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## First as Adornment, Then as Money: Neo-Rousseauian Theater of Exchange in *The Dawn of Everything*

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### *Summary*

To what extent do contemporary critical theories of money operate under the shadow of Rousseau's sentimentalist horizon of natural equality corrupted by the advent of civilization? This article outlines a Derridean reading of Graeber's and Wengrow's recent anthropological study of prehistoric social formations in an effort to demonstrate the unacknowledged influence which Rousseau's disdain for theatricality holds over many present-day assumptions about the social logic of money. In an attempt to repudiate the orthodox theory of money as a medium of exchange, these anthropologists equate the origin of money with a predilection for adornments and self-display. As soon as money becomes a problem of representation, however, the critical discourse immediately shifts towards an anti-theatrical lamentation for lost authenticity which necessarily rehearses the circular logic of Rousseau's thought. Money ultimately becomes indistinguishable from sociality as such.

**Keywords:** Theories of Money, Theatricality, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Graeber, Metaphysics of Presence, State of Nature

*For the most part, money consists of things that otherwise exist only to be seen.*

David Graeber (1996, p. 4)

*It would remain necessary, however, to show how an economy, stricto sensu, the question of money, production, exchange, etc., always invades anti-mimetic discourse and retraces the fragile boundary, within the "economimetic" system, between gain and loss or failure.*

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1989, p. 125)

## Introduction

In a recent comprehensive anthropological study entitled *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* David Graeber and David Wengrow challenge what they claim to be the widely accepted origin story of the emergence of inequality in human history. Surveying a large body of archeological findings from the prehistoric era extending from the Upper Paleolithic Period to the Bronze Age, these authors set out to disrupt what they identify as a predominant meta-narrative sustaining our most fundamental beliefs about the logic of human historical development – namely, that people lived in a state of primordial innocence before the advent of the “Agricultural Revolution” which gave them more sophisticated means of mastering nature, but at the expense of more equitable social relations; essentially a Christian myth of the original sin, but cloaked in the modern philosophy of the origin of inequality, a philosophy most powerfully proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Mankind*.

Graeber and Wengrow argue that our contemporary understanding of human prehistory rests on this Rousseauian fairy tale of linear degeneration from the natural state, rather than on available anthropological evidence. Against this romanticist hermeneutics – one which equates simplicity with equality on the one hand and complexity with disparity on the other – these researchers plumb existing archeological findings in order to propose an alternative storyline about the emergence of rigid power hierarchies in human societies. They argue that prehistoric social orders were predominantly egalitarian even long after the emergence of complex production techniques, with tendencies towards unequal power relations being consistently contained to the sphere of “grand seasonal theatre” (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 115). These “carnival parades” (*ibid.*, 4) were not in any way dependent on production relations, but were merely “bold social experiments” (*ibid.*) in which early civilizations engaged in a performance of a multitude of possible social relations with marks of social distinction serving as reversible theatrical props rather than binding demonstrations of an enduring superiority. In this sense, for the most part of human prehistory, complexification of production techniques followed an autonomous trajectory, entirely independent of the processes of social stratification. Rather than appearing as a necessary consequence of more advanced modes of production – the orthodox thesis that “inequality is the inevitable result of living in any large, complex, urban, technologically sophisticated society” (*ibid.*, p. 7) – social difference is, for these anthropologists, of an entirely different origin than production: its first trappings emerge within the confines of theater.

Quite apart from the predominant historical pathway paved by the hunters, gatherers and agriculturalists, power for Graeber and Wengrow appears under the distinctive mark of the histrionic: its primeval insignia can be found in burial sites

rich with regalia made of exotic materials such as the teeth of young stags hunted far away from the place of entombment and elaborately decorated scepters and crowns: “a flint sceptre, elk antler batons and an ornate headdress lovingly fashioned from perforated shells and deer teeth” (*ibid.*, p. 88). They point to the hunter-gatherer burial sites dating back between 34,000 to 26,000 years where we find the first instances of “lavish costumes” and “saturation of bodies with ornaments” (*ibid.*). These bodies<sup>1</sup> “were laid out in striking poses and suffused with jewellery, including beads made of marine shell and deer canines, as well as blades of exotic flint” (*ibid.*). Graeber and Wengrow describe these decorative objects as the first instances of something resembling “royal regalia”. They were made of “prestigious materials” which must have been, Graeber and Wengrow reason, “transposed from very distant locations” (*ibid.*, p. 89). In other words, the “lavish costumes” in which only a small minority of bodies had been buried must have been acquired by the means of exchange, rather than having been produced by the labor of local communities. The seeds of inequality are sown at the margins of production.

Graeber and Wengrow take this as proof that for the largest part of human history, inequality has followed a ceremonious, theatrical trajectory independent from that of economic productivity, given that the vast majority of funeral sites show no such signs of distinction and are modestly garnished with objects produced in the immediate range of entombment: “[...] the majestic theatre of Paleolithic ‘princely burials’ – or even of Stonehenge – never seems to have gone too far beyond theatrics” (*ibid.*, p. 125). In stark contrast to the festooned actor buried with the trappings of obscure origin and dubitable use value, the typical Paleolithic cadaver is interred with the paraphernalia of his own making and therefore embodies, quite literally, the predominantly productive kernel of human history. The geographically distant origin of mortuary items reveals a more general penchant of the princely figure for all kinds of deferrals, including those of temporal nature characteristic of debt: the adorned prince is the one that annotates debts, engages in exchanges with distant communities and speculates on imaginary scenarios, instead of tending to the task at hand. Under the auspices of theatricality, exchange and debt usurp the place of direct production and immediate presence.

Rather than following directly from the advancements in the mode of production, Graeber and Wengrow conclude from these diggings that inequality stems from a radically unproductive and purely aesthetic practice of role playing and pageantry which has consistently remained on the fringes of prehistorical social orders, entirely tangential to the principal orbit of material production. Surveying

<sup>1</sup> Graeber and Wengrow focus especially on *Il Principe* unearthed on the coast of Liguria and Lady of Saint-Germain-de-la-Rivière from Dordogne.

the archeological findings of these reportedly sporadic and extravagant burial sites, Graeber and Wengrow draw a firmly antitheatrical conclusion:

If nothing else, this explains the ‘princes’ and ‘princesses’ of the last Ice Age, who appear to show up, in such magnificent isolation, like characters in some kind of fairy-tale or *costume drama*. Maybe they were almost literally so. If they reigned at all, then perhaps it was, like the kings and queens of Stonehenge, just for a season. [...] Rather than idling in some primordial innocence, until the genie of inequality was somehow uncorked, our prehistoric ancestors seem to have successfully opened and shut the bottle on a regular basis, *confining inequality to ritual costume dramas*, constructing gods and kingdoms as they did their monuments, then cheerfully disassembling them once again (Graeber and Wengrow, 2018; emphasis mine).

Far from an inevitable consequence of a universal law of historical progress which ostensibly goes from idling in a harmonious yet underdeveloped society to producing in a technologically advanced yet unequal society, for Graeber and Wengrow inequality is of an altogether separate order from productivity. Social power is no more than a costume drama that has gone out of hand; a theater which has exceeded the boundaries of the stage: “the first kings may well have been play kings. Then they became real kings” (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 117). In a society of producers (be it of a hunter-gathering or agricultural type), the king was something of a clown; a seasonal figure which acquired real dominion over producers only at the very late phase of prehistory. This conclusion leads Graeber and Wengrow to formulate a key question on which hinges their entire exposition:

How did we come to treat eminence and subservience not as temporary expedients, or even the pomp and circumstance of some kind of grand seasonal theatre, but as inescapable elements of the human condition? If we started out just playing games, at what point did we forget that we were playing? (*ibid.*, p. 115).

In a nutshell, the alternative philosophy of history which Graeber and Wengrow derive from a pool of archeological findings is as follows: history is propelled by humans employing objects to productive purposes and for collective benefit. It degenerates once the ceremonial use of objects (e.g., when bronze is used to produce a crown rather than a spear) becomes a socially more consequential force than production. According to Graeber’s (2011) earlier work on debt, this historical overturn of productive forces by generalized theatricality roughly coincides with the 5,000-year long history of money – an ornamental object *par excellence*.

In one of his early essays “Beads and Money: Notes Towards a Theory of Wealth and Power”, Graeber lays out the grounds for his incipient study of money as a form of debt. In the 1996 essay he sets up a rudimentary framework for what

would later become a comprehensive study in economic anthropology of money titled *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. The arguments that he develops in that essay are derived from the following anthropological observation stated in the introduction to the article and which sets up the framework for his entire theoretical analysis of money that is to follow:

It is remarkable how many of the objects adopted as currency in different parts of the world have been objects otherwise used primarily, if not exclusively, for adornment [...] For the most part, money consists of things that otherwise exist only to be seen. Tiny copper axes have been known to become the stuff of currency, or very thin ones, but never axes that could actually cut down a tree (Graeber, 1996, pp. 4-5).

At the outset, therefore, we are led to presume, in no uncertain terms, that whatever the nature of money would turn out to be, it will have to revolve around a fixation on the presentational value of objects at the expense of the immediately productive one, from the possibility that objects can be used aesthetically rather than “actually”, from the discovery that some objects “exist only to be seen”, that is, that some objects exist as *signifiers*.

This presupposition that money is a signifier for a social relation of debt forms the backbone of a host of critical theories of money<sup>2</sup> and it is typically waged against the orthodox view of money as means of exchange.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a neutral instrument *facilitating* a relation of exchange, here money is understood as a perverse supplement *replacing* that relation with a hollow inscription. Once we start exchanging money – so the story goes – we invert the ontological order of things by which objects serve the subject as his ideal means of expression. The means supplant the ends and the subject finds himself on the cusp of ontological erasure. No longer able to recognize his own reflection in an external mark, the subject who uses money loses his own essence in an alien signifier. From this metaphysical standpoint, money distills all of the traits of non-being: absence, superficiality, compensatory ornamentality, transferability, estrangement from original locus, lack of any stable referent, a pure numerical abstraction that allows imagination to take free reign, that absents one from oneself, fills him with an insatiable thirst for distant places, takes one on a wild goose chase for chimeras while making him forget his origins.

To what extent does the recent proliferation of the heterodox theories of money, which insist that money is in fact a violent abstraction from immediate social relations, belong within the sentimentalist horizon of the lamentation for lost au-

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., McNally, 2020; Lazzarato, 2012; Harvey, 1989; Berardi, 2017; Adkins, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The canonical text here is Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. See also von Mises, 1953; Hicks, 1989; Jevons, 2011 [1875].

thenticity that Jacques Derrida (1997, p. 98) has called “the age of Rousseau”: that distinctly modern transfiguration of the metaphysics of presence which translates the Platonic elaboration of the ideality of *eidos* into the modern concerns over *representation*; be it the representation of thought in language, of speech in writing, of general will in representative government, or more generally of a self-same identity in the myriad forms of its material articulation?

If the contemporary critiques of money derive their analytical clout from the historical or philosophical disclosure of an abstraction that lies at the heart of the money form, then the problem of money necessarily becomes anchored in a longing for an unmediated presence which would precede its own mediation in money, whether that presence is conceived along the anthropological lines of chronicling purely local, prehistorical communities perfectly exempt from the relations of exchange, or along the dialectical-materialist lines of exalting labor as an ontological engine of all historical motion. In other words, as soon as money becomes a problem of representation, its critique is necessarily inscribed into a metaphysical schema which Derrida famously referred to as the metaphysics of presence.

In his analysis of the privileged place that Rousseau occupies within the canon of Western political philosophy outlined in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argued that Rousseau’s conceptualization of money parallels his treatment of writing at the same time as it heralds the contemporary critiques of the money form. Both are, according to Derrida, articulated from within the historical vantage of a metaphysics of presence which dreams of a pure memory without a trace either of the phonetic or monetary type. Derrida writes:

This movement of analytic abstraction in the circulation of arbitrary signs is quite parallel to that within which money is constituted. Money replaces things by their signs, not only within a society but from one culture to another, or from one economic organization to another. That is why the alphabet is commercial, a trader. It must be understood within the monetary moment of economic rationality. The critical description of money is the faithful reflection of the discourse on writing. In both cases an anonymous supplement is substituted for the thing. (*ibid.*, p. 300).

This crypto-Rousseauian moralism in which modern critiques of money are soaked is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the famous English economist John Maynard Keynes who, after decades of impassioned attempts at understanding money, reached the following conclusion:

The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life – will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease (Keynes, 1963, p. 369).

Critical theories of money frequently reproduce this Keynesian shudder as a general affective disposition in which their respective theoretical arguments are laid out. In this article, I offer a deconstructive reading of David Graeber's and David Wengrow's seminal study of prehistoric social orders as a paradigmatic case of a certain Rousseauian sensibility that implicitly organizes contemporary critical elaborations of the money form. Within this normative schema, money can only ever appear as a theatrical mask and an ontological perversion;<sup>4</sup> one that needs to be taken off in order to reveal an uncorrupted presence lying underneath; a metaphysical ideal imagined along the Rousseauian lines of pastoral communities bound together by an unmediated feeling of moral obligation and natural pity. However, in an attempt to archeologically excavate the prehistoric world of premonetary equality, Graeber and Wengrow inadvertently rehearse the circularity of Rousseau's own thought. By equating the social logic of money with a theatrical penchant for adornments and self-display, these anthropologists end up confirming what Derrida identifies as the unwitting conclusion of Rousseau's discourse: namely, that the civilizational descent into inequality has always already begun.

### **Horror of Theatricality and the Fantasy of Oral Community**

How *new* is Graeber's and Wengrow's *New History of Humanity*? Despite their attempts to distance themselves from a project which would aim to uncover the origins of inequality, what these anthropologists nonetheless end up outlining is effectively a crypto-conservative pursuit for perfectly innocent origins from which we have degenerated. At the outset, we are recruited into a system of strong metaphysical presuppositions which organize the interpretation of archeological evidence: that sameness precedes difference (first all are equal, then an originally unified social field undergoes fragmentation), that production precedes representation (first comes the axe, then comes the sceptre), that presence precedes absence (first objects are produced locally, then they are exchanged among distant communities), that immediacy precedes mediation (first social relations are transparent and equitable, then they become corrupted through mediation in money), that speech precedes writing (in his book on *Debt*, Graeber argues that for the most part of human history debts were settled orally with the practice of transcribing them in monetary form emerging only at a much later stage). Although Graeber and Wengrow present their conclusions as novel and heterodox propositions about the human condition and its historical development, these postulates are in fact as old as what Jacques Derrida has famously termed "metaphysics of presence": an idealist system of thinking

<sup>4</sup> On the resonances between this type of anti-theatrical repudiation of money and the cultural trope of queerness, see Fisher, 1999.

which he claims has persistently structured metaphysical speculations from Plato onwards.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida introduces the notion of “metaphysics of presence” in order to refer to a “historico-metaphysical epoch” (1997, p. 6) in which the ultimate designation of being is in the final instance attributed to the ideality of an intentional subject to whom the external world serves merely as a sign in which that primary self-enclosed interiority reveals itself. All that is seen as external to that system of ideal presence (signifier, grapheme, matter, technics, money, body, etc.) is thus derogated to the sphere of secondariness: first comes the intentional presence, then comes its outward material expression. In this sense, metaphysics of presence can be most succinctly summarized as a belief in an absolute authority of the speaking voice which ultimately refers to nothing other than itself in a vacuum of complete self-presence: “an indissociable system [in which] the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality” (*ibid.*, p. 12). This theological pursuit for presence without a mark, without exterior supplements, unadulterated by material imprints or past traces is what, for Derrida, drives philosophy in all of its various articulations and it is only from the standpoint of a closure of that metaphysical epoch that its contours can be gleaned and its deconstruction undertaken.

For Derrida, the paradigmatic scene of deconstruction – one which serves as a master metaphor through which the displacement of presence can take place – is that of writing. Derrida argues that living, breathing speech has consistently served as a privileged site for the philosophical elaboration of presence: “the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself, full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense” (*ibid.*, p. 17). This synecdochic proximity of speech to being casts writing as its devalued binary opposite. Writing in this way becomes a mere representation of speech, its pale copy that can be estranged from the living presence of its author and hence a false being, an empty shell devoid of presence as the essence of true being. Exiled into the exteriority of meaning, writing is, according to Derrida, a kind of paradigmatic metaphor for a cluster of exclusions from the domain of proper being. The more it resembles writing, the further away it is from the truth: such is the main axiom of a metaphysics of presence.

Determined by its unique capacity to signify presence, speech belongs to that “epoch of the logos” (*ibid.*, p. 12) which begins by Plato’s expulsion of writing from the realm of true being and which is carried forward into the eighteenth century by Rousseau’s idiosyncratic grappling with the problem of writing. For Derrida, this will be “the age of Rousseau”, “an age of metaphysics [...] that starts from a new model of presence: the subject’s self-presence within *consciousness* or *feeling*” (*ibid.*, p. 98). More than any other modern philosopher, it is precisely Rousseau who will take up Plato’s problématique of writing most systematically and rearticulate it with a view



on a series of distinctly modern concerns over the origin of subjectivity, naturalness, political economy, legitimacy of government, political representation, etc.

Graeber's and Wengrow's "new history of humanity", together with Graeber's overall anthropological body of work on the topics of money, labor, (re)distribution, power, statehood, primitivism, and possibilities for social restructuring along horizontal lines, belong to this Platonist-Rousseauian horizon. The fantasy of an oral community perfectly self-present to itself in the immediacy of its speech, one which Derrida discovers at the core of Rousseau's theory of writing, is also what propels Graeber's and Wengrow's archeological pursuit for origins. According to the conventions of a metaphysics of presence, such a "community of reduced dimensions" (*ibid.*, p. 119) is exempt from the threat of corruption which always befalls it from the outside. Its moral demise can only ever be orchestrated from outside the purview of complete self-presence, from a place of radical absence through "import from abroad" (*ibid.*).

Because it can be alienated from the living presence of its author, because it can reproduce itself in the sheer exteriority of a text without the supervision of a consciousness which ostensibly institutes it, writing stands in for that absence. It corrodes speech by estranging it from itself and thereby haunts originary self-identity with an omen of difference and a prospect of a loss of that primordial sense of self-sameness. In this way, writing ushers in an epoch of lost presence, a fallen age of decadence, inequality, and generalized perversion of natural sentiments.

Derrida's deconstructive procedure consists in pointing to the moments in Rousseau's texts in which something like writing is revealed to plague originary presence from the start. From the standpoint of a metaphysics organized around the ideal of presence, to encounter writing at the scene of origin provokes a kind of scandal, or horror, which is why writing has to be expressly dismissed as secondary, exceptional, parasitic, or supplementary. However, Derrida painstakingly demonstrates that without this unwarranted appearance of writing, presence itself would lose all of its signifying force. In other words, there is some primary sense in which speech depends on its antipode to supply it with meaning. What this derogation of writing therefore points to is a broader field of differences which precedes precisely the kind of conceit of primordial self-sameness which speech is said to unveil.

Graeber and Wengrow follow this Rousseauian procedure to the letter. At every corner, they remind us that, in the prehistoric period, the princely burials were "magnificently isolated", "sporadic", "exceptional" and "anomalous in almost every respect" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 104). The discovery of these "lavishly decorated bodies" performs the function of precisely such originary exceptionality which is immediately denounced as a deviation from the general rule, albeit a deviation without which the general rule itself cannot be given any intelligible substance.

The figure of the adorned prince is “sporadic” in a double sense. On the one hand, its analysis occupies a marginal part within the study itself (only a few scattered remarks in one of the early chapters of the book entitled “Unfreezing the Ice Age”). On the other hand, Graeber and Wengrow insist that this type of elaborate adorning of graves was just as marginal within the actual structure of prehistoric social orders themselves. In other words, the figure of the adorned prince is so radically sporadic that this, virtually frantic, insistence on its *twofold* marginality cannot but raise a certain critical interest in the subtle conceptual labor that this figure performs within the larger narrative of the book. To what extent does the main argument of *The Dawn of Everything* – namely, that prehistoric societies successfully resisted the ossification of inequality – hinge on the ostensibly marginal discovery of the “magnificently isolated” princely bones themselves?

Indeed, the pastoral life of simple commodity production – the “dawn of everything” – peculiarly depends upon the possibility of exchange evinced by the “exotic” mortuary items imported from afar. These “lavishly decorated” burial sites which introduce ornamentality and excess into a hitherto natural community organized around utility and cooperation are also those that set into motion Graeber’s and Wengrow’s no less elaborate display of archeological evidence. Not only do these ornate tombs historically coincide with those of “customary” burials (corruption has always already begun), but their detailed description prepares the ground for Graeber’s and Wengrow’s general conclusion about the prehistoric way of life. This will be a lost paradise almost entirely exempt from exchange, but also a paradise which, from the very beginning of Graeber’s and Wengrow’s exposition, acquires its contours through a prompt recourse to that which it contains only in an exceptional form. The figure of the adorned prince who, “suffused with jewellery” (*ibid.*, p. 88), suspends the customary ways of simple production and assumes instead a “striking pose” (*ibid.*) emerges already at dawn.<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of this lapsarian fantasy of a long-lost kernel of production – the mythical origin before the rise of exchange in which human labor functioned as a transparent (i.e., unmediated) backbone of communal life – lies a social practice picturesquely described by Graeber and Wengrow as “congregations for festive labour” (*ibid.*, p. 105). These were public festivals (a thoroughly Rousseauian theme) in which work was agreed upon in debate – that is to say, *orally*. To counteract the predominant misconceptions of the technological backwardness of prehistoric civi-

<sup>5</sup> The Paleolithic royal adornments are indicative of a trope of luxury which frequently appears as a marker for a degeneration from the origin, albeit a marker that is, paradoxically, always already present at the origin. For Derrida’s analysis of luxury, see Derrida, 1992. For a comprehensive genealogy of the concept of luxury in Western thought, see Sekora, 1977; Berry, 1994; Mathiowetz, 2010.

lizations, Graeber and Wengrow draw attention to a variety of architecturally complex monuments of this period (ranging from Göbekli Tepe to a variety of human habitats extending from Kraków to Kiev) and argue that the secret to their construction lies precisely in the egalitarian manner in which labor was distributed. After the construction work was done, an exuberant feast followed in which food was shared in much the same way as labor – communally among subjects capable of sustaining congenial conversation.

On Graeber's and Wengrow's interpretation, the complexity of these monuments discloses the capacity of prehistoric laborers for coordinated activity on a large scale, independently of exchanges with distant communities or the superintendence of hierarchical structures (*ibid.*, p. 89). In other words, these remains of prehistoric engineering are interpreted as testaments to their architects' propensity for dialogue. Dialogue here signifies both the priority of presence over absence (to speak is to operate by way of proximity, while exchange follows the logic of distance/absence) as well as the priority of sameness over difference (to speak is also to do things among equals, while writing connotes the disruption of originary equality by laws, orders, and hierarchies, all understood on the model of writing). Graeber and Wengrow interrupt their archeological discussion of these ancient labor festivals so as to derive from them a general conclusion about human nature:

In conversation, we can hold thoughts and reflect on problems sometimes for hours on end. This is of course why so often, even if we're trying to figure out something by ourselves, we imagine arguing with or explaining it to someone else. Human thought is inherently dialogic. Ancient philosophers tended to be keenly aware of this: that's why, whether they were in China, India or Greece, they tended to write their books in the form of dialogues (*ibid.*, p. 94).

What we see here is that, within Graeber's and Wengrow's analysis of prehistoric civilizations, labor performs the same function that Derrida attributes to speech in the philosophies of Plato and Rousseau: it reveals the original self-presence before the external intrusion of writing systems such as exchange, debt-keeping, or reified power structures such as kingdoms and states. Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*:

Conversation is, then, a communication between two absolute origins that, if one may venture the formula, auto-affect reciprocally, repeating as immediate echo the auto-affection produced by the other. Immediacy is here the myth of consciousness. Speech and the consciousness of speech – that is to say consciousness simply as self-presence – are the phenomenon of an auto-affection lived as suppression of difference. That *phenomenon*, that presumed suppression of difference, that lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier, are the origin of what is called presence (Derrida, 1997, p. 166).

What Graeber's and Wengrow's analysis makes apparent, however, is that the myth of consciousness is tacitly inscribed within the general purview of political economy, or, more precisely, that the conceit of self-presence plays itself out within the confines of the scene of production. It is this scene of a laborious idyll which the figure of the prince threatens to subvert. His lavishly decorated body allegorizes the sinister operation of political power which is in turn imagined as concerned with representation and appearances, borrowing its tongue for gold, speaking from learned scripts rather than from the soul, maintaining its life by unnatural means, marking debt, trading in tallies and coins, and veiling its true being with masks and costumes to evade capture.<sup>6</sup> He will be the one who perverts the normal relationship between subject and object in which agency belongs to the speaking subject. Coordinated labor in this sense becomes a demonstration of the subject's capacity for reasoned speech. By using objects for staging a spectacle of power, such as crowns, jewellery and scepters, the prince is seen as compromising this distinctly human capacity.

However, while this perverse use of instruments for marking debts or instilling idolization enables him to transcend the original scene of material production and acquire command over the murky realm of appearances, it simultaneously turns the prince himself into a mere extension of the object. Instead of employing objects to productive ends, the adorned body lavishes on them, lends itself to them, abandons itself to an exterior play of shadows and surfaces and relegates the control over its motility to an outside apparatus, in this way opening a Pandora's box of distinctly political problems such as (mis)representation, unequal distribution of wealth, ideological deception and various forms of indenture and servitude: a fallen age which the emergence of writing is said to inaugurate.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the laborer who only ever uses the objects, the prince is used by them: he relies on costumes for presenting himself to others, he relates to others only through the mediation of a tally, and rather than from the heart, he speaks to others only by way of written scripts. This leads the prince to eventually forget himself in the objects and lose the very substance of his personhood. Stripped of the fine-

<sup>6</sup> Unlike the worker, the figure of the actor has traditionally been associated with a host of tropes that are seen as antithetical to production proper such as prodigality, preference for adornments over tools, idleness, and the unhealthy preoccupation with the body (see, e.g., Auslander, 1997; Barish, 1985; Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989; Lawtoo, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Graeber maintains that this theatrical use of objects lies at the heart of all power relations. The figure of the king around whom premodern power is concentrated is a thespian figure *par excellence*. His power derives directly from his penchant for adornments and self-display: "By making a show of magnificence, a king is able to define himself in such a way that others are moved to transfer some of their wealth to him. [...] By covering themselves with gold, then, kings persuade others to cover them with gold as well" (Graeber, 1996, p. 9).

ries, there is no longer anything human left in the prince. It is from this phantasmatic cultural repository of theatrical horrors that money as a concept emerges in the course of Graeber's and Wengrow's exposition. The flamboyant adornments through which power comes to insinuate itself at the scene of human history ultimately take the form of a generalized social practice of exchanging money; a thoroughly Rousseauian narrative indeed, yet one that I claim Graeber and Wengrow rehearse rather than challenge.

### The Two Rousseaus

Within the schematics of Graeber's and Wengrow's general argument about the human historical degeneration from laborious orality to ornamental theatricality, Rousseau is accorded a central, even if ambiguous, structural position: he will be at once someone whose naïve, romanticist depiction of an innocent state of nature undergoing a gradual process of degeneration by the advent of agriculture has been unduly promoted to an orthodox, commonsensical philosophy of history (a philosophy that will have to be undone on the pages of *A New History of Humanity*) and also someone who did not really say what he was taken to be saying, or more precisely, as someone who said what he said only within a self-avowedly parabolic genre:

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 [...] 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'? (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, pp. 24-25).

At stake is therefore a certain kind of parable, a metaphoric analogy, an equalization of one thing with another. "In no sense" is this Rousseauian illustration of "the fundamental paradox of human politics" to be understood in the manner of "many contemporary scholars", that is to say, in no way should Rousseau's representation of a natural origin be understood literally, or empirically. That kind of a predominant reading of Rousseau's portrayal of a state of nature is in fact a departure from its originary parabolic status; a perversion of the Rousseauian original that has befallen it in the course of its subsequent reception. Whatever the "proper" reception of Rousseau's original thesis is going to be, the name "Rousseau" appears at the outset of Graeber's and Wengrow's archeology as a signifier of a perversion

from the origin. The argument reads as follows: here is the author who has set the stage for our predominant interpretations of human history – the author paradigmatic of precisely the kind of problématique which is about to be submitted to a “radical revision” by empirical means – and here is how his paradigmatic status proceeds from a kind of misconstrual of his original argument; from having been mistaken for literal what, in his original work, is in fact figurative or evocative.

The contemporary reception of Rousseau on the one hand and Rousseau’s original work on the other, therefore, cannot be equated, cannot be made commensurate. In the same stroke in which the entire Rousseauian thematic of original purity and its subsequent degeneration is being dismissed as an effect of a misinvocation, it is immediately reinstated by the means of its reinscription in the sphere of circulation of philosophical texts. What has degenerated will not be the state of nature – such was not Rousseau’s original argument, we are assured – but its reception, its uptake, its subsequent citation. We – contemporary readers of Rousseau – have fallen prey to the very same ruse as the Paleolithic laborers when confronted with the mimetic prince: we have let ourselves become bedazzled by the movement of circulation that governs the reception of Rousseau’s philosophy, we have mistaken the sign “Rousseau” for the thing itself.

This gesture repeats at the level of exchange of theoretical texts what is indeed the main theoretical preoccupation shared by both Rousseau’s overall body of work and the archeological account laid out in *The Dawn of Everything*: namely, the issue of exchange, trading, and the econo-metaphysical impossibility of making things commensurate, exchangeable, marketable. Rousseau will have to be both a philosopher of exchange (his depiction of originary sociality preceding the exchange of money and signs will prove central to Graeber’s and Wengrow’s archeological revision) and a philosopher whose philosophy has suffered a degeneration in the course of its circulation and as such constitutes something of a signifier of exchange itself (or, more precisely, the signifier of the political perils that inhere in all exchange). The literal reception of Rousseau is therefore an allegory of his own philosophy of the degeneration from the figurative original. In this way, Graeber and Wengrow stage a return to Rousseau by circuitous or indeed circulatory means.

They insist that Rousseau’s origin story about the birth of inequality from the bosom of natural innocence is figurative and should not be taken at face value (we should not mistake the signifier for the signified), that it should not serve as a model for the actual progression of human history and that this can be demonstrated by taking recourse to the archeological evidence. In other words, what the literal reception of Rousseau misses about the trajectory of human history can be made evident by the contemporary procedures of archeological evidentiality (*ibid.*, p. 28). For Graeber and Wengrow, therefore, Rousseau is a figurative philosopher who

prompts the archeological search for the literal. The elaborately decorated princely burial sites appear in their analysis precisely in the capacity of empirical evidence – that is, in the capacity of the literal and not the figurative, as that which is, unlike Rousseau’s origin story, meant to be taken *precisely* at face value. But what can be the face value of someone whose defining trait is that he has no face, someone who is said to have exchanged his face for a mask and whose burial place is significant precisely *because* of the very same predilection for figurality that should make us wary of taking Rousseau’s original text too literally? What exactly are his lavishly adorned bones meant to literalize?

For Graeber and Wengrow, the central takeaway from the archeological canvassing of the princely burial sites is their “magnificently isolated” position within the larger structure of prehistoric social orders. From this observation of the exceptional status of figurality in the Paleolithic era emerges the central argument about the literal condition of the prehistoric man:

Rather than idling in some primordial innocence, until the genie of inequality was somehow uncorked, our prehistoric ancestors seem to have successfully opened and shut the bottle on a regular basis, *confining inequality to ritual costume dramas*, constructing gods and kingdoms as they did their monuments, then cheerfully disassembling them once again (Graeber and Wengrow, 2018; emphasis mine).

Rousseau’s ostensibly figurative account of civilization’s fall from grace is in no way surpassed in favor of a “new history of humanity”, but merely reinscribed into an empirically documented, literal lapse from an originary confinement of theatricality to its latter-day generalization. The “magnificently isolated” excavation sites that indicate a predilection for theater are invoked precisely to dispel the horror of theatricality by reassuring us of the “cheerful” (read: non-theatrical and hence authentic, or genuine) natural state in which the prince occupied a less threatening, marginal position from which he has eloped only at the very twilight of prehistory.

Although Graeber and Wengrow insist that the archeological evidence of the complexity of prehistoric social orders counteracts the Rousseauian narrative of a mythical fall from originary equality, the alternative narrative they propose seems to be remarkably similar to the one it is intended to remedy. What, ultimately, differentiates a society that is said to contain inequality within the boundaries of a puerile dress-up play from a society of “primordial innocence” of whose existence the authors are allegedly dissuading us? If we say that difference has always already existed, but then we immediately proceed to uncover an origin in which that difference was no more than a “costume drama” – and hence, a sort of *fiction* – are we not merely supplementing Rousseau’s lapsarian myth with an elaborate account of the

theatrical procedures by the means of which that lapse was staged?<sup>8</sup> Is the archaeological revelation of these primordial antics, such as scepters and crowns, emancipating us from the figurality of Rousseau's discourse, or does it merely reinstate that figurality by empirical means? Rather than challenging the Rousseauian orthodoxy, Graeber and Wengrow in effect transpose what they take to be the figural story of the original sin of ornamentality onto the enfleshed literality of the ornamentally sepulchered prince. His literal bones will therefore come to enact the figurality of Rousseau's original narrative: they are a case of a literalized figurality which contains the entirety of Rousseau's figurative philosophy in an embryonic form. In this way prehistory is figuratively partitioned into dawn and dusk. The origin has become internally divided so that its purity can remain preserved.

### **Original Sin of Exchange and the Perversion of Natural Passions**

However, something crucial about Rousseau's origin story of the primordial state of natural equality is lost in the way in which Graeber and Wengrow set up what could rightfully be called the Rousseauian *problématique*; namely, the question of nature and culture, origin and degeneration, authenticity and theatricality, self-presence and self-estrangement. In his "Essay on the Origin of Languages", Rousseau offers an almost cloyingly pastoral description of a primordial scene of the emergence of sociality from a natural state. Benevolent and compassionate by nature, the 'noble savage' originally finds himself isolated in the state of absolute dispersion. Still lacking language, he is unable to communicate with his fellow men. Without grounds for mutual comparison, unaware of his own appearance, other men appear to him as giants, frighteningly bigger and stronger than himself (Rousseau, 1990, p. 294).

This keeps the sentimental and inherently social *homo natura* in a dismal state of isolation. However, in arid climates of the South, where droughts are persistent and the sources of water are few and far between, the natural elements combine so as to spring forth the conditions for the birth of a community. Rousseau reasoned that the irrigation technologies, around which we find the first inklings of early civilizations, must have necessitated some kind of a collaborative effort and it is here, within what he imagined to be the primeval festivals at the water hole, that the exercises of conviviality were staged for the very first time. Rousseau indeed describes the early days of sociality in the romanticist style whose figurality is inescapably apparent:

There [at the water hole] the first festivals took place, feet leaped with joy, eager gestures no longer sufficed, the voice accompanied it with passionate accents;

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, in his "Letter to M. d'Alembert on Spectacles", Rousseau (1968) himself offers a largely analogous account of how theater occasions the degeneration of society.



mingled together, pleasure and desire made themselves felt at the same time. There, finally, was the true cradle of peoples, and from the pure crystal of the fountains came the first fires of love (*ibid.*, p. 314).

Although Graeber and Wengrow treat this glaring figurality of Rousseau's discourse on prehistory as a sort of authorization for their archeo-logical "remedy" (*pharmakon*), perhaps we would be well advised to thread more carefully here. Granted, Rousseau's story is clearly self-consciously figurative. However, at stake for Rousseau is precisely the status of that figurality itself. By engaging in a figurative style of reasoning, he wants to propose that the origin of human language is itself figurative. His figurative discourse attempts to resuscitate the original figurality of language that has been lost to writing; a primeval poesis of oral expression that has succumbed to the demands of reason. This will in fact be the main thesis of the *Essay*:

As the first motives that made man speak were the passions, his first expressions were Tropes. Figurative language was the first to arise, proper meaning was found last. Things were not called by their true name until they were seen in their genuine form. At first, only poetry was spoken. Only long afterwards did anyone take it into his head to reason (*ibid.*, p. 294).

Before man enters into sociality, before he develops the common standards of comparison – that is, before he develops writing and *logos* – his language is poetic, figurative. Before being a figural thinker, Rousseau is, therefore, primarily a thinker of figurality. Whatever ambivalences may arise from his figural description of an originary figurality (and this is precisely the direction we are headed), they are in no way put to rest by Graeber's and Wengrow's archeological intervention into the Rousseauian edifice. Rousseau's ornamentally supplemented argument that there is figurality to be discovered at the scene of origin is meant to be taken just as literally as Graeber's and Wengrow's discovery of the primordial ornamentality of the mimetic prince. Rousseau uses the figure of the water hole festival in much the same capacity in which the mimetic prince is said to use "a flint sceptre, elk antler batons and an ornate headdress lovingly fashioned from perforated shells and deer teeth" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 88) – as a rhetorical ornament employed to produce effects on his audiences, a trope designed to reinforce the argument by circuitous and indeed aesthetical means. But the argument itself is rehearsed in Graeber's and Wengrow's exposition: there is theatricality, figurality, ornamentality already there at the origin. Although the empirical discovery of the mimetic prince's bones is meant to alleviate the ambiguities of Rousseau's figurative discourse, what these lavishly decorated tombs end up literalizing is precisely that figurality itself. In other words, the very same figurality that prompted the recourse to archeo-logical intervention is now redoubled on an empirical level.

Rather than attempting to *resolve* the problem of the relation between figurality and literality in Rousseau's *Essay*, Derrida identifies a certain kind of irresolvable undecidability – a doubling of a sort – ingrained at the heart of Rousseau's attempt to posit figurality as the origin of human languages:

That sign is metaphoric because it is *false* with regard to the object; it is metaphoric because it is *indirect* with regard to the affect: it is the sign of a sign, it expresses emotion only through another sign, through the representer of fear, namely through the *false* sign. It represents the affect literally only through representing a false representer (Derrida, 1997, p. 277).

This doubling of the sign in Rousseau's original text which Derrida here identifies is indistinguishable in principle from Graeber's and Wengrow's supplementation of Rousseau's narrative with their archeological discourse on the prehistoric princely burials. According to their schema, Rousseau's origin story is *indirect* with regard to its prehistoric referent (it is a figure for the distinctly modern human condition in which inequality has already taken place), while the Paleolithic prince is a literal representer of a prehistoric way of life and hence added to the discourse on inequality as a remedy to the undecidability of Rousseau's original text. However, in much the same way in which the sign represents the ostensibly "original", literal referent only through a representer that is already false in relation to its origin, so too does the adorned prince come to represent literal prehistory only through representing a false representer; by taking recourse to the one who already appears on the scene fully dressed in signifiers (crowns, scepters, costumes, etc.), that is, to the one who cannot appear in any other way than as a metaphor for something else.

At the "dawn of everything" we find an entombed embodiment of the original ornamentality, conveniently sepulchered precisely in the moment in which it was making itself pass for the thing itself. It is as if the scene of ornamentality was already being staged for the future archeologist; frozen at the exact moment of its original transgression, buried with all the evidence needed to ensure conviction; a sin of figurality petrified in a way that would provide the occasion for its subsequent archeological commentary. The adorned cadaver is at the same time an empirically verified deceit and a deceit providing the grounds for the archeological discourse that legitimizes itself through the empirical procedures of unearthing its literal meaning.

However, by bestowing ornamentality with an empirical body of the adorned prince, Graeber and Wengrow simply repeat what Rousseau understands to be the twofold procedure of signification: an originary figurality is expressed in words and subsequently reified in the form of a literal or proper meaning – the feint by which language occludes the figurality of its own referent. It could be said, therefore, that

the Paleolithic prince discovered at the scene of origin literalizes the conceit of referentiality which is the condition of all signification: the original ruse that makes us believe that language ultimately refers to anything more than itself.

What would appear at first glance to be an error within Rousseau's original text – one that finds itself redoubled on the pages of *The Dawn of Everything* – is, for Derrida, symptomatic of a perpetually frustrated desire to uphold the metaphysical ideal of presence. Although Rousseau embarks on a search for original self-presence before the emergence of writing, before the deterritorializing abstraction of arbitrary signifiers, he is nonetheless compelled to install something like writing already at the scene of origin. The origin will have to be indistinguishable from its subsequent degeneration, the utopia of the spoken word will always already contain the inklings of its own future perversion in writing.

In this sense, the crux of Derrida's reading of Rousseau will consist in a careful deconstruction of a series of irreconcilable binary opposites within Rousseau's text: the one between languages of the South and those of the North, between passion and need, between pity and *amour-propre*, between the original dispersion of pre-social men and their perfectly localized accentuations, etc. Over and again, the only determination of these oppositions is that each ends up collapsing into the other to the point at which neither can be said to have come first – what comes first, Derrida persistently shows, is difference itself. It is this infinite play of differences which ultimately propels Rousseau's discourse; a play that Derrida will designate as "writing in the general sense", or "writing" as a kind of master metaphor for an entire field of differences which Rousseau seeks to subordinate to presence understood on the model of orality.

The obliqueness of Rousseau's discourse is, therefore, not simply an ambiguity arising from his figurative style of writing or from the unavailability of archeological evidence at the time of his writing, as Graeber and Wengrow maintain; one that could be smoothly resolved by the simple exhumation of Paleolithic cadavers. Such an archeological project can only ever be but another story added to Rousseau's depiction of the origin which would repeat the separation that already inheres within that depiction itself. This is why Graeber and Wengrow cannot but install a separation of their own at the "dawn of everything". There will have to be a time before and after inequality has transcended the confines of "ritual costume dramas", the dawn and dusk of prehistory. Appearing on the scene of origin adorned with "royal paraphernalia", the mimetic prince announces that potential for "degeneration as separation". The opacity of the signifier has always already begun to supervene upon an ostensibly transparent origin.

## Rousseau's Allegories of Money

Nevertheless, there is more to be said about Graeber's and Wengrow's adoption of Rousseau's arguments laid out in the *Essay* than the fact that both are structured on the idealist model of presence. Consider that, unlike Derrida, Graeber and Wengrow do not read Rousseau's original text as outlining a theory of writing: they read it as a figurative attempt to account for the emergence of economic inequality and in this they may well be more firmly situated within the Rousseauian eighteenth century problématique than Derrida's strictly philosophical reading of Rousseau which asks us to immediately translate it back into the much more general orbit of "Western metaphysics".

Indeed, Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* reads as a politico-economic treatise on the emergence of economic differences as they *disclose* themselves in language but are not *caused* by it. In the passage from speech to writing, language picks up on the inauguration of difference whose true origin lies elsewhere. In other words, Rousseau philosophizes about language because he thinks language mirrors the changes within a broader field of a general economy of social relations; an economy which will include more than the exchanges of words, either written or spoken, exchanges that take place between a variety of social actors such as merchants, craftsmen, actors, prostitutes, townsmen and villagers, state legislators and citizens, men and women, etc.<sup>9</sup> Although it clearly comes with a hefty metaphysical baggage, writing does not appear in Rousseau's *Essay* as a purely metaphysical concept. There, Rousseau offers clues both as to the identity and the technique of the one who would "take it into his head to reason" and who would in this way bring mayhem and discord to the bucolic idyll of the first peoples. In analyzing the causes of the eventual emergence of the phonetic script from the originally passionate and purely oral languages, Rousseau argues:

The third [manner of writing] is to break down the speaking voice into a certain number of elementary parts, whether vowels or articulations, with which one could form all imaginable words and syllables. This manner of writing, which is our own, must have been devised by commercial peoples who, traveling in several countries and having to speak several languages, were forced to invent characters that could be common to all of them. This is not precisely to depict speech, it is to analyze it (Rousseau, 1990, p. 297).

The first thing to underline in this passage is that Rousseau does not treat writing as the cause of degeneration from speech: he sees writing as an effect of the

<sup>9</sup> This is particularly Samuel Chamber's (2022) point about Derrida's tendency to elide the question of a general political economy by reducing exchange to a strictly philosophical plane of an exchange of concepts.

commercialization of society. With the aid of writing, the merchant perverts the primeval language of passions. In its degenerative transmutation from speech to writing, language merely reflects the metastases already under way at the socio-economic level. Rather than a metaphysics of language, what Rousseau is outlining here is best understood as a *political economy of language*. The merchant arrives at the water hole from a foreign land and interrupts the spontaneous outflow of natural passions by approaching the originary scene of oral bliss as if it were a spectacle that can be observed, analyzed, transcribed and – as it is the case with alphabetic writing – systematized. Writing, for Rousseau, has a distinctly social location – the marketplace. This commercial backdrop against which Rousseau articulates his understanding of writing becomes especially apparent if we consider what I argue can be seen as a paradigmatic scene of writing outlined in *Emile*:

I see a man, fresh, gay, vigorous, healthy, his presence inspires joy, his eyes proclaim contentment, well-being; he brings with him the image of happiness. A letter comes in the post; the happy man looks at it; it is addressed to him; he opens it, reads it. Instantly his aspect changes. He becomes pale and faints. Coming to, he weeps, writhes, moans, tears his hair, makes the air resound with his cries, seems to have a frightful fit of convulsions. Senseless man, what ill has this piece of paper done to you then? Of what limb has it deprived you? What crime has it made you commit? Altogether, what has changed in you yourself to put you in the state in which I see you? (Rousseau, 1979, p. 83).

An initially joyous man is confronted with a letter that reports on the events that transcend the immediacy of his originary self-presence and instantly undergoes a loss of vitality – a condition which, in the *Essay*, Rousseau attributes to writing: much like the oral language that has begun to imitate writing, the recipient of the letter becomes “enervated” (Rousseau, 1990, p. 300). The letter has dispossessed him of his energy, it has awakened imagination of distant places where the writing informed him tragic events have taken place. Instantly transposed from his immediate and happy existence, he is thrown into a kind of a hypochondriacal tantrum. From this scene of circulation, Rousseau develops a full-scale phenomenology of writing:

Our individual persons are now only the least part of ourselves. Each one extends himself, so to speak, over this entire large surface. Is it surprising that our ills are multiplied by all the points where we can be wounded? (Rousseau, 1979, p. 83).

Writing colludes with globality; circulation is its natural environ. It wrenches us from our organic community based on presence and allows us to imagine ourselves as infinitely larger than we actually are. Self-aggrandized and dispersed, the subject of writing is vulnerable to corruption, he has fallen prey to an illness which

befalls all those who attempt to extend themselves beyond the immediate and the natural. It should therefore come as no surprise that the paradigmatic subjects of writing which Rousseau invokes in this context are precisely the prince and the merchant: “How many princes grieve over the loss of a country they have never seen? How many merchants are there whom it suffices to touch in India in order to make them scream in Paris?” (*ibid.*).

What the prince and the merchant share is the imaginative capacity to abstract themselves from the immediacy of their own circumstances. They have their being in faraway countries and foreign markets; they have lost their home in the pursuit of power and money. Although the prince and the merchant are portrayed as having an intimate relationship to writing, it does not follow from this portrayal that their self-estrangement is *caused* by writing. For Rousseau, writing is not so much a metaphysical model on which this faculty of imagination is to be understood. Writing constitutes but a historical phase of a more general politico-economic teleology of degeneration; a teleology which begins as a pastoral orality at the water hole and culminates in the speechless and anonymous monetary exchange in the metropolitan center. Within Rousseau’s “economics of sentiment” (Leichman, 2016, p. 85), writing as a concept emerges as a highly formalized allegory for a very real social practice of exchanging money. In the concluding segments of the *Essay*, Rousseau argues:

Societies have assumed their final form; nothing is changed in them any longer except by arms and cash, and as there is no longer anything to say to the people but *give money*, it is said to them with placards at street corners or with soldiers in their homes (Rousseau, 1990, p. 332).

The logic of money extends the logic of the alphabet: if phonetic script causes us to “read while speaking” (*ibid.*, p. 300), then money takes this abstraction a step further and makes us exchange money *instead of* speaking. In the same way in which writing abstracts from organic speech and the natural passions entangled with it, money abstracts from writing and perverts the passions even further. Rather than a cause of degeneration, writing is but a stopover on the historical pathway to money. Rousseau worries about writing because he sees it as a harbinger of monetary exchange; a first inkling of the absolute perversion of natural passions which monetization of societies necessarily entails. It will be money that completes the process of degeneration from originary innocence. Only with money do societies “assume their final form” [*dernière forme*]; a thoroughly degenerated form for which writing has already “set the stage”.

## The Language of Money and the Founding Ruse of Sociality

This is precisely Paul de Man's conclusion about the status of language in Rousseau's overall body of work. He argues that, for Rousseau, "the political destiny of man is structured like and derived from a linguistic model that exists independently of nature and independently of the subject: it coincides with the blind metaphorization called 'passion', and this metaphorization is not an intentional act" (de Man, 1979, p. 156). Much like writing and speech, money is, for Rousseau, itself a kind of language. The only privilege that specifically oral language has over writing and money is that this originary, "blind metaphorization" – what de Man understands to be a founding fiction through which language establishes sociality – is less transparent, or less vulnerable to being exposed in the case of speech than it is in the case of phonetic or monetary writing. Money makes this inaugurating feint of language – the unconsciously feigned belief that language refers to anything other than itself (be it external objects or intersubjective feelings) – almost impossible to shield from exposure. Because of its dangerous susceptibility to demystification, money threatens with a wholesale collapse of sociality as such. Rousseau himself labors to secure this secret even as he depends upon its subtle disclosure for his own argument. De Man writes:

If society and government derive from a tension between man and his language, then they are not natural (depending on a relationship between man and things), nor ethical (depending on a relationship among men), nor theological, since language is not conceived as a transcendental principal but as the possibility of contingent error. The political thus becomes a burden for man rather than an opportunity, and this realization, which can be stated in an infinity of sardonic and pathetic modes, may well account for the recurrent reluctance in the works of Rousseau (*ibid.*, pp. 156-157).

The political is a burden for man because, unlike language which only ever plays with temporal deferrals of meaning, political discourse depends upon substantial qualifying distinctions. Money, on the other hand, reduces all those political qualifiers to mere quantities and in this way exposes the true nature of language. Money, therefore, names the moment in which that originary abstraction at the heart of human sociality dangerously approaches the tipping point of its full disclosure; one that can no longer be kept at bay by infinitely deferring meaning back and forth between the literal and the figurative. From the moment in which "there is no longer anything to say to the people but *give money*" (Rousseau, 1990, p. 332), we stand on the precipice of deconstructing the originary feint that allows us to believe that there ever really was a time when we had something more to say to people that was not already reducible to something like money.

Because it replicates itself without the aid of the speaking subject, money, therefore, literalizes what de Man calls the self-referentiality of language. Although this narcissism of monetary exchange marks the “final form” of degeneration from the perfectly innocent days at the water hole, Rousseau simultaneously maintains that the potential for this degeneration is already present from the beginning. In *The Second Discourse* Rousseau speculates on the origin of money:

It is very difficult to conjecture how men came to know anything of iron, and the art of employing it: for we are not to suppose that they should of themselves think of digging the ore out of the mine, and preparing it for smelting, before they knew what could be the result of such a process. On the other hand, there is the less reason to attribute this discovery to any accidental fire, as mines are formed nowhere but in barren places, bare of trees and plants, so that it looks as if nature had taken pains to keep from us such a mischievous secret. Nothing therefore remains but the extraordinary chance of some volcano, which belching forth metallic substances already fused might have given the spectators the idea of imitating that operation of nature (Rousseau, 2002, p. 120).

It would appear from this passage that Rousseau holds a metallic theory of money according to which the essence of money is contained in the metallic substance from which coinage is casted.<sup>10</sup> In order to reach such a conclusion, however, one would be required to suspend Rousseau’s vertiginous oscillations between the figural and the literal to which Derrida and de Man alert us. Upon closer inspection, however, we notice that money’s metallic origin is relevant for Rousseau only to the extent that the natural fusion of metallic elements – one which will be imitated in monetary society – lends itself to repetition on the theatrical model of spectatorship. Money derives its power from metal because metallic substance is seen by Rousseau as particularly amenable for replication, imitation, dissemination. There is something about metal which invites spectatorship – a natural propensity of metallic substance to appeal to the audience, to make itself available for display – which is why nature has shielded it from inquisitive gazes. Benevolent nature has taken pains to keep its own clandestine propensity for ornamentality a secret; it has placed metal far from the water hole, far from all the parts that are most conducive to sociality. Nature’s “mischievous secret” is that at least some of its produce can be used as decorations, as adornments. Rather than a metallic theory of money, it would be more accurate to conclude from this passage that Rousseau holds an ornamental theory of money according to which the essence of money is contained in its presentability. In Rousseau’s origin story of money, metal is, therefore, but a figure of ornamentality making itself pass for a literal substance.

<sup>10</sup> For the most famous modern articulation of this view, see Menger, 2009 [1872].



This is precisely the theory of money put forward by Graeber and Wengrow. The adorned prince is no more than the embodiment of this primordial propensity of nature to put itself up for display. By discovering nature's "mischievous secret", the Ice Age prince instigates the process of degeneration from the origin; a slow and gradual decline from originary self-presence which begins with Paleolithic "costume dramas" in which, to employ de Man's phrasing, "fictional seductions resist the transformation into literal acts" (de Man, 1979, p. 159), passes through the circulation of writing and ultimately culminates in money understood as a kind of literalized adornment in which nature's secret penchant for ornaments has been laid bare for everyone to see. In this way, the discovery of ornamental use of nature both enables sociality as a kind of compulsive game of circular deferrals from the literal to the figurative but also threatens its ultimate breakdown should the rules of this game ever be fully deciphered.

In "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense", Nietzsche, unburdened by Rousseau's moralistic<sup>11</sup> investment in the game itself, bluntly lays out its rules:

If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable: but that is the way it is with the seeking and finding of 'truth' within the rational sphere [...] [The investigator into such truths] forgets that the original intuitive metaphors *are* indeed metaphors and takes them for the things themselves (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 251).

Framing Rousseau's argument in Nietzschean terms, we could say that money is a pretense of this discovery which is, unlike writing, performed entirely without the participation of the disingenuously bewildered "investigator". But precisely because money accomplishes this inaugurating gimmick of sociality in the sheer absence of a subject, money also turns this game of hide and seek into a kind of Russian roulette in which the festival of revealing and withholding can at any moment collapse on itself (the sneak peek can all too quickly turn into a spoiler). Žizek argues along similar lines in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

The social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are *not* aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality *whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants* – if we come to "know too much", to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself (Žizek, 2008, p. 15).

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche's disdain for Rousseau and his projection of benevolence onto nature is well-documented. In *Daybreak*, for example, Nietzsche refers to him as a "moral tarantula" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 3) and, anticipating Derrida, identifies an entire epoch of moralistic conceptualization of nature as "the age of Rousseau" (*ibid.*, p. 16). For a detailed account of Nietzsche's critique of Rousseau's moralism, see Ansell-Pearson, 1991; Ure, 2006.

For Rousseau, much like for Žižek, sociality is not merely a game: it is a game which depends upon the strategically partial occlusion of its own set of rules. To the extent that money proper brings this game to its final conclusion, it can be said that sociality ultimately refers to the collective fantasy of its own premonetary past. The foundational operation of money, in other words, is one of projecting the belief in its own prelapsarian history: a history of a melodious orality at the water hole. The phantasmatic positing of its own outside is what money ultimately *is*. This is how, de Man tells us, we should understand the true nature of Rousseau's "economic determinism": at its core, society is no more than the double operation of proliferating monetary relations and, at the same time, of warranting the endless series of speculations on how it might have looked like had this proliferation never taken place.

The archeologically discovered prince appears as an attempt on Graeber's and Wengrow's part to keep the game going while at the same time partially disclosing its circular grammar. Indeed, the princely crowns and scepters reveal the real function of money proper; they are, to borrow Nietzsche's formulation, no more than "worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins" (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 250). The innocent days when inequality was contained within the boundaries of "ritual costume dramas" name the moment in which the prehistoric royal regalia still retained its "sensory impact", in which its true ontological status *as image* has not yet been compromised (i.e., the moment in which its innate figurality has not yet been "worn-out" and hence mistaken for reality as such). However, at the very moment in which the prince's discovery of proto-money brings the game of sociality to a stalemate, the scene of a feigned discovery attributed to the prince is redoubled; this time by an archeological discovery of the princely bones themselves. And just like that, we are again thrown back into what Nietzsche describes as the perennial game of "beating around the bush". In this sense, the main wager of *The Dawn of Everything* is an attempt to reconcile the game of sociality with the full disclosure of its cryptography: "If we started out just playing games, at what point did we forget that we were playing?" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, p. 115). Money therefore completes the historical trajectory of the project of sociality: societies start and end with money.

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