

The Elvis of Anthropology

Eulogy for David Graeber

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The feeding frenzy has begun. Everyone was best friends with David Graeber. David would have liked it – he had come to rely on superficial forms of recognition. He would also be mad (so mad) to see all the politicians who never gave him the time of day now honouring him in public. Yes, I can just see him – sitting in the bath, with his laptop perched on the side of the tub, he gesticulates wildly at Twitter. His coffee cup is leaving brown rings on the porcelain. It's all so endearing now.

I want to honour David by sharing what I know of his wishes. From 2005 when I first wrote to him grateful for *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), David and I carried on the most challenging and fun intellectual dialogue I have ever known, first by email, later in person, finally living together – we were in a relationship for seven years, engaged throughout 2013-2017. In the beginning we poured over an early manuscript of *An Ethnography of Direct Action* (2009), which unfolds partly in my home town Montréal, while his little-known MA thesis soon became a key reference in my own dissertation on anarchist social movements – an antidote to his own. He read very few of the feminist texts I recommended, but often cited them where I told him to. I remember he wrote *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years* (2011) before the Pirates book (as yet unwritten) because the economy crashed. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if he hadn't. Maybe he wouldn't have become famous, and we could have had a life, and he would still be here today. I saw what unfolded. I saw him shake his fists and mouth curses every time an interviewer for *Debt* brought up Occupy. I saw his initial attempts to avoid being dubbed 'leader' of that movement, while still very much wanting recognition for his scholarly work in anthropology, his life-long pride and joy.

David was both brilliant and problematic. He was someone who learned early on to avoid physical and emotional discomfort by dissociating into mental play. His childhood was painful and characterized by rejection – he probably cultivated imaginative distractions to get by. Perhaps he was already difficult as a child. Perhaps as a working-class boomer (vs. middle class millennial) no allowances were to be made for him being “on the spectrum”. In any case David could not feel his body. If he tried to place his attention even briefly in his chest, on his breathing, he felt he would suffocate and die. He could never remember it being otherwise. I think being inside his body just hurt too much, emotionally and physically. Thinking had been better than feeling for a long time.

Later on I will need to vent about how it was largely his (growing) social privileges that enabled him to get through life without realizing his dissociation or hitting bottom – a woman like David is not considered a “mad professor” or “package deal” but a “flaky psychobitch”, and a person of colour with his temperament might easily be murdered by police. Part of my heart still goes out to him when I remember us, alone together, riddled with our respective traumas, fervently discussing every major Western philosophical text on Desire – Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kojève, Butler, Lacan, Deleuze, De Beauvoir, Kristeva – because that was the closest we could get to intimacy. So many word games, inside jokes and giggles papered over our deep loneliness. *There once was a German named Hegel, whose Logic was shaped like a bagel, he was very clever, but his wife said whatever, I'd rather be hanging with Schlegel.* On more active days we would write jokes about classical Greek figures in the genre of Nasruddin tales.

David was a magnificent nerd. He was also a great researcher and rigorous scholar and deserves to be remembered as he most wished – for his contributions to anthropology. Not only for popularizing the discipline, and inspiring students with his enthusiasm and approachability, but because his research intervened in long-standing classical disciplinary debates on value, sacrifice, kingship, hierarchy and social change, in what he did tend to glorify as the ‘grand tradition’. That tradition is indeed colonial and masculine. I was the first to complain (literally) about that book he wrote with Marshall Sahlins *On Kings* (2017) that somehow avoids addressing how Kings are not Queens. Yet there remains certain value in the anthropological archive, however begotten by violence and trauma, just as there is value in David’s expansive, lop-sided intelligence, however begotten by violence and trauma – and constitutive of it. Both things are true. David was one of few living anthropologists well-versed and politically-motivated enough to show us how classical anthropological methods can continue to teach us about humanity and our collective possibilities for social change. As I explain in my upcoming essay *Anthropology* (2021), I find David’s cross-cultural study of property, hierarchy and ‘avoidance’ – one of his traditional endeavours, and early replies to Dumont (1970) – useful to think with in my own ethnography of “good politics”, even if it needed qualification to address questions of race and gender: Within the game of “good politics”, successful identity-appropriation requires successful self-appropriation.

David knew the *Bullshit Jobs* book (2018) was fluffy, by the way. His paper-thin pride (and the material conditions of production) would never let him admit it on social media, but to me in private he called it his sell-out book. Simon and Schuster offered a pretty penny and he took it, as he wanted to be able to finally buy a house (in London ...) instead of renting into his sixties. We can be smug about this, or acknowledge that he was searching for a sense of economic security that many who criticize him already enjoy.

I could see the frustration of David’s double-bind, wherein many political activists derided him as an establishment man, while for many academics his credential as a scholar was weakened by his political engagements. It especially annoyed David that people called him an “anarchist anthropologist”, as if having a political interest in anarchism should qualify his status as an anthropologist. In many ways fame did not treat David well. We could say he got pulled this way and that. Meanwhile, the *Pirates* book and the *Sacrifice* book both got pushed down the line by the forthcoming *Wengrow* book. It’s the *Pirates* book I always wanted to see. David was always so happy when talking about Madagascar.

Whether you are a fan, or simply feeling curious or generous to Graeber upon his death, please do read his book on magic and slavery in Madagascar, *Lost People* (2007). He lost a decade and his youth – including his godforsaken working-class teeth, as all who knew him will remember,

pouring every resource into that ethnography, yet it is little read. Partly because he fought so hard to publish it at 486 pages. He was proud of his dissertation research, and this literary ethnography (he was reading Dostoevsky when he wrote it – you’ll chuckle) deserves to be appreciated more than some of his popular stuff. I hope now that he is gone, it will be.

I had to leave David, yet still feel terribly sad now knowing our conversation has ended forever. I wanted so much for him to experience more and better happiness, to live long and enjoy the fruits of so much labour, feeling economically secure and self-assured, able to laugh at himself, surrounded by students, interesting characters and friends in a big house full of luxurious snacks. There would be excessive curios and scarves lying about. David was basically the Elvis of anthropology – David, I know that joke would have pissed you off, but it’s hilarious and true and awesome, and from your new digs I trust you can’t take yourself so damn seriously. You’ve finally found the magic.

I wanted more for David, and now can only ask for us to respect him in his passing – whether or not I myself agree with his ideas, he should be known for who he was: He did not agree with the academicization of anarchism (‘anarchist studies’), he felt strongly that anthropology should not give up on reality (objectivity à la ‘critical realism’), he thought both anarchism and anthropology require class analysis, he thought important decisions should be made by consensus, he despised bourgeois operators. Give him a break about the Bullshit Jobs book and read the Madagascar one. David deserves to be remembered for the values he held dear – for rigorous scholarship and for being a kind and silly person, with many redeeming qualities.

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