What Happened to David Graeber?

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I BOW TO few in my admiration for the anthropologist, economist, radical leader, and delightful prose stylist David Graeber, who died unexpectedly in 2020 at the age of 59. Since I read his little book *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* in 2004, I've been telling anyone who seemed inclined to listen that he was the most important anarchist thinker since Peter Kropotkin, who died in 1921. His ideas, including those beautifully captured in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), helped motivate and shape the Occupy movement, which took inspiration from his commitments to radical democracy, egalitarianism, and "prefigurative politics"—the idea that people seeking to make a revolution should try to live and organize now in a way they'd want to arrange their lives together in the future.

Graeber studied at the University of Chicago under Marshall Sahlins and did his anthropological fieldwork in Madagascar in the early 1990s. When he returned, he published the still-neglected *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (2001), a work of high theory whose ambitions constituted a throwback to the eras of Marcel Mauss or Claude Lévi-Strauss, though its positions were strikingly fresh. On the strength of his early work, he got a job at Yale and at the same time became active in the "anti-globalization" movement (Graeber hated that term), with its demonstrations and actions against such organizations as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. When he didn't get tenure at Yale, he believed it was because of his politics.

By his own account politically unemployable in American academia, he claimed that, though the academy of that era sheltered myriad "authoritarian Marxists," anarchism was considered beyond the pale, as I can confirm from personal experience. But with his remarkable energy and productivity, he landed on his feet in London, eventually scoring a richly deserved professorship at the London School of Economics. *Debt* continued his work at the juncture of anthropology and economics that had begun with *Theory of Value*. The two disciplines overlap, after all, in being concerned with the nature of exchange, the origin of money, and in describing structures of inequality, among other matters. The book had a remarkable reception; never before has an anarchist been enthusiastically blurbed by the editor of the classic capitalist organ *Financial Times*.

Indeed, that book, and a lot of the best Graeber, has an "undeniable" quality: even if you write for *Bloomberg Businessweek*, it turns out, you are very unlikely to think the same things about money, debt, and value after you read it as before. You may well start to think you are seeing these matters clearly and nonideologically for the first time, as Graeber traverses the world's cultures and history to see how forms of money and forms of peonage emerge. He shows that there have been many alternative possibilities for systems of exchange and value—Mauss's "gift economies," for example. All of this in loose yet precise and swashbuckling prose, and all of it well documented by a serious scholar. *Debt*, the book, had for many a dramatic "head-flipping" quality, and it helped make sense of what Occupy, emerging at that moment, was saying and what it wanted.

The book yielded insights into many things but was compelling above all in giving a real history of economic hierarchy and domination, culminating in the structural and ideological predicaments of neoliberal capitalism, as each consumer blamed herself for undertaking the debt she carried throughout her life, and as the whole human world became, as though by an invisible hand, a completely unaccountable vertical power structure. People came to Occupy, for one thing, because they realized suddenly that the burden of debt they were lugging around was a structural strategy centuries in the making, not an individual failing.

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The anarchism that Graeber developed across a series of protest actions and writings (including, eventually, 2007's *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire*, 2009's *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, and 2013's *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, for example) was—is—notably contemporary and inspiring. Central aspects of Graeber's politics as he framed them circa 2000–15 include "the rejection of the state and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination"; "decentralized forms of consensus-based direct democracy," as developed in Occupy encampments but also in many other places and cultures; "prefigurative politics of resistance" or the claim that a nonauthoritarian revolution cannot be conducted successfully by authoritarian forms of organization; "rejection of permanent, named leadership structures"; and anti-statist "communism," economies based around sharing or even "the gift," as suggested by the anthropology of Mauss, for example.

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It has taken a little while and repeated readings for it to sink in, but I think that Graeber was reaching the point of rejecting, or at least severely (if implicitly) qualifying, almost all of these positions by late in his authorship. Particularly in *On Kings* (2017), his collaboration with his mentor Sahlins, and *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021), co-written with the archeologist David Wengrow and completed just a couple of weeks before his death, Graeber's politics grew more "mainstream" in a number of respects, even as his narrative of the origins of political authority and economic hierarchy remained fresh, radical, and richly documented, and even as his prose style retained all its charm. But perhaps LSE professorships, FSG book contracts, and the approval of the *Financial Times* have moderating or even co-opting effects after all.

In *Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow argue that neither inequality nor the state has any particular origin, indeed that "equality" and "the state" are not sensible or singular concepts at all. As issues in political philosophy, questions about the alleged origins of the state and of economic inequality arose in the Enlightenment of the 18th century, historians say, primarily because of the challenges presented by

greater contact with diverse cultures in the era of colonialism. But these questions rested, Graeber and Wengrow argue, on a set of historically contingent, tendentious, and simplistic readings of human history by figures such as Rousseau and Turgot. Both "inequality" and "the state," on Graeber's late view (or on *late Graeber*'s view), are problematic and ideological concepts, not adequately defined, perhaps not definable. Hence, egalitarianism and anti-statism, insisting that these things ought to be destroyed, are equally simplistic and equally trapped in Western conceptualizations that emerged in modernity.

It is not clear, to me at any rate, that one can be an anarchist and not also be an egalitarian and an anti-statist. Repudiating those two positions, by which Graeber definitely defined his politics circa 2010, amounts to repudiating the anarchist position, or else leaves you trying to define it in other terms, terms more adequate to the subtlety and complexity of power as it actually appears in real cultures. If he intended to generate such a reconstrual, he hadn't quite done that work yet when his writing abruptly stopped.

One wonders what Occupy-era Graeber, the man who (by his own account and many others') helped formulate the slogan "We Are the 99%," might make of passages like the one below. Its placement near the beginning of *Dawn of Everything* indicates that it amounts to the book's fundamental frame:

> [I]t's not clear what eliminating inequality would even mean. (Which kind of inequality? Wealth? Opportunity? Exactly how equal would people have to be in order for us to be able to say we've "eliminated inequality"?) The term 'inequality' is a way of framing social problems appropriate to an age of technocratic reformers, who assume from the outset that no real vision of social transformation is even on the table.
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> Debating inequality allows one to tinker with numbers, argue about Gini coefficients and thresholds of dysfunction, readjust tax regimes or social welfare mechanisms, even shock the public with figures showing just how bad things have become ("Can you imagine? The richest 1 percent of the world's population own 44 percent of the world's wealth!")

Here, he appears almost to be ridiculing himself and the Occupy movement (if also Thomas Piketty), or Graeber and Wengrow appear to be ridiculing earlier Graeber. Do I hear a touch of Friedrich Hayek? What was once a fundamental critique of the world economic hierarchy, insisting that it has created an absurd and ever-increasing degree of differential access to resources, has become "technocratic tinkering," and it is not exactly clear why. That some questions about inequality are obscure or ill-framed does not indicate that inequality of wealth is not a fundamental social problem. To make sure you don't miss the centrality of this stunning turnabout, Graeber and Wengrow return to their critique of egalitarianism in their conclusion, and also to their critique of the concept of the state. Of the concept, mind you, not the thing.

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Late Graeber, in *On Kings* and *Dawn of Everything*, asserts again and again, in the words of the title of a long chapter, that "the state has no origin." "Social scientists and political philosophers have been debating the 'origins of the state' for well over a century," observe Graeber and Wengrow. "These debates are never resolved and are unlikely ever to be. [...] Much like the search for the 'origins of inequality,' seeking the origins of the state is little more than chasing a phantasm."

This assertion builds on a complex analysis of social power emerging from anthropological and archeological research. Rejecting the classic Weberian definition of the state as a group of people who claim a monopoly on violence, Graeber and Wengrow argue that the modern state contingently combines three elements that are seen in history in very different configurations: control of violence, control of information, and individual charisma. Reducing political power ultimately only to the first of these paradigmatic forms of domination is, they repeat, terribly simplistic.

"It seems to me that 'the state' is itself becoming something of a shopworn concept," Graeber writes in *On Kings*. Debates about its origins, he continues,

> almost always assume that "the state" is just one thing, and that in speaking of the origins of the state one is necessarily also speaking of the origins of urbanization, written literature, law, exploitation, bureaucracy, science, and almost anything else of enduring importance that happened between the dawn of agriculture and the Renaissance, aside, perhaps, from the rise of world religions.

This is a mistake, he says, because "'[t]he state' would better be seen as an amalgam of heterogeneous elements often of entirely separate origins that happened to have come together in certain times and places, and now appear to be in the process of drifting apart."

But this "simplistic" conception of the state is also the conception that fuels or articulates the anarchist critique of the state, from William Godwin to Mikhail Bakunin to Emma Goldman. As I argue in my book *Against the State: An Introduction to Anarchist Political Theory* (2008), state power rests on violence and coercion; violence and coercion, to be defensible, require a moral justification; social contract theory and all other attempts in this regard are pathetically inadequate. Therefore, there should be no political state. In late Graeber, this looks simplistic and nonempirical. "The state" is a concept that falls apart under analysis and should be abandoned. Of course, that makes anti-statism just as senseless, for what is an anti-statist fighting against, really?

"It is possible to have monarchs, aristocracies, slavery and extreme forms of patriarchal domination, even without a state," write Graeber and Wengrow, somewhat puzzlingly, and "it's equally possible to maintain complex irrigation systems, or develop science and abstract philosophy without a state." So, "what do we actually learn

about human history by establishing that one political entity is what we would like to describe as a 'state' and another isn't? Are there not more interesting and important questions we could be asking?"

Well, certainly there are other questions. But this one takes Graeber well beyond—or well before—his previous anarchism.

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A fundamental line of argument in *Dawn of Everything* suggests, specifically, that Graeber was developing toward something like liberalism by the end of his authorship. This will of course please some and annoy others. I am in the latter camp, but I want to acknowledge that liberal political philosophy might find an interesting new set of justifications and also interesting new versions and formulations in late Graeber. In any case, Graeber and Wengrow centrally argue that concepts such as individual rights and democratic decision-making procedures, so central to Enlightenment political thought, in fact originated in an "indigenous critique" by colonized peoples of the political arrangements of European powers. They make this vivid with the figure of Kandiaronk (died 1701), a Wendat orator, probably from what is now Michigan, whose challenges to Western political systems may well have been ("may well have been" and "almost certainly" appear frequently in this book) influential on Diderot and Voltaire.

This is a way of rehabilitating the concept of universal inherent individual rights and freedoms from the familiar claim that it is a Eurocentric artifact of colonial exploitation and the Marxist critique that individualist liberalism represents the official ideology of the bourgeoisie. Graeber and Wengrow suggest that such concepts in fact embody an attack on colonial exploitation and rising capitalism, made by the very people being exploited or destroyed.

On this basis, the authors issue something like a universal declaration of human rights, rather different from the United Nations version, but related to it as well. They enumerate three basic liberties: namely, "the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey and the freedom to create or transform social relations." They seem to hold that these rights belong to every individual in any culture. In a bewildering yet ultimately suggestive passage in their conclusion, Graeber and Wengrow write:

> [O]ur own intellectual traditions oblige us to use what is, in effect, imperial language [...] and the language already implies an explanation, even a justification, for much of what we are really trying to account for here. That is why, in the course of this book, we sometimes felt the need to develop our own, more neutral (dare we say scientific?) list of baseline human freedoms and forms of domination.

I don't think this is in keeping even with the vast panoply of political and economic arrangements that the authors themselves have just surveyed, but I agree that the book

makes use of an "imperial" vocabulary, delineating the putatively objective, irresistible political truths that all rational persons will arrive at in the end. As to the idea that the freedoms and forms of domination that Graeber and Wengrow delineate are "scientific": Rousseau and Turgot said the same, but I wouldn't have thought that I'd hear the claim from Graeber, especially as there is no consideration in the book of other contenders for fundamental freedoms and no attempt to give foundational justifications for these specific freedoms, or even to sort them out in relation to one another.

It's not that I think we should routinely violate one another's freedom to disobey, though that is going to require some elucidation. It's that I'm somewhat surprised to see this sort of universalism emerging from this sort of anthropology, which supports it thinly at best and is widely and wildly in tension with it at worst. Graeber was never a relativist, exactly, but casually applying the same three concepts to every culture that has ever existed seems incompatible with his previous vast respect for human differences, not to mention many of his own earlier political positions. The persistent "threeness" of the distinctions hints at a line of a priori reasoning that is anything but empirical.

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If I had to take a crack at characterizing late Graeber's politics, I might say that he seemed to be becoming a mainline leftist or state socialist. In an excellent profile of the author in *New York* magazine, Molly Fischer writes that, at the end of his life, Graeber was active in the UK Labour Party. "The reason I support [Jeremy] Corbyn, or am happy about him," he said in an interview, "is because he is willing to work with social movements." Graeber, reports Fischer, "had struck up a connection with John McDonnell, Corbyn's shadow chancellor of the exchequer [in] an effort to bring ordinary Britons into the workings of government." Corbyn's communications director described Graeber as someone "sparking the imagination for what's politically possible." Responding to the charges of antisemitism that, in part, led to the end of Corbyn's leadership, Graeber recorded a video in his defense. I think that is pretty far from where he was in 2000.

Perhaps Graeber's political positions "matured"; most of ours do, really, if we persist long enough. Or perhaps the empirical data drew him in different directions, or his collaborators affected his expressions of his positions. Still, I wish we'd had a couple more books to see where this was going, and a couple of chances to hear Graeber's own interpretation of his development in relation to his previous ideals. As it is, I'm left a bit disheartened.

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