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# Freedom and Anarchy

An Interview with David Graeber

Peterson Roberto da Silva and David Graeber

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David Rolfe Graeber (1961–2020), professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, passed away of unknown causes on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, in Venice, Italy.

Graeber was born in New York, son of working class parents active in unions and beyond – his father, for instance, had fought in the Spanish Civil War, passing on to his son the idea that another world was actually possible. This seems to have been important in forming an academic with an acute wit – he was Marshall Sahlins’s most creative student, according to Sahlins himself, who was his supervisor in Chicago. Rutger Bregman called Graeber “one of the greatest thinkers of our time and a phenomenal writer.”

That people from Rojava to Latin America are praising the anarchist activist is evidence of the way he made friends wherever he went, and how he loved to work alongside others. One of his most important ideas regarded the relevance of dialogue, in both day-to-day living and scholarship. Graeber has left a great mark on social theory, but in particular developed ideas that could be used as tools by contestatory movements – both the ethnographies that allowed

for more informed self-reflection and the ideas that allowed for new ways to analyse the world one fights in.

Despite all that, he didn't like being called the "anarchist anthropologist" ("you wouldn't call someone a social-democrat philosopher, would you?" he used to say). Few things annoyed him more than people who wouldn't engage with his ideas, dealing instead with the straw men they produced out of his political orientation. People who do interact with his ideas in good faith, however, find an original thought, and, what's more, transmitted with simplicity and a sense of humour. Graeber's texts, from his public interventions to the thicker titles, are fountains of ideas that challenge us to see things from other angles. From those that had a bigger impact, we can cite *Debt*, *The Utopia of Rules* and *Bullshit Jobs*.

His passing painfully breaks the human connections he had inspired and frustrates the promise of future works – the loss is gigantic in several senses. But what we have gained from his life is incalculable, and will still reverberate for a long time everywhere there is resistance and hope for a better future.

This interview with David Graeber, by Peterson Roberto da Silva, took place in London, at David's office, on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

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**Peterson Roberto da Silva:** Thank you so much for this interview, professor. Since my research is on the idea of freedom among anarchists, it was very fortunate for me that in this new book [*Anarchy – in a Manner of Speaking: Conversations with Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Nika Dubrovsky, and Assia Turki-Zauberman*] you deal with this concept more directly than you had before. I wanted to begin by asking about the making of the book, because although it's a dialogue, and "dialogue" itself is discussed, we're not really given details about how this conversation took place.

**David Graeber:** I ran into Mehdi [Belhaj Kacem] through a student, Christophe Petit. We'd been corresponding and he was very

enthusiastic about me meeting a philosopher friend of his, who he said was an anarchist as well. I was in Paris when I met this former student of mine, Assia [Turquier-Zauberman]. Assia was someone I thought very highly of, and when I heard about meeting Mehdi the next day, I suggested that Assia should come along – and she did. We all sat down at a café and discussed various ideas and we talked about movies, and all those kinds of things you talk about when you are around French philosophers ... I don't remember all the topics, but a mockery of [Quentin] Tarantino was involved.

We didn't discuss the idea of writing a book, we were just sort of getting a sense of each other. But Assia must have made a very good impression on Mehdi because she got an email the next day saying, "Well, you are obviously one of those ambitious enterprising young women ... How would you like writing a book?" And she was like, "... OK?" It wasn't clear at first if it was going to be for a series on anarchism, if I was going to be interviewed, whether Mehdi was going to be involved ... But then we realised, gradually, it was in fact a dialogue.

Mehdi was slightly depressed during that time, but he bounced out of it by taking on three new book projects. He's just in the process of finishing this 1200-page opus on the concept of pleonexia ... His work is completely unknown in the anglophone world. But I read up in the meantime and I was impressed. Even though the direction of some of his ideas pushes in very different directions than I was used to – the very concept of pleonexia was challenging in certain ways – I thought it was a very fruitful dialogue.

We all patched this book together. We spoke in English, and Assia – who found very nice apartments in Paris where we could feel appropriately relaxed, provided recording devices – heroically transcribed two days of conversation. Then we started rearranging it, smoothing out the prose ... Some of us would add things and give it to the others to see if they wanted to respond, and gradually we made it into something like a coherent whole. I think the last edit was Assia's.

Nika Dubrovsky, who's my partner, was there for the whole time. She was kind of shy, but every now and then she would make extremely acute interventions. And I was really happy that towards the end of the whole thing she really got into it and suddenly these women were talking about the idea of dialogue, Jewish theology and education, and I was like ... "Cool!" I wanted it to be a dialogue in which new things emerged that I wouldn't have thought of, and it actually worked!

**Peterson:** In this book, you defend a notion of freedom that revolves around the tension between play, as the exercise of power for its own sake, and games, or the rules that this very same play is constantly generating. So being free can consist of the capacity to influence the social structures by being able to not participate in them (to leave, or to disobey orders), but crucially the capacity to reframe our social structures, to reshape society, so to speak, otherwise we get stuck thinking that things ought to be what they have been and can't ever change. Is that a good description of what you were trying to convey?

**David:** Yes, that's a part of it. You've probably synthesised the pieces more than I would have. That's one of the things that dialogue does, people confront you with what you think.

**Peterson:** They hold a mirror to you ...

**David:** Exactly, I mean ... Was it Oscar Wilde, with that line? "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?"

**Peterson:** You also state that organisation is not inherently freedom-lessening or dominating. But at the same time, anarchists have frequently avoided "outlining" a desirable society with too much specificity. Are there social and material structures, however, that would be definitely more desirable than similar progressive alternatives, or should anarchists limit themselves to criticising those which are definitely undesirable, such as borders and prisons?

**David:** The line I always use is that I'm not interested in coming up with an economic model for how exactly we would distribute goods and services in a free society, but I am interested in coming

**David:** Exactly. And that's what happened. The civil rights movement was really successful and then: Vietnam. We'll invade some country in southeast Asia. Anti-nuclear movement, suddenly you've got Nicaragua ... Also Afghanistan.

**Peterson:** But then again, you're in the heart of the empire, right? I can't see Brazil doing that, for instance – except if it's an internal war, like you wrote on "[The divine kingship of the] Shilluk" article: it doesn't matter if it's internal or external, the state is constant war.

**David:** That's true, they're both the same ... The state would just crack down on human rights.

They shut down the nuclear power plant program, in terms of the increase that was planned.

Similarly with the global justice movement. When we blockaded the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the news weren't even going to mention structural adjustment. We had media people training everybody, "If you see somebody with a camera, say 'Structural adjustment!' repeat that phrase over and over again, we're going to ram this one home." And sure enough, the media guys were like, "We know what you're doing, fuck you." No mention of structural adjustment at all! "They don't even seem to know what they're protesting ..."

However, after a year or two, all those op-eds that we sent into the press that they refused to print, all the points we made, suddenly started appearing in their in-house editorial writers; they said, "OK, you're right, never mind structural adjustment, there is no more structural adjustment" – so it worked! But the short-term goals were like, "No, forget it, we're not going to let you shut down the meetings – whatever it is you say you're going to do, we're not going to let you." The long-term goals, you know... Revolutionise society, make it directly democratic and communist, well, no, we didn't do that. But the middle-term stuff, we expected it was take ten years to destroy the Washington Consensus, but it took a year and a half! Maybe two.

But the usual reaction, and this is what was really interesting with all these movements, is each time the same thing happens. The government panics at the danger of some sort of vast democratic mobilisation ... They give in to your middle-term demands very quickly ... And then they start a war. Not against you, but against – it doesn't matter who it is, just somebody. Then the movement has to turn into an antiwar movement, and for some reason antiwar movements are almost invariably top-down in their organisation. It's really hard to do a bottom-up directly democratic antiwar movement.

**Peterson:** It's almost like a war against a war.

up with something of the process for how we could actually make that decision collectively.

It's not so much a matter of how much detail, but where should we put the detail. So I've been concentrating on thinking of the processes of decision-making because that kind of has to come first. We could come up with different utopias. All the criticisms of utopianism are entirely premised on there just being one ... Multiple utopias are not a problem. But how to integrate these multiple utopias is another matter.

But that's related to the question of deliberation. Deliberation is the art of how to come up with compromises between absolute or at least incommensurable perspectives – that's what the essence of politics ultimately is. So that's why I think focusing on the political process of deliberation, for one's prefigurative politics, is the priority.

**Peterson:** But even if you do have that, don't you think it's a little complicated to not put forward a kind of plan that other people see and understand what anarchism would look like?

**David:** Yeah, you want to convince people that it's not a pipe dream.

I mean, I'm an anthropologist, so for me that is just not much of an issue ... And I have had the experience myself, in terms of decision-making, of for the first time going to a really big meeting and seeing people making a collective decision without a leadership structure through a process of participatory consensus-finding. The real shock is that you hadn't realised that you'd been taught all your life this is impossible. You just *assumed* it was impossible. It's not impossible, it's not even all that hard! So it leads almost automatically to two questions: how did they manage to convince us all this was impossible, when it was not? But the other thing is: what other impossible things are actually possible?

Obviously not all impossible things are possible, but some of them definitely are. So all you really need to do is demonstrate that one or two things that everybody assumes are impossible are

not impossible. It's amazing how commonsensical it is to people to say "Oh, if there were no police, everyone would start tearing each other apart." Well, that could be empirically tested! There are places – I lived in one! – where the police just vanished and nobody started killing each other. There was a little more theft, but way less violence!

**Peterson:** In the preface to *Revolution in Rojava* you wrote about the security forces they had there, didn't you? I think Paul Simons called it an "anarchist police."

**David:** Yeah, but you know, one of the "fantasies" they have in Rojava in terms of their long-term vision is to give everyone in the country police training, and then get rid of the police.

**Peterson:** Interesting! Talking about equality, in a way, in *Direct Action* equality seemed crucial to avoid a dynamics in radical organising in which some people with the resources to be "defiant" for longer were also seen as privileged by those who were not only alienated but directly oppressed.

**David:** Yeah, even when there isn't a whole lot of revolutionary activity going on, when very few sectors of the population subscribe to radical politics, it often seems like artists are the ones who do. I always wondered why artists, of all people ... That is not so much true anymore, but even so, artists usually claim to be left-wing even if they don't claim to be revolutionaries anymore. But why is that? I realised that they tended to be poor, except for a very few super rich, and they had the experience of non-alienated production.

It occurred to me that there's a similarity in the social composition both of certain bohemian artistic circles and of revolutionary groups. If you look at history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the pattern reproduces itself over and over again. Pierre Bourdieu did a study of the social backgrounds of who attended the first bohemian artistic shows. The stereotype we have is that they are all a bunch of rich kids who are living in pretend poverty until their dad gives them a company. That's true in some cases, but maybe about

When you strip down reality to 3% of what's going on there, you can see patterns that would not have been visible otherwise, that you would never have seen, and there is a partial truth that's revealed. There's nothing wrong with that, that's good, that's how knowledge of human beings advances. *However* ... The dangerous thing is when that 3% view of humanity acquires weapons! When someone says, "History shows the dialectic can only lead in one direction ... The material infrastructure determines the ideological superstructure ... Therefore do what you're told or I'll shoot you."

**Peterson:** At first I thought it had to do with something else you wrote on the book, the idea of the "delayed effects" of revolutionary events. For the last question, then, I would like to ask about that. How to conceive of activism today if we're only going to see the consequences of what we do much, much later, and in ways we can't imagine?

**David:** In "The Shock of Victory" I argued that what happened to the global justice movement is that we won too fast. None of us thought we were going to win that fast. I differentiated between short-term, middle-term and long-term goals, and I compared a series of social movements that relied on a certain degree of prefigurative politics, mass mobilisation, direct democracy, non-violent direct action – so there's the civil rights movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the global justice movement ... And what I said was that there was a surprisingly similar path. You have short-term goals, which are almost never achieved. You have long-term goals, which you won't know for generations if you achieved ... And you have middle-term goals that you achieve so fast you're completely confused.

The nuclear power plants were a great example ... Seabrook, Diablo Canyon – all the ones they were specifically protesting, they were like, "No, fuck you, I don't care if it's completely insane to build a power plant directly on a fault line, we're going to do it anyway just because you're protesting." However, they didn't build any other nuclear power plants for the next 30 years. So it worked!

about *at all*, I mean, most models of what degrowth would actually be show you'd have more free time, therefore you'd have more freedom. But that's not the way it's imagined. So I was trying to reframe it.

That's what I try to do a lot. I try to find things we already know, but don't quite realise that we knew? That's why I talk the way I do about communism. We do communism all the time. As I pointed out, one of the things we learned from Occupy was that most Americans are perfectly competent at communism. They know how to do that; they're not very good at democracy!

**Peterson:** Talking about democracy, in the book you discuss "ugly mirrors," processes meant to convince us we're horrible through our own engagement with them, and connect them with the idea that some theories (such as the pleonexic person, that St. Augustine already talked about) are not so much a problem but do become so later, when they are "weaponised." I wonder what exactly you meant by that.

**David:** All social theory is a massive simplification of reality. Anybody presents a theory, if you just say, "Yeah, well, life is way more complicated than that," you know you'll always be right. But if that's all you have to say you'll never say anything particularly interesting, you'll just be right and you'll be boring! So if you want to say anything interesting, anything new, you have to massively simplify reality, which means being to some degree, wrong, and to become a great theorist is, to some degree, to have the courage to just persist in obviously wrong insights to their logical conclusion! Claude Lévi-Strauss would say things that were totally absurd half the time but he was a great theorist, he said things that no one else would have thought of, he would just push through anyway, despite all common sense. That's fine, there's nothing wrong with that, in a way that's a courage that most people will not have – to be wrong in a way that can tell you something new about the world ...

a third come from well-off backgrounds. The single most common occupation for the parents of these guys was "peasant."

Bourdieu realised that 1848 saw the first law of universal, compulsory education. That was a practical outcome of the revolutions of '48. So you have the first generation in France, that came out in the 1860s, where everybody had a chance to go to school. If you are a smart child of a peasant and very accomplished you could even go to university. But then you discovered that getting a bourgeois education doesn't actually mean you get to be part of the bourgeoisie! And you're angry, and you have the whole history of radical thought at your fingertips, and so those are the guys who ended up both the revolutionaries and the crazy artists. But they kind of joined forces with the downwardly mobile, descendants of the professional classes or sometimes the bourgeoisie who rejected their parents' values. So if you look at the history of revolutions: Mao Tsé-Tung, peasant son, becomes a school librarian; Che Guevara, his parents were doctors; Fidel Castro, parents were shopkeepers who managed to help their kid to get a law degree ...

**Peterson:** I was going to talk about your experience of organising in New York, about which you wrote (in *Direct Action*) that so many people from more oppressed backgrounds saw these sort of people as privileged.

**David:** Mainly, in the United States, it's all about race. There were endless crises in the Direct Action Network about how white we were. But on the other hand ... Activists of colour tended to do at least some of the organising in groups specifically about issues for activists of colour (black-based groups or latino-based groups or whatever it would have been), so it would be unfair for them to do double shifts ... Instead what we got was this terrible problem for us, because it became a vicious circle, we became a group seen as too white and people didn't feel comfortable with that ...

I feel the endless agonising and reflection on it was if anything part of the problem. I still have this very keen memory when I first came to England of going to this social centre where Peter Gelder-

loos was giving a talk, and afterwards there was a general discussion, and ... It was OK until finally somebody said, "Look, there's something we're not talking about here ... We're all from middle class backgrounds, we lived in environments where we were protected from violence, even as children ... We have this privilege that we internalised and our entire thought about violence and nonviolence is based on our privileged backgrounds." And suddenly everybody only started talking about their privilege. Some people were making jokes about it, some were agonising over it, and some reflecting seriously about it ... But it was all about how they felt about their privilege.

And I was sitting at the back thinking, "Man, now I understand what it's like to be, like, the one black guy in a white radical group." I'm actually *not* from a middle class background, I'm from a working class background, I saw plenty of violence as a child ... I can't think of any topic I find *less* interesting than how you feel about your privilege! Don't tell me about it, I *don't* want to know.

**Peterson:** You theorised that inequality was the reason why these accusations would always come up. But in this new book, it feels like equality falls to the background in favour of freedom. You say that discussing equality is almost like missing the point.

**David:** Inequality is a way of dressing up questions about freedom, power, control, and domination in a way that makes it seem like it's a natural part of life that can be tinkered with. Because if I talk about equality and inequality I can say, "Oh my God, twenty people own as much property as half the world's population! The levels of inequality are through the roof, we must do something about this!" But what we're *not* going to do is make everybody exactly the same. Inequality is by definition something which is going to be modified, but not eliminated. Because what would total equality even be like, and would anybody actually like to live in that world? Probably not. We don't want somebody saying, "I'm sorry the value of the books in your office is such that you can't

**Peterson:** But also, "I care that my company gets more oil out of the ground than others," so ... How would that help with climate change?

**David:** Right, obviously, anything you do it's because you care that you're doing it ... Though some jobs are such bullshit you can't come up with anything ... Nonetheless, it already puts a razor to it, and makes you think seriously about what you do.

And in a way, all it is doing is validating what people already think. And this is what I would want to emphasise here. The reason I came up with this in part is because I went through what hundreds of people said about their jobs, and when people said, "My job is bullshit," what they usually said was "It doesn't help anybody." "I can't think of anybody whose life is better off because of what I do every day." "I can't think of any way this contributes to anybody being happier, safer, healthier, anything good." So you don't really need to come up with a theory yourself, you need to figure out what folk theories are already being applied here.

I imagine that to do that you'd have to look at two factors: the onerousness or enjoyability of the job, which is kind of what we're already doing now, but also measure that against the benefits to others. Because at the moment the benefits to others is almost a negative. If the benefits to others are great enough that they make the work less onerous, because you're happier doing it – the conclusion now is "pay them less." We need to break that! We need to include onerousness, you know, people should be paid more for cleaning sewers than they should for playing the guitar. But there's more than that.

I chose care and freedom because they are two things which could be augmented without necessarily doing ecological harm. We've got an economy based on consumption and growth, and I think the language of degrowth ... people don't find it particularly inspiring. The first thing you think of when you hear about degrowth is, "I'll have less stuff." "There will be less variety of food ... Maybe there will be less food!" Which is of course not what it's



*polis* that Arendt saw as a model, but for him we should make the machines our slaves.

What's more, she got to the wrong conclusions but you don't have to discard everything she said. I mean, the idea of pardon is fascinating because it's about exceptions – it goes back to the Schmittian idea of the state of exception but in a nice way. The fascist version of the state of exception is that you stay in the state of exception so that you can kill people (basically). Whereas in traditional constitutions, the only thing that is a personal power is pardon. If you look at it, it's always "the people" who condemn someone to death. It's the people or the sovereign that has the power that kings used to have, the power to kill. But it's individual officeholders who can make an exception to that and say, "OK, don't kill him."

**Peterson:** Kacem talks a little about how our "pleonexia," the endless multiplication of desires, is driving us to extinction through climate change. You said that you wanted an economic theory that replaced "production" with "care" and "consumption" with "freedom." Since that was a little vague, I wonder if you would indulge me in a little improvisational sci-fi in terms of trying to convey in what ways the economy would change if it began, say, tomorrow, to take that sort of framing seriously so that we could organise around that.

**David:** That's an interesting question, and a lot of people have to work on that. I'd have to speculate.

**Peterson:** Please do!

**David:** The first point is that all meaningful labour is a form of care, and any form of labour that can't be conceived as a form of care we shouldn't be doing at all. If I'm building a car, I care that people can get around. There is a way to construct that as care. I suppose you could, if you really wanted to, take any bullshit job and say, you know, "I care that my client has a slightly better public profile ..." "I care that the powerpoint presentations at the meeting have really nice graphics ..."

have a car." You would need a vast bureaucracy and total control. We wouldn't want that. Nobody would.

**Peterson:** But isn't that only the case for wealth, or money? Isn't equality still worth talking about in terms of power, for instance?

**David:** Sure. I don't think that we should totally eliminate any idea that anybody should be equal on anything. No. What I'm saying is that making equality the centrepiece of the argument is essentially a liberal reformist language. You know, we should have equal rights ...

When we talked about the 1% in Occupy [Wall Street], the 1% and the 99%, what we had in mind wasn't that 1% of the people *owned* more than anybody else, it was a matter of class *power*. It was that 1% of the population was both the people who a) have gained all of the profits from economic growth since 2008, but also b) gave all the campaign contributions. So basically that's the portion of the population who could turn wealth into power and then power back into wealth. And it was *that* which we were trying to get at. Class power, not simply the fact that they got more. Class power is something that you can actually eliminate, whereas inequality you can't.

**Peterson:** There's also the idea that relations of domination are often perverted or inverted relations of care. With something like a police force we can clearly see a seed of something undesirable, but if we really do desire a place where people take better care of each other, how do we safeguard against the slippage of care into domination?

**David:** Actually a lot of care roles are being turned over to the police sector ... I still have this very keen memory from when I was a graduate student: these two big, beefy Chicago cops mediating a dispute between roommates, as one of them was trying to kick the other out. And one of the cops was saying, "Well Deirdre, I don't think you're listening to Sharon's point of view!" And I was like, "Good God, what has our society come to!" A cop going, "I mean

yes, I could bounce you out of here, but I think maybe you could reconcile!” They have to be trained to mediate disputes because we don’t have anybody else to do it – because they cut the budget of social services! There are people learning how to read in prisons because they’re not taught well in schools.

I wanted to define care as action which is oriented to maintaining or increasing another person’s freedom, specifically, because if you don’t define it that way, then why isn’t the prison giving you care? They give you clothes, they feed you ... But there’s a slippage.

There was an interesting guy named Franz Steiner. Everyone’s forgotten him. Jewish intellectual during the war, fled Germany, ended up a refugee for a long time ... He wrote this 900-page tome on the origins of slavery, and ... lost it on a train! He left it in a suitcase, went to the bathroom, came back, it was gone ... He did however write a shorter version later. But he’s had bad, bad luck. Two years later he proposed to the novelist Iris Murdoch. She said yes, and then the next day he died of a heart attack ...

Anyway, one of the things he discovered, being a very eminent refugee, was that there was this fascinating process by which hospitality turns into domination. There’s a reason why the words hospitality and hostage come from the same root. So you’d show up at a place and people would go, “Oh my God, professor Steiner, we are so honoured to have you!” You know, they’d serve the best food, so forth and so on ... But if you stay for more than a week, suddenly they’re making you do yard work! And before long you go from the highest ranking person to the lowest.

That kind of slippage happens a lot. One of the things we learned about Mesopotamia is that the first factory systems were actually charitable organisations. Mesopotamian temples were mass producing woollens to export in exchange for other stuff. They had this whole trade network set up, institutionalised trade. The temples were basically factories. But the people they employed in the factories were essentially people that had no place else to go. People with disabilities, orphans, old widows, they would come

I’ll surely give it!” Because inevitably there are women organising against that.

There is often an assumption that if you describe something in certain terms you are implicitly presenting it assuming the legitimacy of intervention. But I do think that as an activist, and I spent my time there with Palestinian activists, I am keenly aware that there are two levels to any struggle. There are the sort of “rules of engagement” on the ground, the sort of tactical stuff – what you can do from each side, which can vary totally, depending on the context – but then there is also the larger political struggle which determines what those rules of engagement are. That’s the sort of moral, ideological, political and media struggle which necessarily involves a larger audience of various kinds. If you neglect that, you end up with rules of engagement where people can just shoot your children – which is what you got there! So if you want to be an effective activist, you have to be able to figure out a way to change the larger imagery which surrounds the struggle in such a way that makes it harder for one side to just arbitrarily shoot anybody that they want.

**Peterson:** I see what you mean. Also, in the book we’re reminded that people who are starving are the least likely to rebel. Freedom seems more about the way we understand other people to relate morally to us, to be “in the same social game,” so to speak. But this kind of echoes Hannah Arendt’s idea of freedom. So much more does the way she talks about freedom as basically the power to promise and the power to forgive. But she concluded that worthwhile revolutions shouldn’t be about redistributing wealth, only about “the political.” With this concept of freedom, don’t anarchists get closer to Arendt’s conclusion? Shouldn’t anarchists be concerned that they do?

**David:** Yeah, but Marx also said that people have to be liberated from material needs in order to be free. Oscar Wilde also said humans will always need slaves to be free, like in the ancient Greek

of Palestine – not as being the same but as possibly being explained by a similar logic.

**David:** Yeah, I wrote that piece about bullying and then I went to the West Bank shortly thereafter. And I was just shocked by how much it was exactly that logic of bullying applied.

**Peterson:** Right. But since that logic hinges so much on the figure of the audience, isn't there a risk here of downplaying actual violence or maybe underplaying its centrality – in that specific example, of framing the solution to the Palestinian conflict in terms of the moral intervention of state actors?

**David:** I don't know about state actors ... I understand where you're going with this and I agree that there is a subtle way that you describe things morally in such a way that intervention is implied.

I always use the example of FGM [female genital mutilation] – that being the popular euphemism for clitoridectomy, or female circumcision. There are a lot of debates about, "Who are we to criticise?" "Can we say this is a form of violence against women when the women themselves think is important?" in this last case comparing it to Jewish circumcision. And you find people ardently saying, "No, this is a cultural practice, there's nothing wrong with it, it's not an oppression of women," even when, you know, men in places where it is a common practice will say, "Oh, you can't allow women to feel sexual pleasure because then they will cheat on us!" I mean, even when it pretty obviously *is* an oppression of women.

In those debates, Westerners seem to argue vigorously that you shouldn't treat this as an outrage against women, because they think that if this were an outrage against women, we would have to intervene. Therefore they justify all sorts of things because of this underlying imperialist assumption that if someone is doing something bad to someone else in Botswana in a systematic way, it's my business to go in there and stop them ... So you can't just say, "Yeah, that's really obnoxious," or "I sure hope people in that part of the world organise successfully against that, if they want my help

into the temple, and they would be fed ... So it was a charitable thing. But then, when there were wars, and they had prisoners of war and they had to do something with them before they were ransomed – you can see where this is going! – they'd be put there too, and sometimes they weren't ransomed and they turned into permanent slaves. And gradually, what had been sort of a caring, charitable institution, turned into the first sort of factory slave system. If you know anything about orphanages, that's not going to surprise you that much.

Things like that happened a lot. Steiner had these very interesting examples of places in Amazonia, where the chief had this gigantic house, and he had a household like anybody else except all the strays came to him. Anybody, again, who had no place else to go, would go to the chief's house. And these are Clastrean chiefs, they don't have any power of command, in fact they have to work harder than anybody else and they can't tell anybody what to do, but they have these flunkies around ... Most of them are in need of help in some way, but some of them will also be runaways from other societies who got in trouble – maybe they killed somebody, and they're hiding from a feud ... So these kinds of ruffians take shelter there too and suddenly the chief's like, "Wait a minute ... I've got a goon squad! If somebody really gets on my nerves then there are these guys, maybe I can say I didn't know what they did ..."

**Peterson:** So at some point these relations were caring because they were enhancing the freedom of these people, and then they weren't.

**David:** Exactly. Caring relations can turn around. Even slavery is very strange that way, because if you look at, again, Amazonian societies, most indigenous American societies prided themselves as the real human beings, and the people around them were savages of one sort or another. I mean, it's a notorious thing in anthropology, most of the words we use for tribal names are insults from other tribes ...

But they also then prided themselves in the ability to take any one of those “eaters of raw fish” or “savage killers” or whatever they called their neighbours, take one of their kids and turn them into a proper human being. So they have the conception of the universal humanity *in potentia*, someone that *could* be turned into a proper human being. So they would often have wars and take captives and socialise them ... Even with adults. Fred dies, they send a war party to kidnap you and say, “OK, you’re Fred now.” There are your wife and kids ... Sometimes you’d run away and they’d kill you, but if you didn’t run away, then great, you’re Fred!

So when they turned someone into a normal social adult, they would be applying the socialising labour to turn the captive into a person, but sometimes you’ll find that shift where they start using the captives to do the domestic labour to turn other people into full social adults. And there’s a subtle point where it shifts and people who only become half-socialised are there to socialise you. That kind of caring labour flips around ... It seems like there is a mutable point where you can turn caring relations into domination without quite noticing if it turns out to be one or the other.

**Peterson:** It’s just a little hard to see that most of what we see as domination today traces back to that – unless we are talking about the origins of the state, so to speak, with that squad of goons ...

**David:** Yeah, I’m talking about a very very distant time. I’m not saying that the modern state emerges from the welfare state or anything like that.

But if you look at early kings, they’re always going on about taking care of the widows and orphans and the needy. Invariably. Ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient China ...

**Peterson:** This seems also related to desire, right? Turquier-Zauberman mentioned the idea of a “tantric theory of desire,” which you seemed to approve of, but we don’t get much specificity: what makes desire so tricky to theorise?

**David:** Well, it’s because we have two opposite conceptions of what desire is. And there’s a sense that they should somehow be integratable ... But we’re not quite sure how!

The standard theories of desire are about absence. You’re hungry, you feel the lack of food, you want some food. Frustrated desire: there’s something you want. So you feel yourself lacking and every story is based on, “I am inadequate because I have a problem, I have a lack, I need to fill that lack,” the narrative is based on how I go off to do something about it ...

So one theory of desire is imagining something that isn’t there, and trying to fulfill that sense of absence. But there is also a sense of desire that flows through at least people like Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze ... Which is desire that holds us together as an entity to begin with. The ultimate form of desire is the desire to continue to exist. Self-preservation – I think Nietzsche somewhere talks about “life that desires itself.” And this is what I was talking about when I was talking about the play principle – why do birds want to fly in formations and do goofy manoeuvres? What are their motivations? Well, why do birds wish to continue to exist in the first place? I mean, they do, right? All life desires to preserve itself. For what purpose is that? Only for the sake of existing ... Well, existing as something that can fly – of course you’re going to want to fly!

**Peterson:** Talking about two theories in conflict, there seems to be a tension about violence in your work. Just as you frequently criticise a dismissal of actual violence within theories of structural violence, the dynamics of bullying that you take up in this book (which were first laid out in an article for *The Baffler*) hinges a lot on the figure of the audience. In that article, you wrote that bullying is a moral drama in which the victim’s reaction to an act of violence is used as retrospective justification for the original act of aggression. The bully seeks approval from the audience and, contrary to expectations, the bully tends to stop if confronted. This allows for a general framework that you use to compare, for instance, the global justice movement in the US with the Israeli occupation