
RACHEL JONES

Bookforum talks with David Graeber



David Graeber

David Graeber is an anthropologist, anarchist, the author of *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*, a professor at Goldsmith's, University of London, and one of the organizers of Occupy Wall Street, which is the subject of his forthcoming book. Bookforum spoke with the writer in Los Angeles about the future of anthropology, ecstatic moments in activism, and the problem of political imagination.

Bookforum: You're an anthropologist who has written a book that combines history, economics, and philosophy. What drew you to anthropology as

a discipline?

David Graeber: I got involved in anthropology largely because I like to think of it as the intellectual equivalent of never having to grow up. If growing up is coming to terms with all the things you're never going to do and never going to be, like you're never actually going to be a rock star or an Olympic ski jumper. Anthropology is the discipline which does that to you least. Because it is studying human beings, there really isn't much that's not covered by it. I suppose you can't study astrophysics, but you can study astrophysicists.

BF: In light of our current economic situation and the pressure on traditional academic disciplines, do you think anthropology is going to become more important?

DG: Anthropology has the potential to become more important as a discipline if it embraces the breadth of its potential calling. I fear anthropology has been moving in the opposite direction in recent years. It's parochialized itself, there's been a movement away from theory, or at least from generating theory, to local concerns through the mediation of whatever trendy continental theory of the 1970s is currently in fashion. It's very strange. To be honest, I sometimes wonder if anthropology has some sort of death wish, a desire to box itself out of relevance. If it overcomes that, it has huge potential.

BF: What will it take to overcome that?

DG: I think it's a generational problem that might go away by itself. At least I hope it will! I'm currently involved with a journal called HAU: A Journal of Ethnographic Theory. It's a classic example, as an anthropologist would say, of the alliance of alternative generations. It unites graduate students and old fuddy duddies, because both have a big picture view they want to talk about. Once upon a time, anthropologists would take unfamiliar concepts they encountered and try to apply them as theoretical terms, which led to all sorts of conceptual breakthroughs. Our technical terms used to be words like totem, taboo, or manna, or potlatch. Everybody got excited—Sartre tried to theorize the potlatch; Wittgenstein wrote about Frazer; Freud wrote Totem and Taboo. Nowadays all we talk about is ideas culled from continental philosophy and nobody cares. So I think that we need to go back to the richness of the material only we have access to. We have access to traditions from all over the world, which most people ignore. After all, ninety-eight percent of human thought seems to get relegated to anthropology.

I think as a society we've become afraid of asking really big questions, or even undertaking big concepts. A bizarre conservatism has crept over us. I was talking to some friends in Europe about the collapse of the EU, and some of them are journalists who were actually at these meetings with the leaders of Europe, and the most amazing thing they all describe is the lack of imagination—all that our current leaders can think to do is to maintain things that already exist. In generations past, people used to create things like the EU, the UN, or try to foment global revolution or go to the moon. But nobody thinks about things like that anymore. No one thinks big. No one can imagine anything radically different. I think anthropology has fallen into that same trap, but anthropologists are uniquely positioned to help us escape it as well.

BF: What led you to write a big-picture book like *Debt*?

DG: Maybe that's a generational thing as well. I'm not actually of my generation—my parents came of age in the '30s, and they had me late in life. I should have lived in a different age. I like to think that I could have fit well in the past and that I could also fit well in the future. For now, I hope we're moving back to a time when we can think big. That's why one of my heroes is Marcel Mauss. He was willing to ask giant questions even though he knew he couldn't come up with proper answers to them yet. Even though data wasn't available to answer the questions posed in *The Gift*, he started to frame these questions; like, what is a market, anyway? Why do we feel obliged to return a gift? Where does the individual come from? Those kinds of sweeping questions correspond to moments when people are willing to enact revolutionary change and create new institutions out of whole cloth. For a while, we lost the ability to try great historical or conceptual experiments, but I think we're entering into a period in which we have no choice but to go back to them.

BF: Are people still telling you that things are more complicated than that?

DG: Of course, they always do. Usually not to your face. I've heard that the first reaction of a lot of people in my field to me was, "What is this weird 19th century stuff? What, does he think he's Oswald Spengler?"

I'm not saying things aren't complicated. I'm just saying that if all you have to say is "it's more complicated than that," well, you'll have the pleasure of always being right, but you'll never know the pleasure of saying something that people don't already know. If you want to say something that people don't already know, you have to take risks. Actually, I'll go further: You have to have the courage to be at least partially wrong. Any broad theoretical statement is necessarily a simplification of reality,

it's necessarily leaving a lot out. It's only by having the courage to be wrong—in that particular way—that you're going to learn anything you didn't know already.

BF: You say that at the moment we don't have any other choice besides thinking in a different way, and opening the floor to new questions. Why is that?

DG: Well, some very dramatic things have happened in recent years, and I think that the first thing one does while in the middle of some kind of tectonic shift is to get a sense of rhythm and ask what the relevant cycles at play are. In this case, the big economic cycles are the two cycles of post-war capitalism, and Gramsci's four stages of global capitalist hegemony. There are a million kind of cycles you could apply, and they're all relevant, but in general, the bigger the change the longer the cycle. So I started thinking in terms of a really big one. As soon as I did, things started connecting in ways that I hadn't imagined. I came up with these grandiose cycles of virtual versus physical currency. It worked, and the interesting thing is that I when showed this to historians they didn't laugh at me. I've actually heard historians of money say, "I'm not sure if anybody's ever said that, but if they haven't they should have. Yes, I think that's more or less correct." All of the people I thought were going to jump down my throat mostly haven't.

BF: Can you recall a particularly ecstatic moment you've experienced during your activism?

DG: One of the great things about activism is that it's full of ecstatic moments. That's why you do it, aside from actually caring about the state of the world. One of the high points of my life was definitely pulling down a wall in Quebec City during a 2001 protest against the Summit of the Americas. Everybody, from steel workers to Mohawk warriors, were all dressed in similar black clothing and pulling down this wall with grappling hooks. Though we had been planning it for months, we didn't entirely think it was going to happen. Then suddenly, here we all were, destroying these fortifications. When you set out to do something and you're not sure if you can, and you do it in solidarity with others, that sense of combined accomplishment is what makes it most exciting.

One of the problems with intellectual life is that this sense of solidarity and combined accomplishment is not something one gets to experience very often, if at all. Collective thinking does happen, but the current organization of intellectual life is inherently egotistical. Some of my favorite moments intellectually have come from batting ideas around with friends late at night, when we suddenly realize that we've

made some breakthrough together. It wasn't something any one person came up with, but the dynamic between us. There are so many ideas that I don't know who came up with, me or one of my friends, because they resulted from these intense conversations, and are kind of a collective product.

I actually came to the conclusion that thinking is not something done by a single person. We have a false model of what thinking is. Because you can't really think by yourself, can you? You have to create someone else in your mind to explain things to, and to have an imaginary conversation with. This idea was inspired in part by the philosopher of cybernetics, Andy Clark, who proposed something he calls the extended mind hypothesis. Basically, the argument goes like this: Say you're doing long division on a piece of paper instead of doing it in your head. Clark asks why the piece of paper is not just as much a part of your mind while you're doing that calculation as the part of your brain that's doing the math. He says there's no reason at all. There are a million similar examples that philosophers like to trundle out—you have a bad memory so you write everything down. Is that piece of paper then part of your mind?

“Mind” isn't “brain”— the brain is just an organ; your mind is the dynamic interaction of various moving elements that culminates in thought. Philosophers like Clark are willing to take that argument this far, but the question that never seems to occur to them is this: when you're having a conversation with someone else, is their mind part of your mind? Nowadays, many philosophers of consciousness like to note just how razor-thin this thing we call “consciousness”, that self-aware part of our mental operations, really is. The average person can rarely hold a thought for more than three or four seconds, eight at the most, before the mind wanders. It's very unusual to be fully conscious for more than a tiny window of time. That is, unless you're having a conversation with someone else, in which case you can often do it for long periods of time, especially if the conversation is with someone you find particularly interesting. In other words, most of the time we're conscious is when we're talking to someone else, or otherwise interacting intensely; during moments in which when we're not clear whose mind is whose. So consciousness is interactive, it's dyadic or triadic. It's a fallacy to imagine that thinking is something you largely do alone. On some level, of course, we already know that. But I don't think we've even begun to explore the full implications.