

NONFICTION

# Savages! Innocents! Sages! What Do We Really Know About Early Humans?

In “The Invention of Prehistory,” the historian Stefanos Geroulanos argues that many of our theories about our remote ancestors tell us more about us than them.



Look like someone you know? No longer the hunched and hairy creatures of the 1980s and '90s, Neanderthals are now depicted as blond and blue-eyed tool users. Sculpture: E. Daynes; Photo: S. Entressangle/LookatSciences, via Science Source



By **Jennifer Szalai**

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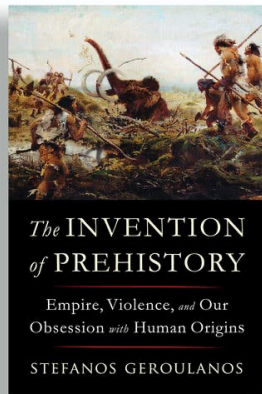
## **THE INVENTION OF PREHISTORY: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession With Human Origins**, by Stefanos Geroulanos

History may not be bunk, but prehistory is: So argues Stefanos Geroulanos in his spirited new book, “The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession With Human Origins.” Best-selling authors like [Yuval Harari](#), [Jared Diamond](#) and [Steven Pinker](#) have all distilled (or cherry-picked) research about early humanity in order to make grand claims about the near inevitability (or impossibility) of human progress. Even [“The Dawn of Everything”](#) (2021), by David Graeber and David Wengrow, which took issue with the simplistic narratives offered by the Big Thinkers with their Big Books, provided an alternative narrative of its own — that of early human communities experimenting and making do without resorting to structures of hierarchy and domination.

Geroulanos expends few words addressing his contemporaries, preferring instead to guide us through several centuries of research into (and consequent conjecture about) human origins. “The Invention of Prehistory” begins around the mid-18th century, moving through various concepts of early humanity to conclude that even as our knowledge of specifics becomes undeniably richer and more detailed, our sense of the bigger picture remains tenuous and subject to change.

I already anticipate some grumbling from fans of Harari & Co. that Geroulanos, a professor of European intellectual history at New York University, is advancing an anti-science argument. He is not. He has plenty of praise for geneticists and paleontologists who have enlarged our understanding of various areas of inquiry, including human migration, food intake and the Neanderthal genome. What both fascinates and troubles him is our seemingly irrepressible urge to look to the lives of early humans — to that mysterious time before recorded history — to tell us who, essentially, we are. Not to mention that such interpretations can condition how we relate to others: Prehistoric “findings” have been used to shore up a prejudice, justify an injustice or expand an empire.

“Human origins are not mere abstractions,” Geroulanos writes. “Nor are they simple prompts for thought experiments and pure scientific inquiry. Promises and violence have regularly been unleashed in their name.”



Geroulanos dates the invention of prehistory, at least as we understand it, to sometime around 1750, when Enlightenment imperatives meant that religious tales of creation would no longer do. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes had already declared that “man is wolf to man” in the state of nature, and so it was in everyone’s interest to submit to a sovereign for protection from fellow humans. A century later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued something different. Disgusted by the extreme inequality in French society, Rousseau proposed that the “noble savage” had instead been corrupted by civilization. He assumed an analogous notion of childhood: innocent and pure. “Man is born free,” he wrote, “yet everywhere he is in chains.”

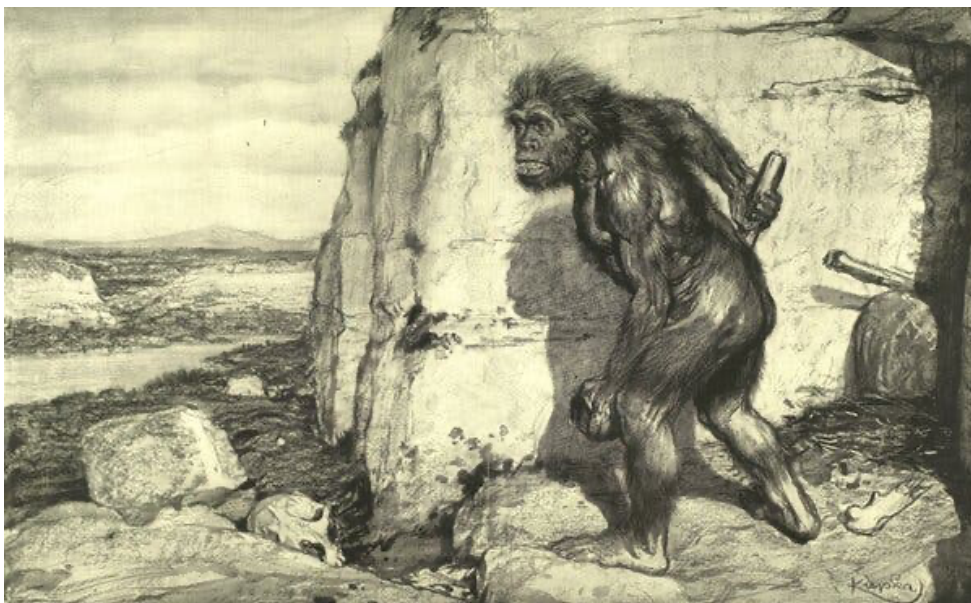
### Uncovering the Past, One Discovery at a Time

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The more you want to upend the status quo, the more likely you’ll be to venerate an idyllic past. The reverse is also true: The more you want to preserve the status quo, the more likely you’ll be to scorn the past as horrific —

or, at least, unsustainable. Geroulanos traces the long history of Europeans depicting Indigenous and colonized peoples as “savage” — thereby rationalizing every violent measure used against them, from brutality to annihilation. One trope that came up again and again was that of “the disappearing native,” which Geroulanos deems a “convenient euphemism,” because of how it couched colonial destruction in terms of biological inevitability. “Natives don’t die of diseases introduced by settlers,” he writes, in an acerbic aside. “They’re not murdered in asymmetrical warfare; really, they disappear.”

“The Invention of Prehistory” mostly follows a rough chronology, though the chapters are arranged conceptually. Geroulanos, who started his research for this project more than a decade ago, includes so many thinkers and theories that it can be hard to keep track of the mounting contradictions. But the tumbling cadence of conflicting ideas also serves to illustrate his point. He is dismantling, not synthesizing. He devotes an entire chapter to the French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who tried to reconcile evolution with Christian theology. Another chapter starts with Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey”; turns to the “Out of Africa” thesis of the Australian-born anthropologist Raymond Dart; discusses the work of the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius and its influence on the Negritude movement; brings in the racism promulgated by the Hollywood screenwriter turned-nonfiction naturalist Robert Ardrey; and ends with a mention of Wakanda.



“For a long time,” Geroulanos writes, this image, published in the Illustrated London News in 1909, “was perhaps the most influential representation of a Neanderthal.”  
Credit...Illustrated London News

Most readers will already be familiar with the pejorative uses of “savage” and the positive uses of “civilization”; they will also recognize reversals like Rousseau’s. Less familiar to me were the distinctions that 19th-century Europeans made between “good barbarians” (Germanic tribes) and “bad barbarians” (Mongols, Huns and other “Asiatic” invaders). And Geroulanos reminded me that depictions of Neanderthals have undergone a transformation during my own lifetime. No longer the hunched and hairy creatures of the 1980s and ’90s, they are now blond and blue-eyed tool users.

Given the racialized stereotypes embedded in these iterations, it’s perhaps no surprise that the current, lighter-skinned version has figured in grotesque, far-right talking points about “white genocide” and a “great replacement.” Geroulanos quotes an anthropology paper describing the Neanderthals as “the Indigenous European race” that was “demographically and genetically swamped by the African biological race of *Homo sapiens*.” Over on the dark web, Geroulanos finds white supremacists portraying Neanderthals as victims of “diversity.” He doesn’t dispute the science that has added to our store of knowledge, but he does dispute the meanings we project onto it. “The Neanderthals themselves say nothing,” he writes. “We arrange them into whatever position we need them to take.”

“The Invention of Prehistory” isn’t simply critique for critique’s sake. “When early humanity is presented as violent or weak, we pronounce ourselves triumphant,” Geroulanos writes. “When it is presented as strong or complex, we empathize with it.” Meanwhile, we “make excuses for the real humanity that burns forests and oil and cares little for the poverty right outside our door or on the other side of the planet.”

It’s a thought that’s both undeniably unsettling and surprisingly hopeful: Why cling to speculations of what our forebears may or may not have done, way back when, in order to make sense of what we actually do, right now?

**THE INVENTION OF PREHISTORY: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession With Human Origins** | By Stefanos Geroulanos | Liveright | 498 pp. | \$29.99

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/10/books/review/the-invention-of-prehistory-stefanos-geroulanos.html>