David Wengrow

KAIROS

> ‘It was not only that he knew many myths … he did not touch them, did not interpret them, he did not order them according to scholarly principles, he left them alone. They never became a means to an end for him. For him too, they were the greatest and most precious things that humanity had produced. We could talk together about myths for days on end… The trust between us was grounded in our respect for myths.’ (Elias Canetti, on his friendship with Franz Steiner)

27th January, 2021

For dearest Erhard,

On the occasion of your 60th birthday, I could offer reminiscences of days long ago in North Oxford, and hours spent in conversation. Not sure how we discovered one another back then, perhaps at an ISCA seminar, or over drinks in the Gardener’s Arms, but as you know it is a very rare thing to meet intellectuals in a university. Somewhere in the middle, we stopped talking for a few years – I had a long essay of yours in German printed out to read, about Mauss and the logic of Pacific exchange systems – which took me some time to get around to, and then we were off again, but now as much in friendship as in academic play.

I was always glad for that time, again years ago (as you probably notice by now, I have no head for short-term chronologies – or birthdays – although I do quite well with millennial phases of the Neolithic, and such like), that you spoke briefly to my Viennese grandmother on the phone, and subsequently for the opportunity to meet

your wonderful sons. As you know, I have a strange longing for a central European heritage that I know very little about, and our friendship always filled part of that gap for me. Our conversations about anthropology and history were always blessed with serendipity: somehow, miles apart and sporadically in touch, our minds were following complementary pathways.

Then came the testing days of "Oedipus and Job," of which no more need be said here.

A more recent memory, now poignant: your visit to London, and our evening with the late David Graeber in The Clissold Arms, a pub on my doorstep in Muswell Hill, famous for its association with The Kinks, but frankly not much of a place these days. I remember it as a slightly awkward occasion – your rhythms clashed, you and Graeber; too much to say, and (more than we realised back then), not enough time. Which brings me on to my offering – a true piece of arcane knowledge; the alternative ending to The Dawn of Everything, for your eyes alone (and those on this forum, who I am now trusting). We wrote a number of drafts, you see, and rejected most of them. Here is one that will probably never see the light of day, and is no doubt full of errors, which you will be keen to point out . . . with affection and admiration, your friend, David Wengrow.

*

'We began this book with a quote, which refers to the Greek notion of kairos as one of those occasional moments in a society's history when its frames of reference undergo a shift – a metamorphosis of the fundamental principles and symbols, when the lines between myth and history, science and magic become blurred – and, therefore, real change is possible. Philosophers sometimes like to speak of "the Event"—a political revolution, a scientific discovery, an artistic masterpiece—that is, a breakthrough which reveals aspects of reality that had previously been unimaginable, but once seen, can never be unseen. If so, kairos is the kind of time in

which Events are prone to happen.

Societies around the world appear to be cascading towards such a point. This is particularly true of those which, since World War I, have been in the habit of calling themselves "Western." On the one hand, fundamental breakthroughs in the physical sciences, or even artistic expression, no longer seem to occur with anything like the regularity people had come to expect in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet at the same time, our scientific means of understanding the past, not just our species' past, but that of our planet, has been advancing with dizzying speed. Scientists in 2020 are not (as readers of mid-twentieth century science fiction might have hoped) encountering alien civilisations in distant star systems; but they are encountering radically different forms of society under their own feet, some forgotten and newly rediscovered, others more familiar, but now understood in entirely new ways.

In developing the scientific means to know our own past, we have exposed the mythical sub-structure of our "social science" – what once appeared unassailable axioms, the stable points around which our self-knowledge is organised, are scattering like mice. What is the purpose of all this new knowledge, if not to reshape our conceptions of who we are, and what we might yet become? If not, in other words, to rediscover the meaning of our third basic freedom: the freedom to create new and different forms of social reality.

Myth in itself is not the problem here. It shouldn't be mistaken for bad or infantile science. Just as all societies have their science, all societies have their myths. Myth is the way that human societies give structure and meaning to experience. But the larger mythic structures of history we've been deploying for the last several centuries simply don't work anymore; they are impossible to reconcile with the evidence now before our eyes, and the structures and meanings they encourage are tawdry, shop-worn, and politically disastrous.

No doubt, for a while at least, very little will change. Whole fields of knowledge – not to mention university chairs and departments, scientific journals, prestigious research grants, libraries, databases, school curricula, and the like – have been organised around the old structures, and the old questions. Max Planck once remarked that new scientific truths don't replace old ones by convincing established scientists they were wrong; they do so because proponents of the older theory eventually die, and generations that follow find the new truths and theories to be familiar, obvious even. We are optimists. We like to think it will not take that long.

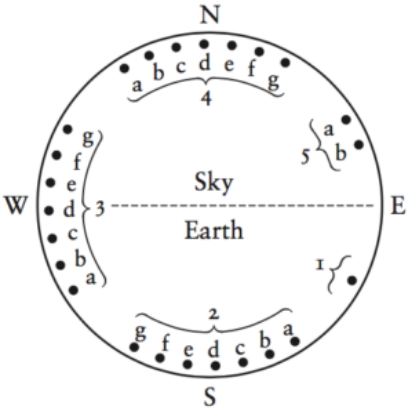
In fact, we have already taken a first step. We can see more clearly now what is going on when, for example, a study that is rigorous in every other respect begins from the unexamined assumption that there was some "original" form of human society; that its nature was fundamentally good or evil; that a time before inequality and political awareness existed; that something happened to change all this; that "civilisation" and "complexity" always come at the price of human freedoms; that participatory democracy is natural in small groups but cannot possibly 'scale up' to anything like a city or a nation-state.

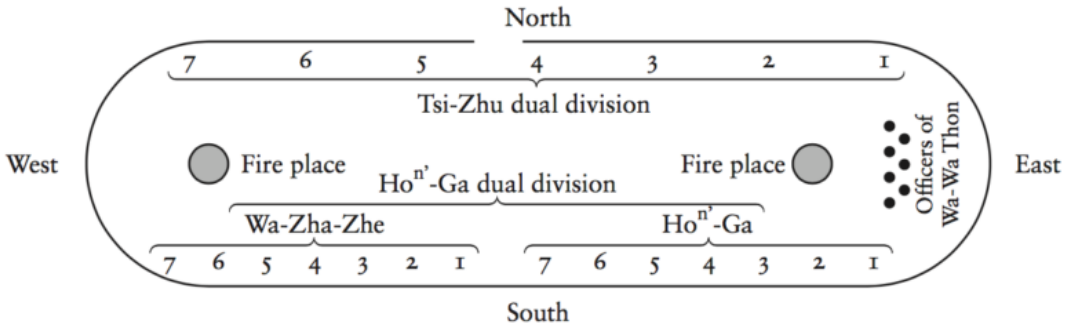
We know, now, that we are in the presence of myths.'

And now for something completely different . . an image from 'The Dawn of Everything,' which is an Osage puzzle for our sage friend Erhard to figure out = how to fit 7 into 5? A cryptic clue lies in "the Flesh."

David Wengrow

arrangement of different clans (1-5)
in an Osage village





how representatives of the same clans arranged
themselves inside a lodge for a major ritual