

Democracy against *Homo sapiens* alpha: Reverse dominance and political equality in human history

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1 | INTRODUCTION

For tens of thousands of years Paleolithic hunter-gatherer communities lived in democratic systems. These democratic communities based their relations on power and freedom on what Christopher Boehm has called "reverse dominance hierarchy" systems, which, for much of human history guaranteed political equality among members of hunter-gatherer communities. The reverse dominance hierarchy is a principle that could be used today to rethink the foundations of current democracies and design political systems that ensure true political equality in our societies. To understand democracy in the history of *Homo sapiens* and to evaluate current democratic systems, it is necessary to broaden the usual limited perspective on democracy. Robinson (2010) points out that modern humanism considers prehistory in rather negative terms and as largely irrelevant, yet prehistory covers most of *Homo sapiens*' existence and has left deep evolutionary traces in modern humans.

Carroll (2015) proposes that power and dominance structures can be divided into four major periods: (a) dominance by an alpha male individual or group; (b) egalitarianism and democracy in hunter-gatherer societies; (c) the return to dominance by an individual or groups in postagricultural societies; and (d) the resurgence of democracy in today's modern democracies. Such a far-reaching historical perspective, while admittedly rather schematic and simplified, is important because it links modern democracies to a past that encompasses thousands of years of the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Sterelny (2021a, 2021b) offers a chronological perspective in affirming that, since our species was established around 300,000 years ago, 97% of its history has developed in egalitarian and democratic communities. This perspective should radically change the *Homo sapiens* vision of themselves, their past and present, and their possibilities for the future.

The image we have of democracy and of today's liberal democracies is influenced by our vision of the history of democracy. The currently dominant perspective is that today's liberal democracies are a democratic exception in the authoritarian history of humanity, and there is a tendency to be condescending in relation to liberal democracies and to generously excuse their shortcomings. However, a perspective that recognizes long periods of radical democracies in human history can be more critical. The democracies of the Palaeolithic demonstrate that democratic political systems cover most of human history, that humans have imagined and built democracies with a very high degree of

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political equality, and that democratic practices are closely linked to the evolutionary development of our species. For all these reasons, reevaluating the original democracies can have a significant impact on critical evaluation of the liberal democracies of today.

I explain forms of power in prehistoric democratic societies, as their political systems may offer important pointers for reflection and lead to new insights. I first describe contributions from evolutionary anthropology and political anthropology regarding Palaeolithic democracies—which I designate the original democracies—considering Boehm's theory regarding the reverse dominance hierarchy in those democracies, and then offer a historical perspective as the basis for reflection on modern democracies and the evolution of *Homo sapiens* political systems. Finally, from the perspective of the reverse dominance hierarchy of the original democracies, I briefly review the original democracies in view of reconsidering current democratic systems and their future.

The fundamental objective of this article is to present a historical and theoretical framework for a rethinking of democracy on the basis of the original democracies in which humans were organized and developed during most of their existence. The proposal, long ranging in scope, views political theory in light of evolutionary anthropology and political anthropology. Seeking new democratic principles by researching the political systems of the past is not novel: modern republicanism, for instance, has sought alternatives to liberal democracy in ancient Athens, the Roman Republic, and the Italian Renaissance republics. However, it is important to go further back in time and revisit the Palaeolithic democracies because those more radical democracies can contribute concepts that enable a rethinking of the democracies of the future.¹

Focusing on the original Palaeolithic hunter–gatherer peoples is not an anachronistic exercise of naive transposition of idealized cultures, as the immense distance between Palaeolithic and modern societies is acknowledged. Rather, the original democracies may serve as comparative models and an inspiration to reflect on the past, present, and future of democracy.

In this article, we deliberately refer to original democracies, not just prehistoric democracies or Palaeolithic democracies. This is because the chronological references used to date the processes that possibly led to the emergence of democratic and egalitarian communities go back to the origins of *Homo sapiens*. There could not have been democracies prior to the prehistoric ones, since prehistory encompasses the existence of *Homo sapiens* since its origins. It may be possible that democracies existed in some of the Homo species prior to or contemporary with *Homo sapiens*, but our use of the term “original democracies” refers to the earliest democracies of *Homo sapiens* and not of any other Homo species.

2 | THE ORIGINAL DEMOCRACIES

The divergence of the Homo from the Pan species around five to seven million years ago marked the beginning of a long journey from mainly alpha male-dominated communities to more egalitarian *Homo sapiens* communities (Boehm, 2012a). Evolution toward egalitarianism began around two million years ago, culminating in the Late Palaeolithic and modern humans (Boehm, 1999, 2012b; Boehm et al., 1993; Hayden, 2001; Richerson & Boyd, 1998, 2001; Wiessner, 2002). The Neolithic extension and consolidation of sedentarism and agriculture, approximately 10,000 years ago, began a massive transition from egalitarian and democratic societies to hierarchical societies based on direct dominance.

Evidence of the democratic nature of most Palaeolithic hunter–gatherer communities is twofold. First, most of the few hunter–gatherer communities that survive on almost every continent are highly egalitarian and democratic, even though they live in different conditions from their ancestors, being largely confined by other cultures, and especially by modern states, to inhospitable areas with few resources. However, the fact that patterns of political relations in most hunter–gatherer communities in different ecosystems are similar would suggest an underlying substrate shared with their Palaeolithic ancestors. Second, since Palaeolithic archaeological remains only exceptionally provide evidence

of social inequality, it can reasonably be inferred that, broadly speaking, hunter-gatherer communities were mainly egalitarian and democratic (Boehm, 1999, 2000).

Although hunter-gatherer communities were fundamentally democratic, uniformity was not absolute, for example, the political structure of the Calusa Amerindian fisher and warrior people of western Florida was authoritarian and was headed by a deified chief. Also possibly indicating social hierarchization are a few luxurious burial sites for some hunter-gatherer societies of the Mesolithic, transitional to the Neolithic following the great Ice Age (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

It is customary to differentiate between simple and complex hunter-gatherer. Simple hunter-gatherer living in small mobile communities equally shared resources, political power, and freedom. Complex hunter-gatherer with more diverse sociopolitical systems were characterized by longer term seasonal settlement, less mobility, larger constructions, and, in some cases, by signs of inegalitarian political relations (Arnold, 1996; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Moffett, 2013; Singh & Glowacki, 2022; Woodburn, 1982;). However, complex hunter-gatherer systems can be considered special cases that occurred in ecosystems (e.g., rivers) rich in accumulable resources. In any case, hunter-gatherer cultures that have survived to recent times and archaeological evidence both indicate that most hunter-gatherer communities lived in a nomadic, egalitarian, and democratic manner during the Palaeolithic (Seabright, 2013; Venkataraman, 2022; von Rueden, 2022). This analysis is fundamentally focused on the simple hunter-gatherer society, as more clearly egalitarian and democratic.

Although it has been argued that Palaeolithic political egalitarianism was only partial, since it applied to men but not women, several anthropologists and archaeologists refute this. Gender equality has been widely reported by Mead (1982) for the Arepesh, Mundugumor, Tchambuli peoples of New Guinea; by Kaberry (2005), Bell (1983), and Leacock (1981) for Australian Aboriginal peoples; and by Gómez (2008, 2017) for the Bijagós (Guinea Bissau) and Zapotecs (Isthmus of Tehuantepec). Similarly, among several Amerindian peoples in North America, prior to European colonization, women possessed powers and rights similar to those of men (Leacock, 1981; Ward, 2006).

Authors such as Lerner (1990), Ginn (2010), and Eisler (1987) argue that patriarchy began only in the Neolithic, with dominance by some humans over others and the habitual use of coercive violence.² Patou-Mathis (2020) argues that no archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates that Palaeolithic women were less than men in community social activities. Women archaeologists and anthropologists who question Palaeolithic male dominance generally affirm that male anthropologists and archaeologists have taken for granted that this intergender dominance must have occurred in the Palaeolithic just as in modern cultures.

Palaeolithic equality of power and freedoms between men and women is currently a subject of debate, so no conclusion is possible. If male-female political equality was lacking, we can say only that in the original democracies there was an important lack and then we can extrapolate only models of political equality between men, extending them to women. If male-female political equality existed, however, then those were the fullest democracies that have existed throughout the existence of *Homo sapiens*.

In hunter-gatherer communities, egalitarianism meant that no wealth, power, or status hierarchies were established (Gintis et al., 2019; Woodburn, 1982). In addition, the seizure of power or dominance by an individual or group was avoided (Gintis et al., 2019). Adults (men, and possibly women too) were equal, both in their personal autonomy and in relation to decision making on community matters (Boehm, 1999, 2000). This characteristic is extremely important because it connects the Palaeolithic peoples with what we understand today to be democracy: a political system in which all citizens, as free individuals, have the power to jointly make decisions in the community's best interest.

To develop the argument that hunter-gatherer communities were democratic, a very generic definition of democracy will be used as a starting point, namely, a political system in which all or most of the members of a community have the right to political participation in decision making for all or most of the community. Starting with the classic differentiation between monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, democracy does not mean the power of one or some, but of all or, at least, the majority of a community. But, leaving aside relative numbers of individuals who participate in decision making, a fundamental principle of any democracy is political equality, that is, the participants in the collective govern-

ment of the community have the same degree of political power and freedom. In the final section of this article, this initial generic definition will be discussed in relation to modern democracies compared to the original democracies

3 | DEMOCRACY AND SELF-DOMESTICATION

Self-domestication, one of the most important theories explaining our pro-social evolution, may explain how certain preferences, values, and behaviors have produced changes in humans over time. Domestication of a species reduces aggressiveness, as was demonstrated by Belyaev's silver fox experiment: over 40 generations in 50 years, domesticated foxes, whose behavior is more similar to dogs than to wild foxes, were obtained by selecting the least aggressive specimens for breeding (Belyaev, 1979; Trut, 1999).

A theory of human self-domestication considers that domestication produces changes (anatomical, physiological, behavioral, cognitive, etc.), collectively labeled the "domestication syndrome," for example, more feminine and youthful faces, globular cranial development, depigmentation of the sclera, reduced neonatal androgen and pubertal testosterone levels, gradual brain development with extreme delays in synaptic pruning, increased early-onset social cognition, and increased social tolerance (Hare & Wrangham, 2017). Such changes seem to be related to mild neurocristopathy, that is, a reduced rate of neural crest-cell migration accompanied by related mechanisms (Wrangham & Fitch, 2014).

The most plausible thesis underlying human self-domestication is that it derives from tendencies and behaviors that can be considered political. Regarding Late Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities (from some 50,000 years ago), it has been argued that punishment and even execution of dominant aggressive alpha males gradually reduced the reproduction of the corresponding traits over some 2000 generations, contributing to the evolution of less aggressive and more altruistic and moral humans (Boehm, 2001, 2008, 2012; Mamelì, 2013).

Wrangham's (2018, 2019, 2021) coherent argument that explains human aggression is that self-domestication reduces reactive, but not proactive aggression (i.e., instinctive and thoughtless violence, not planned violence). Self-domestication probably resulted from hunter-gatherer conspiracies to assassinate alpha male leaders or aspiring leaders, with collective planning and decision making facilitated by the evolution of language and cognition. For Wrangham, self-domestication began in the Middle Pleistocene (about 300,000 years ago), when egalitarian antidespotism against dominant alpha males generated a democratic culture in which power was exercised by the community. Language and cognition developed in a feedback loop as both a cause and a consequence of Palaeolithic democracy. The original democracies facilitated the development of leadership and sociopolitical relationships based on motivation, persuasion, prosocial cooperation, and consent, which, in turn, resulted in cultural niches that facilitated the development of cognition and language (Boehm, 2000; Gintis et al., 2019).

Cooperative alpha male assassination planning was also enhanced by the emergence of lethal projectile weapons, potentially rendering dominance extremely dangerous (Bingham, 1999; Gintis et al., 2019; Woodburn, 1982). Physical strength and aggression was thus no longer a factor in maintaining power.

Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities ensured egalitarianism by assassinating dominant males, whether individuals or coalitions. In this we differ from our chimpanzee cousins that assassinate alpha males, then directly replace them with the challenging chimpanzee. *Homo sapiens*, unlike chimpanzees, became self-domesticated through a feedback loop of genetic and cultural factors. While Fukuyama (2011) establishes a certain equivalence between chimpanzees and hunter-gatherers, he overlooks two very important differences: the tendency of humans to eliminate the alpha male so as to organize on democratic principles, and human self-awareness regarding their choice of systems for organizing power in their community (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

Wrangham's self-domestication proposition regarding reactive violence is important, as it explains why self-domesticated humans can be aggressive in an especially perverse way, since the violence is often planned and systematic, for example, cruel military operations and even genocides. While planned proactive violence helped Palae-

olithic coalitions impose democratic societies, powerful antidemocratic coalitions in authoritarian Neolithic societies headed by ambitious egotistical leaders used proactive violence to impose despotic power.

Given *Homo sapiens* development during the Palaeolithic and early Neolithic, it could be said that antiauthoritarianism and the democratic spirit are fundamental to human evolution. Considering the above-described genetic-cultural feedback loop, it could also be said that not only did *Homo sapiens* create democracy but also, to a point, that democracy created *Homo sapiens*. We can thus consider the Palaeolithic democracies to be the original democracies, as they are certainly the origins of today's humans.

Two further factors that explain the evolutionary development of egalitarian Palaeolithic democracies were cooperation between community members, especially in hunting large mammals and in raising children (Bingham, 1999; Gintis et al., 2019), and a system of immediate returns in producing resources that did not encourage the accumulation of wealth and the consequent establishment of inequalities (Cashdan, 1980; Hayden, 1995).

An issue debated among experts is why most egalitarian Palaeolithic societies disappeared in the Neolithic, or evolved into the hierarchical and coercive systems of direct dominance and unequal resource distribution that gave rise to states. Some hypotheses point to cooperation (such as in the construction of infrastructures), while others highlight conflicts, military conquest, and socioeconomic differences.³ The hierarchies and power systems that developed from the Neolithic regressed most of humanity to the dominance of communities by *Homo sapiens* alpha individuals and coalitions that persists to this day.

4 | ORIGINAL DEMOCRACIES AND THE REVERSE DOMINANCE HIERARCHY

Boehm (1993, 2000, 2012) concluded, from a comprehensive study of ethnographic literature on hunter-gatherer societies of Africa, Asia, Australia, and North America, that these were politically structured to enable power to be exercised over individuals or groups that attempted to dominate the community—what Boehm called a reverse dominance hierarchy. While direct dominance refers to dominance of a ruling minority, reverse dominance refers to community dominance over a ruling minority. This hierarchy is the longest lasting political system in the history of *Homo sapiens*, covering, at least, the lengthy Late Palaeolithic period of hunter-gatherer societies.

The reverse dominance hierarchy was anticipatory, in that it was designed to anticipate direct dominance based on coercion. Grüner (2007) calls the political system of hunter-gatherers one of “anticipated revolution.” It was also persistent, as individuals not only abstained from inequality but also actively contributed to building equality (Macdonald, 2012). Finally, it was intentional, in that hunter-gatherer communities actively tried to avoid and did not generally elect authoritarian subjects as leaders (Boehm et al., 1993).

In egalitarian Palaeolithic societies, hierarchies were organized according to antihierarchical sentiments based on moral values that differeontiated between good and evil and that viewed coercion as morally aberrant. Boehm (2000) hypothesizes that the first taboo of *Homo sapiens* was coercion and direct dominance, with society functioning as a moral coalition that punished deviant dominance behaviors. Thus, the alpha male was the first deviant *Homo sapiens* individual, mildly or severely punishable, for example, by criticism, mockery, disobedience, desertion, overthrow, ostracism, expulsion, and execution (Boehm et al., 1993). In reverse dominance hierarchy systems, beyond specific political positions and procedures, what is most relevant is that the community acted as a coercive apparatus to prevent individual or minority dominance. This coercion could be informal (e.g., gossip and personal ridicule) or formal (e.g., public debates and collective decisions on ostracism). Boehm does not argue that egalitarianism is a part of human nature, since *Homo sapiens* is descended from highly hierarchical species, rather that hunter-gatherer democracy was made possible by very specific power structure designs and a persistent struggle for political equality (Boehm, 1999).

In Palaeolithic and early Neolithic egalitarian hunter-gatherer, horticulturist, farming, and herding societies, we can deduce the existence of basic democratic practices and roles, such as community assemblies, task leaders, seasonal leaders, and community leaders. Although there may be some differences between egalitarian and democratic

Paleolithic communities, here I focus, in a very summarized and generalized manner, on the democratic practices and roles that feature most in political anthropology studies.

Community assemblies were a form of direct democracy, with an important deliberative aspect, whereby members as a whole made decisions that affected the community. In the event of conflict, an attempt was made to reach a consensus (Draper, 1978), but if the conflict persisted, one of the parties' splits from the community, to join another group or create a new community. This meant that one party could choose not to submit to the will of the other party. The possibilities of fission were facilitated by the sparse population and the abundance of natural resources and unoccupied territory (Bandy, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Lomas, 2009; Turner, 1957).

For some peoples, oratorical and communication skills were crucial in assemblies, as documented, for example, in an ethnographic study of political power in the Gahuku-gama people of New Guinea by Read (1959). The first Europeans who came into contact with Amerindian peoples were impressed by their eloquence and dialectical ability to debate sociopolitical issues, according to Graeber and Wengrow (2021) who describe daily assemblies to communally decide matters, and self-awareness of the values that underpinned their community. In some hunter-gatherer traditions, bombastic speech, and pretentious oratory was ridiculed by the community.

Task leaders were expert men or women who directed childbirth, healing, singing, dancing, connecting with spirits, warfare, etc., although they only had the corresponding authority for the duration of the task, for example, war leaders were granted full authority during war, but their power ceased as soon as conflict ended, although they did retain prestige (Chagnon, 1983; Hooper et al., 2010; Lowie, 1948; Price, 1981).

In several hunter-gatherer peoples, for example, the Inuit on the Arctic coasts and the Kwakiutl in Canada (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021), just as there were leaders for war, there were also leaders for seasonal tasks who coordinated hunting and gathering activities. Alternating between small bands and large population settlements, communities were ruled either in an authoritarian system in which a chief exercised power, or by democratic rules of collective decision making and individual freedoms. In the authoritarian system, the chieftom was rotated from one year to another: nobody could seize and hold onto power, as power ultimately resided in the community.

Regarding monumental constructions hunter-gatherer peoples, as discovered in recent decades (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021), it might be thought that an authoritarian hierarchy would be necessary for this task. However, the task could also have been delegated to temporary task leaders by the community for the duration of the construction.

What surprised modern Europeans most, however, in their early contact with hunter-gatherer peoples, was the fact that the elected community chief held no power, an image that is novel in our modern understanding of democracy. In Palaeolithic communities, a powerless chief is the clearest example of political authority to which reverse dominance hierarchy principles are applied.

Leadership in Palaeolithic communities was based on expertise and limited time periods. The chief held no power and could not coerce other members of the community, for example, as in Amazonian Amerindian peoples as documented by Clastres (1974) and Amerindian peoples (Ojibwa, Dakota, Nambikuara, Barana, etc.) as documented by Lowie (1948). Unlike leaders in modern democracies, chiefs did not have executive, legislative, or judicial powers, but functioned as peacemakers, benefactors, and spokespersons for fundamental community values, as documented by, for example, Chapuis and Riviere (2003), Mainville (2014), and Perrone-Moisés (2011), with generosity and humility as essential leadership traits (Bird & Power, 2015; Boehm et al., 1993; Macdonald, 2012; Patton, 2005; von Rueden et al., 2014). Chiefs, without power and without coercive capacity, maintained the unity of the community by resolving conflicts, attending to members lacking resources, facilitating consensus, and reminding members of the community rules. Graeber (2011) even suggests that North American indigenous chiefs were sometimes the poorest in their community, due to pressures to be generous to others, while Levi-Strauss (1967) indicates that the chieftom role was so unbeneficial that many rejected it. Only those with a vocation for serving the community or who wanted prestige offered to become leaders.

Overall, the hunter-gatherer communities relied on democratic political systems similar to what we would today describe as direct, assembly-based, and deliberative. Their unique democratic practices were based on agreeing hierarchical systems for limited periods and for specific tasks and on noncoercive leadership. The fact that hunter-

gatherer peoples organized themselves into time-limited hierarchical or authoritarian systems shows, not that they had failed to advance to a higher level of civilization, but rather that they rejected it as an ongoing hegemonic form of political organization.

5 | REVERSE DOMINANCE VERSUS SOCIETY AGAINST THE STATE: DEMOCRACY OR ANARCHY

Clastres (1974, 1977) identified a political life in Amerindian hunter–gatherer societies based on a very different logic from that of the state. There was no state, their leaders had no power or coercive capacity, and power was held by the community. Clastres interpreted these hunter–gatherer societies as societies against the state, as norms and politics mitigated against the emergence of a power apparatus external to the community.

Clastres' reflections have had a notable influence on important political theorists and philosophers, especially French, for example, Lefort, Abensour, and Gauchet (Abensour & Kupiec, 2011; Holman, 2021; Holman, et al., 2015; Moyn, 2004), and have been especially well received by disenchanted leftist authors, suspicious of state power from their insights to Soviet totalitarianism.⁴

However, from the perspective of democracy, Boehm's principle of reverse dominance may be more appropriate than that of Clastres' society against the state, as it seems less restrictive and more operative. Clastres had enormous merit in pointing out that politics was also a dimension of the life of stateless societies. However, by interpreting hunter–gatherers as a society against the state, he was, in fact, reintroducing the centrality of the state. If politics is always related with or against the state, then it can be viewed only from the perspective of the state, and so, of necessity we have a state-centered political theory. The concept of a reverse dominance hierarchy is, in contrast, more open, as it refers to any type of dominance—not just state or counterstate dominance. It therefore allows us to consider that dominance over communities has occurred and continues to occur through a state apparatus, but also through nonstate structures such as mafias, religions, corporations, private armies, armed gangs, caste and lineage systems, etc. Therefore, if a democratic society is one that is free from any type of dominance that impedes self-government, we need to consider not just state dominance, but also dominance as exercised by any system that wants to subject society to its will, interests, and power.

The position of Clastres, an anarchist anthropologist, raises the question of whether we should speak of anarchism rather than of democracy, given that the original democracies were not states. There is no easy answer because it depends on what is understood by democracy and anarchism and on how they are perceived to be interrelated. To begin with, the assumption that anarchism and democracy are incompatible systems is highly questionable, given that modern anarchists such as Graeber (2013) and Price (2016, 2020) understand anarchism to be democracy without a state. Furthermore, classical anarchist critics of democracy, such as Proudhon, Bakunin, and Malatesta, wrote in the late 19th to early 20th centuries and so were referring to representative liberal democracies, with suffrage largely restricted to certain social sectors. In fact, Bakunin (1995) affirmed that if democracy was the power of the people for the people, then anarchists were democrats.

Furthermore, in Western political historiography, Athens is usually considered the first democracy. The Greek polis, in the 19th century, were labeled city-states by a political culture used to considering political power organized from a state perspective. Since the late 20th century, however, doubts have been raised as to whether the Greek polis were really states with a power apparatus differentiated from the community (Anderson, 1997; Cartledge, 1999; López Barja, 2012; Manville, 1994; Paiaro, 2018; Routledge, 2014; Wood, 1996). If we conclude that there was no state in the strictest sense in the Greek polis, we should not necessarily hold that there was no democracy in classical Athens.

Certain anarchist concepts are enlightening, especially the rejection of all kinds of domination and coercion and the anthropological perspective of the human as a species that can live in communities without the need for coercion. The anthropological debate between Erdal and Whiten (1994) and Boehm on the original Palaeolithic hunter–gatherer communities clarifies this issue. Erdal and Whiten (1994) reject Boehm's position regarding the reverse dominance

hierarchy in Palaeolithic communities, instead, he proposes the concept of counterdomination, whereby individuals are governed by the principle that no adult will allow another adult to impose his power on him. The reverse dominance system, by contrast, is an integral community coalition that assumes power and that punishes, even with execution, any attempt to gain dominance over the community.

There are important differences between the counterdomination and reverse domination political systems. Counterdomination results in a community in which the powers and counterpowers of different individuals cancel each other out; therefore, in the community ultimately there is no effective power. This lack of effective power possibly fits with the anarchist ideal, even though this annulled power is not achieved through solidarity or cooperation. Reverse dominance supposes domination and coercion, but reversed, as indicated by the term: the community is constituted as a coercive apparatus against members who seek to impose their power on others. Reverse dominance presupposes a less optimistic vision of *Homo sapiens* than that of anarchism in implying the ever-present possibility of a community member attempting to take control, and therefore implying a tendency in *Homo sapiens* to domination. Supporting Boehm's position is that most anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer communities confirm community exercise of power and coercion over individuals or groups that seek dominance, that is, a democratic power that repressed the emergence of any type of authoritarian power. Reverse dominance systems of Palaeolithic democracy are therefore a special type of democracy without a state that, however, cannot be considered anarchist in the strict sense.

6 | A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING MEANING IN THE PRESENT

The exploration of the characteristics of the original democracies raises the question of the degree to which, as real or hypothetical states, they correspond to the state of nature or the social contract as imagined by contractualists throughout the history of political thought, from Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke to Rawls and Nozick. Some authors have explored this correspondence (Amato, 2002; Widerquist, 2020; Widerquist & McCall, 2015), while Reis (2019) has pointed to the link between the reverse dominance principle and Rousseau's postulates. Also of relevance is the contrast between contractualist thinking and Aristotle's vision of the human as a *zoon politikón*. Although space does not permit further exploration of these issues, what is emphasized is that *Homo sapiens* societies did not originate in a contract involving isolated individuals, but in pre-*Homo sapiens* societies. The contractualist version is, in most cases, a legitimizing ideology of liberal individualism (Gauthier, 1977).

Adopting a generic perspective, Carroll (2015) suggests that democracy developed in Palaeolithic communities and reemerged in European cultures from the 18th century, but overlooks the fact that there was no democratic vacuum between the Palaeolithic and modern democracies.

Although the standard Western vision of democracy is that it came into being in classical Athens, academics in recent decades have proposed an alternative vision that considers other democracies prior to the Athenian polis. Thus, Keane (2009), Isakhan (2006,2015), Stockwell (2011, 2015), Muhlberger (2011), Presedo Velo (1998), Bernal (2020), Colera (2015), Glassman (2017), and Graeber and Wengrow (2021) consider ancient Mesopotamian and Phoenician cities to be pre-Athenian democracies, featured by practices such as more or less inclusive assemblies, elections of kings and chiefs, advisory councils, etc. Some authors specifically considered the Sumerian cities of southern Mesopotamia to be the earliest human democracies. In all, those findings are important because they consider the plurality of the origins of democracy, that is, not exclusively linked to Western culture.

Regarding those "primitive democracies" as denominated by Jacobsen (1943), however, the Sumerian democracies were not the first in history, but were preceded by the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities, extensively signaled as the origins of democracy (Bollen & Paxton, 1997; Ember et al., 1997; Glassman, 2017; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Hattersley, 1930; Shultziner, 2007; Shultziner et al., 2010; Traversa, 2011). Furthermore, if humanity originated in Africa, democracy also originated in Africa because the emergence of democracy is linked to the emergence of *Homo sapiens* (Reiter, 2021).

It is not clear when the new pro-democratic era of humanity of today began, although it is usually indicated to originate in the 17th–18th centuries within the framework of what we know as Western culture. Turchin et al. (2015) argue that while inequality and despotism by *Homo sapiens* took root at the beginning of the Neolithic era, they began to decline between 800 and 200 BCE in the Axial Age (Jaspers, 2011) with the development of new forms of religious and philosophical thinking, leading, in India, China, Greece, Judea, etc., to Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, and Greek philosophy as the main sources of modern human cultures. Classical Athenian democracy thus belonged to the Axial Age, which Stuart-Glennie conceptualized as an era of moral revolution (Halton, 2014, 2018; Mullins et al., 2018). Whitehouse et al. (2019) argue that, rather than referring to an Axial Age, we should refer to axiality: a revolution in moral principles in various locations and times that occurred once societal complexity no longer admitted the despotism of archaic states ruled by divinities and elites possessing absolute power. Axiality meant the spread of important egalitarian principles, with different religions and philosophies establishing moral standards to apply equally to rulers and the ruled, that is, power could not be imposed by coercion but must be legitimate. Democratic practices corresponding to axial moments existed in ancient cultures where writing was used, such as China, India, the Islamic world, etc., prior to the advent of modern Western democracies (Abdalla & Rane, 2011; Keane, 2009; Keating, 2011; Muhlberger, 2015).

Nonetheless, many of the proposed examples of democratic practices in Buddhist India, Confucian China, Muslim caliphates, etc. do not genuinely define democratic political systems but merely reflect measures to contain autocratic power of leaders. However, less autocratic or oligarchic systems are not necessarily democratic, so we need to account for differences between democratic systems and systems to contain authoritarian power in any history of democracy.

We can hypothesize that the current pro-democratic push on our planet arose in response to three impulses: first, from the original Palaeolithic democracies, second, from axial moments experienced at different times by different cultures, and third, from the global influence of modern Western democracies. Those impulses were not sequential, but mixed and overlapping, occurring at different times and in different directions.

Considering the continuity in political, philosophical, and religious thinking between the Axial Age and Modernity, it may be thought that we are currently experiencing a lengthy cycle of transition from authoritarianism to democracy that to date has lasted some 2500 years. Perhaps this cycle is incomplete and we are still in transition, with setbacks and advances, toward fuller democracy. However, given that history is not teleological, the possibility of current democratization processes ending in authoritarian collapse cannot be ruled out.

Different democratic impulses and their prolegomena and effects sometimes dramatically short-circuit each other. Since the 15th century, for instance, Western absolutist or liberal empires and large states (France, Great Britain, Spain, the United States, etc.) have classified the original democratic societies as savage or subhuman, enslaving and culturally and even physically exterminating them: indigenous peoples in the Americas, aboriginal peoples in Oceania, hunter-gatherers in Africa, etc. Modern Western culture—the origin of humanity's third pro-democratic impulse—has paradoxically destroyed democracies of peoples living according to the principles of the original democracies, on the pretext of spreading true religion and a culture of reason, and ultimately, of so-called “civilization.” In recent centuries, the trajectories of democratic systems have taken a complex and even cruel direction.

What the history of democracy shows is that it runs parallel to human history and that democracy and political equality are issues that fully involve *Homo sapiens* as a species.

7 | RETHINKING DEMOCRACY FROM THE ORIGINAL DEMOCRACIES

The original democracies and the reverse dominance hierarchy are relevant models through which to question current liberal democracies and to posit radical alternatives. What substantially differentiates original democracies are not their procedural aspects (assemblies, consensuated decision making, powerless leaders, etc.) but their nature: they were radically egalitarian, fundamentally because of the equal distribution of political power and freedoms among members. However, in absolute terms, the question remains as to the role of women in Palaeolithic cultures. If women

had the same power and freedoms as men, then those democracies were fully democratic; if there were no gender equality, then they were partial democracies, and we can take only the political equality between men as a reference and extend it to all adults. If in some but not other Palaeolithic communities, all adults had power and freedoms, then, likewise, we can take only as a reference those communities with gender equality.

The fundamental issue in the original democracies was the principle of political equality: no one could acquire social, economic, cultural, military, etc. power that led to domination and political inequality within the community. This is important from the political and cultural perspective of our societies because political equality as a fundamental value of democracy is seen as utopian. Dubrow (2014) argues that while political inequality exists in all current democracies, there is no evidence that political equality ever existed. Therefore, considering the original Palaeolithic democracies may be relevant because political equality may have existed there.

The egalitarian ethos is present in the formulation of any democracy. The transition from monarchy to oligarchy to democracy, that is, extending participation in decision making to a greater number of members of a community, implies a degree of political egalitarianism since democracy supposes government by all, or at the very least, by a majority, which to some degree renders community members equal.

The egalitarian principle is implemented in different ways depending on the type of democracy. In elected, representative, and liberal democracies, political equality is limited, but political equality is the argument for their legitimacy. Elected democracies tend to implement the Schumpeterian principle of minimal democracy, as citizens are equal in their votes to elect political elites. The argument for legitimacy is that all citizens have the right to cast a secret vote of equal value. Citizens in liberal democracies are also equal in their fundamental freedoms (thought, expression, assembly, etc.) and before the law.

The greater the equality of power and freedoms between citizens, the greater the level of democracy. From a radical democracy perspective, when power and freedoms are unequally distributed, then there is no true democracy, but a hybrid form between democracy and oligarchy. Therefore, to assess a society's level of democracy, it is important to establish both the proportion of citizens with the right to political participation and the degree of political equality among citizens.

The basic principle in the original democracies was that all its members possessed the same degree of political power and freedom. Procedures were subject to this fundamental principle, and, for this reason: (a) the community became a coalition that ridiculed, deposed, expelled, or executed those who claimed more political power and who wanted to dominate others; (b) decisions were made by consensus in assemblies, so that no one was excluded; (c) when there was no agreement, the community would divide, so no one had to accept decisions that they did not feel were their own or continue to belong to a community where they no longer wanted to belong; (d) leaders had no power or ability to coerce, to ensure that they would no more power than others or curtail the freedom of others. However, those procedures cannot be viewed as the application of a system of nondomination, but of reverse dominance: it was the community, as a coalition, which guaranteed, through the exercise of power and coercion, equality of political power and political freedom among its members.

References to what constitutes an egalitarian democracy appear in modern political theory: all citizens have equal political power, the same freedoms, the same rights to participate in politics and to define the agenda, and, above all, the same influence on decisions that affect the community. Dahl's (1971, 1989, 2006, 2007) concept of democracy, as opposed to polyarchy, contains references to conditions for what could be an egalitarian democracy: a balanced distribution of power resources and of all instruments and relationships that allow equal influence on decision making. Other authors have discussed political equality and egalitarian democracy, including Dubrow (2015), Näsström (2017), Rueschemeyer (2004), and Post (2006).

According to work by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, egalitarian democracy is one of the democracy types to be considered in the elaboration of democracy indices for different countries, in addition to elected democracy, liberal democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy (House & Gandhi, 2017; Sigman & Lindberg, 2015, 2019; Skaaning, 2021; Wolff, 2022). The procedures of elected, liberal, participatory, and deliberative democracies are fundamentally instruments for citizen political participation to have some degree of effectiveness

and equality. Egalitarian democracy, however, cannot be situated at the same level, as egalitarianism should mean that political equality is maximum: egalitarian democracy is simply democracy.

Political inequality is the great problem of existing democracies, with numerous empirical studies demonstrating that, beyond the vote, influence over government decision making is very unequal among people, depending on race, culture, gender and, above all, socioeconomic resources (Bartels, 2009, 2018; Elsässer et al., 2021; Gilen, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014; Przeworski, 2015, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). Even a deliberative democracy as defended by Habermas and Rawls is impossible if there is no equal access to resources, participation, and public influence (Cohen, 1997, 1989, 2018; Knight & Johnson, 1997). This equality is lacking in our society because of great differences in economic and educational resources, and media control by private corporate, state, and partisan interests, etc.

Political inequality arising from socioeconomic inequalities is the blind spot of the liberal democracies (Wolff, 2022). Liberal democracy has lost legitimacy as a consequence of the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, neoliberal state oligarchy and technocracy of the last four decades, and the current crisis in neoliberal consensus (Kalyvas, 2019). Various authors (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Ranciere, 1995) refer to postdemocracy and similar to explain how, with the emergence and growing hegemony of neoliberalism since the 1970s, democracy has become degraded and can no longer be considered as such—at best, regimes are liberal but nondemocratic.

Indeed, in modern liberal democracies linked to capitalism, there has always been a tension toward political inequality. Ever since the English, American, and French revolutions, the bourgeois elites of liberal constitutionalist systems have restricted voting rights, that is, liberal thinkers that legitimize restricted suffrage are not true democrats (Macpherson, 2003, 2005). Even parliamentary representation systems have developed to avoid the democratic principle of equal political power for all citizens (Manin, 1998).

A transcendental issue arises when one questions the extent to which democracy, as equality in political power and freedoms, is compatible with inequalities in other nonpolitical social areas. Capitalism as an economic system, in its most extreme forms, generates socioeconomic inequalities that produce great political inequalities (Albertson & Whittle, 2021; García-Olivares, 2014; Houle, 2018; Levin-Waldman, 2020; Lindberg, 2019; Mahmutefendic, 2021; Milner, 2021; Schäfer, 2012). Rawls' (1971) difference principle justifies economic inequality, provided that it benefits the least favored in society. However, even if fundamental freedoms and equal opportunities for access to positions of authority are preserved, as called for by Rawls, greater economic inequality inevitably means greater political inequality and, therefore, less democracy, as privileged sectors will directly predominate over disadvantaged sectors.

In short, reverse dominance in Palaeolithic communities guaranteed egalitarian democracies in a cultural environment imbued with a strong egalitarian ethos. Reverse dominance was implemented through various means, as explained above, but this does not mean that modern societies need to implement those same procedures. Nonetheless, they can serve as an inspiration in considering how they could be adapted to our circumstances.

Political equality requires relevant conditions, not only in terms of political institutions and procedures but mostly in the political culture of societies. In the original democracies, the community neutralized any attempts by an individual or group to increase power and acquire political dominance. Individuals had freedoms, but they were limited in the interest of all because no one could acquire the capacity for economic, religious, military, etc. influence and decision making, which implied that political power and political influence are superior to those of the other members of the community. Such a limit to freedoms is not taken into account in today's liberal democracies. To ensure political equality, states and societies need to strike a balance between individual freedoms and strict limits to the political power that individuals, groups, sectors, and social classes accumulate formally or informally. The community as a whole needs to be involved in this task, based on a morality that considers political inequality and direct domination a taboo, whose transgression is an aberrant act that must be punished, as indicated by Boehm in relation to the original democracies. Political and institutional procedures are not enough when there is no social morality to support them.

Over and above such fundamental issues, some of the political systems and procedures of the hunter-gatherer peoples who practiced reverse dominance are familiar to us, for example, direct democracy and deliberation and consensus processes, as often used in small communities. Other procedures may be more difficult for us to understand and to implement, for example, the powerless leader. Further considerations come to mind: What would a state-

based democracy founded on reverse dominance look like? Is the fission–fusion system applicable to disagreements in territorialized states and sedentary populations? What reverse dominance procedures would function in today's overpopulated societies?

Some emerging lines of development and reflection in the framework of current democracies point, albeit tentatively, to the principle of reverse domination. The issue of community domination over the leader is exemplified by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, composed mostly of Mayan Indians, through their principle of “command by obeying” (not exactly the principle of reverse dominance, but operating in the same direction). This principle has already been assumed, especially by Latin American indigenous leaders such as the Aymara Evo Morales and David Choquehuanca, who have been president and vice president of Bolivia, but even by European politicians such as Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona. While political application may not, in many cases, be coherent with the proclaimed principles, the idea is germinating positively and can be further developed (Andreani, 2017; Couch, 2001; Fernández, 2018; Infante, 2016; Luna, 2015; Paraschivescu, 2014; Portugal et al., 2014).

As for fission, that is, a community split as a means of resolving disagreement, this is related to the problem of the legitimation of the demos. Näsström (2007) argues that the very composition of a people must be democratically legitimized and must not be justified simply by arbitrary historical forces. Who should be part of the demos, what limits it should have, and what principles legitimize it have been widely debated. Goodin (2007, 2016), Owen (2012), and Abizadeh (2010, 2012, 2017) argue that the demos should include all those affected by its decisions and those for whom its decisions imply some kind of coercion. In a context of superpowers whose decisions affect other countries, the demos could be expanded to encompass all of humanity. Other authors have proposed more restrictive criteria to preserve democratic guarantees within the framework of nation-states, for example, Song (2012). Space does not allow this issue to be discussed here, other than that it affects not only migrants, exiles, regions fighting for secession from other constituted states, etc. but also influences the political configuration of all humanity. Through fission–fusion processes in Palaeolithic communities, individuals were integrated into the communities in which they wanted to belong, with compositions and limits that today we would consider to be democratically legitimate. These communities permitted people the freedom to abandon a community to create a different community. They also established a principle of political affinity according to which new communities were formed on the basis of agreement as to how to live together. The question remains: Would fission–fusion systems be possible that would serve for both social majorities and minorities to consent to belonging to certain communities, to democratically legitimize those communities, and to ensure political equality in those communities?

Finally, regarding overpopulated societies, implementing direct democracy with deliberation is complicated, yet not impossible. In recent decades, direct democracy has once again been vindicated, a democracy in which the citizens themselves make decisions about laws and regulations. If participation by everyone is overly complicated, a form of lottery could select citizens to direct the fate of communities in place of politicians. Already several theoretical reflections and practical implementations of mini-publics and citizen assemblies have been documented. Obviously, within the framework of a democratic reverse dominance system, these citizens' assemblies should not simply be consultative but also be decision making. Although space does not permit this complex issue to be addressed here, it remains a line of development connected to certain important aspects of the reverse dominance principle (Altman, 2019; Courant, 2022; Guerrero, 2014; Jakob, 2019; Krämling, 2022; Lafont, 2017; Michels & Binnema, 2018; Niemeyer, 2011; Setälä, 2014; Setälä & Smith, 2018).

Using the original democracies to rethink democracy allows us to radically decenter our usual chronocentric, geocentric, ethnocentric, culture-centric, and state-centric thinking, and taking into account political anthropology and evolutionary anthropology can be transcendental. Democracy can no longer be thought of as an exclusive product of Western culture that emerged in Modernity. Yet even in the tradition of critical theory, such limitations continue to feature in, for example, Habermas (2019a, 2019b). Democracy, a heritage of all humanity, is a journey that started with our earliest ancestors on all continents, in all cultures, and in all ethnicities.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021) and Weatherford (2000) argue that a fundamental factor in Europeans beginning to rethink freedom and equality during the Enlightenment period was contact with native peoples (especially in North

America), with ideas of their own on equality and freedom, not to mention criticisms of European sociopolitical systems (observed through contact with Europeans and in the travels of chiefs in Europe). Such criticisms should be at the root of modern democratic theory, as they can revitalize democratic thinking.

Neorepublicanism has synthesized the political tradition of republicanism in the fundamental principle of nondominance, yielding a theoretical model proposed as an alternative to liberalism (Pettit, 1997, 2012). In my opinion, the reverse dominance principle is an alternative to nondominance that reflects a more radical model of democracy.

Proposed here is that political theorists committed to reflecting on truly democratic systems, that is, radical democracies, also consider the democratic political systems of the Palaeolithic and the early Neolithic periods. A good benchmark is the reverse dominance hierarchy, as it allows us to explore fundamental concepts. The Palaeolithic cultures (and their heirs, i.e., many of today's indigenous cultures, despite change and cultural contamination) can inspire us to seriously rethink democracy. This is a project that requires rigorous and open-minded reflection, and also much imagination to think beyond established principles and procedures.

8 | CONCLUSION

Democracy, the historical heritage of all humanity (not just of Western culture) is deeply ingrained in the origins and evolution of *Homo sapiens*. For this reason, political theory needs to rethink its history and its significance for our species. We have a distorted vision of democracy because we have only a partial and limited perspective on human history. When we reflect on democracy, we especially overlook what is perhaps the most fundamental and constitutive part, that is, prehistory.

The chronology of democracy must be reconsidered in terms of the original democracies of the Paleolithic era that lasted tens of thousands of years. The three democratic impulses evident in the history of humanity—overlapping and short-circuiting each other—were the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities spreading out across the earth, Axial Age impulses in ancient cultures in different times and locations, and the impulse of Modernity that crystallized different influences in Western culture in recent centuries. But the ultimate source is that of the original democracies, since their moral and political energy continues to be present in humanity's democratic tendencies.

The original democracies were marked by political practices such as deliberative assemblies, elected or rotating task and seasonal leaders, elected but powerless community leaders, and communities that split when consensus was lacking. Those practices show that hunter-gatherer community members were self-aware in organizing according to democratic principles and in acting according to reverse dominance principles to ensure that no individual or group seized power.

The fundamental function of hunter-gatherer political bodies and procedures based on reverse dominance was to preserve political equality among community members. Modern democracy needs to be based on a similar principle of political equality that guarantees all citizens the same powers and freedoms, and the same ability to define the agenda and to influence decisions that affect society. While liberal democracies guarantee some political equality in the right to vote, fundamental freedoms, and equality before the law, etc., they are far from ensuring consistent and strong political equality among citizens. Immense inequalities persist in liberal democracies, above all, in terms of influencing the direction of decisions by governments and other state bodies.

While there are, obviously, great differences between Palaeolithic communities and modern societies, those original democracies governed by reverse dominance principles demonstrate that political equality among *Homo sapiens* can be achieved, through decision-making bodies and procedures that can inspire us to rethink democracy and imagine new ways of politically and socially organizing a truly democratic society, a society in which all citizens have the same power and freedoms.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹This work takes as a reference the research and reflection by authors who have assessed Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities from a political history perspective, including Hattersley (1930), Bollen and Paxton (1997), Shultziner (2007), Glassman (2017), and Graeber and Wengrow (2021).
- ²Eisler (1987) considers that dominance and, in particular, dominance over women, began in the Neolithic, when societies began domesticating and enslaving large animals.
- ³Some authors with a functionalist tendency point out that hierarchy and inequality commenced with the undertaking of large collective enterprises such as irrigation systems, intensive agriculture, defence, and economic exchange and trade (Blanton et al., 1981; Diehl, 2000; Saitta, 1999; Wittfogel, 1957). Some authors with Marxist roots highlight that wealth accumulation developed with agriculture and livestock herding, demographic growth, land scarcity, and social conflict (Brumfiel, 1983; Cohen, 1981; Kirch, 1984; Roscoe, 2000). Other theories focus on conquest (Oppenheimer, 1975), and especially the geographical conquest that occurred in territorial circumscription (Carneiro, 1970). Egalitarian sociopolitical systems reduced to a few residual and isolated cultures were largely supplanted by strongly hierarchical systems centered on an alpha male, as typical of the primitive ancestors of six or seven million years ago when the Pan and hominid species had not yet diverged.
- ⁴Perhaps the theoretical model of democracy that has most clearly derived from the reflections of Clastres is insurgent democracy, as formulated by Abensour (1997, 2009, 2012).

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