A New History of Humanity

HUMA 5702

3 credits

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Class Schedule: L1 Thursday 12:00PM – 01:50PM (Room 3494)

Tutorial Schedule: T1: Thursday 02:00PM – 02:50PM (Room 3494)

Office Hours: Wednesday 2PM – 4PMpm (Room 2354). By appointment.

Course Description

This course takes on the broad sweep of human history from an anthropological perspective, shedding light on the vast cultural, social, and political diversity of human experience. Popular accounts of global history depict human society evolving stepwise in a unilinear fashion: egalitarian hunter-gatherers gave way to hierarchical agricultural societies, followed by the rise of cities and, eventually, the formation of states. New archaeological and anthropological discoveries are now challenging this picture: the trajectory of human history, it turns out, has been far more diverse and unpredictable than previously imagined. The course delves into anthropological phenomena that showcase this diversity, such as hunter-gatherers' seasonality, "play agriculture" in Amazonia, egalitarian cities, urban revolutions in Mesoamerica, and stranger-kings across the Pacific. Analyzed through modern anthropological theory, these case studies reveal the deep role that the collective imagination has played in shaping our history. These findings do not only illuminate the past but also offers insights into the possibilities for humanity's future.

The primary course textbook is *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) by David Graeber and David Wengrow. Each tutorial will focus on discussing one chapter of this book.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of the latest anthropological debates surrounding the grand narratives of global history.
2. Acquire knowledge of the variability of human social organization across the world and through time, and about the major historical shifts and transitions
3. Acquire comprehensive knowledge of recent archaeological discoveries that have contributed to revising the grand narratives of human history.
4. Employ specific anthropological case studies to construct theoretical arguments on themes related to global history and philosophy of history.
5. Develop critical thinking skills, particularly in relation to the debate between historical determinism and human agency.

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation. More detailed instructions on each assessment will be given on Canvas.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Attendance	5%	N/A
Participation	15%	N/A
Weekly quiz	15%	Weekly (starting from week 2)
Presentation	15%	Individual deadline
Final exam	50%	University's exam period (date TBC)

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Participation	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	Participation in class allows students to engage with anthropological debates and archaeological discoveries that challenge traditional narratives of global history (ILOs 1–3). They are encouraged to connect specific case studies to broader discussion on human history (ILO 4). Doing so involves applying theoretical arguments and critical thinking skills, particularly around the tension between historical determinism and human agency (ILO 5).
Weekly quiz	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3	A quiz consisting of 8–10 fairly simple multiple-choice questions based on the chapter of *The Dawn of Everything* assigned for the week. It requires acquiring knowledge of anthropological and archeological debates and findings (ILOs 1–3) related to that chapter.

		The quiz will be given at the start of class.
Individual presentation	ILO4, ILO5	This task requires students to select one historical/anthropological case study from the provided reading list (given in week 1) or of their own choosing, present it in class, and discuss its significance in relation to the week's topic and the corresponding chapter of *The Dawn of Everything* (ILO4, 5).
Final exam	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	The exam will include a set of multiple-choice questions to assess general knowledge of the course topics and one open-ended question that students can choose from a list to evaluate their argumentative skills. The multiple-choice questions will test students' knowledge of the major shifts and transitions in global history (ILO2), recent archaeological discoveries related to these shifts (ILO3), and the anthropological debates surrounding them (ILO1), which will be explored in the lectures and in *The Dawn of Everything.* The open-ended question will test students' ability to use ethnographic case studies of their own choice to construct arguments that address, among other things, the debate on agency and determinism in human history (ILO4, ILO5).

Grading rubric for class participation

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A 90-100	Excellent	Consistently contributes to discussions with insightful comments and questions; encourages participation from others and fosters a collaborative environment. Demonstrates

		thorough preparation, presenting well-argued perspectives on the readings.
B 80-89	Good	Regularly participates in discussions with relevant comments, showing a good understanding of the course material. Listens to peers and responds appropriately.
C 70-79	Satisfactory	Participates in discussions but may need prompting. Demonstrates basic understanding of the readings. Listens to others but contributes minimally.
D 50-69	Marginal Pass	Rarely participates in class discussion. Shows little preparation or understanding of the material.
F 0 - 49	Fail	Barely if ever participates in class discussion. Shows very little to no preparation or understanding of the material.

Grading rubric for individual presentation

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A 90-100	Excellent	A thorough analysis with deep insight into the chosen topic. Strong organization and argumentation. Demonstrate creative thinking and independent research, and strong ability to draw connections between ethnographic case studies and anthropological theories.
B 80-89	Good	Shows a solid grasp of the topic, with good analysis and some integration of relevant theories. Research is well-executed, using a variety of sources. The presentation is organized with clear arguments. Exposition is mostly coherent, with few errors
C 70-89	Satisfactory	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the topic, with limited analysis and minimal integration of theories, touching on some cultural aspects. Research is adequate but may rely on limited sources. The presentation has some organization, but arguments may be unclear.
D 50-69	Marginal Pass	Shows little understanding of the topic, with inadequate analysis. Research is insufficient, with limited use of sources. The presentation lacks organization, and arguments are unclear. Exposition is incoherent, with many errors.
F 0-49	Fail	Confusing presentation with no understanding of the topic and little to no research into it.

NOTE: While this counts as a general grading rubric, please refer to the more specific instructions on the individual presentation that will be uploaded on Canvas in the first week of the course.

Grade rubric for final exam

The final exam consists of two sections: **Multiple-Choice Questions** and one **Open-Ended Question**. The final mark is calculated as the sum of the two section marks, weighted at 30% and 70% respectively. The grading rubrics below outline how marks are assigned for each section.

Multiple-Choice Questions (30%)

Grade	Short Description	Percentage of correct answers
A 90-100	Excellent	90-100 %

B 80 – 89	Good	80 – 89%
C 70 - 79	Satisfactory	70 - 79%
D 50 – 69	Marginal Pass	50 – 69%
F 0 – 49	Fail	0 – 49%

Open-Ended Question (70%)

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A 90-100	Excellent	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the topic in question, with insightful and original analysis, and integration of relevant theories. Original answers that show strong research skills and the effective use of a wide range of sources that go beyond the syllabus and the lectures. The answers are persuasively argued, coherent and well-organized.
B 80-89	Good	Shows a solid grasp of the topic. The answers are well-executed, using a variety of sources. They are organized and with clear arguments. Writing is mostly coherent, with few errors.
C 70-79	Satisfactory	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the topic, with limited analysis and minimal integration of theories. The answers are adequate but may rely on fewer sources in support of the arguments therein. There is some organization, but arguments may be unclear.
D 50-69	Marginal Pass	Shows little understanding of the topic, with inadequate analysis and poor integration of theories. Limited use of sources. The answers lack organization, and arguments are unclear. Writing is incoherent, with many errors
F 0-49	Fail	Demonstrates no meaningful understanding of the topic. Lacks analysis, coherence, and use of relevant theories. Answers are disorganized and with unsupported arguments. Writing is barely readable, failing to meet basic academic standards.

NOTE: While this counts as a general grading rubric, please refer to the more specific instructions on the final exam that will be uploaded on Canvas after week 7.

Course AI Policy

The use of AI is strongly discouraged because the assignments require students to draw connections across specific case-studies and theories, and to demonstrate independent thinking. Simply put, the more an essay relies on AI, the less original and creative it will be. Using AI to fix grammar and syntax in preparation for the presentation or the final exam is fine. However, expressing thoughts in

your own way, rather than relying on run-of-the-mill AI generated text, will make writing more interesting.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks and feedback for individual presentations will be provided via Canvas after week 13. Marks and feedback for the exam will be released 2 weeks after the exam date. Students with further questions about the feedback or marks should consult the instructor within five working days of receiving the feedback. Feedback will highlight factual inaccuracies, weaknesses in argumentation, areas for improvement, and suggestions for expanding on the ideas presented.

Required Texts and Materials

Throughout the course, students are required to read the entirety of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) by David Graeber and David Wengrow, which is freely available on Canvas. One chapter of the book will be discussed during each tutorial. Both this book and the secondary readings listed for each week—useful for preparing the presentation and the final exam—are accessible on Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Course outline and primary readings

Week 1

Introduction: the power of origin myths

Origin myths across the world are not merely stories about the past; they also serve as frameworks for shaping a society's present and imagining its future. In this introductory week, the course examines the main origin story that has shaped the modern era—one rooted in the concepts of 'progress' and 'social evolution'. This narrative proposes that society evolved in a linear trajectory, beginning with small bands of hunter-gatherers, transitioning to more complex and hierarchical agricultural societies, and eventually culminating with the rise of cities and states. Embedded within this story are ideas of inevitability and historical determinism—concepts that have recently been challenged in anthropological theory. The course will explore the implications of this debate and lay the foundation for the key themes that will guide us throughout.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 1)

Week 2

The worlds of hunter-gatherers (1)

For about 98% of its history, humanity lived by hunting and gathering. This week, the course will take a broad look at hunter-gatherer studies, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. It asks whether hunter-gatherer societies that have been studied by anthropologists in the 20th century are truly representative of the distant past or whether they have been shaped by more recent socio-political changes. It also explores issues of exchange and egalitarianism, classic topics in the field.

Required Reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 2)

Week 3

The worlds of hunter-gatherers (2)

Digging deeper into the past, the course examines recent archaeological findings on hunter-gatherer societies, focusing on North America, Paleolithic Africa and Mesopotamia, which showcase a dramatic diversity of hunter-gatherers' worlds. Questioning earlier portrayals of foragers living in 'tiny egalitarian bands', it looks at examples of hierarchical societies, seasonal variation in political organization, and at large social networks of hunter-gatherers that could span continents.

Required Reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 3)

Week 4

Sex and gender

The distant past has often served as a vast canvas for projecting the collective fantasies of the present. Few topics are more prone to such projections than ideas about gender relations in so-called "primitive" societies. Was primitive society matriarchal and governed by women, as Friedrich Engels suggested? Or was it characterized by violence and patriarchal rule, as some evolutionary psychologists propose? Can contemporary understandings of the categories of 'man' and 'woman' even be applied beyond our own cultural sphere and into the deep past? This lecture examines the available evidence to shed light on these questions, striving, as much as possible, to tease apart myth from reality.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 4)

Week 5

Cultural differentiation

This week examines how societies come to define themselves in contrast to one another, a process that intensified during the Mesolithic. Bringing this theme into more recent times, the lecture focuses on notable examples of cultural differentiation, such as the contrasts between Sparta and Athens, or between the Kwakiutl of the Northwestern coast of America and the Yurok of California. It will also consider the history of the Akha highlanders of Southeast Asia (where I conducted ethnographic research), whose culture of egalitarianism, animism, and orality can only be understood in opposition to the hierarchical societies of the lowlands. The lecture assesses Marcel Mauss's idea that "societies live by borrowing from each other but define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance."

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 5)

Week 6

The agricultural revolution?

Did the beginning of agriculture mark a profound shift in human social organization, leading to inevitable hierarchy and militarization? Many assume so. But this narrative, primarily derived from the study of ancient Mesopotamia, has recently been challenged by archaeological discoveries that reveal that the transition to agriculture was not a one-size-fits-all process. As a point of contrast, the lecture examines 'play farming' in Amazonia, where societies transitioned in and out of agriculture without ecological factors being a major determinant of social organization. It aims to reassess the influence that 'modes of production' have on social dynamics and to consider their effects on the spectrum between egalitarianism and hierarchy.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 6)

Week 7

Extended case study - Aboriginal Australia

The discussion of the role of agriculture in history has been particularly lively in Australia, where the discovery of ancient systems of irrigation has sparked new debate over the timeline of the social transformation of indigenous Aboriginal societies and newfound appreciation for their complex social organization. The lecture will consider several aspects of the so-called 'Dark Emu debate', the evidence it draws upon, and what is at stake in it.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 7)

Week 8

The first cities

Starting from the Neolithic 'mega-sites' of Ukraine and the pre-Aztec metropolis of Teotihuacan in Mexico, the lecture looks at how the discovery of egalitarian cities is overthrowing the equation of early cities with kings and warrior elites. It will also look at theories on the origins of cities and consider the hypothesis that cities emerged as the contraction, in a single physical space, of already existing imagined communities.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 8)

Week 9

Collapse

From Easter Island to the fall of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, this week of the course examines the main contemporary theories that account for societies' downfalls. It explores the patterns and repercussions of collapse, focusing on the ecological determinants invoked in each case. However, it also considers instances of collapse—such as Cahokia, Teotihuacan, and Taosi—that appear to have been driven less by ecological conditions and more by collective choice and social transformation.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 9)

Week 10

Kings and the rise of states

This week explores what kingship is, both anthropologically and historically. Kings represent more than just sovereignty; their study provides a unique lens through which to examine fundamental dilemmas concerning the nature of power, meaning, and the human condition. The lecture considers how the authoritarian elements of kingship are preserved in the formation of states. From ancient Egypt to the Aztec and Inka, we see that the 'state' represents an amalgamation of elements of domination and violence that exhibit significant cross-cultural variability. This week's lesson provides a glimpse into the diversity of authoritarian structures throughout history.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 10, pp.359-399)

Week 11

The metamorphoses of violence

Continuing a major theme of the previous lecture, we take a large-picture approach on how violence has manifested throughout history and its role in establishing structures of domination. We begin with the classic Yanomami controversy in anthropology, which ignited debate on whether human aggression is innate or learned. From there, we consider different forms of violence and their historical context, such as genocide and the evolving nature of warfare. The lecture will also reflect on the concept of 'structural violence' and the role it has played in the development of the state, colonialism, and capitalism.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 1, pp. 11-20; Chapter 10, pp. 400-440)

Week 12

Exchange and the rise of capitalism

While it is tempting to project modern capitalist logic onto deep history, anthropologists have long recognized that the creation and distribution of goods in the past could follow fundamentally different patterns. Some societies were organized around what anthropologists call 'gift economies.' This week, the lecture examines the most famous documented case—the Kula exchange of the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea, studied by Malinowski—and explore what it reveals about the role of reciprocity in global economic history. Taking a long-term perspective, it then traces the major shifts that transformed gift economies into market-based systems and global capitalism, reflecting on what might have been lost and gained in the process.

Required readings: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 11)

Week 13

Conclusion: are we stuck?

This final lecture looks at the impact of the Columbian Exchange after 1492 and its implications for the rest of the world. It will reflect on how, as global powers expanded, the diversity of

sociopolitical forms and the scope for social experimentation—central topics of this course—began to shrink. Since being human, in many ways, involves the ongoing capacity to consciously experiment with different social arrangements, we are left to ask: are we now stuck? If so, in what ways? The lecture will examine major attempts to address this question before concluding with a review of the key themes covered throughout the course.

Required reading: Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. (Chapter 12)