

DAVID GRAEBER — ON THE VIOLENCE OF ALL THINGS GOOD

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The article is a brief summary of the intellectual legacy of anthropologist David Graeber (1961–2020). In it, I revisit some of the key arguments and lines of thought developed by Graeber over the course of his life beginning with issues of money, debt and morality and moving on to discuss his less well-known contributions to theories of bureaucracy, value, and modes of production. Graeber was an intellectual giant who not only demonstrated excellent academic rigour but was politically active engaging and leading various social movements that defined the first two decades of the 21st century. He leaves behind a rich collection of books, essays and articles that will undoubtedly shape the outlook of many future scholars.

On September 2nd, the world-renowned anthropologist, David Graeber, died in a hospital in Venice. He was an intellectual giant who defined much of my limited academic as well as political work. I was lucky enough to meet him once and it was only an unlucky turn of fate which prevented me from becoming his doctoral student at London School of Economics (LSE). So I mainly know him through his books and articles, but the missed opportunities to learn directly from him still haunt me a little and his death somehow strikes me on a personal level. Back in 2016 when I was making my PhD application, Graeber seemed really enthusiastic about my idea of researching 'Momentum' — the Labour Party's grassroots organisation supportive of Corbyn (Jeremy Bernard Corbyn, born in 1949) which was in its relative infancy back then. Looking now at the way British politics has evolved, it seems that an anthropological engagement with the Corbyn project would have yield-

ed rich insights into the possibilities before us and I wish I could have been part of it. But there's no time for regret. Instead, I felt the need for a short sojourn into Graeber's scholarship and life's work. I still remember the first time I picked up *Debt: the first 5000 years*¹ which was my first introduction to Graeber's thought — as I believe it has been for many — and simply couldn't put it down. Then, when I met him, he asked me about my intellectual influences and noted that what is really important is finding the book you'd like to write. Again — I'm sure most of his ardent readers feel that way, but *Debt* was certainly one such book. So let me go through some of Graeber's most fascinating and original arguments beginning with his *magnum opus*.

Debt: the first 5000 years (2011) became known for its arguments about the origins of money and the way relations based on debt have transformed over time. Opposed to the economic view which saw

such developments as arising through the geniuses of private individuals who simply invented money, it put forward a more nuanced perspective describing the role of public institutions in creating markets. This was one of its more forceful blows: states cannot be opposed to markets. In fact, states actively created market relations, decoupling people from their land and communities, forcing taxes on them and thus creating impersonal mediums of exchange that substituted societies based on mutual obligation. Money, then, was a legal instrument created and verified by something like the state. Most people in human history did not really need such an impersonal monetary tool as they relied on their personal relationships to secure their physical, social and political needs. But take away their access to land, tell them they need to get their hands on a certain kind of coin to pay in tax, force them to do so with a show of violence and soon enough even personal debts will be calculated using impersonal means of payment.

However, this was only a small part of the story. Some of Graeber's most original contributions concerned the way market rationality came to serve as a model of and for morality as a whole. He showed how our modern language as well as understanding about ourselves is shaped by the dynamics of the marketplace. In the contemporary era, one does not have to reach far to find examples – we treat ourselves as a marketable commodity, as if we have an essence that can be removed and sold on the marketplace. But he also pinpointed the same dynamics in the world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam. Graeber argued that all of these religions initially developed as peace movements in the context of societies that had been overwhelmed with wars and increasing commercial logic. Thus, the emphasis on the value of leading an immaterial, spiritual life can only be understood in relation to a logic of materialism, the de-

sire to find the fulfilment and meaning of life in endless accumulation of material things and wealth. In these religions, he also found the issue of debt spelled out in its extreme forms. The language of these religions was formed in warring and trading societies and so we find discourses on how each individual is born into debt to her parents, her society and has to lead life in a way that repays this original debt. But this way of thinking leads to logical absurdities, since technically a debt is something that can be paid off, but if one is born into debt, then the only way we can repay it is by dying. The emphasis on the original debt has meaningful parallels with the Christian original sin — Graeber in fact traces the etymological affinities in various languages with debt and guilt and sin. Debt is central to Christian thought and in Bible we find articulated arguments about the moral necessity of cancelling debts (“forgive us our debts”). The tradition of debt cancellation has a much longer pedigree, but Christian thought frames the necessity of debt cancellation as a moral imperative — as something that has to be done because it is *right* to do so.

Myself, I always saw Graeber as an anthropologist of violence. He spoke animatedly about the invisible structures of violence surrounding us and traced these back to ancient times, when, as noted, states and markets came into being. For him, these relations were fundamentally based on violence. Max Weber formulated the well-known maxim of the state as the holder of the monopoly of violence but for Graeber markets were just as violent as they were based on cold, calculating, impersonal logic. Indebted farmers, unable to pay back debts due to draught or war, were forced to sell their land, often their daughters and ultimately themselves, reducing relations of mutual obligation to relations of slavery and subordination. He argued that in order for such violence to be possible, it was necessary to provide it with morality, to

justify it, and morality based on the logic of debt suited perfectly since by framing structurally unequal relations in such a way it was possible to blame the victim for the predicament. Thus if we see morality as debt, as a logic where one is impelled to do something because “he owes it” and the other side is justified in expecting favours and services because “they are owed to”, the potential for exploitation and violence is all too present. We may think we live in the best of all possible worlds, but in an echo of Nietzsche, he forced us to reflect on the violence and suffering that lies beneath all of the things that we take as good and desirable.

Yet Graeber is never easy to read despite his brilliant writing as sometimes his arguments go in many directions at once. One of the most striking passages in the book concern the criminalisation of debt in early modern England, of harsh laws that penalised any debts people might have toward others. He recounts a story of a woman who had promised to pay a shopkeeper later for the good she desired. While the shopkeeper accepted the promise, he changed his mind and then sued the woman who was then subsequently hanged. He reminds us that in small societies any person was always in debt to another person as well as being a creditor. Even now this is largely the case. So the criminalisation of debt amounted to criminalisation of society and ideas of individual self-sufficiency were taking hold at the time producing respective political and economic visioning as in Adam Smith — where individuals exchange with one another and never remain in debt to each other and an invisible balancing force ensures the stability of the system. Debt can be good — a socially unifying force — but debt can also be bad.

However, Graeber was probably best known for his political views as an anarchist. He was critical of the way academic scholars concerned themselves with high

theory with little to no understanding of what actual people were doing to bring about change. His books *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004)² and *Direct Action* (2009)³ were therefore more than just academic contributions to questions about social change which has been a historically prevalent interest in social sciences: how does change happen? Who makes it happen? What are the consequences? In anarchism he found the perfect marriage between sophisticated understandings of the political and economic dynamics and practical ways of experimenting with new forms of living. He was the engine of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) (whose history he recounted in *The Democracy Project* (2013)⁴) movement that was not only a space of critical reflection on the way finance had begun to dominate every aspect of our waking life, but also a place where people experimented with horizontal, consensual decision-making that had evolved through centuries from the pre-historical era to the modern day with the Quakers, the feminist movement, Zapatistas and the global justice movement. It turned out that such forms of cooperation can be even more effective than hierarchical, militaristic, top-down decision-making which lies at the heart of every state structure. OWS was a radical democracy based on the idea of direct action — acting as if one is already free and thus actually becoming free. It was a vision of a world where people do not engage with impersonal bureaucratic structures in order to help other people, settle their debts, and make complaints. It was a refusal of state violence but was ultimately crushed by state violence.

For me, learning about anarchism was a process whereby the obvious began to seem absurd. Why should we have a class of people that make decisions on our behalf? Why does the argument of efficiency override the argument of meaningful personal autonomy? Why should we accept international organi-

sations like the World Bank, the WTO and the IMF as well as the European Commission that bully smaller and weaker states into submission, forcing loans upon them and then telling them to cut spending in healthcare and education thus rendering any long-term prospects of development virtually impossible? Why should we ask the authorities for a permission to protest? Doesn't that defeat the entire purpose of a protest? Anarchism is an exercise in imagination. And it is imagination which capitalism has been so successful at eradicating. For most people, any idea of living in a world where states and markets are not the dominant modes of life seems impossible despite the fact that many moments of the day are spent performing actions that are beyond these structures. Waking up next to a loved one and hugging them, eating breakfast with your kids, laughing with your colleagues, dancing at a club – moments of sheer pleasure, the kind of moments that are actually the most meaningful are those where no violent hierarchies, no cold calculation exists. How is it that despite this we find a world built on such principles unthinkable? Graeber argued that this is due to a machinery of destruction where any attempts to bring into being such a world are met with guns, bombs and tanks. No wonder then that humans instinctively withdraw from any thoughts about a better, nicer world.

Bureaucracy occupied a central place in Graeber's thinking — and was wholesomely critiqued in *The Utopia of Rules* (2014)⁵ — probably because it is the one setting most devoid of imagination, indeed, defined by the necessity to withhold any imaginative thought and simply follow the laid down procedures. It is also the quintessential way in which explicit violence is normalised and routinised. The police are simply the one bureaucratic element where violence is least disguised. Yet violence is present in any setting where formal top-down rules meet

with real social situations that escape easy categorisation or resolution. If the people in charge are prevented from engaging in interpretations of the presented context, then stupid outcomes are bound to result. Furthermore, if the administration of social life is laid over imposed social inequalities, then bureaucracy is really just the management of pre-given stupidity since any relationship defined by arbitrary inequality is possible only thanks to the threat of violence. And violence is the weapon of the stupid. Bureaucracy, then, is the kind of phenomenon which sustains morally unjustifiable inequality — sometimes it does so tediously, slowly, and unremarkably. But sometimes stupidity has to be aggressively guarded, and this is the function of the police.

Graeber pointed out that inequalities sustained by violence — threatened or real — had pernicious effects on people's imagination. Drawing on feminist literature, Graeber argued that in an unequal relationship, the subordinate is forced to be always involved in imaginative labour regarding their superior, if only to avoid being the object of unpredictable anger. This does not happen the other way around, though, as the superior side does not have to care at all about what the subordinate thinks and feels since they have the ability to force them to do anything they want. The imagination of the subordinate, though, leads them to also sympathise with their superiors, aware as they are of their humanity and possible vulnerability. The police again serve as a good example as they have become one of the most mythologised and eulogised institutions in popular culture — watchers of popular TV shows like CSI or countless others are always invited to look at the world through the perspective of the police. Thus, we also sympathise with it and should there be a situation when we encounter it — likely to accept their perspective on what has happened. Yet, this interpretative labour

carried out constantly by the subordinates also harbours prospects of a revolution since the kind of knowledge accumulated about the operations of the superiors can be used to re-define the terms of the relationship. If we can take something from this line of thinking then it's probably that imagination has to be re-weaponised.

One of Graeber's single most notable intellectual inspirations was Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). It might be said that his reading of Mauss determined his entire outlook on the political and economic possibilities before us. His interpretation not only had academic merit but clear implications for revolutionary action. Revolutionaries are often preoccupied with the dire prospect of presenting the source of the new society. But Graeber pointed out that the effort of trying to figure out how something new comes into being is at best misguided. The possibilities and alternatives are already here. Mauss had attempted to lay out the universal feelings and motivations that underpin human societies arguing that they are based on mutually experienced obligations that are marked by the transfer of objects. Instead of a market-like rationality, Mauss posited a view of human beings as continuously engaged in a labour of thought about one's fellows — what their desires, needs, grudges, and other all-too-human inclinations are and acting upon them. It was precisely the fundamental sociability of humans which drove the yearning for a society where individualistic, cynical, selfish qualities would be relegated to an unvalued domain of human activity. So instead of forcing some kind of fundamental rapture with the development of society, what was needed was a change of emphasis, a recognition of everyday acts that embody mutual care and affection. This was not a naïve view of the world for these very same relations of love and care always harboured the potential for envy, lust and anger. But the remarkable theoretical twist

was the rejection of capitalism and the market as the natural state of humanity and the harbinger of freedom instead seeing it as a parasitical add-on. It was an attempt to reject institutionalised selfishness, something to be shaken off as a bad case of flees.

While most people have read Graeber's latest books since *Debt*, his earlier work should probably deserve even more attention. His *Value* book (*Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: the False Coins of Our Own Dreams*)⁶ published in 2001 was an original attempt to frame social theory in a new light, giving it a fresh epistemological grounding. Rallying against the theoretical positions that assumed permanent social structures that can be known by an analyst in their entirety, always grappling uncomfortably with the phenomenon of change and transformations, while also rejecting the view of seemingly structureless societies where all that exists are moral claims for identities that unwittingly reinforce the grand structure of the market, Graeber suggested a new way forward. Humans are creative creatures, we possess imagination, we make new things all the time and we spend much of our lives improvising new ways of being and acting in the world — this should be the point of departure for any social analysis. Driven as we are by the impulse of creativity, Graeber defined *action* as the basic analytical unit. Action in turn was driven by value — be it beauty, freedom, power, or wealth — which attributed significance and importance to what was done. Herein came the social element of the analysis as human actions were socially sanctified in a public context — in relation to others — acquiring reality. Structure was nothing more than a mechanism of coordination for actions or, in other words, actions repeated on a regular basis formed a pattern that could be analytically discerned as a structure. The function of value was to connect singular actions with the larger structures of which they were a

part. In the case of capitalism this is quite obvious — people work (perform an action) motivated by money (the ultimate form of capitalist value) and the market (structure) determines the importance or worth of their actions. Of course, Graeber knew very well that even in a capitalist society, not everyone is actually motivated by money as value. Capitalism was simply characterised by an institutionalised appreciation for money as a form of value while rendering other forms of value, those impossible to measure quantifiably — like love, care, artistic expression, justice — valueless. Yet this was also the source of potentially revolutionary thinking — we already live in a society where people pursue all kinds of value, where all kinds of “structures” exist side by side, underneath, or above the “market”. These can never be known in entirety, presented neatly in a museum, but the academic duty was to recognise the various societies that co-exist, sometimes even amidst the same people so as to infuse politics back into the picture. Because for Graeber, quite memorably, politics was the struggle to define what value is and what forms of value should be privileged and celebrated. By re-positioning the conceptual role of structure, he rejected those leftist thinkers who feared the imposition of any kind of structure by default thus actually throwing the gauntlet open for the imposition of most totalitarian structures human societies had seen. Graeber argued forcefully that some regulatory framework will have to exist and we would do well to think about what kind would ensure human freedom.

My all-time favourite book though by Graeber is probably *Possibilities* (2007)⁷ which is a collection of essays playing out the themes of desire, hierarchy and rebellion. I still remember the eye-opening feeling I had when reading the essay about capitalism and slavery in which Graeber criticised the concept of “modes of production” as it

had been developed in the academic language since Marx. By arguing that most of economic analysis has been wrongly centred on the way *things* are produced in a society, Graeber suggested that instead we define human beings as the end goal of any production in any society. This was an idea he later developed in the *Debt* book offering the term “human economy” to denote a society where objects change hands in order to mark a change in relationships between people (like getting married, divorced, dying, etc.). Even a capitalist economy — which ideationally privileges the production of objects as the ultimate purpose of humanity — is a human economy if we see the underlying pattern of it as the production of wage-labourers. Thus, if the ultimate purpose of humanity is to be engaged in a continuous and always ongoing process of “fashioning people” as Graeber said it, then care should be taken to figure out exactly what kind of people we want to create and what kind of social relationships should ensure their infinite reproduction. It was the profound humanism which underlay Graeber’s work pointing out that human beings are simply the sum total of the social relations they are enmeshed in. Pull them out of their social context, away from people who define them as sons and daughters, and husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and what you get is a vulnerable being subject to violent definitions as a thing, to be freely bought and sold, dispensed with, their emotions unreckoned with, reduced to an object. For this reason, the power to define the substance of relations, to determine the rules and norms of it, the inherent hierarchies and possibilities of subversion, is the kind of power we should regard with utmost seriousness.

It was probably this line of academic research which underlay Graeber’s famous argument about “bullshit jobs” which he expounded in a book by the same title published in 2018⁸. Graeber interpreted the

anthropological record as suggesting that most societies are primarily preoccupied with the creation of people, and the production and exchange of things is subordinated to this broader process. The mere existence of jobs that seemed to serve no purpose at all — as reported by the people themselves — was indicative of a deep confusion which permeates our societies regarding the meaning of work. The fact that the financial, legal and advertising professions seem to be best remunerated whereas people in the education, health and care sector generally tend to be paid a lot less reflects a twisted dynamic. The work of the latter is indeed about the creation and maintenance of people — something which may even be appreciated morally, but certainly not monetarily. Finance, law and advertising though has very little to do with people and mainly revolves around the creation and maintenance of money — a morally questionable necessity, but monetarily superior to pretty much any other activity. He suspected that the evolution of technology had a lot to do with it, making us work more instead of liberating us. Human societies have been able to harness ever-more energy which hasn't necessarily translated in the production of socially useful technology. How did we get to this? And how do we get out of it? Graeber didn't necessarily advocate specific public policies — except, very broadly, debt cancellation and universal basic income — but he did point out that a truly free society would be one where people are able to determine the time and place of their own creative labour. For most this may seem too abstract or impossible, but there is no reason to doubt that the global human society would be able to provide housing and food for every human being on the planet enabling the possibility to spend much of our time as we want and see fit. Graeber saw the function of creativity as central to our understanding of human beings and conceptually perceived the world

as in continuous motion saying that it is always possible to create new worlds if we are unhappy with our current work. After all — this is exactly how the world is kept in motion anyway.

It is impossible to give justice to the breadth and depth of Graeber's work — these were only the more popular arguments and themes in his wide-ranging scholarship. He is often lauded for his engaging writing but not all of it is actually that accessible. Yet at least for me — it was precisely the less easy bits that captured most of my attention. But his arguments follow a surprisingly simple scheme — he often uses binary oppositions to lead the reader through the conceptual maze of his thought. This is the tradition of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009) as well as Edmund Leach (1910–1989) who Graeber acknowledged as an influence. So for anyone struggling, I recommend the use of pen and paper to jot down his main terms of analysis and paying close attention to the way subsequent terms build on the initial units. There is a surprising correspondence which enabled Graeber to playfully weave through multiple arguments and perspectives at once without ever losing sight on the main target. Social theorists would do well to keep in mind the useful function of analytical simplicity enabling enormously complex arguments without making the reader feel as if they are complete idiots. There is hardly any doubt that Graeber's work will live on for generations to come.

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Andris Šuvajevs ir absolvējis Oksfordas Universitāti, kur ieguva sociālo zinātņu maģistra grādu sociālajā antropoloģijā; iepriekš A. Šuvajevs ieguva bakalaura grādu socioloģijā Glāzgovas Universitātē. Kopš 2017. gada A. Šuvajevs ir doktorantūras students Latvijas Universitātes socioloģijas programmā.

DEIVIDS GRĒBERS — PAR VARDARBĪBU VIŅPUS ACĪM REDZAMĀ

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Kopsavilkums

Atslēgas vārdi: *Grēbers, nauda, parādi, vardarbība, birokrātija, vērtība*

Rakstā sniegts antropologa Deivida Grēbera (1961–2020) intelektuālā mantojuma īss kopsavilkums. Autors aplūko Grēbera nozīmīgākās idejas vairākās kultūras un sociālās antropoloģijas jomās, sākot ar naudas vēsturi, parādattiecībām un ar tām saistīto morāles diskursu un beidzot ar plašākai sabiedrībai mazāk zināmu ieguldījumu teorijās par birokrātiju, vērtībām un ražošanas veidiem.

Grēbers bija viens no mūsdienu laikmeta ievērojamākajiem domātājiem, kurš līdztekus izcilam akadēmiskam sniegunam demonstrēja politiski aktīvu nostāju, reprezentējot un vadot vairākas sociālās kustības, kas būtiski ietekmēja uz 21. gadsimta politiku pasaulē. Grēbers ir atstājis bagātīgu literāro mantojumu — grāmatas, esejas un rakstus, kas neapšaubāmi iespaidos nākamo paaudžu pētniekus.