

David Graeber's battle over the imagination



Artforum's June issue features a terrific interview with David Graeber, author of *Debt, the first 5,000 Years*. The interview, conducted by Artforum editor Michelle Kuo, is sprinkled with eloquent takeaways, including insights on economic theory, the language

of culture, labor, modernism, and how these things tinge and highlight contemporary art. Portions of the interview follow.

MK: What's interesting, too, is the entire notion of rupture. As historians or cultural critics, we're always taught that rupture is good and continuity is bad. It's still a reaction against [Leopold von] Ranke's narrative version of history. In other words, continuity is seen as a reactionary way of looking at history. But you're obviously interested in posing a more sweeping, long-range history or theory of history. Why did you choose to do so?

DG: As an activist it strikes me that some of the most radical, most revolutionary movements today base themselves in indigenous communities, which are communities that see themselves as traditionalists but think of tradition itself as a potentially radical thing. So the deeper the roots you have, the more challenging things you can do with them.

MK: But that's modernism, too, in a way—T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

DG: Well, to a large degree, what we call postmodernism is modernist. What we call poststructuralism is structuralism. It's because you have that static notion of structure that you have to have rupture.

MK: In general, theories of labor and culture tend to revert to periodization, to impose a deterministic relationship between economic shifts and cultural ones. What do you think of the impetus to find moments of social revolution, for example, and then correlates in the cultural sphere?

DG: Well, I'm guilty of that myself, on occasion. Take the notion of flameout. When I first proposed it, I was drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein's notion that at least since 1789, all real revolutions have been world revolutions and that the most significant thing they accomplished was to change political common sense, which is what I like to think is also happening right now. Wallerstein himself is already talking about the world revolution of 2011.

It happens twice—it happens in the artistic field with the explosion of Dada right around the world revolution of 1917, and then it happens in the '70s in Continental philosophy, in the wake of what Wallerstein calls the world revolution of 1968. In each case you have a moment where a particular grand tradition, whether the artistic or the intellectual avant-garde, in a matter of just a few years runs through almost every logical permutation of every radical gesture you could possibly make within the terms of that tradition. And then suddenly everybody says, "Oh no, what do we do now?"

As a political radical myself, coming of age intellectually in the wake of such a moment, there was a profound sense of frustration that it was as if we'd reverted to this almost classical notion of a dream time, where there's nothing for us to do but to repeat the same founding gestures over and over again. We can return to this kind of creation in an imaginary way, but the time of creation itself is forever lost.

MK: How do you view attempts within or on behalf of art to engage in this "battle over the imagination"?

DG: Actually, when I was thinking about what I would say about the relation between the art world and Occupy Wall Street, I was struck by a remarkable pattern. I started thinking of all the conversations about the art world I've had in the process of Occupy Wall Street, which was surprising to me because I don't know that much about the art world. I thought, Who are the people who really led me to the events of August? I was based in England the year before, and the group I was involved with was Arts Against Cuts. And the person I worked with most closely was Sophie Carapetian, a sculptor. Then when I got here to New York, the person who brought me to 16 Beaver Street, where I found out about the Occupy Wall Street planning, was another artist, Colleen Asper. And there I met the artist Georgia Sagri, with whom I was intensely involved within the formation of the General Assembly. And

then the first person I got involved, who ended up playing a critical role, was Marisa Holmes, who used to be a performance artist and is now a filmmaker. What do all these people have in common? They're all young women artists, every one of them.

And almost all of them had experienced exactly that tension between individual authorship and participation in larger activist projects. Another artist I know, for example, made a sculpture of a giant carrot used during a protest at Millbank; I think it was actually thrown through the window of Tory headquarters and set on fire. She feels it was her best work, but her collective, which is mostly women, insisted on collective authorship, and she feels unable to attach her name to the work. And it just brings home the tension a lot of women artists, in particular, feel, that they're much more likely to be involved in these collective projects. On the one hand, such collectives aim to transcend egoism, but to what degree are they just reproducing the same structural suppression women artists regularly experience, because here too a woman is not allowed to claim authorship of her best work?

How do you resolve the dilemma? Yes, it is the collective that makes you an individual, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't become an individual. It's a really interesting question. But I thought I would throw it out there because I don't know the answer either.