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2021

## David Graeber and Militant Epistemologies: A Tribute

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## **David Graeber: on militancy and prefiguration**

ADRIAN FAVELL

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Scholars, activists and political dreamers around the world were shocked to hear of the sudden death in Venice, in September 2020, of the activist anthropologist David Graeber. From a working class Jewish background in New York, Graeber was effectively blackballed for his politics out of a career in the American Ivy League, taking refuge in London academia at Goldsmiths and then the LSE towards the end of the 2000s. At the same time, deeply involved in and moved by a variety of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements of the early 21st century, he rose to prominence as the most visible thinker of the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York in the autumn of 2011. He is credited with its most indelible slogan: 'We are the 99%'. In the last two decades of his life, he produced a series of essential books in social and economic anthropology: on the anarchist foundations of anthropology (Graeber 2004), on the praxis of activism based on an ethnography of the global justice movement (Graeber 2007, 2009), on the world history of debt (Graeber 2011a), and on the logic and curse of bureaucracy and meaningless employment in a neoliberal era (Graeber 2015a, 2018), each informed by his adherence to a mutualist, necessarily utopian, understanding of the fundamentals of human society.

In hindsight, Graeber may be read as the most iconic political theorist of his generation, and particularly of the dismal years of unrelenting crisis since the global financial meltdown of 2008/9. Although himself older, he spoke most to the millennial and post-millennial generation, young people in these years disabused of the illusions and pieties of globalist liberal democracy, and mobilised into action in the face of implacable neoliberal 'inevitabilism', and an ever more grim economic, political, demographic and climatic outlook for the world. Against the grain of so much left-leaning critique of this period, Graeber was an optimist, a tireless advocate of political hope, and of activism as 'a field of political possibility' to soundbite one of his constantly pithy formulations. He was a no bullshit writer, in word and deed, unlike so much of contemporary social and critical theory, analytically clear and unerringly direct in his diagnoses. And, as Myka Tucker-Abramson here so eloquently relates, he was famously able to read through the self-fulfilling gloom of so much contemporary textbook Marxist-Foucauldianism, to grasp the need for

prophecy and renewed political futures, however impossible they often seem. The joy and exhilaration in his writing is palpable: we can feel the gloom and anxiety of relentless, downbeat critique lifting, as the first rock is thrown. As he said: 'Direct action is ultimately the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free' (Meadway 2021).

The power of Graeber lies in this 'prefiguration' of where so many have found their own thoughts heading. I first encountered his work, around the time of Occupy, in the talk and radical practice of younger artists and curators in Japan. I turned to his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) as a manual for re-stating an anthropological understanding of human cooperation and solidarity: as a pervasive alternate grounding of social structure in distinction to unequal exchange or bounded hierarchy, running back through his erstwhile colleague at Yale, James C. Scott, and his PhD mentor at Chicago, Marshall Sahlins, via Karl Polanyi, to the work of Mauss and Kropotkin. True to his core belief in action over theorisation, however, he always rejected the pigeon-hole label of the 'anarchist anthropologist', and in later years was more comfortable joining protests at campus sit-ins, or on the streets, than amassing academic plaudits.

A typical article of Graeber — for example, 'On the phenomenology of giant puppets', the sparkling piece on the aesthetics of street protest which graced the catalogue of a 2014 Victoria and Albert Museum show *Disobedient Objects* (Graeber 2014a) — displays all the brilliance and insight of his work. In a text originally from his 2007 book of essays, infused with the excitement of protests across the US he has witnessed first hand in the early 2000s, he details how outrageous, burlesque puppets seen in such protests are the perfect complement of the anonymous militants engaging in corporate property destruction to 'break the spell' of ubiquitous private property and legal enforcement. Often defusing potential moments that might devolve into violence, they work to change the rules of engagement with the forces of order, by transforming the political protest into something more like a piece of street theatre or religious ritual. Graeber's talent for phenomenological insight never wavered, as he turned to the more insidious violence inside of organisations and employment relations. His later books became guidebooks and self-help manuals for present day work conditions in the professional-managerial classes under neoliberalism, for those toiling in stupid jobs and even more stupid bureaucracies,

with all the violence they structurally contain — something which cannot but be attributed to his short but eventful time working in British universities.

We try to run the Bauman Institute at the University of Leeds as a rarely found ‘safe space’ for open critical theory and political reflection. Such spaces have become next to impossible in universities whose management have sought to turn everything on campuses into procedure, marketing, commerce, and governmentally-approved ‘output’. David Graeber was a natural choice to launch the discussions in our seminar, *The Bauman Underground*, dedicated to key thinkers whose work has provided us with ‘militant epistemologies’, to use a term borrowed from our colleague Glenda Garelli (see Garelli and Tazzioli 2013). There was a certain uncomfortable opportunism in this, perhaps, but also it seemed an imperative given the loss felt by so many.

The notion of militant epistemologies, clearly, signals the idea of critical theory as a key mode of not only of seeing the world anew, but seizing it in order to advance and potentially force change. Graeber's contributions are eminently placed in this tradition, and would have been no less so if he had been alive. The notion also flags his autocritique of university work, which must take place outside of accredited, timetabled, workloaded regularities which stifle all creativity, while daring to hope that critique might also be wedded to action, or at the very least, to an unsettling view of the political.

In subsequent sessions, indeed, we put a range of thinkers—from both the classical, such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Adorno—to the eminently decolonial or post-colonial, such as Achille Mbembe and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui—to this test. We were honoured to feature the work of a comrade of Graeber's at Occupy, the Japanese theorist and translator, Sabu Kohso, presenting his own anarchist masterwork, *Radiation and Revolution* (2020). And a certain pall seems to have gathered over the series, with loss of another of our featured authors, Lauren Berlant, in the summer of 2021.

It was the three solicited, personal appreciations of David Graeber, here presented in full, which set the pace of our debates. We thank Albena Azmanova who joined the discussion for the opportunity to publish these short, sharp interventions.

The first, by American literature scholar, Myka Tucker-Abramson, seizes with great immediacy the ability of David Graeber's work to deliver, in the words of Walter

Benjamin, a 'profane illumination' that may enable scholar-activists to grasp the contingency and absurdity of the supposedly unchallengeable logic and power of the neoliberalism that engulfs them. The root of this, she argues, is to be found in unlocking the oppression of the roles and rules imposed by university work in the present era: for this, David Graeber's work is the key. Mark Davis, an economic sociologist, takes up the importance of Graeber's biggest work, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Graeber 2011a). Not only was this massive statement the logical outcome of campaigning for the global cancellation of debt as part of the Jubilee 2000 movement; the work also offers an essential lesson in how to understand economics without being deceived by professional economists. Davis also makes the link with insights he traces to another eloquent late modern prophet of the present, Zygmunt Bauman. Urban sociologist Andrew Wallace, meanwhile, puts the emphasis on how life in London transformed and infused Graeber's writings and practice, in the years since his 'exile'. He draws parallels with the equally iconic theorist and disrupter of the 'There is No Alternative' logic of late capitalism: Mark Fisher. Persuasively, Wallace suggests that their combined diagnoses and imaginaries, that converged in a powerful support for the political rise of Corbynism on the left, have — despite its bitter electoral defeat and their own tragic passing — laid the ground for a new politics: that is, for a much clearer-eyed commitment to a 'collective refusal' which may respond to the renewed brand of authoritarian state capitalism that will emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clearly the point that most needs stating here is that Graeber lives on — in his works and in the memories of those who knew him. We hope the present collection of thoughts on his life and influence is a modest but worthy testimony.

## **David Graeber's profane illumination**

MYKA TUCKER-ABRAMSON

University of Warwick

David Graeber's work exemplifies what Walter Benjamin once termed 'profane illumination,' a term Benjamin developed to describe the Surrealists' political and artistic work in the 1920s. What Benjamin meant by 'profane illumination' was that the Surrealists' excavation of dreams, abandoned and disused urban spaces, and newly unfashionable commodities created a wholly secular, 'materialistic, anthropological inspiration' (19) that opened up the potential for new kinds of worlds in the ruins of the present. Benjamin thought that this method allowed the Surrealists to simultaneously be attuned to the horrors of a world wracked by World War I, colonial violence and rebellions, rapid industrialization and immiseration, and rising fascism, and to see the revolutionary new world that was possible out of the old. Benjamin, in short, used the term to describe a method of staring the catastrophies of the present in the face and seeing within them the outline of a better world.

This is what Graeber's work did. Writing in a different, but equally apocalyptic moment, marked by the so-called end of history, the War on Terror, as well as the present crises of ecological collapse and rising fascism, Graeber's work sought to provide an anthropology, or profane illumination. The topics his work took up — debt, bureaucracy, bullshit jobs, and state violence — are key nodes which he hoped would let us see the present in a new light and change it. Working and struggling within an era often termed neoliberalism, Graeber's project could be boiled down to a lifelong attempt to challenge the omnipresent ideology of 'There Is No Alternative,' by showing how utterly bewildering, absurd, and contingent this violent and unequal world of ours is, and also the ways in which it could be changed and how indeed people were changing it.

To give just one example of this method, I want to turn to one of my favourite essays 'Of flying cars and the declining rates of profit' (Graeber 2012). In typical fashion, the essay opens with a joke-y question that is also deadly serious. The question is this:

Where, in short, are the flying cars? Where are the force fields, tractor beams, teleportation pods, antigravity sleds, tricorders, immortality drugs, colonies on

Mars, and all the other technological wonders any child growing up in the mid-to-late twentieth century assumed would exist by now? (#2)

The inevitable laughter such a question prompts is exactly the point. After all, he noted,

For earlier generations, many science fiction fantasies *had* been brought into being. Those who grew up at the turn of the century reading Jules Verne or H.G. Wells imagined the world of, say, 1960 with flying machines, rocket ships, submarines, radio, and television — and that was pretty much what they got. If it wasn't unrealistic in 1900 to dream of men traveling to the moon, then why was it unrealistic in the sixties to dream of jet-packs and robot laundry-maids? (#20)

But looking back from the perspective of 2012, it was unrealistic. Indeed, he argued, so impossible was the idea of any new and exciting future devices that where once science fiction took place 50 or 60 years in the future, now much of it had to remain 'vague about the dates, so as to render 'the future' a zone of pure fantasy, no different than Middle Earth or Narnia, or like *Star Wars*, 'a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'" (#10).

Systematically dismantling the fantasy that we live in a techno-futurist utopian dreamscape, Graeber shows us instead how paltry our present is in relation to the dreams we had of what it could be: that instead of transporters, all we have are ever smaller headphones that are easier to lose and require charging, larger and more hi-resolution iPhones, and more brutal machines for killing. This is not, Graeber emphasizes, the result of a lack of innovative minds or of technological capacity, but rather a change in bureaucratic structures in the post-Cold War era. Unencumbered by challenges from a rival empire that did dream big, the US colonised all forms of research and development in its own image: one governed by corporate management strategies that was concerned only with those technologies 'most conducive to surveillance, work discipline, and social control' (#43).

The example he offers, one many of us will be familiar with, is his own university experience, noting how much fucking time we now spend on 'administrative tasks' or 'trying to sell things'. As he puts it pithily, later in the same



essay: ‘As marketing overwhelms university life, it generates documents about fostering imagination and creativity that might just as well have been designed to strangle imagination and creativity in the cradle’ (#58-59). Given these circumstances, he points out, no wonder that nothing genuinely new or interesting has been developed.

Graeber’s insights about the university’s role in shaping or limiting ideas through its disciplining of staff and students were hard won. As is well known, he was effectively bullied out of his job at Yale for his work in the anti-globalization movements of the early 2000s and for supporting the unionisation drive of graduate students. Always the anthropologist, Graeber turned this too into an opportunity for analysis and developed a typically brilliantly obvious definition, in an essay about bullying as an archetypal relation of domination. Bullying, he wrote, ‘creates a moral drama in which the manner of the victim’s reaction to an act of aggression can be used as retrospective justification for the original act of aggression itself’ (Graeber 2015b, #34).

Such a definition, however, doesn’t only apply to individual acts of bullying in or out of the university. What Graeber actually provided here is nothing less than a definition of current university governance in the UK. Let’s consider the COVID-19 crisis. To protect their real estate interests, and against the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) that all university and college teaching should be online unless face-to-face teaching was absolutely essential, universities insisted students travel across the country to move into ludicrously expensive on and off-campus accommodation by farcically promising a normal campus experience. To justify this move, universities forced staff back onto campus to provide in-person teaching. When staff resisted, citing their own health, that of their loved ones, or that of the local communities where they taught, the University used this to drive a wedge between staff and students, by treating teachers as selfish staff who don’t care about their students, and thus need to be disciplined to do their jobs. Meanwhile, because students have been forced to live under dire conditions in residencies, many rightfully turned on teaching staff, demanding they get in-person teaching because that was what they were promised. Students are bullied into becoming demanding consumers; staff into selfish, intransigent service providers.

Graeber understood all too well that such divisions were often the goal. His work consistently highlighted the lack of solidarity inherent in the professional-

managerial classes (2014b), and thus in that great factory of the PMC, the University. Graeber's activism constantly sought ways to disrupt this managerialism and the numerous forms of violence underpinning and being upheld by it. This is what led to his involvement in the Anti-Globalisation Movement, in Occupy Wall Street, and it's what led him in 2010 to turn up at the many student occupations that started in response to the Coalition government's tripling of tuition fees, but became about so much more. In the midst of these protests, numerous 'free schools' and other forms of popular education popped up and of course, Graeber was there. As James Butler wrote: 'His sources of hope were always a lot closer to the street than the seminar room. I can almost hear him over my shoulder as I type this, wondering if, well, the street couldn't be a seminar room.' (Butler 2020, #4). This fall, numerous university housing blocks across the country also became seminar rooms, as the immediate fight to not pay for accommodation that they're either trapped in or not allowed to enter, became a political education about the structure of the corporate University itself. As Rent Strike Cambridge put it on Twitter, 'this wave of rent strikes has the capacity to demand an entire remodelling of university finances, and by extension an economic model where education and housing are not commodities' (@RentStrikeCam; Jan 6, 2021). These moments — where education exceeded beyond the limits of the university-sanctioned classroom — were the educational experiences Graeber valued above all else.

This commitment to a genuinely transformative politics resolutely shaped Graeber's writing and intellectual affiliations. And thus, whilst Graeber could be a fierce critic — his argument that Foucault's focus on knowledge-politics gained ascendancy because it appealed to academics who were 'former radicals, [...] completely divorced from any access to political power' (Graeber 2012b, 111) is particularly spicy — he would also strain to redeem those theorists or critics who he saw as continuously working in and for social movements, even if he fiercely disagreed with them.

The best instance of this is an essay called 'The sadness of post-workerism' (Graeber 2008). Here Graeber examined the work of Anthony Negri, Bifo Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato — a group of theorists referred to as 'autonomist Marxists' or 'post-workerist theorists.' The review offers a scathing critique of the key terms and theoretical concepts developed by post-workerism. For instance, he complains that Lazzarato claims 'his concepts emerge from a large body of recent 'empirical

research' which he never, however, actually cites or specifically refers to', and he describes 'real subsumption' as a 'giant blender' into which Negri throws 'all the specific gestures, exchanges, and transformations' instead of analysing the different forms that labour might take under different moments of capital accumulation (12). And yet, Graeber pulls back at the end, and reinterprets their work in the most wonderful way. He writes that we would be wrong to dismiss or reject them for all the reasons he's laid out above. And this is because, he argues, the main point of their work is not ultimately social theory. Rather, he argues, somewhat surprisingly, they are 'prophets.'

A prophet, he explains, is someone who 'organize[s] the desires of the multitude, to help these already-existing forms of communism burst out of their increasingly artificial shackles. Beside this epochal task, the concrete analysis of the organization of real-life TV studios or cell phone dealerships seems petty and irrelevant' (13). And this is what he saw as their value: to inspire and change how people think, and to make it possible for people to act.

Prophets, in short, work to change the arc of history.

Graeber continues:

Just as we can only grasp an individual's life as a story once he is dead, it is only from the perspective of the end of time that we can grasp the story of history. It doesn't matter that we do not really know what the messianic Future will be like: it can serve as the Archimedean point, the time outside time about which we can know nothing that nonetheless makes knowledge possible. (15)

We can, unfortunately, now grasp Graeber's life as a story, but history is still up for grabs. It is our job now to use the tools that he left us to seize it.

## Still in Graeber's debt

MARK DAVIS

University of Leeds

Being someone long interested in researching the social relations of money and finance as an economic sociologist — but also as an activist, having been part of the Jubilee 2000 movement at the turn of the millennium during my undergraduate days — my contribution to our reflections on the legacy of David Graeber is a commentary on his book, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Graeber 2011a).

As that rather heroic subtitle suggests, there isn't space here to précis the entire argument in the book in anything like the detail it deserves. To give the reader an idea of the rich anthropology contained within its pages: only around halfway through, some 250 pages in, does Graeber's retelling of the social and cultural origins of money reach the dizzying contemporary heights of the year 800 BCE. In what follows, I have thus decided deliberately to jump around the book to pick out some of the key moments and sections in order both to try to establish its major themes and messages, but also to act as an invitation for the readers to go and learn more by exploring it themselves.

The theoretical core of *Debt* is founded upon a typology of three types of human economic relationships: namely, 'communism', 'exchange' and 'hierarchy'. Each one is not intended accurately to describe a distinct type of society, but instead functions to reveal the rather different 'modalities' of human behaviour that are present and so operate to a greater or lesser degree in all societies, whether monetised or not. Graeber's *communism*, for example, covers all relationships that can be seen as somehow answering to Marx's dictum 'to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities'. People therefore already act as communists, Graeber insists, not only towards significant others of friends and family but often also towards those generalised others of guests, neighbours and strangers. Graeber says that because these obligations are inherently social, and therefore not monetised, '[w]hat is equal on both sides is the knowledge that the other person would do the same for you, not that they necessarily will.' (100) Indeed, the corrupting impact of monetary forms on precisely these 'communist' relations is a major part of the book's more moral narrative, something I'll return to later on.

Second, relationships of *exchange*, by contrast, entail that each party gets from the other a more or less exact equivalent to whatever is given. In other words,

and contrary to the orthodox economic view of the relationship between value and price, both parties actually have to enter into and leave from the exchange believing that they walked away with the ‘better deal’.

What is crucial in Graeber’s distinction between communism and exchange is the way in which the former serves to build and maintain social relations and obligations held over time — that reliance upon others is a core part of human societies — and how the latter actually serves to end or break those relations. Because exchange ‘gives us a way to call it even: hence, to end the relationship’, it takes place mostly among strangers. As societies develop, this clearly creates a central role for convertible currencies. Money thus cancels or neutralizes social obligations.

Finally, *hierarchy*, just like communism, is a mode of ongoing relationship building, but not between equals. In this mode, obligations are enforced by social and cultural custom, with the structure of hierarchy requiring that social inferiors make repeated material tribute to their betters in party, class/caste or status. Crucially, and again contrary to the orthodox story of human economic history moving through distinct social systems or epochs — such as feudal, capitalist, and post-capitalist — instead, Graeber’s analysis reveals that all three of these modalities can and do exist at one and the same time, but always in a different balance with each society over time and across cultures.

With that typology at the core of the book outlined, let’s turn to some of the key messages in the book that deal with its principal object of study, namely *debt*. In its simplest expression, Graeber says debt is ‘a promise corrupted by both math and violence’ (391). In studying the origins of money as an anthropologist, Graeber is conscious of all those mistaken attempts by orthodox, chiefly neoclassical, economists and later neoliberal political philosophers to establish a ‘barter theory’ of money’s origin. With this story having been debunked so often now, beyond suggesting some good places to go read, let’s dwell on this point no longer than simply to sum up this thread of the book as quickly as possible by saying that Graeber held the neoliberals to be catastrophically wrong.

More seriously, what distinguishes Graeber’s account of the history of money, apart from its anthropological richness, is his emphasis upon state violence. For Graeber, money did not spontaneously emerge to address a social need. As Mark Carney (2021) recently argued, orthodox economists have been saying this in

relation to barter ever since they bought or borrowed and then misread Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations*, also having completely ignored its important predecessor, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Instead, money emerged not spontaneously out of social need but as part of a calculated effort by state-societies to build markets for their own benefit, primarily to fund the war-machines that they built around them in order to maintain power and social control.

In Britain, this ranged from the state dealing in bonds and shares in the simultaneously military and mercantile activities of the East and West India Companies, with monopoly concessions granted by the state to assist their well-documented colonial brutality abroad. Still closer to home, with the legalisation of interest charges on consumer debt, which reversed both formal (legal) and informal (moral) restrictions on the practice of usury that had been in place since medieval times, states at once created and then set about promoting the spread and the criminalisation of indebtedness. This process included everything from capital penalties for default on repayment in the 16th century to the widespread criminalization of the once social condition of poverty today, a reality so expertly and poignantly captured in Zygmunt Bauman's 1998 book *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. There are thus two trajectories of violence at work here: first, a horizontal trajectory, between subjects through the unequal distribution of resources and so power between them; and second, a vertical trajectory, state violence towards its subjects and through which the horizontal trajectory is both conceived and constituted. In becoming an (inter)acting subject, acquiring agency through the acquisition of money in a consumer society, one is simultaneously becoming subjugated to state authority — a 'velvet repression' in Bauman's expression — a somewhat crucial point that the orthodox narrative of money's origins continues to omit.

We also learn from Graeber's analysis that the real function of money lay in its ability to take the complex relations of human social life and make them seem simple; simple enough to be a vector for exploitation and violence. If I am in your debt in an abstract sense — as I may be to a family member, a friend, or a colleague at work, to follow Graeber's 'communist' mode — then there is a sense in which that moral obligation can be enacted in different ways, including for one or more parties to deem the obligation cancelled. If I am in your debt in a formal monetary sense, however — to a corporate or financial institution, to draw on one or both of Graeber's

‘exchange’ and ‘hierarchy’ modes also present in all societies — then there is a fixed numerical amount that can only be cancelled once settled in full. It is this that is used to justify the apparently legitimate use of violence via either state or market to enforce the obligation, something not apparent in ‘communist’ relations of reciprocity according to Graeber.

All of which brings us back to the start of the book, where Graeber usefully quotes a well-known American proverb: ‘If you owe the bank a hundred thousand dollars, the bank owns you. If you owe the bank a hundred million dollars, you own the bank’. The truth behind the proverb is fundamental for Graeber. The issue in so many of our social relations with money and finance is the way in which the moral injunction and legal imperative to ‘repay one’s debts’ is not enforced by the threat of violence for everyone in the same way. It is not, in the final reckoning, the actual *quantity* of debt that matters. It is rather the perceived *quality* of the individual debtor as viewed through the peculiar lens of the state and market that truly counts. Not only does this raise hugely significant political questions about the punitive treatment of poorer individuals and households when it comes to debt, but gives one pause to consider the true meaning of the phrase ‘*creditworthiness*’ in our contemporary debt economies.

Signalling the importance he ascribed to stopping the vicious cycle of social marginalisation through indebtedness, Graeber remarks, ‘Nothing would be more important than to wipe the slate clean for everyone, mark a break with our accustomed morality, and start again.’ After all, anthropological research reveals that ancient societies already knew this. In the Old Testament one was declared debt-free every fifty years. No social order could hope to function successfully when based upon the indefinite indebtedness of its subjects. Graeber’s book thus concludes with a call for a ‘biblical-style jubilee’ — like the one we campaigned for around the world in the run up to the new millennium — in order to cancel outstanding consumer and government loans. The failure to act on the Jubilee 2000 promise to ourselves, as well as the inconceivability today of such a policy ever been taken seriously, is a mark not of any inherent impracticability, but instead of the capture of all governments by a self-reproducing financial oligarchy. For example, not once was such a policy considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as a way of alleviating financial stress upon families, and here in the UK we have already begun to see a tentative return of the moral imperative to ‘repay one’s debts’

as politicians begin to signal that the £450BN the UK government 'borrowed' from itself to pay for the furlough and job retention schemes must be paid back with significant public belt-tightening. In Graeber's own words, this is because today's neoliberal times are governed by the assembly of a 'giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures' (382).

This is one of the most important messages in the book, and a useful place to close this short commentary, because it also speaks to Graeber's anarchist politics. Either we continue to be afflicted by what Zygmunt Bauman (2007) has called the TINA syndrome — the neoliberal mantra that 'there is no alternative' to global financialized capitalism — or we continue to hope that an alternative society needs to be built by acting now. We must change how we engage with the world now, instead of apparently favouring a strategy of simply hoping that a better world will miraculously arrive at some point in a distant future.

I have my own disagreements with Graeber. I am too persuaded by the important work of Viviana A. Zelizer (1994) and the relational school of economic sociology fully to concede that money simply cancels or neutralizes social relations. And, since the heady undergraduate days of Jubilee 2000, one comes to realise that 'simply' wiping the slate clean of debt changes very little if the same economic principles nevertheless remain etched in stone such that the whole process of indebtedness simply begins again, perpetuating the same forms of exploitative social relations.

What is undoubtedly so powerful about the economic anthropology of Graeber's approach in *Debt*, however, is that through remembering the history of money and moral obligations we can perceive and so grasp two fundamentally important things. First, that it is our society today that has the strangest of all attitudes towards debt. There is nothing obvious or natural about the logic we apply to debt relations today. Our attitudes towards money and debt relations are not timeless. And second, that alternative possibilities for a better future are already present in the here and now. The task that befalls on us is to recognise them and help them to grow.

I want to end with another quote, not from Graeber this time but from the British economist Joan Robinson (1978), who is quoted as once having said:



‘The purpose of studying economics is not to acquire a set of ready-made answers to economic questions, but to learn how to avoid being deceived by economists’ (75) .

This has always struck me as the primary motivation at the heart of Graeber’s book on debt. I hope to have encouraged as many readers as possible to seek it out in order to protect themselves from economic deception.

**Trouble and desire:  
David Graeber and entanglements with the English left**  
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A decade ago in Tottenham, in the summer of 2011, Mark Duggan was killed by the Metropolitan Police, inciting young people to riot across London. It came during a year of anti-austerity marches, student protests, public sector strikes and Occupy mobilizations — actions which, in hindsight, prefigured and energised a new popular left movement that would help sweep socialist veteran Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour Party leadership in 2015. This was a remarkable renaissance of the left that helped the party buck the European social democratic party trend of time, but it was one that was ultimately roundly defeated at the 2019 general election. That said, legacies of the period remain evident in an ecosystem of prominent radical commentators, think tanks, media spaces and influential discourses that were almost impossible to imagine in 2011.

One other notable legacy of this new left moment was the breakthrough of two curious intellectuals. In 2011, David Graeber, having been ex-communicated from the US academy, found himself teaching in London and becoming increasingly active on the febrile streets of both London and New York. His landmark anthropology text *Debt: The First 5000 years* was published, and he was emerging as a sharp-eyed essayist on the economic crises and oppressive state clampdowns pervading the era (i.e, Graeber 2011b). Two years earlier, another Gen X dissident — Mark Fisher — had published his seminal book *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher 2009). Since the early 2000s, he had helped drive a new radical online subculture via his blogging alias *k-punk*. Here, he popularised hauntological takes on contemporary culture and politics for a network of young, left-inclined digital natives (see Fisher 2018). Both men would be heralded as cult intellectual heroes by parts of ‘generation left’ (see Milburn 2019 for an overview), a reverence that would only be galvanised by their untimely deaths aged 59 (Graeber in 2020) and 48 (Fisher in 2017). There are obvious bear traps in seeming to appraise modern English left populism through the prism of these two compelling white men. Nonetheless, we can glimpse some of the lineages, tensions and possibilities inherent in this new left constellation by bringing some of their orientations and positions into dialogue. They shared the odd platform and a university campus for a time, but never collaborated and seemed to

only rarely (but warmly) comment on each other's work. Upon hearing of his death in 2017, Graeber tweeted 'so sad about Fisher, a man who had already come up with half the ideas I thought were my own'.

It is striking how these two distinct personalities both came to enter the post-crash English left scene. Graeber was born in 1961 into an internationalist, working class family in New York City (his parents were 1930s radicals). He turned 18 in 1979 as the neoliberal counter-revolution was gaining ground. He would access elite east coast schooling via scholarship before attending the University of Chicago for his doctoral anthropology study on rural Madagascar. Radicalised by the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, he was famously sacked by Yale before taking up a post at Goldsmiths and then becoming a high profile 'tenured radical' professor at the LSE. Fisher was younger (born in 1968) and came from a conservative working-class family in the East Midlands of England. His coming of age coincided with vibrant post-punk independent arts and music scenes, but — heralded by the 1984/5 miner's strike - an intensifying abjection of British working-class culture. He ended up at Warwick University, doing a PhD with the darkly accelerationist Cybernetic Culture Research Centre before becoming a freelance dissident: blogging as *k-punk*, managing his depression, and working in a Further Education college. He gradually shifted towards radical London circles and, finally, a teaching post also at Goldsmiths. If, in the context of left-wing London, Graeber was the ballsy émigré unafraid to call out the 'bullshit' of late capitalism with 'big daring books' (Butler 2020), newspaper op-eds and direct actions, Fisher was more a subaltern, provincial figure immersed in distinctly English cultural forms and neuroses, writing for and from its margins. In his struggle for economic security, Fisher became the 'laureate of precarity' (Niven 2017) for the young, disenchanting Millennials being saddled with rising student debts and, in England's large cities, astronomical rents.

Both men were astute and sensitive diagnosticians of the individual and collective spiritual damage wrought by capital and state but were punchy stylists who worked with the kind of intuitive sweeps that would raise the eyebrows of the forensic investigators — aka 'REF reading groups' — that assess research 'rigour' in modern UK universities. Needless to say, neither had any time for the university managers Fisher called 'grey vampires'. Where Fisher was scathing about a 'market Stalinism' entrenched by Blairite public sector reforms, Graeber wrote similarly about 'managerial feudalism' and the kinds of perverse moralities of productivity, work and

debt that, he argued, we have sanctified and internalised, but which corrode our capacities for empathy and co-operation (Graeber 2018). Both wanted to re-enchant and re-energise human agency in the face of such ‘structures’ through new publics and movements. Fisher saw this largely as an individual and collective consciousness-raising project requiring a post-capitalist model of desire to compete with capital’s ‘libidinal technicians’ (see Fisher 2021). Here we can point to his co-founding of Zer0 Books (and then Repeater Books) and its role in publishing many of the bloggers and freelance writers he inspired (Owen Hatherley, Dawn Foster, Simon Reynolds and Grace Blakeley) who often share a common preoccupation with recovering the ‘popular’ or ‘pulp’ modernism Fisher believed had been trashed by neoliberalism.

Graeber was more energised by the promise of the street and drew inspiration from other times and spaces to challenge capitalist common-sense and offer the left a broader range of imaginaries and possibilities. Notable here was his support for Kurdish autonomy and self-organisation in Rojava, Syria (Graeber 2014c) — an important contemporary example of the ‘radical municipalism’ theorised in the global North by another US anarchist — Murray Bookchin in the 1970s. This reflected Graeber’s anarchist inclination for the kind of ‘horizontalist’ strategies that typified the Occupy camps and which left accelerationists (like Fisher) would dismiss as unambitious ‘anarchist fatalism’ and ‘folk opposition’ (see Srnicek and Williams 2015 for an overview of this critique). Despite these tensions both Fisher and Graeber were vocal supporters of the Corbyn Labour party, pushed policies like Universal Basic Income, and became cautious advocates of the kind of post-work autonomism (notwithstanding his caustic take on Lazzarato et al, see Myka Tucker-Abramson above), that has become *de rigeur* in left publishing (see Manavis 2021 for a recent overview). This line has been popularised by fashionable think tanks like Autonomy and undergirds the intellectual thrust of Novara Media, an independent left news platform edited by veterans of the 2010/11 student protests.

Despite their avowed outsiderdom, the two figures would come to have modest skirmishes with the post-Blair Labour party. In *Debt*, Graeber argued, via his anthropological method, echoing Mauss and Polanyi, that rather than the selfish utility-maximisers of neo-classical economics lore, there was clear evidence that human beings could accumulate, over time, webs of reciprocity, trust and co-operation in social and economic affairs. With the invention of money and debt,

these every day ‘communist’ relations had become quantified, distorted and, ultimately, had to be secured by systems of oppression and violence. Therein lay hope, for Graeber: that alternative, non-oppressive modes of social organisation were possible and could be found from within our own lifeworlds. Adam Curtis might be less fashionable on the left these days, but it was this sentiment of Graeber’s (echoing David Harvey and Marx) which flashed up in the opening titles of his 2021 documentary series *Can’t Get You Out of My Head*: ‘The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is just something we make and could just as easily make differently’. Predictably, Mark Fisher was also an inspiration for Curtis.

Intellectually, Graeber’s revisionism chimed with the heterodox economic thinking emerging in the post-2010 austerity period that became influential on Labour. Indeed, my first real encounter with Graeber’s ideas came at a seminar given by James Meadway in 2013. Meadway was at that point economist at the New Economics Foundation and was later to become advisor to John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor under Jeremy Corbyn, and former chair of finance for the Greater London Council during its radical 1980s heyday (see Meadway 2021 for an updated take on Graeber’s influence on current left impasses and futures). Upon Graeber’s death, McDonnell himself would speak about the impact of his work on popularising understandings of debt, class formation and ‘bullshit’ jobs for a new generation.

With his collaborator and friend, Jeremy Gilbert, professor at the University of East London, Fisher wrote a report for the left Labour party pressure group Compass called *Reclaim Modernity: Beyond Markets, Beyond Machines*. Published in 2015 but making little impression on the party leadership at the time, it called for Labour to understand that those voters who were turning away from the party post-1997 were not nostalgic for the faith, family and flag recipe of a lost communitarian ‘golden age’ but pining for the promises of modernity that had been quashed by over-weening markets and bureaucracies. Only by reviving the radical democratic spirit of the original New Left could this impasse be overcome, they argued. Fast forward to 2021 and this seems to anticipate the brand of analysis now infusing the post-Brexit, municipal left governments of Preston and Salford and which is being circulated more broadly by organisations like Commonwealth and Centre for Local Economic Strategies and recent texts like Brown and Jones’ (2021) *Paint Your Town Red: How Preston Took Back Control and Your Town Can Too* (published by Fisher’s Repeater Books).

In the work of David Graeber and Mark Fisher, fresh diagnoses, accounts and imaginaries helped energise the hunting down of a toxic capitalist ideology that had seemed so completely entrenched only years previously. They were amplifiers and clarifiers; an inspiration for a kind of new bravery on the part of a younger left generation existing in the interstices of precarious academia, freelance writing and digital media and trying to act on behalf of a wider youth cohort fatally disenfranchised by austerity. The counter-revolution unleashed by the tragic post-2016 period has been fierce, and we are yet to really see what new configurations of authoritarian state capitalism will emerge from COVID-19. But the lines of sight on all this feel sharper and the possibilities of collective refusal feel closer at hand than at any other time in my life. David Graeber came to England and helped change the terms of political debate. Post-Brexit, one wonders if the international exile anarchists of the future will bother.

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