INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GRAEBER by ELLEN EVANS & JON MOSES

Ellen Evans and Jon Moses interview Graeber on Madagascar, anarchy, democracy and debt, and how all these implicate each other.

IX MONTHS AGO, WHILE PREPARING TO INTERVIEW DAVID GRAEBER, I decided to conduct some brief internet research on the renowned anthropologist and activist. Although critically acclaimed in academic circles (he has been described as 'the best anthropological theorist of his generation'), I was surprised to find relatively little on the man and his work – save a few articles and interviews regarding his involvement in various alter-globalisation movements over the past decade, a few more concerning his controversial departure from Yale, (he now teaches at Goldsmiths University of London), and of course, the odd intellectual dispute with Slavoj Zizek in the LRB.

Yet, since June, interest in Graeber and his work has soared, indubitably due to the expansion, replication, and success of the Occupy Wall Street movement, something which Graeber has been heavily involved in from its formative stages, causing the mainstream media to characterise him as a sort of 'anti-leader' of the global anti-capitalist movement. Articulate, engaging, and profoundly intelligent, Graeber has become a popular spokesperson for the protests (although one should be careful with the term given the non-hierarchical structure and ethos of the camps), an eloquent commentator who offers a historically engaged analysis of the movement's aspirations and grievances alike.

His most recent book, DEBT: THE FIRST 5000 YEARS, which explores an alternative history of money and markets that is steeped in violence and oppression, has been described by Bloomberg Business Week as providing 'an intellectual frame and a sort of genealogy' for the occupations. Meanwhile, in recent articles and interviews Graeber has been particularly vocal on the point of demands, or more specifically the lack of, from OWS and its ilk – a strategy the media has remained utterly baffled by, insisting it to be antithetical to the change they seek, and using it as evidence of the protestor's 'lack of clear aims' or understanding.

Instead, Graeber has put the spotlight on the anarchist principles of the Occupy movement, explaining that the lack of concrete demands is part of a pre-figurative politics. The protestors act as though they are ‘already living in a free society’, and thus refuse to accept the legitimacy of existing political institutions and legal order – both of which, he says, are immediately recognised in the placing of demands.

This interview was conducted with David Graeber in person last summer.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Could you tell us a little bit about your life, your parents and your family background?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— I grew up in a cooperative in New York – in Manhattan, Chelsea. My father was a plate stripper and my mother was a garment worker. My mother had also been the female lead in a musical review entirely made up of garment workers called PINS AND NEEDLES. The play became a hit on Broadway, so she was a star for three or four years —and then had to go back to being an ordinary person again. My father was working class, but I guess we were what’s sometimes described as working class aristocracy – book-lovers, engaged in an artisanal kind of skilled labour – but we never had money. I found this background was a great impediment, especially in grad school, because it meant while I usually knew far more about, say, the Oresteia than the bourgeois students, I was completely lacking in professional manners.

My father tried his best; he did not want me to become an activist. I think he felt very guilty that he had avoided opportunities to become an exploiter, and that he couldn’t have come through for his children as he would have liked to. He fought in Spain, and he knew a lot of anarchists, but he was never one himself.

He lived in Barcelona at a time it was run on anarchist principles and he would always tell me these fun stories about it. He always said Barcelona was one of the greatest experiments in world history, because what we discovered there was that white-collar workers don’t actually do anything. In Barcelona their idea of having a revolution was to get rid of all the managers and just carry on without them. And nothing really changed.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Growing up, were there any texts or writers that particularly inspired you?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— There were a lot of books around the house when I was growing up, but almost no books of critique. I mean I'm sure my parents had CAPITAL, at least volume one, but very few books about how awful the world was. They had lots of science fiction, lots of history, and lots of anthropology. I think their attitude was 'I spent my nine to five working, experiencing how this system sucks for myself; I don't need to read about that; I want to read about what other ways of existing might be like.' I still like that. I like it when plucking something off the shelf takes you to another world completely. I like things that aren't explicitly political, but open up radically different ways of being.

Orwell's HOMAGE TO CATALONIA – that was important to me, too. My father gave it to me, to give me a sense of the politics, but reminded me to take it with a grain of salt, to take everything you read about Spain with a grain of salt.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— In the UK we often talk about the 'right to protest'? Should protest be conceived of in a rights discourse?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— I find the word 'protest' problematic. With 'protest' it sounds as though you've already lost. It's as though it's part of a game where the sides recognise each other in fixed positions. It becomes like the Foucauldian disciplinary game where both sides sort of constitute each other. In that sense, Foucault was right: resistance is almost required to have power. Which is why I like the concept of direct action. I think in a lot of ways we've been going backwards. I come from the US so I know what's going on there better, where the right to protest, to dissent, to oppose the government is explicitly enshrined in the constitution, and yet flagrantly ignored.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— So, to flesh out the distinctions then: what is the difference between direct action and protest, or direct action and civil disobedience? What is special about the term 'direct action'?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— Well the reason anarchists like direct action is because it means refusing to recognise the legitimacy of structures of power. Or even the necessity of them. Nothing annoys forces of authority more than trying to bow out of the disciplinary game entirely and saying that we could just do things on our own. Direct action is a matter of acting as if you were already free.

The classic example is the well. There's a town where water is monopolised and the mayor is in bed with the company that monopolises the water. If you were to protest in front of the mayor's house, that's protest, and if you were to blockade the mayor's house, it's civil disobedience, but it's still not direct action. Direct action is when you just go and dig your own well, because that's what people would normally do if they didn't have water. In this respect the Malagasy people are totally engaging in direct action. They're the ultimate direct actionists, but they're also in a situation where it's much easier to get away with it.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Your theory of the state in Madagascar is interesting. You write that when you first went there you thought that nothing was amiss, but it later dawned on you that, actually, the state had abandoned its primary function as far as we understand it in Europe.

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— Well, if we are talking about the rural areas, off the paved roads, no one was collecting taxes and the police would not come. So the two most essential functions: extracting revenues and enforcing the law, the state just did not do. Even in the smaller towns they barely did. The Malagasy have created this 'almost revolution' by subtle indirection. It's like a magic trick. I realised that essentially the government had ceased to exist and the people had come up with ingenious expedients of how to deal with the fact that there was still technically a government, it was just really far away. Part of the idea was never to put the authorities in a situation where they lost face, or where they had to prove that they were in charge. They were incredibly nice to them if they didn't try to exercise power, and made things as difficult as possible if they did. The course of least resistance was to go along with the charade.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Can you give us any examples?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— I only started figuring out that the government had essentially stopped functioning when I heard about this guy in a village outside town who had beaten up his sister. The locals assembled the fokon'olona – a tradition of local assemblies that operate by consensus – and they decided to make him sign a confession saying he'd murdered his sister. The idea was that they were going to lodge it in the police station (because you could take it as given that the police wouldn't go there) and if anything happened to his sister, he'd have already said that he'd done it.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Do you think that there's an anarchist theory of revolution that's quite different? You're suggesting a kind of compromise situation where the state still seems to be functioning, where at least it still has the superficial pretence of existing, but at the same time, quietly, it isn't really there.

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— Yes, it's like an eggshell theory of revolution. You just hollow it out until there's nothing left and eventually it'll collapse.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— So instead of a big revolutionary moment, the state is completely negated?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— It can happen. I think you need to consider all possibilities. There's this idea that people in power will never give up power voluntarily, therefore it will end in battles on the streets – but I always point out, it's not like a bunch of anarchists are going to military defeat the 101st Airborne Division. Anyway they have nukes. The only plausible scenario for revolution is when it comes to the point that the forces of order refuse to shoot. For most revolutions in world history that is what ultimately happens.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Are you suggesting we look to a dual power situation?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— I think it'll come to that. I think it already has come to that in many parts of the world, but people just don't talk about it. There was clearly a dual power situation going on in Madagascar. There could even be three or four powers – who knows! That's what the Zapatistas are experimenting with: opening up a space of autonomy. I don't think we can do without confrontation of any kind, I think that's equally naïve, but the exact mix of withdrawal and confrontation cannot be predicted.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— When you were first studying anthropology, what was it about Madagascar that interested you?

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DAVID GRAEBER
— It was my adviser in graduate school who first suggested it. I was always fascinated by its extraordinarily cosmopolitan hybrid culture. It's exotic in the classic anthropological sense – you know, people do apparently bizarre things with dead bodies and everyone plays around with magic – yet they are also the exact opposite of this type of cultural islet stereotypically associated with such things. They've been caught in global world economies since they first arrived. Plus, there's something about Malagasy culture that I immediately recognised as being profoundly subversive. It's kind of a hybrid rebel culture, created by a population of escaped slaves.

The reason people can't see it is their still tacitly stuck on an evolutionary model that says, well, the Malagasy language originally came from Borneo, so primitive people from Borneo must have shown up, spread out, developed complex states and came in contact with world religions. In fact, it's very clear if you look at the history that Malagasy people knew all about states and world religions from the beginning – and wanted nothing to do with them. Refugees and rebels from all over the Indian ocean ended up accumulating in Madagascar, mixing together and creating this wildly subversive cultural substratum on which states later did arise and were often just as quickly overthrown.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— You have written about how in Madagascar one of the strategies that was used to overthrow state rule, particularly during the French colonial period, was to proxy back power relations into this shadow-world mediated by rituals and magic – a world that the French couldn't understand and therefore couldn't contest. What exactly do you mean by this?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— In many parts of Madagascar they have this idea that dead kings continue to exist and possess people and retain all their authority. As a result, as Gillian Feeley-Harnik wrote, the Sakalava on the West Coast, could insist that the ultimate authorities in the colonial period were these old women, normally of slave descent, who were entranced and possessed by dead kings. How on earth were the colonialists supposed to negotiate with that?

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Is this part of the revolutionary ideology in Madagascar?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— It's an interesting thing – there's a revolutionary ideology in Madagascar but it's not called a revolutionary ideology, and it's not called a political ideology −it's identified with an ethnic

identity. In fact, one of the projects I'm working on is about that – it's about how so many of the things we think of as cultures might be better viewed as social movements that were to some degree successful in achieving their aims. Essentially, Malagasy culture is an identity that originally congealed around these escaped slaves who rejected world religions.

It can go in any direction – you can have horrible right wing fantasy utopias realised in some cultures, extreme patriarchal ones in others, and so on and so forth. But I think we need to start thinking about history. Radical social movements, revolutionaries, reactionaries and all those things we're familiar with in contemporary politics weren't invented two hundred years ago. We've been taught that they were – that right and left suddenly came into being, and that all these revolutions suddenly started happening, in the middle of the eighteenth century. But I think they've actually been happening for thousands of years, it's just that we don't have the language to describe them.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Was it your experiences in Madagascar that inspired you to become an activist? When did you first become active?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— I first became active right after the Seattle protest in 1999. Before then I was happy to follow my dad's advice and simply be a scholar. I had got a job at Yale, which would have thrilled him. True, I had lived in this bizarre semi-anarchist enclave in Madagascar, but I didn't even fully understand some of the things that were going on there until I got involved in the Direct Action Network. I remember that I had given my last lecture for a course I was teaching at Yale called 'Power, Violence and Cosmology', a kind of Political Anthropology course, and I walked out of the class, saw one of those newspaper boxes with the headline 'Martial Law declared in Seattle', and I thought 'What? Martial law? Huh?' And I discovered the political movement I'd really like to have existed had come into being when I wasn't paying attention. So I got involved. I learned about consensus, process, direct democracy, and direct action – all these things I knew a little bit about in principle but had never experienced.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— How do anarchist circles work?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— One difference between the kind of anarchist groups I like and the classic Marxist group, for instance, is that we don't start by defining reality – our points of unity are not our analyses of the situation, but rather what we want to do, the action we want to take, and how we go about it.

Plus you have to give one another the benefit of the doubt. One of the principles of the consensus process is that you can't challenge anyone on their motives; you have to assume that everyone is being honest and has good intentions. Not because you necessarily think it's true, but as an extension of what might be considered the fundamental anarchist insight: if you treat people like children they will tend to act like children. If you treat them like adults, there's at least some chance they will act responsibly. Ironically, I found this habit of generosity, this giving people the benefit of the doubt, was the exact opposite of the way I was taught to argue as a scholar.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— So what might an anarchist approach to academic discussion look like?

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DAVID GRAEBER
— I've often though what it would mean to conduct intellectual conversation in that spirit, and I still haven't fully worked it out. I don't think there is necessarily one solution. One conclusion I came to was about incommensurability. I think we make a big deal out of incommensurability. As Roy Bhaskar long since noted, positivists and post-structuralists hold identical positions in a way – some say if reality did exist we could describe it perfectly, and therefore it should be possible, and some say therefore it's impossible or that reality doesn't exist. But they share the same basic assumption. In a similar way, I would argue there's an assumption that we should be able to come up with arguments in the same language, in terms by which it is possible to definitively win an argument.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— In the same way one might say that representative democracy obstructs actual democracy, you could say the academy obstructs actual thinking.

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— In academia there's an obsession with process, but also an obsession with networks of power and how they are created. Now of course it would be easy enough to take the same approach as activists, and start by grounding it all in some common commitment to action; that would have to be some notion that we're all pursuing the same thing, call it truth, knowledge, understanding, whatever you want. If so, a certain generosity would be required, similar to that of consensus process: at the very least, if you disagree with someone, you would want to make the most charitable conceivable interpretation of their argument to be able to see what the real point of disagreement is. Of course this is almost never what academics do; instead, most act like politicians, and regularly make the least generous reading of their opponent possible,

treat debate like gladiatorial combat where one does whatever it takes to prevail. Oddly, they justify it by what are purportedly radical, even semi-anarchist politics — especially via Foucault.

Appealing to Foucault allows them to argue that since there is no ultimate truth, since power is everything, there is no common purpose to be appealed to, and sectarian-style argument is okay. Anyway I think that's the way a lot of academics read Foucault. For most, his work on power becomes the ultimate validation of the reality of the professional classes, so removed from material production, and whose children now almost completely dominate the world of scholarship. For them, it's all obviously true that everything is really about administration and control, since after all they do live a in a world where power is diffused across networks without any clear us versus them, that reality is whatever you can convince people of, everything is strategic games whereby everybody is trying to dominate everybody else. I think the results have been quite pernicious.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Your latest book is called DEBT. One of the arguments you make is that the reason the idea of debt has so much power is because no one has any idea what it actually is. Did you get any closer to understanding what debt is?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— Yes. Debt is the perversion of a promise, a promise that has been perverted through mathematics and violence. I'm not saying mathematics is bad, but the combination of mathematics and violence is extremely bad. A debt is a promise to give a certain sum of money, in a certain amount of time, under certain conditions. It is a contract that is ultimately enforceable through the threat of force. The problem is that through a genuinely perverse historical alchemy, we've come to see such acts of violence as the very essence of morality.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Do you see this reflected in the current economic climate?

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DAVID GRAEBER
— I think that's the situation that we see around us today, and I'm surprised that people are not more outraged by this direct assault on every fabric of their lives. It's an assault on the very idea of community, and an assault on the commitments that we make to each other through the medium of government. Why is it that a promise made by a politician to the people that elected them—to provide free education for instance—has a less moral standing than the promise that politician has made to a banker? It seems insane. But it's simply assumed nowadays.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Is this just the natural consequence of capitalism?

A
DAVID GRAEBER

— It goes back before capitalism, hence why the book is titled DEBT: THE FIRST 5000 YEARS. Capitalism is merely its apotheosis. The vast majority of insurrections in history have been about debt. Peasant rebels tend to all have a remarkably uniform programme: first they go after all the debt ledgers, burn them, and only then usually after the tax documents or land cadastres.

If you look across human history there's a kind of double consciousness about debt you see again and again: on the one hand a kind of acceptance that paying your debts is the essence of morality, but simultaneously, there's this idea that people who lend money are evil. On the one hand, the language of debt is the same as that of morality, on the other hand, most actual debt relations are seen as immoral.

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THE WHITE REVIEW
— Can you explain this further?

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DAVID GRAEBER
— Debt is the most effective way to take a relation of violent subordination and make the victims feel that it's their fault. Colonial regimes did this all the time; they would charge people for the cost of their own conquest, via taxes. However, using debt in this way also has a notorious tendency to rebound, because the subtle thing about debt relations is that, on a certain level, they are premised on equality—we are both equal parties to a contract. This both makes the sting of inequality worse, because it implies you should be equal to your creditor but you somehow messed up, but also, makes it possible to start saying 'wait a minute, who owes what to who here?' But of course once you do that, you have accepted the idea that debt really is the essence of morality. You've accepted the masters' language.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Where would you say this idea of debt as morality originally stems from?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— In a lot of world religions the word for sin is the same as that for debt. In the Lord's Prayer, where it says 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us', the word was originally 'debt'. It's 'forgive us our debts, just as we forgive those who owe us money'. We see this in Plato's Republic: What is Justice? What is Morality? It's paying one's debts. We see the same thing in the Bible, and in the Hindu scriptures too. Life is a debt you pay to the Gods, sacrifice is the interest, and eventually you repay with your own life when you die. But it's very clear that they are using this language because market relations are providing this language, and kingdoms are using it to justify taxes. The remarkable thing is in every case, they first frame morality as debt, and then say, well, actually, no, not really. It's something else. Socrates

discards the notion immediately. So do the Brahmanas, or the Bible. But what that something else is… there are endless answers. The fascinating thing is they always feel they have to start with debt, they are somehow shackled to that logic, much though they then try to shake the shackles off.

This is why I'm suspicious when people ask what is our debt to society, or nature? To the cosmos or to the gods? But we're part of nature, we're part of the cosmos. The very nature of imagining me and nature, or me and the cosmos, or me and the gods as equal parties to a contract is absurd.

Mainly what I wanted to point out in the book is that debt is not an ultimate value. I end it by saying that in the ancient world, it was not repaying debts that was sacred, but one's ability to forgive or especially, cancel debts, and maybe we should learn from that. Because ultimately a debt is a promise, a human arrangement, and freedom is our ability to make commitments to each other but also, to voluntarily rearrange those commitments when circumstances change. Similarly, if democracy is to mean anything, it can only means the collective power to readjust the commitments we have to one another, including financial debts since there's no intrinsic moral difference between an IOU and any other sort of promise.

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THE WHITE REVIEW
— Are you suggesting that we should be looking to a rearrangement of such commitments in the present climate?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— A general debt forgiveness at this moment would be one of the most powerful things we could do to remind ourselves that these forces are not natural forces, they are things we decided to create. If you look at the history of money, we have reason to believe that this is possible now. I think one of the big themes of the book is virtual money – money as credit rather than money as bullion. People talk about the age of virtual money as if it's something new. But actually, it's the original form of money: virtual money comes first, physical coinage comes much later.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— What are the practical implications of states premised on credit?

A
DAVID GRAEBER

— History seems to swing back and forth between periods dominated by virtual money, money becomes debt, and then periods where people recognize that it is a promise, a special arrangement, and it can be arranged in different ways.

In Mesopotamia for example, when there were periodic debt crises there were also periodic debt cancellations. In the Middle Ages when you go back to a period of virtual money, you have bans on usury. Even oawnshops seem to largely go back to medieval China where monks were trying to give peasants alternatives to the local loan shark.

Periods of bullion money tend to be periods where you have empires, chattel slavery, and large standing armies. That was true of the classical world. You don't have the same types of professional armies in the Middle Ages, you don't have the same sort of gold and silver system, and you don't have the same mass abuse of slavery. Around the time of discovery in the new world you have bullion money coming back, gold and silver comes back, slavery comes back and we see huge standing armies. Capitalism is obviously new, you wouldn't describe the ancient world as capitalist, but at the same time capitalism is built on top of something that is not historically unprecedented, and the link between military and money systems remians the dirty secret of capitalism.

Q
THE WHITE REVIEW
— Can you elaborate?

A
DAVID GRAEBER
— It's important to look at the link between what post-Keynesians call 'high-powered money,' and the military, imperial militaries in particular. The Bank of England for example, was created by a loan to King William III to fight a war in France. He then granted the bankers who lent him the money the right to take the money that he owed them for his war debt and monetise it, to take that debt and lend it to other people in the form of bank notes. That's what bank notes actually are, why if you take a tenner from your pocket, it has a picture of the Queen, and next to it, 'I promise to pay' the bearer the sum of ten pounds. It's not ten pounds. It's a promise.

Since 1972 when Nixon went off the gold standard, the world reserve currency has been the US dollar, but what ultimately backs the US dollar? People say nothing, it's 'fiat money' but I don't think this is true. It's a credit system based on the circulation of debt. Of course the US has the enormous advantage of being able to write checks that are never actually cashed: US treasury bonds have become the basic reserve currency for the central banks and as Michael Hudson

originally pointed out, most of these American treasury bonds are never really cashed in. They're rolled over year after year to buy new ones, and these holders are taking a loss on them as they pay interest lower than inflation. So why are they doing that? Well, if you look at the size of US deficit it corresponds almost exactly to the real saw military budget. If you look at graphs showing the growth of the US deficit, and the percentage of it held overseas, and the US military spending—basically, you see almost exactly the same curve. So basically, foreign governments and institutional lenders are buying US treasury bonds and paying for this enormous military spending. So, who are the guys doing it? Well during the cold war it was especially West Germany, now, apart from China, the most important are places like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Gulf states. What do these states have in common? They're all covered in US military bases, or under US military protection. The US is borrowing the money to create these military bases from the very countries that the US military is sitting on top of. In the past, such arrangements were called 'empires' and the money sent over was referred to as 'tribute.' Now apparently your not allowed to use that language, so it's called a 'loan.' Nonetheless, that link between the military and the core of the financial system remains, it's the thing we're not supposed to think about.

In a way the language we use to describe this in the US or UK is self-evidently absurd. We talk of 'trade deficits,' i.e., 'oh for some reason, people all over the world send us stuff worth far more than anything we send them. Isn't that a problem?' If you suggest this has anything to do with the fact that the countries that seem to be getting the inflow of goods (and not getting in trouble for it, anyway), are those which also are massive military powers bestraddling the world, people look at you as if you're practically lunatic fringe. On some level, of course, everyone does have to admit there's a link between who is a military power, who consumes the bulk of the world's resources, and whose money just happens to be the world reserve currency, but it's somehow taboo to try to work out exactly what those connections are.