hunter-gatherer societies (according to Fukuyama) have no concept of private property, and so little incentive to mark out a piece of land and say, 'This is mine.' Band-level societies of this sort, he suggests, are 'highly egalitarian'.²

Jared Diamond, in *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (2012) suggests that such bands (in which he believes humans still lived 'as recently as 11,000 years ago') comprised 'just a few dozen individuals', most biologically related. These small groups led a fairly meagre existence, 'hunting and gathering whatever wild animal and plant species happen to live in an acre of forest'. And their social lives, according to Diamond, were enviably simple. Decisions were reached through 'face-to-face discussion'; there were 'few personal

possessions' and 'no formal political leadership or strong economic specialization'.³ Diamond concludes that, sadly, it is only within such primordial groupings that humans ever achieved a significant degree of social equality.

For Diamond and Fukuyama, as for Rousseau some centuries earlier, what put an end to that equality – everywhere and forever – was the invention of agriculture, and the higher population levels it sustained. Agriculture brought about a transition from 'bands' to 'tribes'. Accumulation of food surplus fed population growth, leading some 'tribes' to develop into ranked societies known as 'chiefdoms'. Fukuyama paints an almost explicitly biblical picture of this process, a departure from Eden: 'As little bands of human beings migrated and adapted to different environments, they began their exit out of the state of nature by developing new social institutions.'⁴ They fought wars over resources. Gangly and pubescent, these societies were clearly heading for trouble.

It was time to grow up and appoint some proper leadership. Hierarchies began to emerge. There was no point in resisting, since hierarchy – according to Diamond and Fukuyama – is inevitable once humans adopt large, complex forms of organization. Even when the new leaders began acting badly – creaming off agricultural surplus to promote their flunkies and relatives, making status permanent and hereditary, collecting trophy skulls and harems of slave-girls, or tearing out rivals' hearts with obsidian knives – there could be no going back. Before long, chiefs had managed to convince others they should be referred to as 'kings', even 'emperors'. As Diamond patiently explains to us:

Large populations can't function without leaders who make the decisions, executives who carry out the decisions, and bureaucrats who administer the decisions and laws. Alas for all of you readers who are anarchists and dream of living without any state government, those are the reasons why your dream is unrealistic: you'll have to find some tiny band or tribe willing to accept you, where no one is a stranger, and where kings, presidents, and bureaucrats are unnecessary.⁵

A dismal conclusion, not just for anarchists but for anybody who ever wondered if there might be a viable alternative to the current status quo. Still, the truly remarkable thing is that, despite the self-assured tone, such pronouncements are not actually based on any kind of scientific evidence. As we will soon be discovering, there is simply no reason to believe that small-scale groups are especially likely to be egalitarian – or, conversely, that large ones must necessarily have kings, presidents or even bureaucracies. Statements like these are just so many prejudices dressed up as facts, or even as laws of history.⁶

ON THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

As we say, it's all just an endless repetition of a story first told by Rousseau in 1754. Many contemporary scholars will quite literally say that Rousseau's vision has been proved correct. If so, it is an extraordinary coincidence, since Rousseau himself never suggested that the innocent State of Nature really happened. On the contrary, he insisted he was engaging in a thought experiment: 'One must not take the kind of research which we enter into as the pursuit of truths of history, but solely as

hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better fitted to clarify the nature of things than to expose their actual origin ...'⁷

Rousseau's portrayal of the State of Nature and how it was overturned by the coming of agriculture was never intended to form the basis for a series of evolutionary stages, like the ones Scottish philosophers such as Smith, Ferguson or Millar (and later on, Lewis Henry Morgan) were referring to when they spoke of 'Savagery' and 'Barbarism'. In no sense was Rousseau imagining these different states of being as levels of social and moral development, corresponding to historical changes in modes of production: foraging, pastoralism, farming, industry. Rather, what Rousseau presented was more of a parable, by way of an attempt to explore a fundamental paradox of human politics: how is it that our innate drive for freedom somehow leads us, time and again, on a 'spontaneous march to inequality'?⁸

Describing how the invention of farming first leads to private property, and property to the need for civil government to protect it, this is how Rousseau puts things: 'All ran towards their chains, believing that they were securing their liberty; for although they had reason enough to discern the advantages of a civil order, they did not have experience enough to foresee the dangers.'⁹ His imaginary State of Nature was primarily invoked as a way of illustrating the point. True, he didn't invent the concept: as a rhetorical device, the State of Nature had already been used in European philosophy for a century. Widely deployed by natural law theorists, it effectively allowed every thinker interested in the origins of government (Locke, Grotius and so on) to play God, each coming up with his own variant on humanity's original condition, as a springboard for speculation.

Hobbes was doing much the same thing when he wrote in *Leviathan* that the primordial state of human society would necessarily have been a '*Bellum omnium contra omnes*', a war of all against all, which could only be overcome by the creation of an absolute sovereign power. He wasn't saying there had actually been a time when everyone lived in such a primordial state. Some suspect that Hobbes's state of war was really an allegory for his native England's descent into civil war in the mid seventeenth century, which drove the royalist author into exile in Paris. Whatever the case, the closest Hobbes himself came to suggesting this state really existed was when he noted how the only people who weren't under the ultimate authority of some king were the kings themselves, and they always seemed to be at war with one another.

Despite all this, many modern writers treat *Leviathan* in the same way others treat Rousseau's *Discourse* – as if it were laying the groundwork for an evolutionary study of history; and although the two have completely different starting points, the result is rather similar.¹⁰

'When it came to violence in pre-state peoples,' writes the psychologist Steven Pinker, 'Hobbes and Rousseau were talking through their hats: neither knew a thing about life before civilization.' On this point, Pinker is absolutely right. In the same breath, however, he also asks us to believe that Hobbes, writing in 1651 (apparently through his hat), somehow managed to guess right, and come up with an analysis of violence and its causes in human history that is 'as good as any today'.¹¹ This would be an astonishing – not to mention damning – verdict on centuries of empirical research, if it only happened to be true. As we'll see, it is not even close.¹²

We can take Pinker as our quintessential modern Hobbesian. In his magnum opus, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2012), and subsequent books

like *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018) he argues that today we live in a world which is, overall, far less violent and cruel than anything our ancestors had ever experienced.¹³

Now, this may seem counter-intuitive to anyone who spends much time watching the news, let alone who knows much about the history of the twentieth century. Pinker, though, is confident that an objective statistical analysis, shorn of sentiment, will show us to be living in an age of unprecedented peace and security. And this, he suggests, is the logical outcome of living in sovereign states, each with a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence within its borders, as opposed to the 'anarchic societies' (as he calls them) of our deep evolutionary past, where life for most people was, indeed, typically 'nasty, brutish, and short'.

Since, like Hobbes, Pinker is concerned with the origins of the state, his key point of transition is not the rise of farming but the emergence of cities. 'Archaeologists', he writes, 'tell us that humans lived in a state of anarchy until the emergence of civilization some five thousand years ago, when sedentary farmers first coalesced into cities and states and developed the first governments.'¹⁴ What follows is, to put it bluntly, a modern psychologist making it up as he goes along. You might hope that a passionate advocate of science would approach the topic scientifically, through a broad appraisal of the evidence – but this is precisely the approach to human prehistory that Pinker seems to find uninteresting. Instead he relies on anecdotes, images and individual sensational discoveries, like the headline-making find, in 1991, of 'Ötzi the Tyrolean Iceman'.

'What is it about the ancients,' Pinker asks at one point, 'that they couldn't leave us an interesting corpse without resorting to foul play?' There is an obvious response to this: doesn't it rather depend on which corpse you consider interesting in the first place? Yes, a little over 5,000 years ago someone walking through the Alps left the world of the living with an arrow in his side; but there's no particular reason to treat Ötzi as a poster child for humanity in its original condition, other than, perhaps, Ötzi suiting Pinker's argument. But if all we're doing is cherry-picking, we could just as easily have chosen the much earlier burial known to archaeologists as Romito 2 (after the Calabrian rock-shelter where it was found). Let's take a moment to consider what it would mean if we did this.

Romito 2 is the 10,000-year-old burial of a male with a rare genetic disorder (acromesomelic dysplasia): a severe type of dwarfism, which in life would have rendered him both anomalous in his community and unable to participate in the kind of high-altitude hunting that was necessary for their survival. Studies of his pathology show that, despite generally poor levels of health and nutrition, that same community of hunter-gatherers still took pains to support this individual through infancy and into early adulthood, granting him the same share of meat as everyone else, and ultimately according him a careful, sheltered burial.¹⁵

Neither is Romito 2 an isolated case. When archaeologists undertake balanced appraisals of hunter-gatherer burials from the Palaeolithic, they find high frequencies of health-related disabilities – but also surprisingly high levels of care until the time of death (and beyond, since some of these funerals were remarkably lavish).¹⁶ If we did want to reach a general conclusion about what form human societies originally took, based on statistical frequencies of health indicators from ancient burials, we would have to reach the exact opposite conclusion to Hobbes (and Pinker): in origin, it might be claimed, our species is a nurturing and care-giving species, and there was simply no need for life to be nasty, brutish or short.

We're not suggesting we actually do this. As we'll see, there is reason to believe that during the Palaeolithic, only rather unusual individuals were buried at all. We just want to point out how easy it would be to play the same game in the other direction – easy, but frankly not too enlightening.¹⁷ As we get to grips with the actual evidence, we always find that the realities of early human social life were far more complex, and a good deal more interesting, than any modern-day State of Nature theorist would ever be likely to guess.

When it comes to cherry-picking anthropological case studies, and putting them forward as representative of our 'contemporary ancestors' – that is, as models for what humans might have been like in a State of Nature – those working in the tradition of Rousseau tend to prefer African foragers like the Hadza, Pygmies or !Kung. Those who follow Hobbes prefer the Yanomami.

The Yanomami are an indigenous population who live largely by growing plantains and cassava in the Amazon rainforest, their traditional homeland, on the border of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. Since the 1970s, the Yanomami have acquired a reputation as the quintessential violent savages: 'fierce people', as their most famous ethnographer, Napoleon Chagnon, called them. This seems decidedly unfair to the Yanomami since, in fact, statistics show they're not particularly violent – compared with other Amerindian groups, Yanomami homicide rates turn out average-to-low.¹⁸ Again, though, actual statistics turn out to matter less than the availability of dramatic images and anecdotes. The real reason the Yanomami are so famous, and have such a colourful reputation, has everything to do with Chagnon himself: his 1968 book *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, which sold millions of copies, and also a series of films, such as *The Ax Fight*, which offered viewers a vivid glimpse of tribal warfare. For a while all this made Chagnon the world's most famous anthropologist, in the process turning the Yanomami into a notorious case study of primitive violence and establishing their scientific importance in the emerging field of sociobiology.

We should be fair to Chagnon (not everyone is). He never claimed the Yanomami should be treated as living remnants of the Stone Age; indeed, he often noted that they obviously weren't. At the same time, and somewhat unusually for an anthropologist, he tended to define them primarily in terms of things they lacked (e.g. written language, a police force, a formal judiciary), as opposed to the positive features of their culture, which has rather the same effect of setting them up as quintessential primitives.¹⁹ Chagnon's central argument was that adult Yanomami men achieve both cultural and reproductive advantages by killing other adult men; and that this feedback between violence and biological fitness – if generally representative of the early human condition – might have had evolutionary consequences for our species as a whole.²⁰

This is not just a big 'if' – it's enormous. Other anthropologists started raining down questions, not always friendly.²¹ Allegations of professional misconduct were levelled at Chagnon (mostly revolving around ethical standards in the field), and everyone took sides. Some of these accusations appear baseless, but the rhetoric of Chagnon's defenders grew so heated that (as another celebrated anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, put it) not only was he held up as the epitome of rigorous, scientific anthropology, but all who questioned him or his social Darwinism were excoriated as 'Marxists', 'liars', 'cultural anthropologists from the academic left', 'ayatollahs' and 'politically correct bleeding hearts'. To this day, there is no easier way to get

anthropologists to begin denouncing each other as extremists than to mention the name of Napoleon Chagnon.²²

The important point here is that, as a 'non-state' people, the Yanomami are supposed to exemplify what Pinker calls the 'Hobbesian trap', whereby individuals in tribal societies find themselves caught in repetitive cycles of raiding and warfare, living fraught and precarious lives, always just a few steps away from violent death on the tip of a sharp weapon or at the end of a vengeful club. That, Pinker tells us, is the kind of dismal fate ordained for us by evolution. We have only escaped it by virtue of our willingness to place ourselves under the common protection of nation states, courts of law and police forces; and also by embracing virtues of reasoned debate and self-control that Pinker sees as the exclusive heritage of a European 'civilizing process', which produced the Age of Enlightenment (in other words, were it not for Voltaire, and the police, the knife-fight over Chagnon's findings would have been physical, not just academic).

There are many problems with this argument. We'll start with the most obvious. The idea that our current ideals of freedom, equality and democracy are somehow products of the 'Western tradition' would in fact have come as an enormous surprise to someone like Voltaire. As we'll soon see, the Enlightenment thinkers who propounded such ideals almost invariably put them in the mouths of foreigners, even 'savages' like the Yanomami. This is hardly surprising, since it's almost impossible to find a single author in that Western tradition, from Plato to Marcus Aurelius to Erasmus, who did not make it clear that they would have been opposed to such ideas. The word 'democracy' might have been invented in Europe (barely, since Greece at the time was much closer culturally to North Africa and the Middle East than it was to, say, England), but it's almost impossible to find a single European author before the nineteenth century who suggested it would be anything other than a terrible form of government.²³

For obvious reasons, Hobbes's position tends to be favoured by those on the right of the political spectrum, and Rousseau's by those leaning left. Pinker positions himself as a rational centrist, condemning what he considers to be the extremists on either side. But why then insist that all significant forms of human progress before the twentieth century can be attributed only to that one group of humans who used to refer to themselves as 'the white race' (and now, generally, call themselves by its more accepted synonym, 'Western civilization')? There is simply no reason to make this move. It would be just as easy (actually, rather easier) to identify things that can be interpreted as the first stirrings of rationalism, legality, deliberative democracy and so forth all over the world, and only then tell the story of how they coalesced into the current global system.²⁴

Insisting, to the contrary, that all good things come only from Europe ensures one's work can be read as a retroactive apology for genocide, since (apparently, for Pinker) the enslavement, rape, mass murder and destruction of whole civilizations – visited on the rest of the world by European powers – is just another example of humans comporting themselves as they always had; it was in no sense unusual. What was really significant, so this argument goes, is that it made possible the dissemination of what he takes to be 'purely' European notions of freedom, equality before the law, and human rights to the survivors.

Whatever the unpleasantness of the past, Pinker assures us, there is every reason to be optimistic, indeed happy, about the overall path our species has taken. True, he does concede there is scope for some serious tinkering in areas like poverty

reduction, income inequality or indeed peace and security; but on balance – and relative to the number of people living on earth today – what we have now is a spectacular improvement on anything our species accomplished in its history so far (unless you're Black, or live in Syria, for example). Modern life is, for Pinker, in almost every way superior to what came before; and here he does produce elaborate statistics which purport to show how every day in every way – health, security, education, comfort, and by almost any other conceivable parameter – everything is actually getting better and better.

It's hard to argue with the numbers, but as any statistician will tell you, statistics are only as good as the premises on which they are based. Has 'Western civilization' really made life better for everyone? This ultimately comes down to the question of how to measure human happiness, which is a notoriously difficult thing to do. About the only dependable way anyone has ever discovered to determine whether one way of living is really more satisfying, fulfilling, happy or otherwise preferable to any other is to allow people to fully experience both, give them a choice, then watch what they actually do. For instance, if Pinker is correct, then any sane person who had to choose between (a) the violent chaos and abject poverty of the 'tribal' stage in human development and (b) the relative security and prosperity of Western civilization would not hesitate to leap for safety.²⁵

But empirical data is available here, and it suggests something is very wrong with Pinker's conclusions.

Over the last several centuries, there have been numerous occasions when individuals found themselves in a position to make precisely this choice – and they almost never go the way Pinker would have predicted. Some have left us clear, rational explanations for why they made the choices they did. Let us consider the case of Helena Valero, a Brazilian woman born into a family of Spanish descent, whom Pinker mentions as a 'white girl' abducted by Yanomami in 1932 while travelling with her parents along the remote Rio Dimití.

For two decades, Valero lived with a series of Yanomami families, marrying twice, and eventually achieving a position of some importance in her community. Pinker briefly cites the account Valero later gave of her own life, where she describes the brutality of a Yanomami raid.²⁶ What he neglects to mention is that in 1956 she abandoned the Yanomami to seek her natal family and live again in 'Western civilization,' only to find herself in a state of occasional hunger and constant dejection and loneliness. After a while, given the ability to make a fully informed decision, Helena Valero decided she preferred life among the Yanomami, and returned to live with them.²⁷

Her story is by no means unusual. The colonial history of North and South America is full of accounts of settlers, captured or adopted by indigenous societies, being given the choice of where they wished to stay and almost invariably choosing to stay with the latter.²⁸ This even applied to abducted children. Confronted again with their biological parents, most would run back to their adoptive kin for protection.²⁹ By contrast, Amerindians incorporated into European society by adoption or marriage, including those who – unlike the unfortunate Helena Valero – enjoyed considerable wealth and schooling, almost invariably did just the opposite: either escaping at the earliest opportunity, or – having tried their best to adjust, and ultimately failed – returning to indigenous society to live out their last days.

Among the most eloquent commentaries on this whole phenomenon is to be found in a private letter written by Benjamin Franklin to a friend:

When an Indian Child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our Customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and make one Indian Ramble with them there is no persuading him ever to return, and that this is not natural merely as Indians, but as men, is plain from this, that when white persons of either sex have been taken prisoner young by the Indians, and lived awhile among them, tho' ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them. One instance I remember to have heard, where the person was to be brought home to possess a good Estate; but finding some care necessary to keep it together, he relinquished it to a younger brother, reserving to himself nothing but a gun and match-Coat, with which he took his way again to the Wilderness.³⁰

Many who found themselves embroiled in such contests of civilization, if we may call them that, were able to offer clear reasons for their decisions to stay with their erstwhile captors. Some emphasized the virtues of freedom they found in Native American societies, including sexual freedom, but also freedom from the expectation of constant toil in pursuit of land and wealth.³¹ Others noted the 'Indian's' reluctance ever to let anyone fall into a condition of poverty, hunger or destitution. It was not so much that they feared poverty themselves, but rather that they found life infinitely more pleasant in a society where no one else was in a position of abject misery (perhaps much as Oscar Wilde declared he was an advocate of socialism because he didn't like having to look at poor people or listen to their stories). For anyone who has grown up in a city full of rough sleepers and panhandlers – and that is, unfortunately, most of us – it is always a bit startling to discover there's nothing inevitable about any of this.

Still others noted the ease with which outsiders, taken in by 'Indian' families, might achieve acceptance and prominent positions in their adoptive communities, becoming members of chiefly households, or even chiefs themselves.³² Western propagandists speak endlessly about equality of opportunity; these seem to have been societies where it actually existed. By far the most common reasons, however, had to do with the intensity of social bonds they experienced in Native American communities: qualities of mutual care, love and above all happiness, which they found impossible to replicate once back in European settings. 'Security' takes many forms. There is the security of knowing one has a statistically smaller chance of getting shot with an arrow. And then there's the security of knowing that there are people in the world who will care deeply if one is.

HOW THE CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE OF HUMAN HISTORY IS NOT ONLY WRONG, BUT QUITE NEEDLESSLY DULL

One gets the sense that indigenous life was, to put it very crudely, just a lot more interesting than life in a 'Western' town or city, especially insofar as the latter involved long hours of monotonous, repetitive, conceptually empty activity. The fact

that we find it hard to imagine how such an alternative life could be endlessly engaging and interesting is perhaps more a reflection on the limits of our imagination than on the life itself.

One of the most pernicious aspects of standard world-historical narratives is precisely that they dry everything up, reduce people to cardboard stereotypes, simplify the issues (are we inherently selfish and violent, or innately kind and cooperative?) in ways that themselves undermine, possibly even destroy, our sense of human possibility. 'Noble' savages are, ultimately, just as boring as savage ones; more to the point, neither actually exist. Helena Valero was herself adamant on this point. The Yanomami were not devils, she insisted, neither were they angels. They were human, like the rest of us.

Now, we should be clear here: social theory always, necessarily, involves a bit of simplification. For instance, almost any human action might be said to have a political aspect, an economic aspect, a psycho-sexual aspect and so forth. Social theory is largely a game of make-believe in which we pretend, just for the sake of argument, that there's just one thing going on: essentially, we reduce everything to a cartoon so as to be able to detect patterns that would be otherwise invisible. As a result, all real progress in social science has been rooted in the courage to say things that are, in the final analysis, slightly ridiculous: the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud or Claude Lévi-Strauss being only particularly salient cases in point. One must simplify the world to discover something new about it. The problem comes when, long after the discovery has been made, people continue to simplify.

Hobbes and Rousseau told their contemporaries things that were startling, profound and opened new doors of the imagination. Now their ideas are just tired common sense. There's nothing in them that justifies the continued simplification of human affairs. If social scientists today continue to reduce past generations to simplistic, two-dimensional caricatures, it is not so much to show us anything original, but just because they feel that's what social scientists are expected to do so as to appear 'scientific'. The actual result is to impoverish history – and as a consequence, to impoverish our sense of possibility. Let us end this introduction with an illustration, before moving on to the heart of the matter.

Ever since Adam Smith, those trying to prove that contemporary forms of competitive market exchange are rooted in human nature have pointed to the existence of what they call 'primitive trade'. Already tens of thousands of years ago, one can find evidence of objects – very often precious stones, shells or other items of adornment – being moved around over enormous distances. Often these were just the sort of objects that anthropologists would later find being used as 'primitive currencies' all over the world. Surely this must prove capitalism in some form or another has always existed?

The logic is perfectly circular. If precious objects were moving long distances, this is evidence of 'trade' and, if trade occurred, it must have taken some sort of commercial form; therefore, the fact that, say, 3,000 years ago Baltic amber found its way to the Mediterranean, or shells from the Gulf of Mexico were transported to Ohio, is proof that we are in the presence of some embryonic form of market economy. Markets are universal. Therefore, there must have been a market. Therefore, markets are universal. And so on.

All such authors are really saying is that they themselves cannot personally imagine any other way that precious objects might move about. But lack of imagination is not itself an argument. It's almost as if these writers are afraid to

suggest anything that seems original, or, if they do, feel obliged to use vaguely scientific-sounding language ('trans-regional interaction spheres', 'multi-scalar networks of exchange') to avoid having to speculate about what precisely those things might be. In fact, anthropology provides endless illustrations of how valuable objects might travel long distances in the absence of anything that remotely resembles a market economy.

The founding text of twentieth-century ethnography, Bronisław Malinowski's 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, describes how in the 'kula chain' of the Massim Islands off Papua New Guinea, men would undertake daring expeditions across dangerous seas in outrigger canoes, just in order to exchange precious heirloom arm-shells and necklaces for each other (each of the most important ones has its own name, and history of former owners) – only to hold it briefly, then pass it on again to a different expedition from another island. Heirloom treasures circle the island chain eternally, crossing hundreds of miles of ocean, arm-shells and necklaces in opposite directions. To an outsider, it seems senseless. To the men of the Massim it was the ultimate adventure, and nothing could be more important than to spread one's name, in this fashion, to places one had never seen.

Is this 'trade'? Perhaps, but it would bend to breaking point our ordinary understandings of what that word means. There is, in fact, a substantial ethnographic literature on how such long-distance exchange operates in societies without markets. Barter does occur: different groups may take on specialities – one is famous for its feather-work, another provides salt, in a third all women are potters – to acquire things they cannot produce themselves; sometimes one group will specialize in the very business of moving people and things around. But we often find such regional networks developing largely for the sake of creating friendly mutual relations, or having an excuse to visit one another from time to time,³³ and there are plenty of other possibilities that in no way resemble 'trade'.

Let's list just a few, all drawn from North American material, to give the reader a taste of what might really be going on when people speak of 'long-distance interaction spheres' in the human past:

1. **Dreams or vision quests:** among Iroquoian-speaking peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was considered extremely important literally to realize one's dreams. Many European observers marvelled at how Indians would be willing to travel for days to bring back some object, trophy, crystal or even an animal like a dog that they had dreamed of acquiring. Anyone who dreamed about a neighbour or relative's possession (a kettle, ornament, mask and so on) could normally demand it; as a result, such objects would often gradually travel some way from town to town. On the Great Plains, decisions to travel long distances in search of rare or exotic items could form part of vision quests.³⁴
2. **Travelling healers and entertainers:** in 1528, when a shipwrecked Spaniard named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca made his way from Florida across what is now Texas to Mexico, he found he could pass easily between villages (even villages at war with one another) by offering his services as a magician and curer. Curers in much of North America were also entertainers, and would often develop significant entourages; those who felt their lives had been saved by the performance would, typically, offer up all their material possessions to be divided among the troupe.³⁵ By such means, precious objects could easily travel very long distances.

3. **Women's gambling:** women in many indigenous North American societies were inveterate gamblers; the women of adjacent villages would often meet to play dice or a game played with a bowl and plum stone, and would typically bet their shell beads or other objects of personal adornment as the stakes. One archaeologist versed in the ethnographic literature, Warren DeBoer, estimates that many of the shells and other exotica discovered in sites halfway across the continent had got there by being endlessly wagered, and lost, in inter-village games of this sort, over very long periods of time.³⁶

We could multiply examples, but assume that by now the reader gets the broader point we are making. When we simply guess as to what humans in other times and places might be up to, we almost invariably make guesses that are far less interesting, far less quirky – in a word, far less human than what was likely going on.

ON WHAT'S TO FOLLOW

In this book we will not only be presenting a new history of humankind, but inviting the reader into a new science of history, one that restores our ancestors to their full humanity. Rather than asking how we ended up unequal, we will start by asking how it was that 'inequality' became such an issue to begin with, then gradually build up an alternative narrative that corresponds more closely to our current state of knowledge. If humans did not spend 95 per cent of their evolutionary past in tiny bands of hunter-gatherers, what were they doing all that time? If agriculture, and cities, did not mean a plunge into hierarchy and domination, then what did they imply? What was really happening in those periods we usually see as marking the emergence of 'the state'? The answers are often unexpected, and suggest that the course of human history may be less set in stone, and more full of playful possibilities, than we tend to assume.

In one sense, then, this book is simply trying to lay down foundations for a new world history, rather as Gordon Childe did when, back in the 1930s, he invented phrases like 'the Neolithic Revolution' or 'the Urban Revolution'. As such it is necessarily uneven and incomplete. At the same time, this book is also something else: a quest to discover the right questions. If 'what is the origin of inequality?' is not the biggest question we should be asking about history, what then should it be? As the stories of one-time captives escaping back to the woods again make clear, Rousseau was not entirely mistaken. Something *has* been lost. He just had a rather idiosyncratic (and ultimately, false) notion of what it was. How do we characterize it, then? And how lost is it really? What does it imply about possibilities for social change today?

For about a decade now, we – that is, the two authors of this book – have been engaged in a prolonged conversation with each other about exactly these questions. This is the reason for the book's somewhat unusual structure, which begins by tracing the historical roots of the question ('what is the origin of social inequality?') back to a series of encounters between European colonists and Native American intellectuals in the seventeenth century. The impact of those encounters upon what we now term the Enlightenment, and indeed our basic conceptions of human history, is both more subtle and profound than we usually care to admit. Revisiting them, as we discovered, has startling implications for how we make sense of the human past today, including the origins of farming, property, cities, democracy, slavery and civilization itself. In the end, we decided to write a book that would

echo, to some degree at least, that evolution in our own thought. In those conversations, the real breakthrough moment came when we decided to move away from European thinkers like Rousseau entirely, and instead consider perspectives that derive from those indigenous thinkers who ultimately inspired them.

So let us begin right there.



Wicked Liberty

The indigenous critique and the myth of progress

Jean-Jacques Rousseau left us a story about the origins of social inequality that continues to be told and retold, in endless variations, to this day. It is the story of humanity's original innocence, and unwitting departure from a state of pristine simplicity on a voyage of technological discovery that would ultimately guarantee both our 'complexity' and our enslavement. How did this ambivalent story of civilization come about?

Intellectual historians have never really abandoned the Great Man theory of history. They often write as if all important ideas in a given age can be traced back to one or other extraordinary individual – whether Plato, Confucius, Adam Smith or Karl Marx – rather than seeing such authors' writings as particularly brilliant interventions in debates that were already going on in taverns or dinner parties or public gardens (or, for that matter, lecture rooms), but which otherwise might never have been written down. It's a bit like pretending William Shakespeare had somehow invented the English language. In fact, many of Shakespeare's most brilliant turns of phrase turn out to have been common expressions of the day, which any Elizabethan Englishman or woman would be likely to have thrown into casual conversation, and whose authors remain as obscure as those of knock-knock jokes – even if, were it not for Shakespeare, they'd probably have passed out of use and been forgotten long ago.

All this applies to Rousseau. Intellectual historians sometimes write as if Rousseau had personally kicked off the debate about social inequality with his 1754 *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*. In fact, he wrote it to submit to an essay contest on the subject.

IN WHICH WE SHOW HOW CRITIQUES OF EUROCENTRISM CAN BACKFIRE, AND
END UP TURNING ABORIGINAL THINKERS INTO 'SOCK-PUPPETS'

In March 1754, the learned society known as the Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Dijon announced a national essay competition on the question: 'what is the origin of *inequality* among men, and is it authorized by natural law?' What we'd like to do in this chapter is ask: why is it that a group of scholars in *Ancien Régime* France, hosting a national essay contest, would have felt this was an

appropriate question in the first place? The way the question is put, after all, assumes that social inequality did *have* an origin; that is, it takes for granted that there was a time when human beings were equals – and that something then happened to change this situation.

That is actually quite a startling thing for people living under an absolutist monarchy like that of Louis XV to think. After all, it's not as if anyone in France at that time had much personal experience of living in a society of equals. This was a culture in which almost every aspect of human interaction – whether eating, drinking, working or socializing – was marked by elaborate pecking orders and rituals of social deference. The authors who submitted their essays to this competition were men who spent their lives having all their needs attended to by servants. They lived off the patronage of dukes and archbishops, and rarely entered a building without knowing the precise order of importance of everyone inside. Rousseau was one such man: an ambitious young philosopher, he was at the time engaged in an elaborate project of trying to sleep his way into influence at court. The closest he'd likely ever come to experiencing social equality himself was someone doling out equal slices of cake at a dinner party. Yet everyone at the time also agreed that this situation was somehow unnatural; that it had not always been that way.

If we want to understand why *that* was, we need to look not only at France, but also at France's place in a much larger world.

Fascination with the question of social inequality was relatively new in the 1700s, and it had everything to do with the shock and confusion that followed Europe's sudden integration into a global economy, where it had long been a very minor player.

In the Middle Ages, most people in other parts of the world who actually knew anything about northern Europe at all considered it an obscure and uninviting backwater full of religious fanatics who, aside from occasional attacks on their neighbours ('the Crusades'), were largely irrelevant to global trade and world politics.¹ European intellectuals of that time were just rediscovering Aristotle and the ancient world, and had very little idea what people were thinking and arguing about anywhere else. All this changed, of course, in the late fifteenth century, when Portuguese fleets began rounding Africa and bursting into the Indian Ocean – and especially with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Suddenly, a few of the more powerful European kingdoms found themselves in control of vast stretches of the globe, and European intellectuals found themselves exposed, not only to the civilizations of China and India but to a whole plethora of previously unimagined social, scientific and political ideas. The ultimate result of this flood of new ideas came to be known as the 'Enlightenment'.

Of course, this isn't usually the way historians of ideas tell this story. Not only are we taught to think of intellectual history as something largely produced by individuals writing great books or thinking great thoughts, but these 'great thinkers' are assumed to perform both these activities almost exclusively with reference to each other. As a result, even in cases where Enlightenment thinkers openly insisted they were getting their ideas from foreign sources (as the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz did when he urged his compatriots to adopt Chinese models of statecraft), there's a tendency for contemporary historians to insist they weren't really serious; or else that when they said they were embracing Chinese, or Persian, or indigenous American ideas these weren't really Chinese,

Persian or indigenous American ideas at all but ones they themselves had made up and merely attributed to exotic Others.²

These are remarkably arrogant assumptions – as if ‘Western thought’ (as it later came to be known) was such a powerful and monolithic body of ideas that no one else could possibly have any meaningful influence on it. It’s also pretty obviously untrue. Just consider the case of Leibniz: over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European governments gradually came to adopt the idea that every government should properly preside over a population of largely uniform language and culture, run by a bureaucratic officialdom trained in the liberal arts whose members had succeeded in passing competitive exams. It might seem surprising that they did so, since nothing remotely like that had existed in any previous period of European history. Yet it was almost exactly the system that had existed for centuries in China.

Are we really to insist that the advocacy of Chinese models of statecraft by Leibniz, his allies and followers really had *nothing* to do with the fact that Europeans did, in fact, adopt something that looks very much like Chinese models of statecraft? What is really unusual about this case is that Leibniz was so honest about his intellectual influences. When he lived, Church authorities still wielded a great deal of power in most of Europe: anyone making an argument that non-Christian ways were in any way superior might find themselves facing charges of atheism, which was potentially a capital offence.³

It is much the same with the question of inequality. If we ask, not ‘what are the origins of social inequality?’ but ‘what are the origins of the *question* about the origins of social inequality?’ (in other words, how did it come about that, in 1754, the Académie de Dijon would think this an appropriate question to ask?), then we are immediately confronted with a long history of Europeans arguing with one another about the nature of faraway societies: in this case, particularly in the Eastern Woodlands of North America. What’s more, a lot of those conversations make reference to arguments that took place between Europeans and indigenous Americans about the nature of freedom, equality or for that matter rationality and revealed religion – indeed, most of the themes that would later become central to Enlightenment political thought.

Many influential Enlightenment thinkers did in fact claim that some of their ideas on the subject were directly taken from Native American sources – even though, predictably, intellectual historians today insist this cannot really be the case. Indigenous people are assumed to have lived in a completely different universe, inhabited a different reality, even; anything Europeans said about them was simply a shadow-play projection, fantasies of the ‘noble savage’ culled from the European tradition itself.⁴

Of course, such historians typically frame this position as a critique of Western arrogance (‘how can you suggest that genocidal imperialists were actually listening to those whose societies they were in the process of stamping out?’), but it could equally well be seen as a form of Western arrogance in its own right. There is no contesting that European traders, missionaries and settlers did actually engage in prolonged conversations with people they encountered in what they called the New World, and often lived among them for extended periods of time – even as they also colluded in their destruction. We also know that many of those living in Europe who came to embrace principles of freedom and equality (principles barely existing in their countries a few generations before) claimed that accounts of these encounters

among people who had no recognizable form of law or government? Would marriage exist? What forms might it take? Would Natural Man tend to be naturally gregarious, or would people tend to avoid one another? Was there such a thing as natural religion?

But the question still remains: why is it that by the eighteenth century, European intellectuals had come to fix on the idea of primordial freedom or, especially, equality, to such an extent that it seemed perfectly natural to ask a question like 'what is the origin of *inequality* among men?' This seems particularly odd considering how, prior to that time, most did not even consider social equality possible.

First of all, a qualification is in order. A certain folk egalitarianism already existed in the Middle Ages, coming to the fore during popular festivals like carnival, May Day or Christmas, when much of society revelled in the idea of a 'world turned upside down', where all powers and authorities were knocked to the ground or made a mockery of. Often the celebrations were framed as a return to some primordial 'age of equality' – the Age of Cronus, or Saturn, or the land of Cockayne. Sometimes, too, these ideals were invoked in popular revolts.

True, it's never entirely clear how far such egalitarian ideals are merely a side effect of hierarchical social arrangements that obtained at ordinary times. Our notion that everyone is equal before the law, for instance, originally traces back to the idea that everyone is equal before the king, or emperor: since if one man is invested with absolute power, then obviously everyone else is equal in comparison. Early Christianity similarly insisted that all believers were (in some ultimate sense) equal in relation to God, whom they referred to as 'the Lord'. As this illustrates, the overarching power under which ordinary mortals are all *de facto* equals need not be a real flesh-and-blood human; one of the whole points of creating a 'carnival king' or 'May queen' is that they exist in order to be dethroned.⁸

Europeans educated in classical literature would also have been familiar with speculation about long-ago, happy, egalitarian orders that appear in Greco-Roman sources; and notions of equality, at least among Christian nations, were to be found in the concept of *res publica*, or commonwealth, which again looked to ancient precedents. All this is only to say that a state of equality was not utterly inconceivable to European intellectuals before the eighteenth century. None of it, however, explains *why* they came almost universally to assume that human beings, innocent of civilization, would ever exist in such a state. True, there were classical precedents for such ideas, but there were classical precedents for the opposite as well.⁹ For answers, we must return to arguments deployed to establish that the inhabitants of the Americas were fellow humans to begin with: to assert that, however exotic or even perverse their customs might seem, Native Americans were capable of making logical arguments in their own defence.

What we're going to suggest is that American intellectuals – we are using the term 'American' as it was used at the time, to refer to indigenous inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere; and 'intellectual' to refer to anyone in the habit of arguing about abstract ideas – actually played a role in this conceptual revolution. It is very strange that this should be considered a particularly radical idea, but among mainstream intellectual historians today it is almost a heresy.

What makes this especially odd is that no one denies that many European explorers, missionaries, traders, settlers and others who sojourned on American shores spent years learning native languages and perfecting their skills in conversation with native speakers; just as indigenous Americans did the work of

learning Spanish, English, Dutch or French. Neither, we think, would anyone who has ever learned a truly alien language deny that doing so takes a great deal of imaginative work, trying to grasp unfamiliar concepts. We also know that missionaries typically conducted long philosophical debates as part of their professional duties; many others, on both sides, argued with one another either out of simple curiosity, or because they had immediate practical reasons to understand the other's point of view. Finally, no one would deny that travel literature, and missionary relations – which often contained summaries of, or even extracts from, these exchanges – were popular literary genres, avidly followed by educated Europeans. Any middle-class household in eighteenth-century Amsterdam or Grenoble would have been likely to have on its shelves at the very least a copy of the *Jesuit Relations of New France* (as France's North American colonies were then known), and one or two accounts written by voyagers to faraway lands. Such books were appreciated largely because they contained surprising and unprecedented ideas.¹⁰

Historians are aware of all this. Yet the overwhelming majority still conclude that even when European authors explicitly say they are borrowing ideas, concepts and arguments from indigenous thinkers, one should not take them seriously. It's all just supposed to be some kind of misunderstanding, fabrication, or at best a naive projection of pre-existing European ideas. American intellectuals, when they appear in European accounts, are assumed to be mere representatives of some Western archetype of the 'noble savage' or sock-puppets, used as plausible alibis to an author who might otherwise get into trouble for presenting subversive ideas (deism, for example, or rational materialism, or unconventional views on marriage).¹¹

Certainly, if one encounters an argument ascribed to a 'savage' in a European text that even remotely resembles anything to be found in Cicero or Erasmus, one is automatically supposed to assume that no 'savage' could possibly have really said it – or even that the conversation in question never really took place at all.¹² If nothing else, this habit of thought is very convenient for students of Western literature, themselves trained in Cicero and Erasmus, who might otherwise be forced to actually try to learn something about what indigenous people thought about the world, and above all what they made of Europeans.

We intend to proceed in the opposite direction.

We will examine early missionary and travel accounts from New France – especially the Great Lakes region – since these were the accounts Rousseau himself was most familiar with, to get a sense of what its indigenous inhabitants did actually think of French society, and how they came to think of their own societies differently as a result. We will argue that indigenous Americans did indeed develop a very strong critical view of their invaders' institutions: a view which focused first on these institutions' lack of freedom, and only later, as they became more familiar with European social arrangements, on equality.

One of the reasons that missionary and travel literature became so popular in Europe was precisely because it exposed its readers to this kind of criticism, along with providing a sense of social possibility: the knowledge that familiar ways were not the only ways, since – as these books showed – there were clearly societies in existence that did things very differently. We will suggest that there is a reason why so many key Enlightenment thinkers insisted that their ideals of individual liberty and political equality were inspired by Native American sources and examples. Because it was true.

IN WHICH WE CONSIDER WHAT THE INHABITANTS OF NEW FRANCE MADE OF
THEIR EUROPEAN INVADERS, ESPECIALLY IN MATTERS OF GENEROSITY,
SOCIABILITY, MATERIAL WEALTH, CRIME, PUNISHMENT AND LIBERTY

The 'Age of Reason' was an age of debate. The Enlightenment was rooted in conversation; it took place largely in cafés and salons. Many classic Enlightenment texts took the form of dialogues; most cultivated an easy, transparent, conversational style clearly inspired by the salon. (It was the Germans, back then, who tended to write in the obscure style for which French intellectuals have since become famous.) Appeal to 'reason' was above all a style of argument. The ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – took the form they did in the course of just such a long series of debates and conversations. All we're going to suggest here is that those conversations stretched back further than Enlightenment historians assume.

Let's begin by asking: what did the inhabitants of New France make of the Europeans who began to arrive on their shores in the sixteenth century?

At that time, the region that came to be known as New France was inhabited largely by speakers of Montagnais-Naskapi, Algonkian and Iroquoian languages. Those closer to the coast were fishers, foresters and hunters, though most also practised horticulture; the Wendat (Huron),¹³ concentrated in major river valleys further inland, growing maize, squash and beans around fortified towns. Interestingly, early French observers attached little importance to such economic distinctions, especially since foraging or farming was, in either case, largely women's work. The men, they noted, were primarily occupied in hunting and, occasionally, war, which meant they could in a sense be considered natural aristocrats. The idea of the 'noble savage' can be traced back to such estimations. Originally, it didn't refer to nobility of character but simply to the fact that the Indian men concerned themselves with hunting and fighting, which back at home were largely the business of noblemen.

But if French assessments of the character of 'savages' tended to be decidedly mixed, the indigenous assessment of French character was distinctly less so. Father Pierre Biard, for example, was a former theology professor assigned in 1608 to evangelize the Algonkian-speaking Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, who had lived for some time next to a French fort. Biard did not think much of the Mi'kmaq, but reported that the feeling was mutual: 'They consider themselves better than the French: "For," they say, "you are always fighting and quarrelling among yourselves; we live peaceably. You are envious and are all the time slandering each other; you are thieves and deceivers; you are covetous, and are neither generous nor kind; as for us, if we have a morsel of bread we share it with our neighbour." They are saying these and like things continually.'¹⁴ What seemed to irritate Biard the most was that the Mi'kmaq would constantly assert that they were, as a result, 'richer' than the French. The French had more material possessions, the Mi'kmaq conceded; but they had other, greater assets: ease, comfort and time.

Twenty years later Brother Gabriel Sagard, a Recollect Friar,¹⁵ wrote similar things of the Wendat nation. Sagard was at first highly critical of Wendat life, which he described as inherently sinful (he was obsessed with the idea that Wendat women were all intent on seducing him), but by the end of his sojourn he had come to the conclusion their social arrangements were in many ways superior to those at home in France. In the following passages he was clearly echoing Wendat opinion: 'They have no lawsuits and take little pains to acquire the goods of this life, for which we

Christians torment ourselves so much, and for our excessive and insatiable greed in acquiring them we are justly and with reason reproved by their quiet life and tranquil dispositions.¹⁶ Much like Biard's Mi'kmaq, the Wendat were particularly offended by the French lack of generosity to one another: 'They reciprocate hospitality and give such assistance to one another that the necessities of all are provided for without there being any indigent beggar in their towns and villages; and they considered it a very bad thing when they heard it said that there were in France a great many of these needy beggars, and thought that this was for lack of charity in us, and blamed us for it severely.'¹⁷

Wendat cast a similarly jaundiced eye at French habits of conversation. Sagard was surprised and impressed by his hosts' eloquence and powers of reasoned argument, skills honed by near-daily public discussions of communal affairs; his hosts, in contrast, when they did get to see a group of Frenchmen gathered together, often remarked on the way they seemed to be constantly scrambling over each other and cutting each other off in conversation, employing weak arguments, and overall (or so the subtext seemed to be) not showing themselves to be particularly bright. People who tried to grab the stage, denying others the means to present their arguments, were acting in much the same way as those who grabbed the material means of subsistence and refused to share it; it is hard to avoid the impression that Americans saw the French as existing in a kind of Hobbesian state of 'war of all against all'. (It's probably worthy of remark that especially in this early contact period, Americans were likely to have known Europeans largely through missionaries, trappers, merchants and soldiers – that is, groups almost entirely composed of men. There were at first very few French women in the colonies, and fewer children. This probably had the effect of making the competitiveness and lack of mutual care among them seem all the more extreme.)

Sagard's account of his stay among the Wendat became an influential bestseller in France and across Europe: both Locke and Voltaire cited *Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons* as a principal source for their descriptions of American societies. The multi-authored and much more extensive *Jesuit Relations*, which appeared between 1633 and 1673, were also widely read and debated in Europe, and include many a similar remonstrance aimed at the French by Wendat observers. One of the most striking things about these seventy-one volumes of missionary field reports is that neither the Americans, nor their French interlocutors, appear to have had very much to say about 'equality' per se – for example, the words *égal* or *égalité* barely appear, and on those very few occasions when they do it's almost always in reference to 'equality of the sexes' (something the Jesuits found particularly scandalous).

This appears to be the case, irrespective of whether the Jesuits in question were arguing with the Wendat – who might not seem egalitarian in anthropological terms, since they had formal political offices and a stratum of war captives whom the Jesuits, at least, referred to as 'slaves' – or the Mi'kmaq or Montagnais-Naskapi, who were organized into what later anthropologists would consider egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers. Instead, we hear a multiplicity of American voices complaining about the competitiveness and selfishness of the French – and even more, perhaps, about their hostility to freedom.

That indigenous Americans lived in generally free societies, and that Europeans did not, was never really a matter of debate in these exchanges: both sides agreed this was the case. What they differed on was whether or not individual liberty was desirable.

This is one area in which early missionary or travellers' accounts of the Americas pose a genuine conceptual challenge to most readers today. Most of us simply take it for granted that 'Western' observers, even seventeenth-century ones, are simply an earlier version of ourselves; unlike indigenous Americans, who represent an essentially alien, perhaps even unknowable Other. But in fact, in many ways, the authors of these texts were nothing like us. When it came to questions of personal freedom, the equality of men and women, sexual mores or popular sovereignty – or even, for that matter, theories of depth psychology¹⁸ – indigenous American attitudes are likely to be far closer to the reader's own than seventeenth-century European ones.

These differing views on individual liberty are especially striking. Nowadays, it's almost impossible for anyone living in a liberal democracy to say they are against freedom – at least in the abstract (in practice, of course, our ideas are usually much more nuanced). This is one of the lasting legacies of the Enlightenment and of the American and French Revolutions. Personal freedom, we tend to believe, is inherently good (even if some of us also feel that a society based on total individual liberty – one which took it so far as to eliminate police, prisons or any sort of apparatus of coercion – would instantly collapse into violent chaos). Seventeenth-century Jesuits most certainly did *not* share this assumption. They tended to view individual liberty as animalistic. In 1642, the Jesuit missionary Le Jeune wrote of the Montagnais-Naskapi:

They imagine that they ought by right of birth, to enjoy the liberty of wild ass colts, rendering no homage to any one whomsoever, except when they like. They have reproached me a hundred times because we fear our Captains, while they laugh at and make sport of theirs. All the authority of their chief is in his tongue's end; for he is powerful in so far as he is eloquent; and, even if he kills himself talking and haranguing, he will not be obeyed unless he pleases the Savages.¹⁹

In the considered opinion of the Montagnais-Naskapi, however, the French were little better than slaves, living in constant terror of their superiors. Such criticism appears regularly in Jesuit accounts; what's more, it comes not just from those who lived in nomadic bands, but equally from townsfolk like the Wendat. The missionaries, moreover, were willing to concede that this wasn't all just rhetoric on the Americans' part. Even Wendat statesmen couldn't compel anyone to do anything they didn't wish to do. As Father Lallemant, whose correspondence provided an initial model for *The Jesuit Relations*, noted of the Wendat in 1644:

I do not believe that there is any people on earth freer than they, and less able to allow the subjection of their wills to any power whatever – so much so that Fathers here have no control over their children, or Captains over their subjects, or the Laws of the country over any of them, except in so far as each is pleased to submit to them. There is no punishment which is inflicted on the guilty, and no criminal who is not sure that his life and property are in no danger ...²⁰

Lallemant's account gives a sense of just how politically challenging some of the material to be found in the *Jesuit Relations* must have been to European audiences of the time, and why so many found it fascinating. After expanding on how scandalous

world. Trained in classical rhetoric and techniques of disputation, Jesuits had learned the Americans' languages primarily so as to be able to argue with them, to persuade them of the superiority of the Christian faith. Yet they regularly found themselves startled and impressed by the quality of the counterarguments they had to contend with.

How could such rhetorical facility have come to those with no awareness of the works of Varro and Quintilian? In considering the matter, the Jesuits almost always noted the openness with which public affairs were conducted. So, Father Le Jeune, Superior of the Jesuits in Canada in the 1630s: 'There are almost none of them incapable of conversing or reasoning very well, and in good terms, on matters within their knowledge. The councils, held almost every day in the Villages, and on almost all matters, improve their capacity for talking.' Or, in Lallemand's words: 'I can say in truth that, as regards intelligence, they are in no wise inferior to Europeans and to those who dwell in France. I would never have believed that, without instruction, nature could have supplied a most ready and vigorous eloquence, which I have admired in many Hurons; or more clear-sightedness in public affairs, or a more discreet management in things to which they are accustomed.'²⁵ Some Jesuits went further, remarking – not without a trace of frustration – that New World savages seemed rather cleverer overall than the people they were used to dealing with at home (e.g. 'they nearly all show more intelligence in their business, speeches, courtesies, intercourse, tricks, and subtleties, than do the shrewdest citizens and merchants in France').²⁶

Jesuits, then, clearly recognized and acknowledged an intrinsic relation between refusal of arbitrary power, open and inclusive political debate and a taste for reasoned argument. It's true that Native American political leaders, who in most cases had no means to compel anyone to do anything they had not agreed to do, were famous for their rhetorical powers. Even hardened European generals pursuing genocidal campaigns against indigenous peoples often reported themselves reduced to tears by their powers of eloquence. Still, persuasiveness need not take the form of logical argumentation; it can just as easily involve appeal to sentiment, whipping up passions, deploying poetic metaphors, appealing to myth or proverbial wisdom, employing irony and indirection, humour, insult, or appeals to prophecy or revelation; and the degree to which one privileges any of these has everything to do with the rhetorical tradition to which the speaker belongs, and the presumed dispositions of their audience.

It was largely the speakers of Iroquoian languages such as the Wendat, or the five Haudenosaunee nations to their south, who appear to have placed such weight on reasoned debate – even finding it a form of pleasurable entertainment in own right. This fact alone had major historical repercussions. Because it appears to have been exactly this form of debate – rational, sceptical, empirical, conversational in tone – which before long came to be identified with the European Enlightenment as well. And, just like the Jesuits, Enlightenment thinkers and democratic revolutionaries saw it as intrinsically connected with the rejection of arbitrary authority, particularly that which had long been assumed by the clergy.

Let's gather together the strands of our argument so far.

By the mid seventeenth century, legal and political thinkers in Europe were beginning to toy with the idea of an egalitarian State of Nature; at least in the minimal sense of a default state that might be shared by societies which they saw as lacking government, writing, religion, private property or other significant means

of distinguishing themselves from one another. Terms like 'equality' and 'inequality' were just beginning to come into common usage in intellectual circles – around the time, indeed, that the first French missionaries set out to evangelize the inhabitants of what are now Nova Scotia and Quebec.²⁷ Europe's reading public was growing increasingly curious about what such primordial societies might have been like. But they had no particular disposition to imagine men and women living in a State of Nature as especially 'noble', let alone as rational sceptics and champions of individual liberty.²⁸ This latter perspective was the product of a dialogic encounter.

As we've seen, at first neither side – not the colonists of New France, nor their indigenous interlocutors – had much to say about 'equality'. Rather, the argument was about liberty and mutual aid, or what might even be better called freedom and communism. We should be clear about what we mean by the latter term. Since the early nineteenth century, there have been lively debates about whether there was ever a thing that might legitimately be referred to as 'primitive communism'. At the centre of these debates, almost invariably, were the indigenous societies of the Northeast Woodlands – ever since Friedrich Engels used the Iroquois as a prime example of primitive communism in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Here, 'communism' always refers to communal ownership, particularly of productive resources. As we've already observed, many American societies could be considered somewhat ambiguous in this sense: women owned and worked the fields individually, even though they stored and disposed of the products collectively; men owned their own tools and weapons individually, even if they typically shared out the game and spoils.

However, there's another way to use the word 'communism': not as a property regime but in the original sense of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'. There's also a certain minimal, 'baseline' communism which applies in all societies; a feeling that if another person's needs are great enough (say, they are drowning), and the cost of meeting them is modest enough (say, they are asking for you to throw them a rope), then of course any decent person would comply. Baseline communism of this sort could even be considered the very grounds of human sociability, since it is only one's bitter enemies who would not be treated this way. What varies is just how far it is felt such baseline communism should properly extend.

In many societies – and American societies of that time appear to have been among them – it would have been quite inconceivable to refuse a request for food. For seventeenth-century Frenchmen in North America, this was clearly not the case: their range of baseline communism appears to have been quite restricted, and did not extend to food and shelter – something which scandalized Americans. But just as we earlier witnessed a confrontation between two very different concepts of equality, here we are ultimately witnessing a clash between very different concepts of individualism. Europeans were constantly squabbling for advantage; societies of the Northeast Woodlands, by contrast, guaranteed one another the means to an autonomous life – or at least ensured no man or woman was subordinated to any other. Insofar as we can speak of communism, it existed not in opposition to but in support of individual freedom.

The same could be said of indigenous political systems that Europeans encountered across much of the Great Lakes region. Everything operated to ensure that no one's will would be subjugated to that of anyone else. It was only over time,

as Americans learned more about Europe, and Europeans began to consider what it would mean to translate American ideals of individual liberty into their own societies, that the term 'equality' began to gain ground as a feature of the discourse between them.

IN WHICH WE INTRODUCE THE WENDAT PHILOSOPHER-STATESMAN
KANDIARONK, AND EXPLAIN HOW HIS VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE AND SOCIETY
TOOK ON NEW LIFE IN THE SALONS OF ENLIGHTENMENT EUROPE (INCLUDING AN
ASIDE ON THE CONCEPT OF 'SCHISMOGENESIS')

In order to understand how the indigenous critique – that consistent moral and intellectual assault on European society, widely voiced by Native American observers from the seventeenth century onwards – evolved, and its full impact on European thinking, we first need to understand something about the role of two men: an impoverished French aristocrat named Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de la Hontan, and an unusually brilliant Wendat statesman named Kandiaronk.

In 1683, Lahontan (as he came to be known), then seventeen years old, joined the French army and was posted to Canada. Over the course of the next decade he took part in a number of campaigns and exploratory expeditions, eventually attaining the rank of deputy to the Governor-General, the Comte de Frontenac. In the process he became fluent in both Algonkian and Wendat, and – by his own account at least – good friends with a number of indigenous political figures. Lahontan later claimed that, because he was something of a sceptic in religious matters and a political enemy of the Jesuits, these figures were willing to share with him their actual opinions about Christian teachings. One of them was Kandiaronk.

A key strategist of the Wendat Confederacy, a coalition of four Iroquoian-speaking peoples, Kandiaronk (his name literally meant 'the muskrat' and the French often referred to him simply as 'Le Rat') was at that time engaged in a complex geopolitical game, trying to play the English, French and Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee off against each other, with the initial aim of averting a disastrous Haudenosaunee assault on the Wendat, but with the long-term goal of creating a comprehensive indigenous alliance to hold off the settler advance.²⁹ Everyone who met him, friend or foe, admitted he was a truly remarkable individual: a courageous warrior, brilliant orator and unusually skilful politician. He was also, to the very end of his life, a staunch opponent of Christianity.³⁰

Lahontan's own career came to a bad end. Despite having successfully defended Nova Scotia against an English fleet, he ran foul of its governor and was forced to flee French territory. Convicted in absentia of insubordination, he spent most of the next decade in exile, wandering about Europe trying, unsuccessfully, to negotiate a return to his native France. By 1702, Lahontan was living in Amsterdam and very much down on his luck, described by those who met him as penniless vagrant and freelance spy. All that was to change when he published a series of books about his adventures in Canada.

Two were memoirs of his American adventures. The third, entitled *Curious Dialogues with a Savage of Good Sense Who Has Travelled* (1703), comprised a series of four conversations between Lahontan and Kandiaronk, in which the Wendat sage – voicing opinions based on his own ethnographic observations of Montreal, New York and Paris – casts an extremely critical eye on European mores and ideas about religion, politics, health and sexual life. These books won a wide audience, and

before long Lahontan had become something of a minor celebrity. He settled at the court of Hanover, which was also the home base for Leibniz, who befriended and supported him before Lahontan fell ill and died, around 1715.

Most criticism of Lahontan's work simply assumes as a matter of course that the dialogues are made up, and that the arguments attributed to 'Adario' (the name given there to Kandiaronk) are the opinions of Lahontan himself.³¹ In a way, this conclusion is unsurprising. Adario claims not only to have visited France, but expresses opinions on everything from monastic politics to legal affairs. In the debate on religion, he often sounds like an advocate of the deist position that spiritual truth should be sought in reason, not revelation, embracing just the sort of rational scepticism that was becoming popular in Europe's more daring intellectual circles at the time. It is also true that the style of Lahontan's dialogues seems partly inspired by the ancient Greek writings of the satirist Lucian; and also that, given the prevalence of Church censorship in France at the time, the easiest way for a freethinker to get away with publishing an open attack on Christianity probably would have been to compose a dialogue pretending to defend the faith from the attacks of an imaginary foreign sceptic – and then make sure one loses all the arguments.

In recent decades, however, indigenous scholars returned to the material in light of what we know about Kandiaronk himself – and came to very different conclusions.³² The real-life Adario was famous not only for his eloquence, but was known for engaging in debates with Europeans of just the sort recorded in Lahontan's book. As Barbara Alice Mann remarks, despite the almost unanimous chorus of Western scholars insisting the dialogues are imaginary, 'there is excellent reason for accepting them as genuine.' First, there are the first-hand accounts of Kandiaronk's oratorical skills and dazzling wit. Father Pierre de Charlevoix described Kandiaronk as so 'naturally eloquent' that 'no one perhaps ever exceeded him in mental capacity.' An exceptional council speaker, 'he was not less brilliant in conversation in private, and [councilmen and negotiators] often took pleasure in provoking him to hear his repartees, always animated, full of wit, and generally unanswerable. He was the only man in Canada who was a match for the [governor] Count de Frontenac, who often invited him to his table to give his officers this pleasure.'³³

During the 1690s, in other words, the Montreal-based governor and his officers (presumably including his sometime deputy, Lahontan) hosted a proto-Enlightenment salon, where they invited Kandiaronk to debate exactly the sort of matters that appeared in the *Dialogues*, and in which it was Kandiaronk who took the position of rational sceptic.

What's more, there is every reason to believe that Kandiaronk actually *had* been to France; that's to say, we know the Wendat Confederation did send an ambassador to visit the court of Louis XIV in 1691, and Kandiaronk's office at the time was Speaker of the Council, which would have made him the logical person to send. While the intimate knowledge of European affairs and understanding of European psychology attributed to Adario might seem implausible, Kandiaronk was a man who had been engaged in political negotiations with Europeans for years, and regularly ran circles around them by anticipating their logic, interests, blind spots and reactions. Finally, many of the critiques of Christianity, and European ways more generally, attributed to Adario correspond almost exactly to criticisms that are documented from other speakers of Iroquoian languages around the same time.³⁴

Lahontan himself claimed to have based the *Dialogues* on notes jotted down during or after a variety of conversations he'd had with Kandiaronk at Michilimackinac, on the strait between Lakes Huron and Michigan; notes that he later reorganized with the governor's help and which were supplemented, no doubt, by reminiscences both had of similar debates held over Frontenac's own dinner table. In the process the text was no doubt augmented and embellished, and probably tweaked again when Lahontan produced his final edition in Amsterdam. There is, however, every reason to believe the basic arguments were Kandiaronk's own.

Lahontan anticipates some of these arguments in his *Memoirs*, when he notes that Americans who had actually been to Europe – here, he was very likely thinking primarily of Kandiaronk himself, as well as a number of former captives who had been put to work as galley slaves – came back contemptuous of European claims to cultural superiority. Those Native Americans who had been in France, he wrote,

... were continually teasing us with the faults and disorders they observed in our towns, as being occasioned by money. There's no point in trying to remonstrate with them about how useful the distinction of property is for the support of society: they make a joke of anything you say on that account. In short, they neither quarrel nor fight, nor slander one another; they scoff at arts and sciences, and laugh at the difference of ranks which is observed with us. They brand us for slaves, and call us miserable souls, whose life is not worth having, alleging that we degrade ourselves in subjecting ourselves to one man [the king] who possesses all the power, and is bound by no law but his own will.

In other words, we find here all the familiar criticisms of European society that the earliest missionaries had to contend with – the squabbling, the lack of mutual aid, the blind submission to authority – but with a new element added in: the organization of private property. Lahontan continues: 'They think it unaccountable that one man should have more than another, and that the rich should have more respect than the poor. In short, they say, the name of savages, which we bestow upon them, would fit ourselves better, since there is nothing in our actions that bears an appearance of wisdom.'

Native Americans who had the opportunity to observe French society from up close had come to realize one key difference from their own, one which may not otherwise have been apparent. Whereas in their own societies there was no obvious way to convert wealth into power over others (with the consequence that differences of wealth had little effect on individual freedom), in France the situation could not have been more different. Power over possessions could be directly translated into power over other human beings.

But here let us give the floor to Kandiaronk himself. The first of the *Dialogues* is about religious matters, in which Lahontan allows his foil calmly to pick apart the logical contradictions and incoherence of the Christian doctrines of original sin and redemption, paying particular attention to the concept of hell. As well as casting doubt on the historicity of scripture, Kandiaronk continually emphasizes the fact that Christians are divided into endless sects, each convinced they are entirely right and that all the others are hell-bound. To give a sense of its flavour:

Kandiaronk: Come on, my brother. Don't get up in arms ... It's only natural for Christians to have faith in the holy scriptures, since, from their infancy,

the Wendat. And yes, for the first thirty years after the banishing of self-interest, no doubt you would indeed see a certain desolation as those who are only qualified to eat, drink, sleep and take pleasure would languish and die. But their progeny would be fit for our way of living. Over and over I have set forth the qualities that we Wendat believe ought to define humanity – wisdom, reason, equity, etc. – and demonstrated that the existence of separate material interests knocks all these on the head. A man motivated by interest cannot be a man of reason.

Here, finally, ‘equality’ is invoked as a self-conscious ideal – but only as the result of a prolonged confrontation between American and European institutions and values, and as a calculated provocation, turning European civilizing discourse backwards on itself.

One reason why modern commentators have found it so easy to dismiss Kandiaronk as the ultimate ‘noble savage’ (and, therefore, as a mere projection of European fantasies) is because many of his assertions are so obviously exaggerated. It’s not really true that the Wendat, or other American societies, had no laws, never quarrelled and knew no inequalities of wealth. At the same time, as we’ve seen, Kandiaronk’s basic line of argument is perfectly consistent with what French missionaries and settlers in North America had been hearing from other indigenous Americans. To argue that because the *Dialogues* romanticize, they can’t really reflect what he said, is to assume that people are incapable of romanticizing themselves – despite the fact that this is what any skilful debater is likely to do under such circumstances, and all sources concur that Kandiaronk was perhaps the most skilful they’d ever met.

Back in the 1930s, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson coined the term ‘schismogenesis’ to describe people’s tendency to define themselves against one another.³⁷ Imagine two people getting into an argument about some minor political disagreement but, after an hour, ending up taking positions so intransigent that they find themselves on completely opposite sides of some ideological divide – even taking extreme positions they would never embrace under ordinary circumstances, just to show how much they completely reject the other’s points. They start out as moderate social democrats of slightly different flavours; before a few heated hours are over, one has somehow become a Leninist, the other an advocate of the ideas of Milton Friedman. We know this kind of thing can happen in arguments. Bateson suggested such processes can become institutionalized on a cultural level as well. How, he asked, do boys and girls in Papua New Guinea come to behave so differently, despite the fact that no one ever explicitly instructs them about how boys and girls are supposed to behave? It’s not just by imitating their elders; it’s also because boys and girls each learn to find the behaviour of the opposite sex distasteful and try to be as little like them as possible. What start as minor learned differences become exaggerated until women come to think of themselves as, and then increasingly actually become, everything that men are not. And, of course, men do the same thing towards women.

Bateson was interested in psychological processes within societies, but there’s every reason to believe something similar happens *between* societies as well. People come to define themselves against their neighbours. Urbanites thus become more urbane, as barbarians become more barbarous. If ‘national character’ can really be said to exist, it can only be as a result of such schismogenetic processes: English

people trying to become as little as possible like French, French people as little like Germans, and so on. If nothing else, they will all definitely exaggerate their differences in arguing with one another.

In a historical confrontation of civilizations like that taking place along the east coast of North America in the seventeenth century, we can expect to see two contradictory processes. On the one hand, it is only to be expected that people on both sides of the divide will learn from one another and adopt each other's ideas, habits and technologies (Americans began using European muskets; European settlers began to adopt more indulgent American approaches to disciplining children). At the same time, they will also almost invariably do the opposite, picking out certain points of contrast and exaggerating or idealizing them – eventually even trying to act, in some respects, as little like their new neighbours as possible.

Kandiaronk's focus on money is typical of such situations. To this day, indigenous societies incorporated into the global economy, from Bolivia to Taiwan, almost invariably frame their own traditions, as Marshall Sahlins puts it, by opposition to the white man's 'living in the way of money'.³⁸

All these would be rather trivial concerns had Lahontan's books not been so successful; but they were to have an enormous impact on European sensibilities. Kandiaronk's opinions were translated into German, English, Dutch and Italian, and continued in print, in multiple editions, for over a century. Any self-respecting intellectual of the eighteenth century would have been almost certain to have read them. They also inspired a flood of imitations. By 1721, Parisian theatregoers were flocking to Delisle de la Drevetière's comedy *L'Arlequin sauvage*: the story of a Wendat brought to France by a young sea captain, featuring a long series of indignant monologues in which the hero 'attributes the ills of [French] society to private property, to money, and in particular to the monstrous inequality which makes the poor the slaves of the rich'.³⁹ The play was revived almost yearly for the next two decades.⁴⁰

Even more strikingly, just about every major French Enlightenment figure tried their hand at a Lahontan-style critique of their own society, from the perspective of some imagined outsider. Montesquieu chose a Persian; the Marquis d'Argens a Chinese; Diderot a Tahitian; Chateaubriand a Natchez; Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* was half Wendat and half French.⁴¹ All took up and developed themes and arguments borrowed directly from Kandiaronk, supplemented by lines from other 'savage critics' in travellers' accounts.⁴² Indeed, a strong case can be made for the real origins of the 'Western gaze' – that rational, supposedly objective way of looking at strange and exotic cultures which came to characterize later European anthropology – lying not in travellers' accounts, but rather in European accounts of precisely these imaginary sceptical natives: gazing inwards, brows furrowed, at the exotic curiosities of Europe itself.

Perhaps the single most popular work of this genre, published in 1747, was *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* by the prominent *saloniste* Madame de Graffigny, which viewed French society through the eyes of an imaginary kidnapped Inca princess. The book is considered a feminist landmark, in that it may well be the first European novel about a woman which does not end with the protagonist either marrying or dying. Graffigny's Inca heroine, Zilia, is as critical of the vanities and absurdities of European society as she is of patriarchy. By the nineteenth century, the novel was remembered in some quarters as the first work to introduce the notion of state

socialism to the general public, Zilia wondering why the French king, despite levying all sorts of heavy taxes, cannot simply redistribute the wealth in the same manner as the Sapa Inca.⁴³

In 1751, preparing a second edition of her book, Madame de Graffigny sent letters to a variety of friends asking for suggested changes. One of these correspondents was a twenty-three-year-old seminary student and budding economist, A. R. J. Turgot, and we happen to have a copy of his reply – which was long and highly (if constructively) critical. Turgot's text could hardly be more important, since it marks a key moment in his own intellectual development: the point where he began to turn his most lasting contribution to human thought – the idea of material economic progress – into a general theory of history.

IN WHICH WE EXPLAIN THE DEMIURGIC POWERS OF A. R. J. TURGOT, AND HOW HE TURNED THE INDIGENOUS CRITIQUE OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION ON ITS HEAD, LAYING THE BASIS FOR MOST MODERN VIEWS OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION (OR: HOW AN ARGUMENT ABOUT 'FREEDOM' BECAME ONE ABOUT 'EQUALITY')

The Inca Empire could hardly be described as 'egalitarian' – indeed, it was an empire – but Madame de Graffigny represented it as a benevolent despotism; one in which all are ultimately equal before the king. Zilia's critique of France, like that of all imaginary outsiders writing in the tradition of Kandiaronk, focuses on the lack of individual freedom in French society and its violent inequalities.⁴⁴ But Turgot found such thinking disturbing, even dangerous.

Yes, Turgot acknowledged, 'we all love the idea of freedom and equality' – in principle. But we must consider a larger context. In reality, he ventured, the freedom and equality of savages is not a sign of their superiority; it's a sign of inferiority, since it is only possible in a society where each household is largely self-sufficient and, therefore, where everyone is equally poor. As societies evolve, Turgot reasoned, technology advances. Natural differences in talents and capacities between individuals (which have always existed) become more significant, and eventually they form the basis for an ever more complex division of labour. We progress from simple societies like those of the Wendat to our own complex 'commercial civilization', in which the poverty and dispossession of some – however lamentable it may be – is nonetheless the necessary condition for the prosperity of society as a whole.

There is no avoiding such inequality, concluded Turgot in his reply to Madame de Graffigny. The only alternative, according to him, would be massive, Inca-style state intervention to create a uniformity of social conditions: an enforced equality which could only have the effect of crushing all initiative and, therefore, result in economic and social catastrophe. In light of all this, Turgot suggested Madame de Graffigny rewrite her novel in such a way as to have Zilia realize these terrible implications at the end of the book.

Unsurprisingly, Graffigny ignored his advice.

A few years later, Turgot would elaborate these same ideas in a series of lectures on world history. He had already been arguing – for some years – for the primacy of technological progress as a driver for overall social improvement. In these lectures, he developed this argument into an explicit theory of stages of economic development: social evolution, he reasoned, always begins with hunters, then moves on to a stage of pastoralism, then farming, and only then finally passes to the

contemporary stage of urban commercial civilization.⁴⁵ Those who still remain hunters, shepherds or simple farmers are best understood as vestiges of our own previous stages of social development.

In this way, theories of social evolution – now so familiar that we rarely dwell on their origins – first came to be articulated in Europe: as a direct response to the power of indigenous critique. Within a few years, Turgot's breakdown of all societies into four stages was appearing in the lectures of his friend and intellectual ally Adam Smith in Glasgow, and was worked into a general theory of human history by Smith's colleagues: men like Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson and John Millar. The new paradigm soon began to have a profound effect on how indigenous people were imagined by European thinkers, and by the European public more generally.

Observers who had previously considered the modes of subsistence and division of labour in North American societies to be trivial matters, or of at best secondary importance, now began assuming that they were the only thing that really mattered. Everyone was to be sorted along the same grand evolutionary ladder, depending on their primary mode of acquiring food. 'Egalitarian' societies were banished to the bottom of this ladder, where at best they could provide some insight on how our distant ancestors might have lived; but certainly could no longer be imagined as equal parties to a dialogue about how the inhabitants of wealthy and powerful societies should conduct themselves in the present.

Let's pause for a moment to take stock. In the years between 1703 and 1751, as we've seen, the indigenous American critique of European society had an enormous impact on European thought. What began as widespread expressions of outrage and distaste by Americans (when first exposed to European mores) eventually evolved, through a thousand conversations, conducted in dozens of languages from Portuguese to Russian, into an argument about the nature of authority, decency, social responsibility and, above all, freedom. As it became clear to French observers that most indigenous Americans saw individual autonomy and freedom of action as consummate values – organizing their own lives in such a way as to minimize any possibility of one human being becoming subordinated to the will of another, and hence viewing French society as essentially one of fractious slaves – they reacted in a variety of different ways.

Some, like the Jesuits, condemned the principle of freedom outright. Others – settlers, intellectuals and members of the reading public back home – came to see it as a provocative and appealing social proposition. (Their conclusions on this matter, incidentally, bore no particular relation to their feelings about indigenous populations themselves, whom they were often happy to see exterminated – though, in fairness, there were public figures on both sides of the intellectual divide who strongly opposed aggression against foreign peoples.) In fact, the indigenous critique of European institutions was seen as so powerful that anyone objecting to existing intellectual and social arrangements would tend to deploy it as a weapon of choice: a game, as we've seen, played by pretty much every one of the great Enlightenment philosophers.

In the process – and we've seen how this was already happening with Lahontan and Kandiaronk – an argument about freedom also became, increasingly, an argument about equality. Above all, though, all these appeals to the wisdom of 'savages' were still ways of challenging the arrogance of received authority: that medieval certainty which maintained that the judgments of the Church and the

establishment it upheld, having embraced the correct version of Christianity, were necessarily superior to those of anyone else on earth.

Turgot's case reveals just how much those particular notions of civilization, evolution and progress – which we've come to think of as the very core of Enlightenment thought – are, in fact, relative latecomers to that critical tradition. Most importantly, it shows how the development of these notions came in direct response to the power of the indigenous critique. Indeed, it was to take an enormous effort to salvage that very sense of European superiority which Enlightenment thinkers had aimed to upend, unsettle and de-centre. Certainly, over the next century and more, such ideas became a remarkably successful strategy for doing so. But they also created a welter of contradictions: for instance, the peculiar fact that European colonial empires, unlike almost any other in history, were forced to espouse their own ephemerality, claiming to be mere temporary vehicles to speed up their subjects' march to civilization – at least those subjects who, unlike the Wendat, they hadn't largely wiped off the map.

At this point we find ourselves back full circle with Rousseau.

HOW JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, HAVING WON ONE PRESTIGIOUS ESSAY
COMPETITION, THEN LOST ANOTHER (COMING IN OVER THE PERMITTED WORD
LENGTH), BUT FINALLY WENT ON TO CONQUER THE WHOLE OF HUMAN
HISTORY

The exchange between Madame de Graffigny and Turgot gives us a sense of intellectual debate in France in the early 1750s; at least, in the *saloniste* circles with which Rousseau was familiar. Were freedom and equality universal values, or were they – at least in their pure form – inconsistent with a regime based on private property? Did the progress of arts and sciences lead to improved understanding of the world, and therefore to moral progress as well? Or was the indigenous critique correct, and the wealth and power of France simply a perverse side effect of unnatural, even pathological, social arrangements? These were the questions on every debater's lips at the time.

If we know anything about those debates today, it's largely because of their influence on Rousseau's essay. The *Discourse on the Origins of Social Inequality* has been taught, debated and picked apart in a thousand classrooms – which is odd, because in many ways it is very much an eccentric outlier, even by the standards of its time.

In the early part of his life, Rousseau was known mainly as an aspiring composer. His rise to prominence as a social thinker began in 1750, when he took part in a contest sponsored by the same learned society, the Académie de Dijon, on the question, 'Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to moral improvement?'⁴⁶ Rousseau won first prize, and national fame, with an essay in which he argued with great passion that they had not. Our elementary moral intuitions, he asserted, are fundamentally decent and sound; civilization merely corrupts by encouraging us to value form over content. Almost all the examples in this *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* are taken from classical Greek and Roman sources – but in his footnotes, Rousseau hints at other sources of inspiration:

I don't dare speak of those happy nations who do not know even the names of the vices which we have such trouble controlling, of those American savages whose simple and natural ways of keeping public order Montaigne does not hesitate to prefer, not merely to the laws of Plato, but even to anything more

way dependent on other human beings (except those under one's direct control). Rousseau, who always insisted he wished to live without being dependent on others' help (even as he had all his needs attended to by mistresses and servants), played out this very same logic in the conduct of his own life.⁵²

When our ancestors, Rousseau wrote, made the fatal decision to divide the earth into individually owned plots, creating legal structures to protect their property, then governments to enforce those laws, they imagined they were creating the means to preserve their liberty. In fact, they 'ran headlong to their chains'. This is a powerful image, but it is unclear what Rousseau felt this lost liberty would actually have looked like; especially if, as he insisted, any ongoing human relationship, even one of mutual aid, is itself a restraint on liberty. It's hardly surprising that he ends up inventing a purely imaginary age in which each individual wandered alone among the trees; more surprising, perhaps, that his imaginary world has come so often to define the arc of our own horizons. How did this happen?

IN WHICH WE CONSIDER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE INDIGENOUS CRITIQUE, THE MYTH OF PROGRESS AND THE BIRTH OF THE LEFT

As we've mentioned before, in the wake of the French Revolution conservative critics blamed Rousseau for almost everything. Many held him personally responsible for the guillotine. The dream of restoring the ancient state of liberty and equality, they argued, led to exactly the effects Turgot had predicted: an Inca-style totalitarianism that could only be enforced through revolutionary terror.

It is true that political radicals at the time of the American and French Revolutions embraced Rousseau's ideas. Here, for example, is an extract purportedly from a manifesto written in 1776 which almost perfectly reproduces Rousseau's fusion of evolutionism and critique of private property as leading directly to the origins of the state:

As families multiplied, the means of subsistence began to fail; the *nomad* (or roaming) life ceased, and PROPERTY started into existence; men chose habitations; agriculture made them intermix. Language became universal; living together, one man began to measure his strength with another, and the weaker were distinguished from the stronger. This undoubtedly created the idea of mutual defence, of one individual governing diverse families reunited, and of thus defending their persons and their fields against the invasion of an enemy; but hence LIBERTY was ruined in its foundation, and EQUALITY disappeared.⁵³

These words are drawn from the purported manifesto of the Secret Order of the Illuminati, a network of revolutionary cadres organized within the Freemasons by a Bavarian law professor named Adam Weishaupt. The organization did exist in the late eighteenth century; its purpose was apparently to educate an enlightened international, or even anti-national, elite to work for the restoration of freedom and equality.

Conservatives almost immediately denounced the Order, leading to it being banned in 1785, less than ten years after its foundation, but right-wing conspiracists insisted it continued to exist, and that the Illuminati were the hidden hands pulling the strings behind the French Revolution (or later even the Russian). This is silly, but one reason the fantasy was possible is that the Illuminati were perhaps the first

to propose that a revolutionary vanguard, trained in the correct interpretation of doctrine, would be able to understand the overall direction of human history – and, therefore, be capable of intervening to speed up its progress.⁵⁴

It may seem ironic that Rousseau, who began his career by taking what we would now consider an arch-conservative position – that seeming progress leads only to moral decay – would end up becoming the supreme *bête noire* of so many conservatives.⁵⁵ But a special vitriol is always reserved for traitors.

Many conservative thinkers see Rousseau as having gone full circle from a promising start to creating what we now think of as the political left. Nor are they entirely wrong in this. Rousseau was indeed a crucial figure in the formation of left-wing thought. One reason intellectual debates of the mid eighteenth century seem so strange to us nowadays is precisely that what we understand as left/right divisions had not yet crystallized. At the time of the American Revolution, the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ themselves did not yet exist. A product of the decade immediately following, they originally referred to the respective seating positions of aristocratic and popular factions in the French National Assembly of 1789.

Let us emphasize (we really shouldn’t have to) that Rousseau’s effusions on the fundamental decency of human nature and lost ages of freedom and equality were in no sense themselves responsible for the French Revolution. It’s not as if he somehow caused the *sans culottes* to rise up by putting such ideas into their heads (as we’ve noted, for most of European history intellectuals seem to have been the only class of people who *weren’t* capable of imagining that other worlds might be brought into being). But we can argue that, in folding together the indigenous critique and the doctrine of progress originally developed to counter it, Rousseau did in fact write the founding document of the left as an intellectual project.

For the same reason, right-wing thought has from the beginning been suspicious not just about ideas of progress, but also the entire tradition that emerged from the indigenous critique. Today, we assume that it is largely those on the political left who speak about the ‘myth of the noble savage’, and that any early European account that idealizes faraway people, or even attributes to them cogent opinions, is really just a romantic projection of European fantasies on to people the authors could never genuinely understand. The racist denigration of the savage, and naive celebration of savage innocence, are always treated as two sides of the same imperialist coin.⁵⁶ Yet originally this was an explicitly right-wing position, as explained by Ter Ellingson, the contemporary anthropologist who has reviewed the subject most comprehensively. Ellingson concluded there never was a ‘noble savage’ myth; at least not in the sense of a stereotype of simple societies living in an age of happy primordial innocence. Rather, travellers’ accounts tend to supply a much more ambivalent picture, describing alien societies as a complicated, sometimes (to them) incoherent, mix of virtues and vices. What needs to be investigated, instead, might better be called the ‘myth of the myth of the noble savage’: why is it that certain Europeans began attributing such a naive position to others? The answer isn’t pretty. The phrase ‘noble savage’ was in fact popularized a century or so after Rousseau, as a term of ridicule and abuse. It was deployed by a clique of outright racists, who in 1859 – as the British Empire reached its height of power – took over the British Ethnological Society and called for the extermination of inferior peoples.

The original exponents of the idea blamed Rousseau, but before long students of literary history were scouring the archives looking for traces of the ‘noble savage’ everywhere. Almost all the texts discussed in this chapter came under scrutiny; all

were dismissed as dangerous, romantic fantasies. At first, however, these dismissals came from the political right. Ellingson makes a particular example of Gilbert Chinard, whose 1913 volume *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (*America and the Exotic Dream in French Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*) was primarily responsible for establishing the notion of the 'noble savage' as a Western literary trope in American universities, since he was perhaps the least shy about his political agenda.

Citing Lahontan as the key figure in the formation of this notion, Chinard argued that Rousseau borrowed specific arguments either from Lahontan's *Memoirs* or his *Dialogues* with Kandiaronk. In a broader sense, he detects an affinity of temperament:

It is Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], more than any other author, that the author of the *Dialogues with a Savage* resembles. With all his faults, his fundamentally ignoble motives, he has put into his style a passion, an enthusiasm which has no equivalent except in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Like Rousseau, he is an anarchist; like him, he is bereft of moral sensibility, and to a considerably greater degree; like him, he imagines himself to be the prey of persecutions of the human race leagued against himself; like him, he is indignant about the sufferings of the miserable and, even more than him, he throws out the call to arms; and like him, above all, he attributes to property all the evils that we suffer. In this, he permits us to establish a direct connection between the Jesuit missionaries and Jean-Jacques.⁵⁷

According to Chinard, even the Jesuits (Lahontan's ostensible enemies) were ultimately playing the same game of introducing deeply subversive notions through the back door. Their motives in quoting the exasperated observations of their interlocutors were not innocent. Commenting directly on the above passage, Ellingson quite reasonably asks what on earth Chinard is actually talking about here: some kind of anarchist movement perpetrated by Lahontan, the Jesuits and Rousseau? A conspiracy theory to explain the French Revolution? Yes, concludes Ellingson, it almost is. The Jesuits, according to Chinard, have promoted 'dangerous ideas' in giving us the impression of the good qualities of 'savages', and 'this impression seems to have been contrary to the interests of the monarchical state and religion.' In fact, Chinard's fundamental characterization of Rousseau is as 'un continuateur des missionnaires Jésuites', and he holds the missionaries responsible for giving rise to 'the revolutionary spirits [who] would transform our society and, inflamed by reading their relations, bring us back to the state of the American savages'.⁵⁸

For Chinard, whether or not European observers were reporting the views of their indigenous interlocutors accurately is irrelevant. For indigenous Americans were, as Chinard puts it, 'a race different from our own' with whom no meaningful relation was possible: one might as well, he implies, record the political opinions of a leprechaun.⁵⁹ What really matters, he emphasizes, are the motives of the white people involved – and these people were clearly malcontents and troublemakers. He accuses one early observer on the customs of the Greenland Inuit of inserting a mix of socialism and 'illuminism' into his descriptions – that is, viewing savage customs through a lens that might as well have been borrowed from the Secret Order of the Illuminati.⁶⁰

BEYOND THE 'MYTH OF THE STUPID SAVAGE' (WHY ALL THESE THINGS MATTER
SO MUCH FOR OUR PROJECT IN THIS BOOK)

This is not the place to document how a right-wing critique morphed into a left-wing critique. To some degree, one can probably just put it down to the laziness of scholars schooled in the history of French or English literature, faced with the prospect of having to seriously engage with what a seventeenth-century Mi'kmaq might have actually been thinking. To say Mi'kmaq thought is unimportant would be racist; to say it's unknowable because the sources were racist, however, does rather let one off the hook.

To some degree, too, such reluctance to engage with indigenous sources is based on completely legitimate protests on the part of those who have, historically, been romanticized. Many have remarked that, to those on the receiving end, being told you are an inferior breed and that therefore anything you say can be ignored, and being told you are an innocent child of nature or the embodiment of ancient wisdom, and that therefore everything you say must be treated as ineffably profound are almost equally annoying. Both attitudes appear designed to prevent any meaningful conversation.

As we noted in our first chapter, when we set out to write this book we imagined ourselves making a contribution to the burgeoning literature on the origins of social inequality – except this time, one based on the actual evidence. As our research proceeded, we came to realize just how strange a question 'what are the origins of social inequality?' really was. Quite apart from the implications of primordial innocence, this way of framing the problem suggests a certain diagnosis of what is wrong with society, and what can and can't be done about it; and as we've seen, it often has very little to do with what people living in those societies we've come to call 'egalitarian' actually feel makes them different from others.

Rousseau sidestepped the question by reducing his savages to mere thought experiments. He was just about the only major figure of the French Enlightenment who *didn't* write a dialogue or other imaginative work attempting to look at European society from a foreign point of view. In fact, he strips his 'savages' of any imaginative powers of their own; their happiness is entirely derived from their inability to imagine things otherwise, or to project themselves into the future in any way at all.⁶¹ They are thus also utterly lacking in philosophy. This is presumably why no one could foresee the disasters that would ensue when they first staked out property and began to form governments to protect it; by the time human beings were even capable of thinking that far ahead, the worst damage had already been done.

Back in the 1960s, the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres suggested that precisely the opposite was the case. What if the sort of people we like to imagine as simple and innocent are free of rulers, governments, bureaucracies, ruling classes and the like, not because they are lacking in imagination, but because they're actually *more* imaginative than we are? We find it difficult to picture what a truly free society would be like; perhaps they have no similar trouble picturing what arbitrary power and domination would be like. Perhaps they can not only imagine it, but consciously arrange their society in such a way as to avoid it. As we'll see in the next chapter, Clastres's argument has its limits. But by insisting that the people studied by anthropologists are just as self-conscious, just as imaginative, as the anthropologists themselves, he did more to reverse the damage than anyone before or since.