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The era of predatory bureaucratization

An interview with David Graeber

Arthur De Grave

27 January 2016

David Graeber is an anthropologist and a well-known anarchist figure. He was one of the initiators of the *Occupy* movement in 2011. He is the author of a major essay, *Debt, the First 5,000 Years*. I met him in Paris for the release of his latest book, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*.

Back in 2011, you were among the initiators of the *Occupy* movement. Several similar social movements have happened ever since, but it seems none of them managed to stay alive long enough to reach their objective. Why such failures?

David Graeber. I don't think social movements failed. I have a theory about that: it's called the "3.5 years historical lag". After the financial crisis hit, back in 2008, security forces all around the world started gearing up for the inevitable protest movements. Yet, after a year or two, it felt like nothing was going to happen after all. And suddenly, in 2011 — though nothing particular had happened that year — it started. Like in 1848

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or in 1968, the social movements are not about seizing power right away: it's about changing the way we think about politics. And at this level, I think there has been a profound change. Many expected *Occupy* to take a formal political form. True, it did not happen, but look at where we are 3.5 years later: in most countries where substantial popular movements happened, left parties are now switching to embrace these movements' sensibilities (Greece, Spain, United States, etc.). Maybe it will take another 3.5 years for them to have an actual impact on policy making, but it seems to me like the natural path of things.

You see, we live in a society of instant gratification: we expect that we are going to click and that something will happen. That's not the way social movements work. Change does not happen overnight. It took a generation for the abolitionist or the feminist movement to reach their objective, and both managed to remove institutions that had been around for centuries!

But can grassroots movements become structured political organisations? The recent example in Greece does not look very encouraging...

D. G. First, I don't see how Syriza could have won: they were in a very difficult strategic position. On the other hand, if such a political coalition could happen in the UK, for instance, that would be a completely different story. Right now, the most important thing for anti-authoritarian and horizontal movements is to learn how to enter an alliance with those who are willing to work within the political system without compromising their own integrity. This is something we clearly underestimated with *Occupy*: we trusted our Democrat allies and the institutional Left to have some common sense about their strategic interest. You see, you need to have your radicals in order to be seen as the reasonable alternative. This is something the Right wing and Republicans understand well. If the Democrats were as absolute in their defense of the 1st amendment as the Right wing is about the 2nd amendment, *Occupy* would probably still be around, and we wouldn't be ar-

D. G. I am quite enthusiastic about it: it's a perfect Left anti-bureaucratic measure. Increasingly, what civil servants do is make poor people feel bad through constant monitoring.

In England, it is fascinating to analyse the strategies of the different political parties. Britain got rid of the industrial apparatus and is now trying to kill the university system, so what is going to be left to export? For now, it's all based on finance and real estate. Why? Why is it that every rich person in the world wants to own a house in London? There are many other beautiful European cities. What's the appeal? I realised two things: first, you can get everything you could possibly want in England, thanks to a docile and subservient working class. I had a friend whose job was to deliver lobsters at any time of the night. Secondly, and most importantly: if you come from Bahrein, Russia or Hong Kong, something could still go wrong, there could still be social unrest. Not in England, it is perceived: the historical defeat of the English working class is Great Britain's main export product.

And really, this is the Tories' strategy: selling the class system to wealthy foreigners. Against that, what was the New Labour strategy? To focus on the export of cultural industries. But there was a problem: creativity doesn't only come from the middle class, but from the working class as well. The Labour party destroyed what it was trying to create by implementing welfare conditionality. Back in the 20th century, every decade or so, England would create an incredible musical movement that would take over the world. Why is it not happening anymore? Well, all these bands were living on welfare! Take a bunch of working class kids, give them enough money for them to hang around and play together, and you get the Beatles. Where is the next John Lennon? Probably packing boxes in a supermarket somewhere.

going about balancing the budget, but about people's actual problems.

Still, I believe it is necessary to come up with a positive synergy between the radical Left and the institutional Left. We don't necessarily have to like each other, but we do have to find a way to reinforce each other. The radical Left itself should be more concerned about winning than playing a game of moral superiority.

What is your analysis regarding the latest development of the Greek crisis? The ideology of debt seems to be riding high in Europe right now.

D. G. It's always possible to take the most repressive phenomena and turn around the order to show signs of hope. In that particular case, the European crisis reveals that the traditional justifications for the existence of capitalism do not work anymore. Of course, capitalism has always generated massive inequalities, but there were three major political arguments to counterbalance that fact. First, trickle-down economics, the idea that if the rich get richer, the poorest layer of society will do better. That's no longer the case. Second: capitalism brings stability. Again, no longer the case. Third: it would accelerate the path of technological innovation. No longer the case.

So, what's left for the supporters of capitalism now that all practical arguments are gone? They have no choice but to revert to purely moral arguments, that is the ideology of debt ("people who don't pay their debt are bad"), and the idea that if you're not working harder than you would like in a job you don't particularly enjoy, you are a bad person.

In your latest book, you write that capitalism doesn't seem to be able to generate new technological developments. Yet, the doxa would have us believe that we are living a time of tremendous innovation. Who is right?

D. G. It seems quite obvious to me: between 1750 and 1950, there were major scientific discoveries, new forms of energy were mastered, a fast path of innovation... It doesn't seem to

happen anymore. Capitalism has become some kind of purely reactionary force, holding back technological development. What happened to flying cars? To space travel? Today universities, heavily bureaucratized, are unable to welcome the kind of eccentric people you need to truly innovate. Einstein's papers would probably not pass peer review nowadays!

Ask people, and you will see that at the end of the day, most of them do not buy into this rhetoric of contemporary innovation. Actually, it is not how ideology works anymore: it's not about convincing people that something is true, but convincing them that everybody else believes it's true. In a way, cynicism has replaced ideology. Think of another myth: meritocracy. We all know that in truth, you don't go up the hierarchy thanks to your merits: it's about being nice to the boss, having a cousin, etc. But there is a sense of complicity: if you want a promotion, don't count on your merits, but on your willingness to pretend it's based on merit. Go along with the official line. That is a byproduct of the bureaucratic mindset I describe in the book.

Do you think it's possible to reconcile technological innovation and social progress?

D. G. It's already happening: Anonymous, WikiLeaks, or to a certain extent 3D printing are the beginning of something. You know, technological development always follows social trends. Do you think people in renaissance Florence said "let's create capitalism: it will involve factories, stock exchange, etc."? Of course not. It was not planned. The same is true for us: once we start with a vision of what we want to achieve as a society, technological innovation will follow.

Imagine if all these people sitting at desks producing securitized derivatives or trading algorithms were instead trying to create a system of resource allocation that would do the same sort of things the Soviets wanted to achieve but were clearly not capable of coming up with. They could probably give birth to something interesting.

According to you, it is unclear whether or not the current economic system can still be called capitalism. Why is that so?

D. G. The nature of capitalist accumulation has changed dramatically. When I was an undergraduate, my teacher in economic history used to say when the extraction of the surplus happens through direct political means, it's not called capitalism, but feudalism. That's what we have today: a fusion of public and private bureaucracies whose purpose is to create more and more debt that will then be the object of various forms of speculation. The only way to create more debt in the first place is through policies: there is no such thing as "financial deregulation", it is just a change in the mode of regulation. In classic marxist theory, the role of the state is to guarantee the property relations which then enable extraction to happen through wage labour. But now, the state apparatus plays a more active role in this process.

We are living in the era of predatory bureaucratization. What percentage of the typical American household revenue is directly extracted by the financial sector? Oddly, this is the one economic statistic you cannot easily get, but when economists make estimations, it falls somewhere between 20% and 40%. Most of the profits are not coming from the industry anymore. Yet, when we think of the history of capitalism, we think of industries, wage labor... Clearly, that's not what we have today. There is no more reason to believe that capitalism will be around forever. For centuries, the Roman Empire was able to absorb barbarian tribes, to draw them into the Roman system, to give their chiefs titles and offices... And one day, they forgot to give Alaric a promotion, which got him pretty upset. We all know what happened then. It's permanent until it's not, every contradiction is absorbed until it isn't.

What is your opinion on the idea of unconditional basic income?