

This interview was conducted by Nina Živančević in London, in November 2015. It has never been published in English before. We publish it here to mark David's tragic passing on September 2, 2020.

David Graeber was a leading anthropologist and politico-economic anarchist-activist, and a prominent intellectual in the public eye. He was a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics, and one of the founders of the American protest movement "Occupy Wall Street", as well as the creator of the slogan "We are 99 %". He was also the author of the bestseller "Debt: the First 5,000 years", prefaced by Thomas Piketty, as well as numerous other texts, including "Utopia of Rules, about Technology, Stupidity and Hidden Pleasures of Bureaucracy". In this interview made in a friend's kitchen in London, Graeber discussed the causes and context of immigration, the plight of Syrian refugees and its catastrophic effect on Eastern Europe, and of the so-called 'European crisis'.

Nina Živančević: We are all concerned about the European crisis, with the so-called migrants and the refugees, not only in Greece, but also in "Mitteleuropa" or Eastern Europe. Do you see these manifestations of crisis as different, isolated elements or do you see them as events which are essentially connected?

David Graeber: You see, I would call all these events a continuing process, the development of the Empire, the Empire in its descent and disintegration. This process could be the one following the period of crisis of debt which started in the Third World countries and was moving to the Southern part of Europe, towards the center of the Empire. This process was made possible due to the work of the forces of the successful Resistance, therefore we also find it in the parts of Asia and Latin America, which is to say that we are talking about the general process of implosion because the American Empire is falling apart but we haven't found a replacement for it. Then, there are waves of migrants who arrive in Europe but Europe is in a deep economic depression. Altogether I would say that all these are manifestations of a certain historical process.

NZ: We are leaving at this moment something that Foucault had called "the society of discipline" and we are entering "the society of surveillance", where everyone is spying on everyone else: how does this new social mentality influence our attitudes towards the refugees/migrants here in Europe?

DG: I remember when I was a kid and reading the old, classic Greek history - there were thousands of people who were packing and moving from one part of the world to another, they were going to Asia, so right there I understood that some "illegal" action was happening there too, in a different form from the action which is happening today as today.

We are witnessing an incredible global control of the territorial borders and laws which govern their borders. Although we know that the technology has advanced a lot, we are still confronted with an incredible quantity of walls and of frontiers being imposed on us, virtual or non-virtual

ones, the walls which cut our planet into a million separate pieces - until recently this was a sort of an abstraction to us and now it's becoming our physical reality.

NZ: How come that we are always going back to the notion of Wall? It could be any wall, a wall in Auschwitz or now more recently a barbed-wire wall between Serbia and Hungary?

DG: Perhaps we need these walls after all. As we mention Foucault and the specific panoptic of spying on everyone, we should underline that people do not understand that this panoptic is also a jail which the prisoners could leave - if it didn't have walls and prison guards who would be violent if someone wanted to leave this jail. In other words, we always have in mind a notion of the metaphysical violence which makes all other forms of violence possible to manifest. What I see here as an incredible thing is that there is an incredibly powerful network of the bureaucratic information which is made necessary for people to move from one part of the world to another: imagine for instance that I were a Syrian refugee and that I did not take with me my birth-certificate as I had to flee the country in a big hurry: so if I don't have it, what do I do? Invent a whole story about who I am, etc? And if I want to contact my family in Syria in order to get the certificate, claim my property, etc - then I see how the power of "walls" gets put into action - wherever I am in the world, I belong to my country, to that part of the world which is behind the wall. Today we cannot even imagine how it looked 2,000 years ago when people wanted to go to some place and they went there any way they liked.

NZ: You mean in the "pre-Paleolithic" times ?

DG: No, not really; say like in the era of feudalism, people travelled from Africa to England, I don't mean here the slaves, these travelers were not slaves, they would only enter another country physically, no one prevented them to enter some country.

NZ: You mean, the way the Hobbits travelled in the novel and film "The Lord of the Rings"?

DG: Yes, and the interesting thing is that they were welcomed pleasantly and warmly by the local inhabitants, the system of hospitality was highly developed and the host felt a moral obligation to welcome a stranger - he would bring the best food to him and feed him for three days. Perhaps if this guest overstayed the host could turn him into a slave - OK, I am joking a bit - we will not enter here the psychological aspects or reasons for someone's hospitality! The Austrian anthropologist Franz Steiner had written a lot about this problem, he wrote a doctoral dissertation, "On the nature of slavery", which he later lost on a train on his trip from Cambridge to London, and soon after he died. However, he developed the thesis related to his personal experience - he himself was a refugee in England but at that time an already famous professor who had always said that people had been inviting him to visit them, wined and dined him, asking him to read his interesting work - only to ask him all sorts of favors in the end, for instance - to wash the dishes!

NZ: I really appreciated your analysis of the perverse structure of the university today and the possible reforms which could be induced into the higher education system. I'm referring to your book, "Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology". Among many other stories, I have a tragic one

concerning my father whose mentor turned his doctoral thesis down after five years of his elaborate research, and then appropriated my father's work !

DG: Oh, that's really disgusting but it happens in the academic circles all the time. It happens due to some old, stale concepts that the academics hold - they grab one idea and do not let go of it throughout their life and then - then they try to steal some new ideas from some new colleagues. I always try to get rid of, dispense of my stale ideas – I have so many of them! Every morning I should clean my head like you clean the table after breakfast.

NZ: I come from Serbia where people use different ideas all the time, in order to survive! This summer I witnessed an incredible influx of the refugees coming to my hometown, Belgrade. They were all humanely welcomed, but I would like to know now, how could the governments of the wealthy Western European countries even imagine that the refugees would be taken care of in small countries such as Slovenia, Serbia, Romania – when these bigger and wealthier ones could not help them?

DG: It seems that in so called Western Europe - the administration and the government started to calculate how many refugees they could accept and which jobs these could eventually get, and where they would feel the best. Oddly enough, they came up with the calculus that the first and the best country for the refugees was Hungary!

NZ: This brings us to my next question in regards to the refugees: would this huge influx of the refugees encourage the National Front in their overreacting in the general scope of politics of the Western European countries?

DG: Yes, this is, as the result, happening in some countries, but it seems that the National Front and their anti-immigrant politics are to be found today in those small towns and villages where the refugees would not land anyways. In France, for instance and in some other countries where the National Front is in action, their representatives live in those forlorn places spared by the immigrants. In London, for instance, the representatives of the National Front have never met the immigrants in person - as they live in those posh suburbs where the immigrants never go, and, if they were to meet some of them they wouldn't even know what to say, what to ask, how to present themselves..

NZ: Big empires, such as those of France and Great Britain, have never truly thought about the possible ways to address their refugees coming to them, the difference being that of Germany, who "worked through" their hour of collective psychoanalysis, after World War II.

DG: Yes, the Germans seem all of a sudden more tolerant in treating the refugees who arrive there now. I would like to emphasize the fact that the Germans had not entirely created all the forms of torture or behavior towards the minorities during WWII - all these forms had already existed in the big colonial empires: the concentration camps, the bureaucratic consensuses and lists of special citizens in Holland and in France, as well as the systematic avoidance of laws, and the double standard for the application of these laws to different groups of inhabitants, as prescribed by the Geneva convention when it was signed - these were not applied in their

colonies. This is to say that in a conflict between the empire and say, the Zulu tribe, or in Ecuador, the laws from the Geneva convention were not respected in these territories. The arms that the empire used there were not even known as such in Europe, like those “dum-dum bullets” for instance. However, the Germans pushed the farthest the war terror as they decided to use the most drastic forms of armament over the population which they declared not white, though these people were seen as “white” by all other nations but the Germans.

NZ: Let’s discuss something else: Jacques Rancière once said that politics and art build a fictive relationship, that something that we see and what we do is just a part of that relationship and that what we do and what we could do in future is another part of that relationship. What kind of relationship could be built between the refugees and the countries where they arrive?

DG: I agree that there is a fictive, imaginary relationship between them – you know, people project all sorts of desires when they meet with the foreigners; we observe here strange and perverse desires as they find these foreigners different from them, however we know that the precondition for building solidarity with the refugees is the feeling of equality and togetherness. Another thing is that people like to see the refugees as victims, they sympathize with them until the certain moment, they imagine themselves in a similar situation which causes them to have empathy, until the moment when these poor refugees start feeling good. Then their hosts’ feelings change, they start having certain doubts in regards to these refugees, now the question is - how do we overcome this feeling?

NZ: Is it the feeling which arises during the meeting with Other, as Levinas would have it? Fear when you meet a stranger, no matter which foreigner?

DG: The notion of Other does not include only fear but also the attraction which we feel towards the Other. Whenever I’ve read the Levinas observations about the face, human face I was hearing him, in a paradoxical way, as we are all the same, in the sense that we all come from mankind, that they are all different. I was thinking about it while living in Madagascar, in a culture different from mine. These faces are not only different from ours- they differ among themselves, just as we differ from one another, people of the same culture. In that sense Levinas wishes to point to the absolute uniqueness of each of us, of each face which we cannot entirely assimilate, which causes certain pain but also an awareness in us that everyone is unique and special. And that it forms a part of the humanizing process, makes us human, this sort of constant appropriation of awareness that every human being is unique.

As an anthropologist I am in a constant process of studying the Other and I am constantly aware that the Other is different and that we are constantly of the verge of an abyss of not understanding other culture, the Other - we are reaching here the point of limitation in us. I often do not understand my own brother who is a great unknown to me.

In Madagascar I met a person who looked so much like my ex-girlfriend that I did not know how to address this person! However we differ so much that in the end we come to a conclusion that people are just people and that they are just the same in many given ways.

NZ: David, let's go back to Karl Marx: the sociologists in Europe say that the refugees and the migrants are not such a weight or burden on Europe, as they could be a source of investment for Europe which lacks workers, and needs a greater working force, and one that is neither physical nor 'intellectual', and which Negri called "the force of immaterial labor".

DG: Yes, I see, if I could draw a certain parallel with what happened in the U.S... In North America the situation is clear: until recently all immigrants without papers there had a status worse than any pariah - they were not allowed to vote nor they had any other rights. They did not have a syndicate which would allow them to speak out, and only recently there started a movement for civil rights which allows for these people to speak out. At the same time the immigration coming from Mexico becomes ever prominent in the US, and the politicians on the top are constantly reflecting whether they should throw them out of the country or not - they cannot agree on this issue - and what these immigrants are today is exactly what the capitalist class has always been fighting for: to have a group of people who have no legal rights and who don't have a workers' syndicate capable of defending their rights. As they don't even have a right to have a syndicate, these people are in a legal limbo. So here we are talking about work which is legally outlawed. These illegal workers have no rights and they swim in the waters where everyone can throw them out at any moment and this is exactly what the capitalists want.

NZ: And how could this influx of new migrants change the working status in Europe today? Is there a real danger for people who work in Europe today to lose their jobs easily as there will be a great number of migrants who are able to replace them?

DG: I don't see that there's a real danger in it, as we should not forget that the great influx of the refugees also creates a number of social jobs, it requests new services as there are new needs for the population which could be satisfied by the work of migrants. In that sense, if the number of the inhabitants is doubled, the needs for food supplies and jobs related to that service also double, the services dealing with the daily survival. In the history we have witnessed similar fears like the one you mention, in history people were afraid, for instance that if the Saxons arrive, they would exterminate the Celts and so on. And what happened was that their territories got sort of integrated and then all of them were called the Saxons from then on...

NZ: How do you see the previous big migrations of the populations, similar to this one today where we see, say, half of Syria move to Europe, etc? When the Jews moved to Israel, and Israel was created, do you see what sort of consequences it had for Palestine for instance?

DG: The problem starts when the migrants who move into someone's territory want to take leadership over the territory where they have just landed - if the Syrians wanted to take leadership in European countries where they have just arrived, I see that that would be a problem.

NZ: Didn't Europe itself or more precisely the Nazi regime create Israel by conducting pogroms and chasing out that part of European citizens out of their original settlements?

DG: Absolutely. After the Second World War the Europeans thought that they had to do something, at least partially for the Jews, and as it was not possible for them to give the Jews a part of the European territory, they decided that the Jews should be directed towards Palestinian lands. You see how that thing got totally complicated as the Jews were originally Europeans as well. This is all a very sad story - when I moved to London in a quarter called Bethlehem Green one could still find numerous synagogues. However, through certain municipal decrees by the end of 1990s, the Brits started moving Muslim refugees into this quarter, telling them “this is the area where you are going to feel at home”. This is just one of the examples which show how the Zionist politics has done the most harm to the Jewish population itself.

NZ: Do you support Habermas’s theory that the “European problem” stems from a certain lack of cohesion and collaboration amongst the members of the European Union as these tend to be overwhelmed by huge bureaucracy? And that the European monetary system became so weakened by the huge pressure which this bureaucracy produces that, as the result, it cannot adequately react to the momentum of an extreme financial crisis? You have mentioned this problem in your new book “The Utopia of Rules- on Technology, Stupidity and Hidden Pleasures of Bureaucracy”.

DG: Yes, we are witnessing this moment right now! We are witnessing a great momentum of the utmost bureaucratization of each and every aspect of our daily reality. I don’t have the exact figures, no one has really counted them, but we should pay attention to the simple fact that an ordinary person spends an incredible amount of time in every European country filling out the forms and papers. It seems that the statistics warns us that we spend approximately two days a year filling out papers – what is really scary right now is the total fusion of the private and the public spheres in the domain of bureaucracy. Yesterday I spent, one more time, about one hour talking to my bank. As usual there is always a person whose name is difficult to obtain, who is beyond reach and invisible - this is a classic bureaucratic approach to the problem - and if you ever reach this unique person, he will tell you that the laws which protect him, that is the bank, are the laws coined by the state; which is not true, as the “laws” for any bank are formed inside the bank lobby and we have to ask the question: is this the private or the public sphere? We see that there was a total fusion between the bank corporations and the state, high capitalism makes its profits by controlling the financial sphere, also by using the indebted individuals and debts which were created through a certain bureaucratic process.

Here we talk about a certain form of utopia, as it is utopist to believe that people should always behave in a certain way, and if they don’t - they will be punished by the state! JP Morgan Chase is a corporation which earned only last year 75% of its profits by getting engaged in politics! The big corporations create laws which we have to abide by, and if we don’t respect them - we will get punished. This type of calculus is pure Utopia and a sort of bureaucratization which devours everything in its way. It is not flexible a single bit, on the contrary - it is deeply conservative. If Habermas took this into consideration, he probably thought of the technological development which goes with this form of Capitalism with all the additional changes and advances in science and the forms of use of the energy. We also have the internet which is a form of the gigantic, huge library, and if we were to show it to someone who had lived in the 1950s, this person would conclude “the internet is fantastic- the last and the final word of science”, without having

thought for a second how this scientific discovery also kills creativity. We arrived here also through the bureaucratization of the education.

NZ: What's your favorite subject these days? What are you writing about at the moment?

DG: I am working on a book entitled "The Pirate-Kings of Madagascar" with a well known archaeologist – you should be aware of the fact that the last time that the anthropologists and the archaeologists got together to work on real discoveries was in the period of the late 1960s. They discovered that we lived feeding ourselves on bunch of invented stories like the one that people in the past lived in small groups of 30-40 people, or in igloos or something and then the age of the agriculture had arrived, etc.. but then when we arrive to the formation of the cities, here we have the ruling class, the state and the whole civilizational package which goes with it. Now, the only problem is that none of this stuff is true! The first three civilizations that we know of are: the civilization of Uruk (4000–3200 BC), of the Indian Valley and Mesopotamia - but what's really interesting is that these civilizations were structured in an egalitarian manner which seemed a strange, if not impossible, to us from our prospective. Always when we have a tiny group of people who represent a certain organization we assume that they will try to take the leadership, but in these ancient cities the citizens enjoyed an equal status. For instance, the largest buildings in them were not the palaces or temples but the sanitary buildings, public baths which allowed the large groups of population to have access to them. The archaeologists have always thought that there was a certain legal codex in such a city, the one which would guarantee the leadership or power to one special group, but it does not seem that it happened that way. The family system did not seem to be so egalitarian there but all other things in these civilizations were. This is just what I've been discovering recently and started writing a book about it.

And I'm pursuing the writing of my book on "bullshit jobs" where I'm going back to Maynard Keynes and his 1930s. He was hoping that technological advancement would help people to work less, or to work the hours that are convenient to them, however what really happened with the technological development was that the bureaucratic and the secretarial jobs piled up ever since. And if we asked all this army of working people "what have they done on their jobs" - they would say "oh, really nothing, we have just stared at the screen, but don't tell that to our boss." And in fact all these guys who are in the marketing, promotion, as well as those lawyers in big corporations - had they suddenly disappeared from the Earth, we would not even noticed their absence! Not to go into the psychological aspect of this problem - what is really going on in the heads of these poor people who are allegedly working on something but who will never even see the final product of their work notwithstanding enjoying its fruit later.

Even if you have to clean the gutters, you know it's a disgusting job, but hey, someone has to do it and you know concretely what the job is exactly about, and now if you look at someone who's a Marketing Director for the US East Coast in the corporation called "Global Vision", you see the poor guy wanted to become a musician but he had a kid, he had to find "a steady" job, to become a lawyer in a corporation for instance, where he keeps on writing one memorandum a day that no one reads. I think that Dostoyevsky described once the most stupid moment in a jail where the prisoners were forced to empty the sand boxes and then to fill the same boxes with

sand which was the most stupid and non-sensical action of them all - that's how people who work on bullshit jobs must be feeling every day...

Poet, essayist, fiction writer, playwright, art critic, translator and contributing editor to NY ARTS magazine from Paris, Serbian-born **Nina Živančević** published 15 books of poetry. She has also written three books of short stories, two novels and a book of essay on Milosh Crnjanski (her doctoral thesis) published in Paris, New York and Belgrade. As editor and correspondent she has contributed to New York Arts Magazine, Modern Painters, American Book Review, East Village Eye, Republique de lettres. She lives and works in Paris.