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David Wengrow, *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xx & 217. £14.99. ISBN 978-0-19-280580-5 (Hbk).

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This ambitious study by David Wengrow of ‘what makes civilization’ seeks to introduce readers to social development in the ancient Near East and how this has affected the subsequent formation of the modern West. The book itself is arranged into two main sections. Part one consists of eight chapters about interconnections through trade, culture, urbanism, technology, religion, and kingship in the ancient Near East. Section two follows with two chapters concerning the discovery of the ancient Near East by European states in the late 18th to early 20th Centuries and the related scholarship associated with political events in the contemporary West. With these two separate sections Wengrow aims to prove that ‘both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society fed from a common “cauldron of civilization”’ (p.xviii) and also that past civilizations are ever present in more recent political junctures within the Western world (p.xix).

In the concise preface which precedes the two main sections Wengrow sets the scene by placing the following study into its modern context. He opens with a discussion of the looting of the Iraq Museum in 2003 and the ‘death of history’, as Gertrude Bell put it (p.xiii). This is followed by a brief introduction to what civilizations are, where and when they have existed and an outline of the aims for this book. Really this short preface sets the pace for the entire study: fast moving and concise, occasionally reading more like a bibliographical compilation of sources – and yet through Wengrow’s style of writing it remains a compelling read.

One theme which prevails through the entire book is one of distance; Wengrow notes this himself (p.154). Distance, he states, between: sources of

materials and areas of consumption, mortals and gods, subjects and kings and antiquity and modernity. All of these different aspects of distance are alluded to in the chapters which make up sections one and two.

One could be excused for thinking that this book is unoriginal, and Wengrow admits this to the reader (p.13). He maintains that he seeks to prove that interrelations did occur between states of the ancient Near East, and at the same time show why and how Egypt and Mesopotamia were differentiated from one another. One particular modern scholar is singled out by Wengrow as a reason for him producing this study - Samuel Huntington 'late Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University'. In 1993 he published 'The Clash of Civilizations' and stated, 'The early civilizations in the valleys of the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus and Yellow rivers also did not interact'. To this Wengrow writes, 'Part I of this book is a reply, by an archaeologist, to Huntington's claims about the lack of interaction between early civilizations.'

The scope of the book is enormous and would be impossible to cover sufficiently in only 176 pages. Wengrow therefore steers away from a narrative history of social development in the Near East, and instead opts to focus on past studies, and specific elements in social development. The eight chapters of the first section therefore concentrate on cultural borrowing, trade, agriculture, urbanism, the spread of urbanism, technology, religion, and kingship. The information in these chapters is remarkably up-to-date and covers a breadth of time from 9000 BC to 1000 BC. It is a testament to Wengrow's knowledge of the topic that it incorporates archaeological sources, ancient literary texts, early and modern European studies, and more recent scholarly material to compile the evidence towards civilization development. Occasionally more time could have been devoted to certain sources, which due to space limitations have been only briefly mentioned – such as Edward Said on page 161. It is also unfortunate that due to the scope of the study certain case studies of social organisation are given less attention than deserved, particularly with regards to Egyptian urbanism and the Giza pyramid town (p.142).

Section two of the book is markedly shorter than the first at only 23 pages. It focuses primarily on the Napoleonic regime in Egypt and the further Egyptomania which swept through Europe. Wengrow cleverly makes the history of the ancient Near East more appropriate to our modern perception of civilization – notably by stating that the West’s perception of the East as a cultural antithesis to civilization is due to ‘Europe’s attempt to grapple with its own, more recent history of sacral kings and dynastic power’ (p.154). Cultural borrowing has become another overarching theme throughout the book, as has how the transfer of this cultural knowledge has been absorbed by the West during its discovery of the ancient Near East to produce an image appropriate for the contemporary political situation in Europe at the time, particularly the French Revolution. The pictographic sources chosen by Wengrow illustrate his arguments well – although their position on plates in the centre of the book and lack of referencing in the text make this association less obvious.

My only criticism of section two is that the limited space Wengrow devotes to this in the book has resulted in a lack of appreciation for the modern Near East. While his focus would have always remained on the perception of the ancient Near East in the modern West, it would have aided the reader’s understanding to have known how the modern Near East was/is perceived by the modern West. For this, sources such as Edward Said, who has already been mentioned, would have proven more useful and would have made this study even more relevant to a modern audience.

In his final conclusion Wengrow very briefly draws the two sections of his book together to discuss ‘what makes civilization’. Through the study he has drawn the distances - spatial, cosmological, and temporal - together to place the ancient Near East in its context for past and present. Despite the focus of the entire book being on civilizations, Wengrow ends on a very poignant question (p.176):

Yet by elevating civilizations to the pinnacle of human achievement, or seeking to orientate our future around an idealized image of what they might become, are we not simply raising up new gods where old ones have fallen? The problem, it seems, is both as old as time and as fresh as our tomorrows.

Finally, the further reading section at the end of the book is very difficult to search through, and would have benefitted perhaps by being a simple bibliography. The index is very extensive and comprehensive for readers to find most searchable items in the book.

This book is very well thought out, it provokes readers to question themselves and the way they think about the world they live in while at the same time giving a historical insight into what made the civilizations we live in. It was clearly not intended for an academic audience, but would be very useful to students beginning research on areas such as the early Near East or perceptions of it in the West. This is certainly a book to inspire theories and begin further research. But one has to question if this book is as relevant now, in 2011, as it was in 2010 when first published. In this short period the Near East has seen a dramatic change and the revolutions we have seen across the region may have turned the tables of this book around on themselves.