

The beauty of the epidemiological approach came from its theoretical strength. Its weakness came from the difficulty of demonstrating occurrence in actual, non-historically trivial cases. David Wengrow's book is a serious attempt to do this, it is probably the only such serious attempt. Whether he is successful in this enterprise seems to me less important than the courage of such an attempt in an anthropology which is becoming ever more pusillanimous. We can only move forward by taking risks. In the case of this book the totally admirable risk taking also involves mastering and discussing completely different types of disciplines. This is, after all, what Darwin did when he combined ideas coming from people such as pigeon fanciers with those of his more scientific work.

The theoretical strength of Dan Sperber's epidemiological approach was that it recognised the necessity of taking into account species-wide human characteristics without running the risk, so evident in previous approaches of this kind, of self-fulfilling reductionism such as we find, for example, in Malinowski's need theory or in Freudian psychology. The approach also avoids the common mistake of ignoring the obvious fact that representations are more usually borrowed than the fruit of individual creation. The whole point of the epidemiology of representations is that it predicted recurrences within populations without invoking over-strong explanations of specific cases. These could only be explained by the *coincidence* of general human predispositions and specific historical circumstances.

David Wengrow attempts to do this in *The Origins of Monsters* with a fascinating wealth of examples. Wengrow therefore explains a coincidence. That is the coincidence of cognitively equipped humans with a specific development occurring very late in the history of mankind and only in certain places. These places are principally Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. Only the first two geographical locations are discussed in the book in any detail.

Since we are talking of the coincidence of two types of very different phenomena it is important to be clear what these two sides, so to speak, are. I would like Wengrow to tell me if I am correct in what I take these to be.

On one side the author accepts the existence of certain general human characteristics from the work of a number of writers such as Scott Atran, Dan Sperber, Pascal Boyer and, more recently, developmental psychologists such as Susan Carey and Liz Spelke. The problem which much of this recent literature considers and which is most difficult for the anthropologist wanting to take this work into account is how far very young children's predispositions are modified, changed or lost through development—especially development in specific historical contexts. (This second aspect is raised by the points made in the citations by Tomasello which form the basis of the conclusion.) (Clearly, if these predispositions were to get obliterated through ontogenic development in specific historical contexts they would have no explanatory value for the kind of things considered in Wengrow's book.)

These general human characteristics taken on board by Wengrow are three. Firstly, there is the proposal that infants display a privileged interest in human as well as non-human animals. This privileged interest is especially focussed on self-generated movements, eyes, and certain facial features. There is by now a mass of evidence for this which, even if I was competent, I will not review.

Secondly, Wengrow takes on, mainly from Atran, the idea that there is a general human tendency to classify the natural world in essentialist ways, thereby creating a non-Darwinian understanding of categorical differences between species.

Thirdly, Wengrow takes on from Sperber, Boyer and others the suggestion that certain systematic limited contradictions of how the world is intuitively conceived become interesting and, as a result,

super catchy. It is obvious that representations of the composite creatures discussed in the book would be candidates for this kind of catchiness.

(I will say nothing here of subsequent work which has questioned the specific modular view of the mind proposed by the writers on which Wengrow relies.)

Now for the other side of things. According to Wengrow the historically specific occurrences which stimulate and encourage the type of composites discussed by Wengrow are, above all, the growth of urbanisation and/or states (surprisingly, given Wengrow's subsequent work, these two factors are not much differentiated here).

Associated with the growth of towns and state three further factors are emphasised by Wengrow: standardisation, mechanical reproduction (mainly through seals) and cultural exchange.

The coincidence of these two sides is what (Wengrow argues) causes the salience of composites. This is a bold and fascinating thesis. The composites from dynastic Egypt and Mesopotamian states cannot but unsettle and interrogate any visitor to the great Museums of the world. The reasons for their existence here proposed are much more powerful than the alternatives reviewed by Wengrow.

Obviously there may well be some particularist objections to the argument such as whether there is something truly distinctive about the composites discussed. Are these truly distinct, as Wengrow argues, from other famous examples of the presence of composites such as those from the west coast of north America or Island Oceania? There is also the question whether exclusively concentrating on material culture, as the archaeologist must, while ignoring, for example, mythology, is theoretically legitimate. (Discussing these niggly points does not seem appropriate in a forum such as this.)

Putting these problems aside, I am left with the central question which the book raises. Is the coincidence that the book argues for a compelling explanation for the occurrence of the types of composites Wengrow discusses?

Some elements seem to me unproblematic. It seems right and very important to stress the connection between the state, standardisation of all sorts, and mechanical reproduction.

More challenging is the proposed connection, or affinity, between composites and urban states. As a first step we can accept with James Scott (cited on page 110) that a characteristic aspect of the development of states is the fact that they impose incompleteness on the much more coherent constitutive communities they absorb.

However, accepting this point is still a long way from seeing a causative connection between this political fact and the presence of relatively standardised types of images or carvings of composites occurring in these states. Further elements along the causation trail connecting states/towns and composites are proposed in chapter 6. There Wengrow talks of three modes: transformative, integrative and protective. I do not, however, see how these connect up with the general theories of the epidemiologists Wengrow discusses. Am I missing something there? Probably, but, if that is so, I would like Wengrow to spell this out in further exchanges in the forum.