Book Review of The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence and Our Obsession with Human Origins

Stefanos Geroulanos
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Reviewed by SHUMON T. HUSSAIN
Multidisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Humanities (MESH), Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Cologne, Weyertal 59, 50937 Cologne; and, Institute for Prehistoric Archaeology, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Cologne, Weyertal 125, 50931 Cologne, GERMANY; ORCID 0000-0002-6215-393X; s.t.hussain@uni-koeln.de

Prehistory continues to throw its long shadow over the present. It is indeed easy to overlook (or ignore) to what extent the way we think and act in the here-and-now and how we imagine ourselves and the future relies on powerful ideas about human prehistory. In Germany, a recent media outrage erupted around the prospective host of the cultural TV programe 'ttt' (*Titel, Thesen, Temperamente*), who apparently contributed to Bro and pick-up culture literature peaking in the late 1990s, legitimating some of the thereby taken positions by referring to masculine nature and human evolution:

> '[…] I think this somewhat supports my thesis that it is something arche-masculine, as a matter of principle my [male] sexuality […] is perhaps based on rape; and society and morality, which we have promoted in Europe through 2000 years of Christianization, have educated us to not do so anymore.'[1]

The human deep past is also regularly conjured up in the context of what Gavin Weedon and Paige Patchin (2022) have called 'Anthropocene fitness culture' comprising such diverse trends as PaleoDiet, CrossFit, mud running, or bushcraft. As Lavi and colleagues (2024) have similarly observed for the British discourse, supposedly original hunter-gatherer lifestyles 'are presented as both the antithesis and antidote to perceived crises in contemporary society,' a tendency also evident in various neospiritualisms fuelled by the pervasive planetary crisis and the desire to re-cultivate intimacy with the living world and nature writ large (Pitcher 2022)—a connection diagnosed to have been severely crippled by modern 'civilization.' In response to what she perceives as the many unrepairable pathologies of 'industrial civilization' and unsustainable capitalist modes of production and consumption, Vierich (2008: 12), for instance, invokes hunter-gatherer lifestyles as the (only) modes of human planetary habitation with a real future:

> '[t]here may be more hunter-gatherers in the year 2100 on this planet than there were in the year 2000. And perhaps some of today's communication technologies will come with us all into that future. If the hunter-gatherers of 2100 have cell phones, and wireless laptops, to keep in touch with the rest of the human family, it will be an interesting world.'

But such ideas not only feature prominently in public conversations, they have also become a mainstay of academic books and articles. Yuval Harari (2015), for example, locates humanity's putative eco-destructive inclination—identifying *Homo sapiens* as a sort of Uber-invasive species—and its supposedly universal genocidal tendencies squarely in our evolved nature shaped in deep prehistory, and Steven Pinker (2012) attempts to mobilize prehistoric evidence to paint a picture of an inherently violent past that can only be overcome by modern institutions such as the state and, most importantly, Enlightenment (Pinker 2019), thereby recasting the deep past in Hobessian terms, as 'nasty, brutish and short.' Archaeologists equally participate in such qualifications. Curtis Marean (2015), for instance, proclaims:

> 'With the ability to operate in groups of unrelated individuals, H. sapiens was well on its way to becoming an unstoppable force. But, I surmise, it needed a new technology – projectile weaponry – to reach its full potential for conquest […] a spectacular new kind of creature was born, one whose members formed teams that each operated as a single, indomitable predator. No prey – or human foe – was safe. […] They became the alpha predators on land and, eventually, sea. This ability to master any environment was the key that finally opened the door out of Africa and into the rest of the world. Archaic human groups that could not join together and hurl weapons did not stand a chance against this new breed.'

In a recent edited volume entitled *A Criminology of the Human Species: Setting an Unsettling Tone* (Eski 2023: 23), it is

> 'imagine[d] how the unique human capacities of the opposable thumb and the precision of our brain have enabled us to imagine and (physically) bring about progress. However, these same capacities have also allowed us to exploit and annihilate other human beings and human-like species on a mass scale. Specifically, the Neanderthal.'

Another unpublished manuscript on Academia.edu advocates an 'alternative perspective' to human history premising 'that people fall into "evolutionary types" […] based on our ancestral modes of subsistence: foraging, farming and herding.' The author goes on to map human 'temperaments' to these different subsistence strategies

concluding things like:

> '[a] police state can be seen as a farmer reaction to a real or perceived threat, removing risks and establishing orders by taking power from individuals and putting it in the hands of authority. We can reframe the Hegelian dialectic in political terms, calling one force conservative and the opposing force progressive. Most of recorded human history is nothing but seeing those forces play out'....or....'[m]ost of today's populist leaders are pastoralist types who make big promises, appeal to nationalism, conjure up external threats and end up extracting a lot of wealth for themselves and their special friends (cronyism). Donald Trump in the US and Silvio Berlusconi in Italy are great examples of that.'[2]

These statements are not 'alternative history' in the critical and productive sense of the term, they are at best what was once called 'conjectural history' but in a clearly rampart, gone-mad guise.

Geroulanos' timely *tour de force* through the 18th, 19th and 20th century history of European and North American thought on 'prehistory' reminds us that none of these ideas are notably new or particularly original, and that conversations on human origins have always been a powerful catalyst of how people of diverse backgrounds and standings have placed themselves in history and motivated or at least legitimated their historical actions and projects (or those of others).

> '*Why* do we need to understand human origins? The answer is that the story of human origins has never really been about the past. […] Prehistory is about the present day; it always has been',

Geroulanos tells us (p. 6, original emphasis). He, in fact, goes on to show how engagements with 'prehistory' played a key role in the emergence of what with reference to thinkers such as Edward Said, Franz Fanon and Laura Mulvey has been termed the 'Western gaze', and how the growing obsession with prehistory directly contributed to some of the most harm-inducing human projects of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially European colonialism (and later imperialism) as well as fascism, in particular in National-socialist (NS) Germany. Geroulanos dedicates an entire chapter (Chapter 13) to carefully unpick how the 'Nazi' phenomenon represents a gloomy culmination of a much broader and longer history of thinking with and appealing to prehistory.

In all of this, Geroulanos attempts a sort of denaturalization of prehistory, exposing the historical entanglements, imports, and legacies of the notion as well as shattering the all-too-common view of prehistory as a neutral and largely factual endeavour. In agreement with earlier work on the subject that has concluded that '[p]rehistory is an invention of the nineteenth century' (Stavrinaki 2022: 9), in the course of twenty chapters, the author traces how discourses on prehistory were shaped by their changing, broader historical contexts but also developed a dynamic of their own fuelled by a handful of sticky concepts that until this day largely determine how we imagine, take up, and research the deep human past. This grown constellation of ideas and modes of thinking with and against prehistory cannot be separated, as Geroulanos argues, from the making of Western modernity as a period and a particular historical horizon of thinking and acting in the world. *The Invention of Prehistory* can indeed be read as a colossal attempt to show how the discoveries of, first, *geological* deep time, and then, second, *human* deep time and the ensuring scientific developments increasingly pivoted prehistory as an unsung substitute of Christianity as the foundational mythology of European modernity. Although this is not the primary focus of the book, the attentive reader will notice how European discourses on prehistory are riddled by Christian religious concepts and figures of thought, some of which can even be charted into modern paleogenomics. This is no mere coincidence and clearly points to the function that 'prehistory' serves today in the societies that have come to dominate what is now called the Global North. Geroulanos maintains (p. 7),

> '[P]rehistory is, at its core, a device for creating meaning – for celebrating those who practice a particular idea of humanity and for demonizing those who don't'.

Geroulanos' impressive synthesis of the history and impact of the idea of prehistory almost reads, and to some extent deliberately so, like a recipe book comprising its constitutive conceptual registers and discursive structures.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by outlining how the 18th century forwarded a particular image of early humans as the 'children of history', which later matured into the 'childhood of man' rendering with far-reaching implications not only for the sorting and qualification of people through time but also through geographic space, exemplified in the juxtaposition of 'Orient' (*Morgenland*) and 'Occident' (*Abendland*) reifying the attendant models of development and progression as worldly order. The basic condition of early humans was a condition of lack and 'Natural Man' was contrasted with the sort of humanity created by 'civilization,' resulting in the vision of a timeless and order-defiant deep past (pp. 16–17). The implicit nature-culture construction coated prehistory as a 'state of nature' linked to ideas about natural warfare (e.g., Hobbes' *Warre*), corruptibility, purity (or naivety), and even freedom. Early humans were considered archetypically free, as 'Man is born free', but in its childhood, humanity was also morally immature and frivolous (p. 26).

Chapter 2 explores how the turn to the 19th century and its broader concerns with nation-building spurred ideas of the 'noble savage' and even a sense of prehistoric 'chivalry,' in the course of which imagined peoples such as the 'Germans' were stylized as freedom fighters and as a 'force of nature,' counteracting and eventually overcoming the excesses of civilization identified by some with the Romans, among others (pp. 33, 35). In an attempt to craft Self and Other, mapping invasions and conquests became a cultural technique of the time, a particular 'mnemonic code'

(p. 34) that continues to shape deep-time imaginaries until today. It is in the context of this 'mythic algorithm' of the past (p. 35) that race became a scaffold of deep-historical thinking, together with how speculations of the spread of original Indo-European languages promoting notions of a 'noble original stock' and an associated racial 'father/homeland' ought to be precisely pinpointed in space and time (p. 42). A particular 'myth of tomorrow' in this way demanded the cultivation of a complementary myth of prehistory.

Chapter 3 illustrates how the discovery of 'deep time' by geologists reconfigured visions of prehistory in the early 19th century, but in many ways also capitalized (and thus extended) on earlier construals of primitive people as far removed in time and hence inhabiting nature proper. Reconstructions of dinosaurs as carnivorous exemplars of nature fostered the idea that the deep past foremostly is a record of warfare and that waging combat and battle represents a 'general law of Nature' (p. 49). The past so became a violent landscape and an evolutionary battlefield—an 'ecosystem of brutality' (p. 50) easily contrasted with the 'fortress of civilization' (p. 51). Destruction and ruination were seen as merely the flipside of a deep history so envisioned; ruins were not only identified in the landscape but also in rudimentary ('useless') human organs—as 'leftovers'—and in cultural practices thought to be inherently 'non-Western' such as pierced earrings qualified as 'relics of lower civilizations' (p. 55 ff). Considering skulls as vestiges of deep time inscribes into this logic and helped to racialize the past and to compare Indigenous people with prehistoric humans (p. 60 ff).

Chapter 4 chronicles the deep intellectual crisis in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 and the ensuing scepticism on a linear model of big history, with progress being exiled from politics to the sciences, industrialization, and technology (p. 64). This momentous shift in thinking about the nature of history led to the 19th century obsession with 'stadial theory' and, in particular, three-stage models of evolution, mirrored in the savagery-barbarism-civilization triad and in Thomsen's three age system. This stageization of prehistory not only strengthened the comparison with Indigenous people (p. 65), it also, in the wake of the ensuing industrialization in Europe, promoted the idea that prehistory mainly unfolded through 'industrial' and (quasi-) 'technoscientific' progression, eventually flowing into the epoch-making idea that only iron was the true civilization-making material. This broader context also fostered extractivist and expansionist readings of the past (p. 68)—prehistoric cultures were cast as resource-mongering and diffusing across space; they were placed in the animism-religion-science sequence elaborated by anthropologists and identified with their crude material culture, developmental stasis, and their refusal to innovate, contrasting with Western civilizations deemed 'dynamic and in control of time' (p. 70). All of these constructions reignited and reinforced a racialized order of the past and justified the idea that some human 'industries' were living fossils from humanity's deep past, pre-empting the lingering binary between Europe and the rest (p. 72).

Chapter 5 traces important developments in evolutionary science and anthropology, which took a leading role in the making of prehistory in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They prominently tabled the question of the human—'[w]hat was the human[,] what is it *now*?'—'the central question as prehistory became the leading laboratory for conceptions of humanity' (p. 77, original emphasis). The publication of Darwin's *Decent of Man* in 1871, through its reification of the human-nonhuman divide *qua* its distinct treatment of the human through sexual selection, marks the rise of two prominent ideas; first, human evolution is not an evolution of races but of cultural differences (later to be capitalized on by various Social Darwinisms) (p. 81); and, second, 'civilized men' in Western societies are the product of continued 'self-domestication' (p. 89), not only foregrounding the maleness of evolution through sexual selection but also introducing the notion of superiority and applying the wild-domestic binary to human societies (p. 90). Culture was now neatly identified with language, encouraging the replacement of racial interpretations of the past with ethnic ones. Prehistory as an academic field was born in this time, when a 'New Science of Man' was erected through this optic, based on the idea of a universal humanity and inspired by the triumphalist experience of European and American wars and the promise for unification and advancement they embodied; this humanity could be mapped on a civilizatory axis and its practical purpose was to certify European hegemony—'some cultures had evolved further than others' (p. 81). The triumph of history and science was so joined together, and, with it, human nature emerged as the perhaps most decisive locus of past-making.

Chapter 6 discusses the lasting legacy of Marx and Engels' epochal writings on capital and communism on the trajectory of thinking prehistory. Through the lens of dialectic history, prehistory was equated with pre-capitalist societies and offered as the model for 'true socialist kinship' (p. 96) and 'primitive communism' (p. 97). This introduced a number of supposedly auto-implicative binaries that were mapped onto the division between deep past and present, notably solidarity/sharing vs. property, status vs. contract, and matriarchy vs. patriarchy (p. 96 ff). Influentially, this resulted in the classic narrative of the Neolithic revolution, imagined as a tipping point of *all* of these binaries. Ironically, the focalization of family and kinship through socialist writings helped to center female kidnapping as a mechanism for 'primitive marriage' (p. 98), naturalizing not only the war-like image of the past but, with it, rape and women themselves, cast as the objects (not the subjects) of sexual selection. Monogamy was mapped onto civilization, polygamy onto savagery (p. 99). Discussions of property were tied to the notion of demographic growth and economic surplus (p. 103). Property was identified as a male logic and to provoke mechanisms of control, authority, and dominance emanating in stratified societies, while totemic practices were cast as ruins of a female deep past when society was pure and its members equal. These ideas were merged with the emphasis on technological progres-

sion and physical power as a motor of evolution (p. 106) and the price of civilization identified as societal 'corrosion' and 'oppression' (p. 106 ff). Arguments for the ancestrality of primitive communism were levelled also to oppose the claim that 'capitalism was natural,' a geopolitical topos of the second half the 20th century, but also to draw on prehistory as evidence for communism being anachronistic and an aberrant form of society (p. 109). Importantly, the 'Earth Mother' and 'Mother-Right' discussions illustrate the role that these invocations played in positioning the past as that what 'seemed most distant in modern life' (p. 112)—equating what *felt* most distant (and either aspirable or despicable) from any given historical vantage point with the *reality* of the most distant past.

Chapter 7 explores the notion of the 'disappearing native,' which, rendered as the 'perishing races of uncivilized man,' raised a moral dilemma akin to slavery (p. 115). Even though the second half of the 19th century saw the structural and biological genocide of various Indigenous people, especially in the Americas and in Tasmania, but also witnessed the denunciation of slavery as immoral, Indigeneity was stylized as an active threat to modernity, and hence as an antithesis to progress and civilization (p. 116). Placing Indigenous people in the ancestral human past imagined as a state of nature helped to naturalize their 'disappearance' as extinction and their expropriation as an inevitable course of history (p. 117). Placing them close to animality invited Darwinian descriptions of their survival or not as 'survival of the fittest' (p. 118) as 'cruelty [simply] was the way of the world' (p. 117). Eugenic readings became widespread and linked Indigenous 'extinction' to the lack of self-domestication and the inability to control their environment, concluding they are 'fossil man' (p. 120), helping to rationalize the annexation and management of their lands. The result was a true anthropological obsession to inventorize these people before it was too late, and in indulging into such 'salvage anthropology' this further reinforced the narrative of their extinction as inevitable and hence natural (p. 124 ff)—not least due to the implied 'urgency' to act, it became a new justification for anthropology itself (p. 122). The parallels to some contemporary discourses on species extinction are not merely coincidental. Importantly, however, the talk of the disappearing native withdrew the respective people of any agency, they were rendered passive, and it was therefore the responsibility of mature civilizations to oversee their fate, who mainly responded by 'preserving' the leftovers of their cultures by forcefully transferring them to European museums, etc. Because Indigenous people could not protect themselves, they needed *to be protected*, and one way of doing so was to keep them in European zoos—completing their tragic zoologization (p. 127). The discussion lucidly illustrates how even seemingly 'good' intentions can have devastating effects and contribute to the normalization of colonial structures of thought and action.

Chapter 8 explores the conceptualization of Neanderthals as mirrors of the human and powerfully illustrates that 'what they mean is still decided in advance by the concepts and biases they are made to embody' (p. 131 ff). As early 20th century portrayals emphasized the fall of Neanderthals and their extinction as inevitable and natural, they quickly provoked counter-voices positioning them as the 'postcolonial subalterns whose voice and humanity wait to be freed' (p. 132). But in recent years they have also become 'a darling of the extreme Right' as they are construed as the original Europeans, the true Indigenous people of Europe before its corruption with African biological heritage through *Homo sapiens*. Early Neanderthal discussions played an important role both in introducing and destabilizing the distinction between 'race' and 'species' (p. 137) and the rise of Darwinism fortified their simian stereotyping, often contrasted with the caveman stereotype of early *Homo sapiens* (p. 139). Geroulanos shows how these views shaped the way Neanderthals were visualized, how their interpretation was configured by ideas of racial purity and a 'human minimum,' and how they served as metonyms for European colonial subjects, an overcome past, or as a proof of white superiority, all supposedly certified by the sciences that helped to craft these images (p. 144). Importantly, Neanderthals also helped to forge (and justify) the binary of cannibalism and burial (p. 150) and are used to this day to stage the past as an arena of sex and violence, reflected not least in the more recent idea of an original, deep-time Neanderthal genocide (p. 156). These conversations, Geroulanos contends, have 'everything to do with making Neanderthals useful' (p. 158); they have 'everything to do with modern European views and very little with the actual bones and skulls that had been found' (p. 144).

Chapter 9 introduces and situates a key concept coined at the dawn of the 20th century—the 'thin veneer,' originally referring to 'the savage beneath the thin veneer of civilization' (p. 161). Again, it is in the ambivalence of the concept that its historical and discourse-making efficacy lies. The thin veneer can either be read as a mere façade or as a protective carapace, and its appeal is thus inseparable from what 'civilization' is taken to mean. The thin veneer formalized the Darwinian idea of self-domestication through civilization, but maintained the deep past kept a hold deep within the human; savagery was not only a condition or evolutionary stage, it was inbuilt and morality was fragile. Through the thin veneer, stratigraphic thinking or the more general idea of evolution producing layers (p. 163 ff) became systematized, responding to the intuition that humans had indeed *evolved*. This was promoted by recapitulation theory and Haeckel's famous assertion that embryonic development replays the evolutionary history of the human species (p. 163). The savage was not only to be found outside of Europe, it also resided *within*—echoed in the mobilization of new concepts such as so-called 'atavistic' traits (p. 164). The image of *Tarzan* is a powerful expression of the thin veneer idea (p. 165), and civilizatory achievements were said to be merely 'skin deep' (they were quite literally understood as 'second skin'); as such, they are constantly under threat to be swiped away through the omnipresence of savagery (both outside and inside), and perhaps especially so in the European colonies as many contemporaries theorized and feared (p. 166). This also meant that savage-

ry carried a sense of authenticity, propelling 'instinct' and 'passion' into the realm of aspirable qualities (p. 168), and when paired with the supposedly war-prone nature of savagery, provided new grounds to celebrate tapping beyond the veneer to overcome enemies in war—the veneer 'had become a weapon of war' (p. 172), conjured notably in the two world wars of the 20th century (pp. 172–174) and used to lionize a 'New Man' for a new age (p. 173). Geroulanos reminds us that the thin veneer thereby played a key role in the acceptance of evolutionary theory as it was intuitive and provided ample of useful resources for justification (p. 174).

Chapter 10 places the development of psychoanalysis and a new science of the mind, which would later be merged into what today is called evolutionary psychology, within this particular historical context. Psychoanalysis powerfully drew on prehistoric imaginations and coined the influential notion of a 'world behind the world' (p. 179) used to certify the search for 'deeper structures' underwriting all human life. The idea of the 'Unconscious' was the epoch-making contribution of these attempts during the interwar period. It joined two powerful concepts and attached them with new significance—the 'childhood of man' and 'primitive strata of mental development' (p. 179). Freud's Ödipus complex was introduced to understand basic patterns of human behavior and as a new key to explain culture and history (p. 180), all based on male sexual fantasies and desires cast as original and authentic. The idea that Indigenous people and other savages —like children—more readily give in to their libido, because it is only under conditions of civilization that the conscious ego imposes constraints on it, was born here (p. 182). Freud positioned marriage and the Ödipus complex as the birth of humanity proper and so helped to frame human origins as a story of guilt, murder, and the domestication of sexuality, thereby merging Darwinian, Christian, anthropological, and other strands of speculation current at the time (p. 184). The Unconscious was in this way found to be a 'living link' to the beginnings of humanity otherwise inaccessible, but human history proper also became identified as a 'history of repression' (p. 184), and prehistory so re-certified as the original context of human freedom, especially sexual freedom. But such freedom could only lead to conflict and murder, Freud surmised, and freedom therefore needed to be constrained through group authority; Freud coevally identified the 'primal father' or 'leader' as a response to the manic crowd's 'extreme passion for [such] authority.' This construal of a severe gap between appearance and reality had far-reaching consequences, inspiring conspiration theories until this day and legitimizing the search for a 'secret' logic and invisible 'geometry' of history populated by unknown 'communal laws' science or those, with special gifts to peer behind the veil, are able to discover (p. 186). Jung's retrieval of 'archetypes' of collective unconsciousness (p. 187), with its emphasis on myth as a motor of the psyche, thereby helped to re-introduce racial sentiments as it affirmed the possibility of a 'racial soul' that can traverse the depth of history (and prehistory) (p. 189). Many of these ideas, including Jung's masculinism and conservatism, are today refurbished by popular Canadian psychologist and self-help guru Jordan Peterson.

Chapter 11 is dedicated to the history of the 'flood(ing)' metaphor and its discursive entanglement with the stipulation of past bounded, ethnic movements and 'barbaric' invasions up until the first half of the 20th century. It highlights how watery figures served (and still serve) to naturalize grand patterns of history and to dehumanize those identified with the flood (p. 197), while affirming their place—*qua* their aquatic filiation—on the other side of civilization defined primarily by domestication and agriculture—and hence through terrestriality. This aquatic Othering was frequently employed in conjunction with the image of the 'horde' to qualify non-Western people or people deemed outside of civilization, reinforcing racial panic (p. 199) and the notion of Europe as a fortress in need of constant defence against the invading counter-civilizatory forces (p. 202). The past was so staged as a permanent 'Siege of Europe' (p. 209). Aquatic Othering also implied a rendering of 'nomadic' people as 'backward' and, through their naturalization, as 'invariant' (p. 200), directly playing into persistent stereotypes of forager societies. Again, maps with arrows as they continue to dominate scientific discourses in modern deep-time archaeology play into and reproduce these imaginaries (pp. 200–204). As Geroulanos shows, much of this was spurred by historical anxieties of rootlessness (p. 200), the implicit equation of nomadism and natural disaster further encouraged by racism and antisemitism (p. 204), and the identification of socialist and communist forces as uprooting (and as a red [natural or unnatural] affliction), all playing into anti-immigration and 'Great Replacement' rhetorics until today (p. 210).

Chapter 12 charts how the past and deep past were drawn upon and used to commit one of the most severe crimes against humanity in the entire history of our species—the Holocaust planned and executed by the Nazi regime in Germany between 1933 and 1945. As a German, this chapter is particularly difficult to read and it must suffice here to say that Nazi Germany stands for the erratic amalgamation and re-articulation of many of the key concepts encountered so far, ushering in a sad reminder of the efficacy of prehistory in the historical present. Yet Nazi Germany and its atrocities, not only against millions of European Jews, were only possible because 'Europeans already believed in a blend of at least some of these ideas' (p. 218), and this is chiefly because of the specific trajectory of historical concept development and discussion to which both scientists and non-scientists contributed —a bleak reminder also for some of today's hijacked discourses.

Chapter 13 introduces air to the equation of water and earth. The possibility of aerial bombing, and its documented devastations during World War II, terrified Europeans and reconfigured stadial theories of progress (p. 234). Arial bombing, only possible through technological advancement, was both a demonstration of superiority and civilizatory prowess ('air superiority' and 'air power') and posed a moral dilemma, requiring justification and rationaliza-

tion when deployed. Bombing was deemed 'necessary,' for example, in order to 'pacify' Native people across Africa (p. 234) or to bring 'law and order' to 'backwards,' 'warlord-ridden' nations (p. 241), and some argued that 'terror from the air' would only apply to armed conflicts between civilized states (p. 235). But the anxiety was not only moral as bombing literally promised to throw the bombed back into deep history since it could strip away all that modern civilization stood for. That the Other would acquire bombs of their own so emerged as an Ur-anxiety and joined 'flooding' in this regard, that together the two threatened to bring down Western civilization altogether (p. 236). But bombing also spurred fascist fantasies that civilizatory supremacy could be demonstrated by and enforced through arial dominance, and both in fascist Italy and Germany a futurist aesthetic emerged that staged and celebrated technologically advanced aircraft and its infrastructure (p. 241). The US utilization of atomic bombs against Japan in 1945 resurfaced the moral dilemma, but was also taken to showcase that 'one could not show superiority and technological power without embracing barbarism – the beast under the thin veneer' (p. 247). The new world order of the post-war area was consequently forged by projecting a reconfigured stadial theory based on technological capacities into geographic space (e.g., developed-developing-underdeveloped countries) and the ensuing Cold War was built on the premise that bombs can upend futures and destroy one's place in modernity.

Chapter 14 chronicles how theology and paleontology converged in the interwar period to forge a new vision of evolution and the human place in the cosmos. The arena of human origins was drawn upon to argue for an overarching spiritual teleology—a unification of matter and spirit—in the course of which a new planetary sphere—the *noosphere*—had emerged and would guide future human transformation towards the so-called 'Omega point,' as the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin argued (p. 255). The deep past was accordingly reconfigured to insert a *sense* into the struggles and hardships of the two world wars and to argue that spiritual evolution (or the development of the mind more generally) is the true pinnacle of humanity and its destiny (human evolution *is* cognitive evolution). This not only endowed prehistory with all sorts of new spiritualisms and made it an attractive site for metaphysical speculation, it also ushered in a critique of traditional humanism and paved the way for an 'evolutionary humanism' (p. 261), fantasies of universal cosmic progress (Huxley), and it pre-empted the modern (eugenic) figure of the transhuman (p. 260). The classic idea of evolution as *self-transcendence* was born, not only perpetuated by the credo of mind over matter but also through the idea of human evolution as *nature transcendence*.

Chapter 15 examines the post-war struggles to come to terms with both the unity and the diversity of humanity, with anthropologists taking the lead in attempting to dismantle the spectre of difference as racial (p. 268). The chapter is a timely reminder that, again, supposedly 'good' intentions, such as the antiracist agenda of the newly founded UNESCO, can powerfully contribute to reinforcing racist sentiments and their inherent Eurocentrisms (p. 272). The inability of scientists, notably from the natural sciences, to come to terms with and abandon the notion of race altogether ironically led to its substitution with 'human groups' or 'ethnic groups' without altering much of its core (p. 274)—a troubled legacy that lives on in modern prehistoric research. Spearheaded by Lévi-Strauss, evolutionism was accordingly criticized as contributing to the disintegration of Indigenous societies by denying them their humanity; while 'Europeans believed they were creating equality [] they were, in fact, destroying complexity and difference' (p. 280). UNESCO's mission of education had ultimately only deepened the harm induced to those who are different.

Chapter 16 explores the role of cave art in the making of prehistory. It underscores the importance of the cave as a core motif in European thought and how its strong associations with eroticism, terror, regeneration, authenticity, and otherworldliness, but also its conceptualization as the prototypical place outside or at the fringes of civilization, shaped interpretations of prehistoric cave art from early on (pp. 284–287). Cave art was instrumental to universalizing religion as a product of human evolution, re-tabling older stadial triads such as the supposed succession of animism, religion, and science. Cave art was used as evidence for the naturalness of spirituality and religion, reflected not least in Lascaux's portrayal as the 'Sistine Chapel of Prehistory' (p. 293). Interpretations of cave art remained infused by colonial ideas of inferiority, i.e., that Paleolithic people did not understand what they saw and experienced, and thus sought to deploy 'sympathetic magic;' realism was invoked because ancient art was identified with the literal, while modern art was supposedly not meant literally, it is 'symbolic' (p. 291)—a polarity subsequently levelled (and rather blatantly used) to argue that Paleolithic art marks the dawn of 'modern human behavior.' Again, art served as a lens to re-affirm *Homo sapiens* superiority, to stylize Europe as the heartland of artists, and to develop theories of institutional evolution because art was supposed to require artists—both an anachronism and a Eurocentrism. This artist-centric view remains consequential—'power rested with the artist' (p. 291) and such power, for example, to see and render visible what others could not, aligned the artist with the shaman, not only giving way to the hegemonic interpretation of cave art as shamanism, but also picturing the artist as through and through male. The nexus of artist and shaman ultimately helped to forge the powerful idea that cave art equates the dawn of modernity (p. 297) and records how 'Man had first announced himself' (p. 303)—a 'man' of course coated in Western clothing.

Chapter 17 traces the formation of another key concept in thinking prehistory of the post-war period—the 'killer ape.' It shows how the reconfiguration of modern paleoanthropology, through discoveries such as the Taung Child and the recognition of the *Australopithecus* branch of human evolution, resulted in the re-affirmation of a violent deep past. This idea was promoted by and coevally shaped

a general understanding of human evolution as fierce and competitive—a *predatory* transition 'from ape to man' (p. 314), not coincidentally placed into the broader context of the African Apartheid with its portrayals of Black people as primitive and violent. This killer ape condition of ancestral humanity (or pre-humanity) not only showed itself in cannibalism, it was also, when the thin veneer could not repel it, unmistakably articulated by the two devastating world wars—it became a foundation of world history writ large (p. 315). The development of the Out of Africa thesis and its strong leanings to diffusionism centered on the idea of a single geographic origin in fact strengthened these ideas, and mapping the spread of civilizatory processes from Africa across the world became a core business. Ethology and the primate laboratory in Africa added ideas such as inborn aggression and territoriality to the mix (pp. 324–325), and they helped legitimate the influential notion that 'man had [not simply] feathered the weapon[,] [t]he weapon, instead, had feathered man' (p. 326). We have come full circle here as ongoing invocations of genocide as an evolved species-level inclination promoted by popular accounts à la Harari (2015) and the talk of supposedly violence- and aggression-leaning people (often reified as cultures or ethnicities) pays dividends to the killer ape trope.

Chapter 18 is complementary and traces the rise of the modern idea that humans are foremost technological beings. Being human now meant to manufacture tools, and then tools in order to craft other tools, inciting a never-ending feedback loop jumpstarting what is today called the Anthropocene. The human, again universalized, was increasingly pictured as a tool-built system (p. 331). Influenced by the promises of cybernetics, paleoscientists shifted their attention from brains and skulls to the body, how it functioned in its environment and operated as a dynamic, interlocked system self-catalyzing change over time; tools were not merely seen as human creations anymore, they 'interceded somewhere *between* nature and culture' (p. 335, original emphasis)—a view that increasingly supplanted the cerebral view of human evolution (p. 332). Oakley, influenced by the predatory, violence-stained view of the past, argued that bipedalism was a disadvantage and needed to be compensated (p. 334); new discoveries by the Leakeys in East Africa led them to imagine original tool-making as a story of interspecies competition from which only *Homo* emerged as tool-wielding (p. 336 ff); and the focus on tool systems and 'technical culture' pre-empted the shift from natural to cultural selection—tool-making was rendered as *the* human adaptation par excellence (p. 340), an 'extension of Man' (p. 338), and then a key part of the original 'extended phenotype' of the human species (Dawkins). Tools were now imagined as a liberating force in human evolution, they were said to have 'tamed' the human, and they had made brains into 'extraordinarily efficient storing computers' (p. 344), promoting the emergence of new concepts such as the operational sequence and a 'human (bodily) economy' (Leroi-Gourhan, p. 347). Tool-making was the new point of origins, argued to, over time, making possible and thus leading to language, urbanism, and industrialism (p. 348 ff), and it painted a dark vision of the technological future—the continuing loss of control through ongoing technological enslavement, ecological catastrophe, and self-destruction (p. 349).

Chapter 19 takes aim at the implicit capital-M 'Man' of human evolution (androcentric model) and exposes past and ongoing difficulties to escape its polar binds. It highlights how influential origin stories of the human as exemplified by Morris' *Naked Ape* (1994) continue to reap an imagined patriarchy and benefit from the premise of the primacy of sexual selection (p. 354), but that many of their responses, for example, Morgan's (1985) *The Descent of Woman* openly attacking Tarzanist fantasies, merely inverted the emphasis, thereby only re-affirming the male-female binary as the principal framework to study the deep past and thereby deepening the essentialization of the role of woman in human evolution (pp. 355–357). Anthropologically inspired approaches invoking the concept of the 'hunter-gatherer' paradoxically only reinforced this discursive dynamic. Ironically, even self-proclaimed feminists portrayed the deep past as stained in rape and male dominance to argue for the need of women to 'fight back' (and to overcome this past), but the resulting accounts only naturalized sexual violence as well as images of the defensive female and the protector male (p. 360). All of these accounts assigned fixed roles to both men and women, left no space for other possibilities and so essentialized gender (p. 363)—a *metaphysical gendered prehistory* was born. 'Images of prehistoric femininity were double-edged. They represented an overdue correction. But this correction wasn't without its own pitfalls', Geroulanos notes (p. 365). To overcome the binds of patriarchy, the careful exposition of the myths of prehistory contributing to its perpetuation hence becomes crucial (p. 367).

The final chapter (Chapter 20) charts the concept of 'war' and shows how questions about the ingrainedness of violence and the origins of warfare continue to deliver important self-image services for Western modernity. In 1871, the dominant ideology of liberal imperialism imprudently entailed that 'civilization stands opposed to war' (p. 369). The opposite claim is that 'civilization is war' (p. 371). Both visions have recurrently been invoked to stage a particular present and variously used and invoked prehistory to support their claims, but, as Geroulanos rightly points out, each answer given 'is about something more than the place of war in human life: it is about humanity itself' (p. 371). War is either stylized as a modern invention, as dependent on particular institutions such as armies, and thus argued to be merely a symptom of the broader history of states, or it is styled as something tribal and quickly linked to hunting as a form of proto-warfare and then argued to be transcended by the fruits of civilization, notably Enlightenment-spurred humanism and rationalism (e.g., Pinker 2012). What war *is* was accordingly re-defined over and over again, largely to fit into one's preferred view (p. 372), yet both positions were also fiercely critiqued. The principal question, however, always remained the same—who was ultimately to blame? Ancients or moderns? 'The question of when war

arose is mostly conceptual,' Geroulanos concludes (p. 378), and in all cases 'the past performs tasks for the present' so that 'readers become the real winners' as they can select what humanity they want to cherish and what humanity appeals to them, irrespectively of the consequences this may have for present and future (p. 387).

Making the past relevant is both inescapable and dangerous. So can we call prehistory a success?, Geroulanos asks (p. 396). In part, this may be the wrong question altogether, *The Invention of Prehistory* seems to suggest. 'Prehistory' has certainly lost its innocence, to paraphrase David Clarke (1973), who from early on insisted on the importance of *critical self-consciousness* for archaeology to claim scientific maturity. *The Invention of Prehistory* joins this astute chorus and reminds us that *historical self-consciousness* is at least equally important, perhaps even more important. Both research and the public have to grapple with the difficult realization that prehistory always was part and parcel of broader theories of civilization and that it has hardly escaped this bid until this day. Doing prehistory also meant to contribute to the great civilizatory mythologies of our time and it helped to rationalize, normalize, legitimate, and perpetuate the associated civilizatory projects. Almost all great prehistorians were theorists of civilization and the same is true for a wider public eagerly participating in the making of prehistory. *Prehistory so emerged in the self-image of those who made it*. This may sound unspectacular at first but, as keystone heritage disproportionally impacting present- and future-directed action and thought, prehistory fundamentally underpins the world we live in, and its key concepts, especially because they 'tend to escape their human designers and the institutions meant to house them' (p. 123), 'do more than we want them to; sometimes they hurt and even kill' (p. 161). Whether particular theories are true appears secondary then and often cannot be ascertained independently, but what 'work they do and at whose expense' can be (p. 9), and the book undertakes a monumental effort to lay bare some of these legacies and expenses as they continue to play out today.

The Invention of Prehistory is a refreshing must-read for anybody interested in the human deep past and thus not only for archaeologists, but archaeologists especially should take careful note of its implications, namely that it is no longer (and arguably never was) tenable to give in to the dangerous illusion that the weight of the data will eventually clear our view. We are, in fact, the only ones who can clear our view by working through and exposing its specific historical horizon and its many historically grown entrapments and constrictions. Geroulanos' book can only be the beginning and often only touches the tip of the iceberg, but it does a great job in outlining the complexity of the situation and what is (and may be) at stake. As Geroulanos points out, 'good, reliable science [of the deep past] becomes difficult to identify' (p. 397), and this is in large part because such science cannot be separated from its historical imports and the conceptual apparatus it brings to bear. Good science, it may indeed be argued, is thus perhaps precisely a science that cultivates the sort of *self-awareness* that *The Invention of Prehistory* works towards—a science that is radically self-critical and seeks to explore knowledge spaces beyond the constraints of all-too-implicit, all-too-convenient, and often all-too-harmful theories of civilization or modernity. Precisely because 'prehistory' is such a burdened yet key present-making project, we can no longer tolerate how it 'shackle[s] what is actually politically possible' (p. 11). *The Invention of Prehistory*, for all these reasons, truly is a reference book for the field, and one can only hope—I certainly do—that it will be widely read and become basic reading in the classroom.

ENDNOTES

[1]https://uebermedien.de/101568/ein-bro-fuer-die-kultur-die-berufung-von-thilo-mischke-zu-ttt-ist-ein-schlimmes-signal/

[2]Andreas Hofer, *Understanding History: Herders, Horticulturalists and Hunter-Gatherers*, Academia 2025 (last access 02.04.2025: https://www.academia.edu/66117227/Understanding_History_Herders_Horticulturalists_and_Hunter_Gatherers

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