David Graeber On Jeremy Corbyn, 'The Most Unlikely Leader Ever'

In Conversation with the London-Based Writer and Anthropologist

Christopher Lydon

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London-based anthropologist David Graeber talks to Christopher Lydon about the recent UK elections and potential change to come. This interview originally appeared at Radio Open Source.

David Graeber emerged as something of a cult writer behind the Occupy movement of six years ago. He's a Yale-trained cultural anthropologist, meaning in his case, he's a tracker of the invisible stitching around matters of debt and wealth from ancient times. He has prophesied at different times a standard 15-hour work week and the dissolution of the US empire. In the matter of Tory rule in England, David Graeber has been writing since before the Brexit vote about an "efflorescence of resistance" and a lifting of England's culture of despair.

Christopher Lydon: David, you got on the Jeremy Corbyn train early. I mean it's more than a year: in 2016, you were writing about a veritable efflorescence of resistance in British culture against the sort of Tory money rule. Trace the history of it, and when you started noticing "despair fatigue," just what that meant.

David Graeber: Well, the key moment is 2010. When the Tories first came to power, they came in in alliance with the Lib Dems, and the Lib Dems had actually run on a platform of abolishing tuition fees, which at that point were around 3,000 pounds. Tony Blair was a neoliberal Labour party leader who had brought in tuition fees, and the Lib Dems promised to eliminate them. In fact, they entered into an alliance with the Tories, tripled them, and introduced an American style student loan system.

CL: In a country where the intellectual division of university tuition goes way back and has always been free!

DG: Exactly, exactly. And all these people who are doing it had been beneficiaries of that free education system. This led to a vast student movement. The student movement began with occupations across the country. I don't remember how many there were in all, but there were 35, 40—basically all universities had student occupations. They were quite radical in their demands. They were organized on some sort of horizontal anarchistic lines.

The occupations all started with the declaration that education is not an economic value, it's not even a political value, it's a value unto itself and it should be respected as such. And it's not like we have an education system just to support an economy; if anything we have an economy

to support the education system, because understanding the world and art and beauty are what we're ultimately trying to organize our lives around.

They tried to stop the legislation. There were street battles regularly. Crazy stuff was going on. I was witnessing literal cavalry charges against students, battles in front of Parliament. Westminster Abbey was incredibly militant. It was incredibly dramatic, and it was almost completely ignored in the international press, but it was one of the things that led to Occupy later on.

The movement was very important because a lot of the veterans of that, you know, they went into radical media, they went into various forms of organizing, housing organizing; they went into all sorts of different things. I mean I've actually seen numbers on the protests, strikes, occupations in the country, and, you know, in the last couple of years there's been more than any time since 1972.

None of that's been covered. Nobody knows about it because the BBC takes this policy of, you know, just never talking about it. Maybe if somebody breaks something, they'll say only that *that* happened, but they will not cover demonstrations because the media has basically been completely cowed. So there are these covert methods of controlling the media—especially the BBC. I've had people, I can't mention names of course, you know, who are artists come on to talk about art, and the first thing they're told is like, "Look no Tory bashing. You can't say anything bad about the government, we're coming up for funding—"

CL: David Graeber, let me just say: You write about the gap in England between "consensus reality," which is to say the chattering class, the newspapers, the BBC, and "existing reality," which is to say "street wisdom" and what anybody knows. I want to say it's wonderful to hear an American with an anthropological eye, even more anthropological than political, looking at England as a sort of distant early warning of our story. But pick it up at the point where, as you've written, England has been subsisting for years, practically since World War II, on a "No future for you" premise. "Better find another way," in the name of austerity.

DG: It's really punk rock that brought it on. I mean, I don't think anybody was saying that in the 1960s. And then people don't realize that the sort of 60s counterculture, the sort of wild and the swinging London of the time was totally a product of the welfare state. All those bands, you know, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles—all those guys had been on the dole and been on relief. I always say in Cockney rhyming slang the word for dole is rock and roll. You know, "Oh, he's on the rock and roll again." Because they are, they're so identified with each other. There are even bands like UB40. I mean UB40 is actually the name of the unemployment benefit form. They were all on relief.

CL: But you also speak of the chattering class's lockstep defiance of reality. How do they get away with it?

DG: I think actually Susan Faludi described this very well in *Backlash*, back in the 90s. She said that people just read each other's talk. So people who are, you know, journalists, and people who are TV producers, and people who are movie producers—for all these guys, their reality is just what the other ones are doing. And they can genuinely believe that things are happening—or that things are not happening—just by listening to each other because they think the other ones are in touch with real people.

It's quite remarkable. I mean, one of the most remarkable things I thought of, showing just how far gone they are in England, was that David Cameron, the prime minister who was putting through a lot of the spending cuts, they found his personal diaries in which he was actually complaining to his local council about the decline of services. You know, he couldn't believe that

his own actions were having the effects they were. He was seeing with his own eyes his local library closing down, and he couldn't believe it was because of the legislation he'd just signed in.

CL: But then, astonishingly, Jeremy Corbyn comes along and gives people a fairly short list of things they might want …

DG: It's a pretty long list, actually! The manifesto has not been broadly communicated overseas. They had to communicate it in the UK. This is what happened with Corbyn: Corbyn had represented what was considered the lunatic fringe of the Labour Party. There was a handful of four, five, six people. He didn't even want the job, but all the other ones had already gone through the motions of running for Labour leader. In fact, I know someone who was in the room; they kind of went around the circle and, one of them said, "Well, I had a heart attack, my doctor says I can't do it." Another one: "Well, I've already tried three times, I think I've done my part." When they got to Corbyn, he said, "Okay, it's my turn." He's the most unlikely leader ever.

And that's one of the things people love about him, that he doesn't really want do this. He's doing this because *people* want him to do it. It's a sense of responsibility rather than a greed for power. And, you know, he sort of reminds everyone of their favorite uncle; he's a nice kind of whimsical, sweet guy. But he also is great at listening to people.

CL: But then he lays it on the line about the government, you know, "Let the government run the railroads."

DG: Yeah, and he says, "All right let's just reverse all this stuff." Nobody wants railroads in private hands. Privatization of the railroads was a disaster. It's a little like healthcare in America. You know, 65 percent of Americans want single payer but no politician is for it. It's similar with the railroads: everybody agrees. I mean, even most Tory voters want renationalization of the railroads. But he went further: okay, the electric power grid, the water, they privatized the post office. But he also said, let's get rid of zero hour contracts. Let's get rid of unpaid internships, we're going to ban that. Let's make tuition free, restore stipends. Let's see if we can cancel student loans. You know, it's a real total reversal of Blairism, which is like Clintonism.

CL: And then astonishingly after two terrorist incidents in Manchester and London during the campaign he says, "By the way, let's get rid of the war on terror."

DG: Yes, that was really an interesting step because, once again, it's something that most people actually agree with; it turns out 75 percent of Britons do recognize that invading Iraq has something to do with why this is happening. But he actually had the nerve to say it. He's been saying it all his life. People took him seriously as not just saying something for political reasons. That's the other thing people like about him: the fact that he's been in the wilderness so long means he actually sticks with his principles. And I should point out that the British press is way worse than the American in terms of this openness about bias. You know, the British press basically immediately said when this guy became Labour leader: "Forget it. No. He's way too far out." Someone did a study, and there were basically no positive stories about him. There were only attacks. There were no neutral stories. They would always quote twice as many people against him as for him.

So what his party knew—this is why when there was a snap election they were for it—was that once the election actually started, there are laws saying they have to give the candidates equal time. So for the first time people were going to be exposed to what this guy is actually like. Clearly a nice guy, sincere. You know, Theresa May acted like a robot, just reading off the sound bites they had written for her, never answering a question. Corbyn would engage with people. So it was almost like the bursting of a bubble. Everybody was thinking, I can't vote for this guy

because nobody else is going to vote for him. As soon as they realized that wasn't true it just, you know, cascaded.

CL: But then, and you saw it coming, the so-called despair fatigue. Enough of the "no future for you." What if we voted common sense?

DG: Yes, exactly; and common sense is one of Labour's big slogans: "Common decency, common sense." But also it has to do with the British economy. The British economy is essentially over. They say it's a financialized economy. It's driven by the City, and to some degree that means they're this sort of faithful lieutenant to the American Empire, but largely it's built on a housing bubble. Every rich person in the world feels they have to have a house in London. And there are whole districts of London were there are no lights on at night because it's all Russian oligarchs or Chinese billionaires who don't actually live there or come maybe once a year.

CL: Not to mention Saudis.

DG: Yes, Saudis, you name it. Anybody who's rich has to have a place in London. And the question is, why London? Why would they want to have a house there? The climate: kind of bad. It rains all the time. It's not that pleasant a place. Why not Rio? There are so many cities they could choose. But the reason for London is because it's safe. Essentially, you know, any possibility of a general uprising has been eliminated since at least 1689, you know. There is a happy subservient working class who will give you anything you want. They really know how to be butlers. They really know how to be nannies. You know you can get the best servants in the world, and there's no danger of any sort of upheaval. If you come from Bahrain or Hong Kong, you know something could go wrong, but nothing's going to go wrong in London.

So the way I put it is, the historical defeat and humiliation of the British working class is now England's export product. That's why the queen and the nobility is all part of the package. That's what they're selling. All these people want to come to England because that's the land where they really respect their superiors. They can do whatever they like. As a result, you can see there's this resentment of foreigners, but they can't resent the foreigners they actually want to resent because that's where all the money's coming from. It's easy for the demagogues of the right to turn that against other foreigners.

CL: So, no more despair. Where are we going?

DG: So that's the despair. The question is one of changing that economy to one based on high technology. Because England is one of the most educated countries in the world it's a place with a long tradition of popular inventions.

Most inventions in the world of the 19th century were not only from England, they were from rural vicars. They really had a tradition of popular science, of popular innovation. England has never done that well for huge corporate complexes and factories. That's more of an American and German thing. They only went for small-scale cottage industries, craft-like, even the high tech stuff.

I always talk about steampunk. Where did that come from, right? There was a sudden efflorescence of fantasy about Victorian technology and, in a way, it's like the Victorian period is the last period before everything went wrong with World War I and we realized that all this technology was just going to lead to mass carnage and destruction. There was this idea of infinite possibility.

So why is it called steampunk? I can see the steam part, but punk? And it's always about no future. Punk is about no future. With steampunk, they went back to the last moment where there was a future and said, let's just forget everything that happened in the 20th century and start over again. It's kind of what's happening here! On the other hand you know we've got a tradition here

we can get back to. And that's what Corbyn represents; he's been trying very hard to talk to the tech industry and say that we're not anti-industry, we're moving back into that sort of thing. And that's where you get all these crazy fantasies. You know, do we want accelerationism? Do we want, like, degrowth? There are all these utopian ideas circulating in Europe, but especially in England. My favorite one is FALC. Do you know about FALC?

CL: No?

DG: Fully automated luxury communism.

CL: David Graeber, there's a way in which Bernie Sanders echoed the Corbyn uprising. What does Corbyn encourage in American politics?

DG: He's the opposite of Clintonism. He is the person who says we are only going to win by actually being true to our beliefs and providing a real alternative. In the UK, you could make the argument that Blair just lucked out. You know, it's a strategic misfortune of the left that they ran a hardcore leftist candidate in an election they weren't going to win anyway, and then they ran the neoliberal compromising guy in an election they were basically going to win no matter who they ran because everybody was sick of the Tories at that point. So everybody began to say, "Oh no, you can't have a left wing position; nobody will vote for you. You've got to compromise your principles if you're going to get anywhere." And, you know, what we've now discovered is that that entire narrative was false. It was never true.

That's an enormous difference, and for America, what it means is that you can actually lay out a program which concretely describes a radical alternative to what we have, and even the sort of people that you think of as the swing voters—like a lot of UKIP guys, a lot of people who'd voted for Brexit—turned around and voted for Labour this election. As it turned out they weren't actually voting against foreigners—they were voting against bureaucrats, and they don't like the ones at home much more either.

CL: You'll be an American again before we know it. Where do we turn in our country?

DG: Wow, I haven't lived there in a while. But it's the same sort of thing. The appeal of Sanders was to speak the truth. Now I should explain: I am not a political party guy. I'm not a member of the Labour Party, I'm not a member of any party in America. I believe in autonomous organizing. The reason I support Corbyn, or am happy about him, is because he is willing to work with social movements. The key thing for the future is to find a way that you can have autonomous social movements that are not in any way dependent on any political party or government, but even more to make sure that the people within the system don't try to co-opt those movements and turn them into an extension of themselves. This what happened to Occupy, and it was largely Democrats who suppressed us, quite violently.

I would say Corbyn is a guy who doesn't do that. John McDonnell, his shadow chancellor, is a very important figure here too. McDonnell always says the way you get social progress, the only way we've ever gotten social progress in the UK, is by combining parliamentary action, radical trade unionism, and, he says, insurrection, or as they now politely call it, direct action. You need to have these things. You need to make sure that the people who are leading the charge in the system are not actually trying to undercut it, let alone beat up and jail the people on the bottom. The right wing understands this. The right wing embraces the radicals, whereas everybody in America thinks in order to be in any way successful on the left you have to completely disavow your radicals. Well, you know, this election is showing that's not the case.

CL: Meantime, the signal here, as there, is sort of, let's get back to utopia. Give us a couple of utopias to think about.

DB: Well, I think I've already mentioned some. There are the degrowth utopias, let's go back to simple living. Examine how much consumerism is necessary. There's Fully Automated Luxury Communism, which moves technologically towards 3D printing and making this and many things free and available to everyone. There's also a basic income, a rising idea across Europe. It's developing in fits and starts. We have a situation where, I believe, around 37 percent in the UK and 40 percent in Holland, think that if their jobs didn't exist, it would make no difference. They're not doing anything. You know, much of what we have is this work machine because we have the idea that nobody deserves the means to life if they don't have a job and aren't working harder than they want to be, working at something they don't enjoy. It doesn't matter if it actually does anything, somehow we're just creating jobs for the sake of it. We could get rid of those jobs and have people work half the amount they are. We could redistribute the jobs rationally. And there's talk about robotization.

So then the question is what is a rational redistribution? The very, very simplest approach is simply to give people the money. We could just start by saying, "All right, everybody gets 40,000, 50,000 dollars. After that it's up to you." People will want more. We'd have to have rent control and certain other things to make sure that landlords don't grab it all, you know. And the nice thing about that is it would be a left-wing, anti-bureaucratic policy.

The left really needs to own the anti-bureaucracy. The right claims to be anti-bureaucracy, but in fact neoliberal policies just create more and more and more bureaucracy, more than the world has ever seen. So we need to get rid of those bureaucrats and, if 40 percent of the people already believe that their jobs are useless, if we just give everybody money and say decide for yourself how you can contribute to society, how can they come up with a worse arrangement than we already have? A lot of people would write bad poetry or form bad bands, but some of them would form good poetry or good bands. And it's a lot better than what we've got now.

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