

Finance Is Just Another Word for Other People's Debts

An Interview with David Graeber

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Odd things happened in fall 2011 as Occupy Wall Street began to inhabit downtown Manhattan. People rode the subway carrying signs that touted the merits of the Glass-Steagall Act; they started sidewalk conversations about corporate personhood and about the social purpose of derivatives. Legislation, legal precedent, and financial products that had once been obscure emerged in public in new ways.

In the months after city officials forcibly evicted occupiers from Liberty Square (née Zuccotti Park), this public conversation—like the occupiers themselves—dispersed. The talk did not stop so much as it spread out, changed forms, and took route through and beyond New York. Those signs on the subway and the initial conversations about financial regulation (and its discontents) yielded to new referents and signifiers, not least among which were *debt*—whether student, medical, foreclosure, municipal, or sovereign—and a substantial red-jacketed book by the same name. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* established an intellectual reference point almost immediately, but it also became the visual sign of membership in a new kind of political dialogue about who owes what to whom.¹

I sat down with David Graeber in late fall 2012, more than a year after he had been among Occupy's first organizers and after *Debt* had been widely reviewed as one of the year's most influential books—not only within anthropology, or even academia, but in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, and elsewhere. Perhaps most importantly to David himself, the book has become a must-read in activist networks that stretch from New York to Oakland, Greece to Germany. He and I ducked into a hole-in-the-wall café in downtown San Francisco to record this interview. David ordered a coffee at the counter, while I—famished and (unbeknownst to David) four months pregnant—ordered the most substantial breakfast on offer: eggs, sausage, toast, orange juice, and fruit. When I moved to pay for what was essentially my breakfast, David insisted on picking up the tab, declaring behind an incredulous smile that writing a book on debt had at last provided him with a little disposable income, which he insisted on distributing. I owe David a thank-you for that breakfast and for this interview. May all of our future debts be comparably repayable.

¹ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

Hannah Chadeayne Appel: *There is much radical lore about your childhood. Tell us about your family background and your own political coming of age.*

David Graeber: I guess my childhood was full of radical politics, but I wasn't entirely aware of it. My father was from Lawrence, Kansas. He was one of two people from the university at Lawrence who volunteered to fight in Spain, where he served as an ambulance driver. I think he always had an anarchistic streak himself. When he first got involved politically, the only thing really happening on campus was the local communist party league, and they were the ones who recruited him. He was never a party member, and he broke with the youth league too, pretty early on. and was always in the anti-CP [Communist Party] faction of the Spanish veterans' group. But he did tell me a story of all the volunteers coming over the Pyrenees and a very inspiring moment when, as soon as they crossed into Spain, they all started singing "The International" at the same time, except in twelve different languages at once.

And then they went to basic training. And basic training is like basic training anywhere—the obstacle course, you jump over things and crawl under things, and they shoot machine guns over your head. As my father was waiting in line, he was watching this and went to the officer directing things and said, "These guys shooting machine guns, are they just recruits too? Or are they experienced troops?" The officer replied, "I don't know. I think they're guys who went through basic training yesterday who we drafted to do this." "What!?" my father responded. "They don't know what they're doing? We could get killed." The officer's response, essentially, was, "You're in the army dude. Do what you're told." My dad thought that was ridiculous. "I'm not going to get killed in basic training. I'm not going to do this." So the officer got mad and went off to get the commanding officer, who heard the story and said, "All right Graeber, you got a driver's license? You're in the ambulance car." Clearly, my dad did not have what it took to be a foot soldier, to just blindly follow stupid orders, so he became an ambulance driver in the ambulance corps. He was posted in Barcelona, but they were wherever the action was, so in a way it was the most dangerous job. You were positioned wherever people were getting killed. But he had incredible luck. He was never wounded or hurt in any way. The other guy who joined from Lawrence got killed almost immediately, which caused a small scandal back in Kansas when his parents found out.

After the war my dad went back to the United States and finished his degree. He ended up in World War II as part of the merchant marines. Again, he didn't figure foot soldier was really the job for him. He met my mother, who had come to America when she was ten, from Ostrov, Poland. Ironically, the places where my parents' families come from are not that far apart. The Graeber family is originally from Bartenstein, East Prussia. Johann Graeber actually fought in the battles of Leipzig and Waterloo. He was my great-great-grandfather, a shoemaker and soldier. They were all shoemakers. I now discover there is a fairly strong history of radical shoemakers from Bartenstein. Johann's son, Carl August Graeber (or Charlie, as he came to be known), came to the United States shortly after 1848—a suspicious date already. He settled in Lawrence, Kansas, which at the time was the very center of American abolitionism and radicalism right in the middle of the Civil War. Apparently, the family was hiding in the haystack when Quantrill's Raiders came through—or he was. The women and children came out to meet them and said that the men were in town. That story is in the family.

Charlie's son, Gustavus Adolphus Graeber, or Dolly, as everyone called him, was actually a musician for a long time on the western frontier. This is our big family claim to fame: he was apparently the man who introduced the mandolin to American music. He got the first mandolin,

this is really true, from a band of gypsies who were coming through town. He bought it. It had no strings. He didn't know what to do with it. He went to the university, and they figured out that you string it like a violin. He sent away for sheet music all the way to Europe, and eventually he formed the first mandolin band, in which he actually played guitar. Later he was the guy who ran the boathouse in Lawrence where kids from the college would rent boats. He was famous for being able to hunt catfish by tying a hook to his wrist and guiding it over the dam. He was a river guy. My father grew up there, in Lawrence, and Dolly had him later in life. That's why my grandfather, my father's father, was born before the Civil War, because he was in his fifties when my father was born. My father was in his late forties when I was born. That was my father's background.

So he met my mom, who was born in Poland to a Jewish family and came to America. She was a very precocious kid. She got into college at age sixteen and dropped out again a year later because it was the Depression and they needed help supporting the family, so she got a job at a brazier factory. She was in the ILGWU (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union). At the time, they went to a seven-hour day. The union manager got that through, so they had all these union activities in their free time, and one of them they decided [was] to put on a musical comedy. At the time, labor drama had this reputation for being didactic and boring, so they wanted to do something funny. She was involved in that. They had a show called *Pins and Needles*, which became a surprise hit on Broadway. It was very successful. And so my mom had this curious rags-to-riches-to-rags story where she was suddenly famous as a female lead on Broadway, with a profile in *Life* magazine—Ruth Rubenstein was her name at the time. She toured the country for a couple of years; they played the White House. And then she went back to working in the factory after three or four years. When she married my dad, she met him at some lefty summer camp or something. They were Zionists and all that, but they were the radical socialists, you know, Martin Buber type, Hashomel Hatzair, who considered the measure of the success of the Zionist project to be how successfully they integrated with the local Palestinian population. Extremely antireligious. My cousin Chesky grew up on a kibbutz in Israel where they raised pigs, just to annoy the religious people. It was that kind of tradition. My mother's family disowned her when she married my dad. Not only was he not Jewish, he was German by background, despite the fact that he was what they called then a "premature antifascist" who fought in Spain. I mean, you can't get much less Nazi than that. It didn't matter to them. So I never actually met my grandmother, for example, even though she continued to live in Brooklyn and only died when I was about sixteen. There was a profound rift there.

The funny thing about anybody growing up is that it's hard to conceive of your parents being cool. In fact, your parents are the definition of what is not cool. So it was only kind of gradually that I figured it out ... I remember there was one time I was talking to my dad, before he moved to the co-op, and they were living on St. Mark's Place in the Village over, I think, what's now Yaffa's. It was an Armenian place at the time. I talked about going to a hockey game and dad said something like, "I haven't been to a hockey game in about thirty years. I think the last time I went was with that Beat poet. What was his name?" And I remember thinking to myself, "Wait a minute, you're actually cool." I didn't know that my family was extraordinary. I gradually realized that while they were still alive, so they were still there when I figured out how cool they were, but it took a long time.

I think my father was very sympathetic with anarchism because he'd seen it work. He was in Barcelona when it was basically organized on anarchist principles. It worked fine. There were

problems, but the problems got resolved. So the way I always put it is that most people don't think of anarchism as a bad idea; they think of it as insane, right? "That would never work! C'mon!" My dad knew that was not the case. It was never treated as insane in my family. So it's hardly surprising that I came into it at an early age. I had all sorts of weird interests and obsessions when I was a kid which weren't explicitly political. I was really into Robert Graves and his ideas on poetry. I had a fascination with Mayan hieroglyphics. That's how I ended up getting into Andover. I went from PS 11 and IS 70—public schools in New York—to an elite private school on a scholarship, and then back to SUNY [State University of New York] Purchase. From private to state school again and then finally to Chicago. I bounced back and forth.

When did you begin to identify as an anarchist?

Some of it has to do with a cousin of mine who I never knew all that well, but I think he considered himself an anarchist and suggested that I look into the thing. As a late teenager, I hadn't really thought of myself as having a specific political identity. I was sort of default radicalism. The cousin said I should read up on Spain. I asked my dad, and he was trying to be fair, so he gave me George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*. Dad cautioned me, "Bear in mind that the guy has a total bias, and a lot of what he says is bullshit. But it's a good place to start." And my father was brought in by the very antianarchist people, and he propagandized against them all the time. But he knew many anarchists personally when he was there and they got along. The position he ended up taking on Spain was that it was necessary to build a modern army to fight the Fascists, but suppressing the actual revolution was insane and suicidal. The anarchist military structure wasn't going to work, but the anarchist social structure and political economic structure [were]. When they shot that down, that was the beginning of the end. So I read Orwell and I read up on Spain and politics, and, you know, I came around to the realization that anarchism is a reasonable position.

Can you give us a brief history of your own political engagement since coming to anarchism? Perhaps situating Occupy in a longer durée of political involvement?

The globalization movement itself was, as I've written, the result of a confluence of movements, that you can trace it back as long as you like, but the seventies were when the pieces really came together in the antinuclear movement.² And it was a convergence between anarchist traditions, feminism—which played the most important role in bringing about the whole emphasis on consensus—and certain spiritual traditions including [those of] the Quakers, who until that time had resisted actually teaching anybody how to do consensus meetings because they felt it was a form of proselytizing, and they didn't want to do that. They understood it as a spiritual exercise. So the pieces—affinity groups, spokes councils—all that really came together in the antinuclear movement and kind of faded in and out in terms of large-scale organizing. It was always there in small-scale organizing. Food Not Bombs is a great example that comes out of the antinuclear movement and endures and then pops back up again as organizing the food for all the big mobilizations of the globalization movement. This is a very American-centric view, obviously. The globalization movement itself doesn't come out of the North at all but [comes] from the Zapatistas, MST (Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil, KRRS (Karnataka State Farmers Association) in India. It was one of the first global social movements where the organizational initiatives all were coming from the South instead of the North. But in the American context that

² David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009).

took on a particular form of direct democracy that people think of as anarchist process. It's just as much feminist process in terms of where it comes from.

So I got involved in 2000 after I heard about Seattle. I had kind of been in my own academic cloud. I had tried to get involved in anarchist stuff periodically, in the eighties, for example, and I wasn't that impressed by what I saw. I like to call the eighties the Bob Black period in American anarchism, where everybody was in these little screaming sectarian parties made up of one person. So I would try. I mean there were very good things going on; I just didn't happen to stumble across them. But I remember very well stepping out of a lecture I had given at Yale in a course called "Power, Violence, and Cosmology." I had given the last lecture of the course. I walked out and I see this little newspaper box that says "Marshal Law Declared in Seattle." And I was like "what?!" That's what happens when there's a press blackout on organizing, and then, suddenly, they do something really big. "Where the hell did that come from?!" which is what a lot of people in New York were saying at the time. So my reaction was, "This is the movement that I always wished existed, and they put it together. It came about when I wasn't paying attention. Where do I go?" So I got involved. A16—the April 16, 2000, actions against the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank in Washington, DC—was my first action. Gradually, I became deeply involved in Direct Action Network in New York.

Then, after 9/11, there were increasing levels of repression, and the rules of engagement really tilted in their favor. A lot of people burned out during this time. They gave up; they went to live on an organic farm, went to grad school, [and] otherwise despaired. I was one of the stalwarts. We would say, "Maybe this year. It's gonna be back." We kept trying and trying and knocking our head against the wall. It was not like it ever really disappeared. I was in Japan for the G8 [Group of Eight summit]. I was in Gleneagles. That was the time a bomb went off in London just at the height of the actions, for reasons having nothing to do with us, but afterward, everything collapsed. Each time it never quite clicked into the thing it used to be. But we kept banging our heads against the wall.

One of the things I would say about the emergence of Occupy is, at some point, you find yourself organizing your life around something that, on some level, you don't think is going to happen. We'd always had this idea that direct democracy is contagious. It will be. You can't explain it to people, but if people actually experience it, it changes their life; they can't go back. But the question is how to get them in the room. So we thought, "This is going to happen eventually." It's going to happen, but at some level we didn't believe it was going to happen, because at some level you have to create this armor to cover up the continual disappointment. And then it happened, and we were like, "Oh, my God! It worked! Finally! How do you like that?" I actually talked to someone in Egypt who told me exactly the same thing. All of these years you organize a rally, a demonstration, only twenty-five people show up, you're depressed. Three hundred people show up and you're happy! And then one day three hundred thousand people show up and you're like, "*What?! What did we do differently?*" So it was like that. I think one of my most important roles in the origins of Occupy was actually just being that generational bridge. Calling up all these people to say, "No, really, it's actually happening this time. I know you've heard me say this before ..."

From that longer genealogy out of which Occupy emerges, what differentiates what's happening now from what happened in the past?

Occupy is constantly reinventing itself. Strike Debt is a good example. But let's talk about the holding-space tactic—the importance of the camp or the community. As in the globaliza-

tion movement, this did not start in the North. That technique of holding space starts in Tahrir Square and Tunisia, and it goes on through Syntagma and Plaça de Catalunya. In contrast, the core thematic center of the globalization movement was the carnival or the festival—festival of resistance, carnival against capitalism, hence the whole clown-and-puppets theme. And it made sense when you're dealing with what's basically a solidarity movement trying to make a mockery of, or attack, the whole structure of global governance. Whereas this round, you don't see so many puppets and clowns at the center. You see some, but it wasn't so central to what we were doing. Rather, again, it was the camp, the community. But, still, there's some continuity here: We're going to create forms of organization which not only show that organizations we're contesting are bad, which everybody knows, but that they're unnecessary. We're going to put an alternative directly in their face as the most potent way of destroying their legitimacy and authority. The carnival made sense for the first round, but the most potent thing we could possibly create as a symbol against Wall Street specifically was a community of people who care about one another. And there's nothing more radical than performing exemplary love in front of this symbol of the impossibility of a society based on that.

What about various projects coming out of Occupy after the camps—Strike Debt, debtors unions, and new tactics?

One of the most effective tools that began to undercut the Washington Consensus and neoliberal hegemony in France was unemployed unions. Unions of the unemployed which formed all over France and were critical in 1996, when they basically blunted the austerity drive there. France became the only country, really, not to go through those policies. So there's a long history of unions based in things other than labor. Part of the problem is that labor unions have been so completely politically defanged they might as well be useless in larger terms. Yet debtors are notoriously difficult to organize. It's a real challenge. And there's a strange paradox about this: the first effect of debt is to create isolation, shame, humiliation, a fear of even talking about it. On the other hand, if you look at history, the vast majority of revolts and insurrections are about debt. So in a sense it's incredibly effective, ideologically, at isolating people. But once people overcome that isolation, the results are always explosive. Debt is something people are most likely to revolt about. So the stakes are high; it's really difficult. But if we can do it, it's going to be very, very effective.

Can you help us understand the relationship between debt and finance?

The way we talk about finance, it's almost completely removed from actual social relations, let alone class, which is of course what Occupy has always been about—reminding us that class power specifically does exist. That was the whole point of “the 99 percent.” But the way finance is always represented is, “Wow, these guys have figured out a way to scam everybody by just making up money out of nothing!” You have this idea that these guys are sitting around, playing with computer blips and pieces of paper, saying, “Ooh, look, money!” Or that they're going in the casino and gambling, and somehow by buying chips they produce more of them. Of course, they very much encouraged that misunderstanding. There's all this rhetoric ... I remember, right before the crash in 2007, I would go to these conferences and there would be these culture theory guys, very slick, trendy, whose work didn't differentiate at all between forms of knowledge, forms of power, and physical reality. So therefore they were like, “This is amazing! They're using forms of securitization to change the very material nature of reality, of time! We have to learn from these guys who can create value out of nothing.” I remember sitting in the back thinking, “I think in the business world those are called scams.” They couldn't put it together. They fell for it. And

the scamsters were totally encouraging this by tossing up spec- ters of expertise: “Oh, yeah, we have these programs that only an astrophysicist can run. There are only five people in the world who can understand.” I saw an interview with one of those astrophysicists, and he was like, “ ‘Ya know, we were just making this up as we went along.” So everybody was scamming everybody. But what was really going on, what financialization actually means is they collude with the gov- ernment through various elaborate forms of bribery to change the law so as to put everyone deeper and deeper in debt, directly turning their income over to the FIRE [finance, insurance, and real estate] sector.

I don’t know the exact numbers. It’s telling that you can’t get these num- bers. But something around 15–25 percent, at least, of average American household income is directly removed in the form of interest, penalties, fees, insurance, et cetera. And it’s obviously much more than that, because 25 percent are either too rich or too poor to be indebted. They are taking money out of your pockets. If you look at the profits of Wall Street, smaller and smaller percentages have anything to do with commerce or industry. I think it’s 9–11 percent that is industrial, and that’s way overstated because for companies like General Motors (GM) (at least in 2007–8) none of their profits came from the cars. It all came from lending people money for the cars, and that’s counted as industrial. In fact, it’s almost all from financial profits, basically indenting people.

I like to describe it like this: look at the fifties—when there was the expres- sion “What’s good for GM is good for America,” which was coined by the head of GM. That made sense at the time when you consider that GM was taxed at 60–70 percent and the executives were taxed at 90 percent. They were producing enor- mous profits, and most of their profits went to the government, which in turn used that money to build roads and highways and infrastructure for the cars, so it became this virtuous circle. And then all sorts of bribes and kickback money circulated in the contracting process, and everybody got rich. Well, not quite everybody, but the money got spread around. Fast-forward fifty years, and companies like that are pay- ing *no* taxes. They’re getting all their money from the financial sector, not from the cars, which are not profitable anymore. Instead, they charge people interest, and use that money to bribe politicians to change the laws that regulate them to be able to extract even more. And that’s basically how the American system works, and that’s why Wall Street and the government become almost indistinguishable. Government coercive force becomes a means through which profit is extracted, and that’s why suddenly you have this change of how people perceive one another in relation to this system.

First of all, fewer and fewer people see themselves as middle-class. Being middle-class means you see the basic bureaucratic apparatus around you as existing in your favor, which is hard to see when you have some illegal robo-signed mortgage guys taking away your home. Second of all, it means that suddenly we have this alli- ance between the working poor and indebted college students. You never would have seen that in the past. They would’ve been archenemies. All of this is directly attrib- utable to the changing nature of capital extraction. I always think of the proliferation of storefront banks as this beautiful symbol of that change. There are hundreds and hundreds of these Bank of America branches or Citibank branches opening up. In New York, they’re everywhere. Every block has one. And what do they sell? Nothing. They sell money. So they have these stores with no merchandise, but they have lots of guards with guns wandering around. It’s a perfect expression—these beautiful, shiny, nothing stores with armed security ev- erywhere. That’s what it is. Both nation- ally and internationally we’re ruled by a ruling class whose profits are based primar- ily on complex forms of rent extraction, backed by coercive force.

Which thinkers and which theoretical or political approaches have been helpful to you in making sense of finance, debt, and contemporary capitalism?

I like the Midnight Notes Collective. Often Marxists take me to task for ignoring the basic tenets of Marxism. I don't think I ignore them, but I actually take them rather for granted. I'm just emphasizing other parts of the equation. I find that the autonomist tradition—not the Negri/Deleuzian branch of the autonomist tradition—but more the kind of thing that comes from people like Harry Cleaver, Massimo De Angelis; Silvia Federici is a big hero of mine, George Caffentzis too. This tradition really has the best, or what I've found to be the most illuminating, approach to contemporary changes in capitalism, the two cycles of postwar capitalism. I've found their works useful. I've found the work of Michael Hudson, coming from a very different tradition, equally useful. And then modern money theory people ... While I don't agree with everything they say, I find them useful. People like L. Randall Wray, from Kansas City. This is a whole post-Keynesian tradition which is totally excluded from mainstream political discourse, but they are extremely interesting and doing important work. So I'm pulling on a lot of different strands.

In terms of the *Debt* book, probably my biggest influence was Keith Hart, one of the first people to talk about heterodox economics in anthropology. He talked about the distinction between bullion theories of money and credit theories of money and how money is this paradoxical thing which is both. I took that and said, "Yes. But over history the weight varies back and forth between the two forms." Hart has said to me that he hadn't realized that. So I'm in that theoretical tradition as well. So I'm synthesizing particularly the autonomous postworkerist school of Marxism with post-Keynesian and anthropological traditions.

Let's talk about the Debt book. It has obviously enjoyed tremendous success far beyond the disciplinary confines of anthropology. Where did it come from?

I was approached by the publisher, who said, "We think you could be someone who could write for the public. What are you working on?" When I said debt, they got very excited. This was back in 2007, before the crash, though not long before. People did have a sense that something was off, not in mainstream media, but anyone with any common sense.

I used to say, "I don't want to be famous, I just want to be famous among those people I actually respect, whose opinions I respect." In a way I had almost achieved that already, in the sense that activists and anthropologists knew who I was, as did other scholars who were working on things I thought were important. But with this project I thought, all right, it would be interesting to write for a broader audience and see what kind of impact you can have on arguments going on. In particular, I was really shocked by the degree to which, after 2008, for example, there was this moment that lasted maybe a month or so, where suddenly you could talk about anything. Everything was in doubt. Even the *Economist* ran headlines effectively asking: "capitalism: was it a good idea?" Obviously, they concluded *yes*; they're the *Economist*. But, nonetheless, it seemed like everything was up for grabs. You could think big thoughts again and wonder why it was all here. Why do we have an economy? And that lasted about four weeks, until everyone said, "Shut up and stop thinking about this. It will come back if we just close our eyes and ears and keep carrying on as if nothing is happening."

It seemed obvious that denial would not last forever. You can't put that conversation off. I mean they did everything they could to put it off. I fervently believe that the attack on the British educational system was a reaction. All of the lines they've been telling us to legitimate themselves have been completely destroyed. Now we know that markets don't run themselves and that these guys running them aren't incredible geniuses we couldn't possibly understand.

The idea that the market and the state are somehow separate entities is absurd. So once all moral justifications for the system have been blown away, all they have left is to destroy any locus from which alternatives might emerge. The only line they have left is, "Okay, the system isn't so great, but it's the only one that can possibly exist." That's basically their only remaining argument, hence the attack on the educational system, where they tried to rewrite the British school system along a financial/business model. From the perspective of common sense, on the one side, you have the financiers who do their job so badly they trash the world economy, and, on the other, you have the educational people who do their job perfectly well. You'd think a logical reaction to the crisis would be to make the financial system more like the educational system, but instead they do it the other way around, taking the failed model. Clearly, they felt they had to organize British education—a place where legitimate alternatives might come from—in such a way that it couldn't actually produce anything outside of our model. There's this kind of desperation.

At that moment it seemed like anyone who had a position from which they *could* open up the conversation that others were so desperately trying to stop had a certain responsibility to try and intervene. You know, I didn't think it would work. But it kind of did!

And where has the book gone?

The most incredible story is Germany. [The] German [translation] was the first translation to come out. I did a tour there, and I knew something weird was going on. It was crazy. Every day I gave one talk and sixteen interviews—radio, TV, major TV shows. I was on the Maybrit Illner show, a big TV news thing with politicians, on a panel. It was one of those hot talk-politics shows. It was fascinating to watch how the conversation unfolded. They were all in their usual mode where 2 percent of what people are actually thinking seems allowable to say on TV. It was an incredibly stale, boring debate with a Greek economist and a bunch of German politicians. And as soon as I walked in, it was almost as if they felt liberated: "Here's a crazy anarchist guy! Let's say my crazy thought." So I heard central bankers saying, "A jubilee might actually work!" The interviewer's first question to me was, "So, is capitalism on the way out?" I thought it was a joke, and then I later found out that she was a former East German TV personality. She had already seen one system go...

The book was actually a best seller for eleven weeks in Germany. We've sold over one hundred thousand copies by now in German. I was trying to figure out why, and the conclusion I finally came to was that a lot of the German intellectual class feel they've boxed themselves into a hole. They have this moral discourse about debt that's so effective that there's almost no way out of it, but at the same time they realize that it's about to destroy the EU [European Union], which is the last thing they want. The reason I think an anthropologist's book was perfect was because, while there is a tradition of anthropology in Germany, there's no tradition of popular anthropology, and they've preempted other approaches. If you're an economist, they'll say, "Oh, you're a Marxist" or "Oh, you're a post-Keynesian." You're a this, you're a that. But anthropology is so far out of the box...

***How do you situate Debt in your own intellectual trajectory, in relation to Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value, for example?*³**

In a larger sense I have constantly been working in this juncture between Marxian and Maussian traditions, though I find Maussian approaches much more radical than people realize.

³ David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

Marcel Mauss himself was a cooperativist and a political organizer. One way to think of it is [that] the Marxian critique tradition is all about seeing how everything integrates in the way of reproducing some totality, which is ultimately one of exploitation in some way. Now, this is very true, and if you forget it, you become very naive. But if that's all you do, you become so cynical that there doesn't seem to be much point in resisting at all. "Everything [is] encompassed in giant totalities" is pretty much what everybody says who doesn't want to be political but doesn't like capitalism. On the other hand, the Maussian tradition is the cooperativist tradition, where rather than seeing everything at its essence coming from its role in reproducing a totality, you see everything, all social possibilities, as simultaneously present. In fact, everything is always there. Mauss stressed that, that democracy, dictatorship, oligarchy, and everything in between is present in all societies at some level or another, that individualism and communism, rather than being in any way contradictory, are mutually reinforcing of each other and always there. So I think I took a lot from that. So I've been trying to reconcile those two traditions throughout my intellectual life.

Mindful that this interview is intended for a history journal, how does an anthropologist deal with five thousand years differently from a historian?

The only people who would write a book like that would be anthropologists, or maybe historical sociologists or economists. I find that historians obviously do the most detailed, empirically informed work, but they have this rigorous refusal to talk about anything for which they do not have specific, concrete evidence, to the extent that you have to treat things that you can't prove as if they didn't happen, which is insane. So people write things about the origin of democratic institutions based on where they find the first written evidence for people sitting around making decisions together. And we have to pretend that before that they didn't do that. It's absurd. On the other hand, economists go all the way the other way. It's all models. They don't really care what's there. They listen until they can have enough evidence to plug into a model where they can show some signs that people are doing what they think they really ought to have been doing, and then they create a model saying they did that. I think anthropology is a happy medium. We can fill in the blank spaces, but we can do so based on empirical observation of what people in analogous situations actually have tended to do. That's what I think we can add.

Where are we now? Help us to think through this moment.

The impression I get right now is that the vast majority of the ruling class have trained themselves to have no more than a two- to three-year horizon. They don't really care what happens. There's still about 10 percent with a certain statesman-like instinct to think about the long-term interest and preservation of the system. Those guys are scared as fuck. I know that because some of them are talking to me, and if they're talking to me, you know they're in trouble. I've had the IMF's chief research economist sending me papers which are saying things like, "Maybe we should get rid of fractional reserve banking entirely. What would that be like?" Really. I'll show you the paper. While they're telling everyone, "Nothing to see here, carry on, carry on," in fact those guys are panicking like crazy. You can see all these clear struggles going on where we don't really know what is at stake. Dominique Strauss Kahn—first he comes out saying stop austerity; spend, spend. Then he says maybe we should move away from the dollar as the world currency. And oops, sex scandal! He's gone. I'm not saying he didn't do it. Obviously, he did. But somebody didn't make the usual phone call.

So there are titanic struggles going on between people saying, "This is an emergency, we have to address this situation," and people who have a different long-term view or others who are just

blindly saying, “Absolutely not.” They’re just going to hold on to this thing until cataclysms embrace us. I’ve talked to people at the Federal Reserve. Not very important people, but nonetheless people who say they’re really worried. They released a white paper calling for mortgage cancellation. They did. Look it up. They know that there’s going to be a huge collapse if they don’t. They’d never call for it otherwise. That’s the Federal Reserve! So on top there are people who are really worried. Radical things might happen. We have a juncture where they’re listening.

What does the ruling class always do? They take the best ideas coming out of social movements and turn them into something horrible. And that’s going to happen. And for years, I must say this, those of us involved in the globalization movement were writing up our position papers. The Midnight Notes guys were involved in this. We weren’t making demands but making an analysis. I remember for the G8 in Sapporo, Japanese people asked us to write something up, so we wrote up an analysis in which we said, look, there’s only one way to save the system. They’ll have to announce an emergency and declare that green capitalism is the only thing to save the planet. Then they’ll divert all that money accumulating to sovereign wealth funds in the global South and places that are not supposed to have it back into the system. It was the only logical thing they could do from their point of view. Except they kept not doing it. They kept sitting around arguing with one another instead. And there we were saying, “Can’t they come up with their evil plan? We can’t fight their evil plan unless they have their evil plan. We can think of a better evil plan than that! Hire us. Give us \$1 million to come up with an evil plan for you, and then give us \$1 million to fight you.” It sounds like that’s what’s happening right now. They’re asking me for a plan, and they’ll make it evil. So we’re at that kind of moment. But which one they adopt, who knows?

It could be [that] we could move in a direction of democratization of finance. It could happen. I don’t know what that would look like or what it would mean. I do think one of the most important things we could be doing right now is to think about that. There are people like Charles Eisenstein who are coming up with all sorts of crazy ideas about what to do with money—ideas that might well work. The reaction, the hypothetical IMF plan to get rid of the private banking system and substitute a public banking system, of course gives even more power to states. Obviously, as an anarchist it’s not really the approach I would take. But as I was talking to the guy at the Fed, I was thinking, what would a democratic money-creation system look like? We haven’t spent a lot of time thinking about it. And I think it’s a priority. If we’re going to look back happy from 2020, rather than from a devastated planet half underwater, it’s got to be something like that.

This is a provocation, but it is this line of thinking that has often led me to say, if Occupy is going to have a demand (and I’m not saying we should), it would be something like this: start with jubilee. But the question is, what happens after the jubilee? And I say, four-hour days, because the debt machine is a work machine (see *Tidal*, issue 3).⁴ It’s the same thing. We have an economy which is based on the assumption of at least 5 percent growth. No one can pull that off anymore except maybe China, and who knows how long they’ll be able to do that. Therefore, we just keep promising ourselves to increase production at the same rate as we used to, even though we don’t do it, so the debt piles up, which is this constant promise of greater future exploitation and productivity. This is exactly what we don’t need right now if we want to preserve a habitable planet. So it seems to me that cancelling the debt also offers a unique possibility to cancel these

⁴ David Graeber, “After the Jubilee,” *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*, no.3, “Year II,” September 2012, tidal-mag.org/pdf/tidal3_year-2.pdf, 26–28.

idiotic promises we've made to one another, primarily that we're going to have to satisfy ever-increasing rent demands of the rich by producing even more for even less reward in the future. Decelerating the work machine would be probably the only way, at this point, to save the planet.

We could go to a basic income system. There are a million ways to do it. If you go to a four-hour day, for example, it's not like people don't do anything during the rest of the hours. They do whatever they want. They'll be producing things, but hopefully things that don't require so much coal.

Looking back on this moment, we know the debt will be cancelled. Among those taking a long-term perspective, everyone agrees on that. The question is, How will that be done, and what's going to happen after that? Are they going to admit they're cancelling the debt? Will there be some acknowledgment that we're living in a different monetary age? Money is something we promise one another. We need to think democratically about what kinds of promises we want to make to one another and how we can create a just social order on that basis. It could happen. Anything could happen. As an optimistic perspective, I would look back to today as a moment of break, where we finally realize that we've shifted into a different sort of regime than we'd been in before. That's one reason I point out in the book [*Debt*]*—*periods of bullion money, which is what we've been moving out of for the past thirty years, tend to be periods of large empires based on standing armies and some or another form of slavery, of which wage slavery is just one form. When you move back to virtual credit money you need to set up institutions that protect debtors.

I personally don't see how capitalism could really, ultimately, be preserved in any meaningful sense of the term within that virtual money environment. In fact, the very meaning of money itself will shift into something radically different. The potential for that happening is there. And something like that will happen eventually if history rings true. But, of course, we're talking about five hundred-year cycles, so thirty years at the beginning of a new cycle is nothing. The first thirty years of the Middle Ages were pretty rough too. The cycles are getting shorter, but they're not that much shorter. The Fed and the IMF have all the information. They know that what they're doing right now is not going to work over the long term. And there are people on the top who realize they have to start listening to other perspectives. Again, they boxed themselves into a hole much like the German situation, where they've been so effective with the ideology, in convincing everybody that nothing else is conceivable, that the moment the thing starts to collapse everyone is sitting there with their mouths gaping open, saying, "But wait, this was supposed to be there forever. Now what do we do?" Some of them are smart enough to start looking around. And you know radical change is coming when they call an anthropologist.

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Hannah Chadeayne Appel
Finance Is Just Another Word for Other People's Debts
An Interview with David Graeber
2014

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