Prefiguration of a Common Dream

An Interview with David Graeber

Qalandar Bux Memon and Zaki Abbas

Qalandar Bux Memon: Can you explain why you support horizontal organisation, collective assemblies and a dialogical method for organising for social change as opposed to the vertical left party?

David Gaeber: I like to make the distinction between forms of organization that could exist outside structures of coercion – that is, in the absence of any ability to call up men armed with weapons to threaten anyone who refuses to go along with a decision – and those which could not. It seems to me it's the responsibility of those who are trying to create a free society to do so through forms of organization that *could* exist in a society where people are not systematically threatened in this fashion – that is, in a truly free society – even though we do not live in such a society today.

QBM: Occupy Wall Street triggered similar Occupy Movements in various locations. For example, there was an attempt at Occupy Lahore. However, my experience with it was that Marxist with vertical organisational habits took over and collective accountability and decision making or a peoples assembly actually making decisions was curtailed. Speeches were made by leading leftists and that was about it. Soon spirits of the younger organisers waned and the thing was called off with the Marxist vertical organisers having preserved their power. How do you assess the challenge in terms of organising horizontally and with collective accountability given the deep roots of vertical organisation in the left? Should those wishing to organise horizontally ally themselves with vertical structures or should they create their own spaces?

DG: It's important to create one's own spaces, and to organize them collectively and democratically. If you combine assemblies to practical questions – what are we going to do about trash removal? How shall we interact with the cops, should we have mediators or not? – then speech-making immediately seems foolish and beside the point. It also tends to empower women, who are actually much better at this sort of practical stuff. One reason the "people's microphone" worked well, actually, is that it forces people to be concise and not to speechify, because if you have to wait to hear everyone repeat every word you say, you have an incentive to keep to the point! Also if you drag on, people can just stop repeating you. (Then if necessary you can put an "educational" section at the end for those who like to speechify or listen to other people to do

it.) I think that introducing new forms and new practices is the best way to get people past old habits.

QBM: Can you explain what you mean by 'prefiguration'?

DG: Prefiguration is the idea that one is "building a new society in the shell of the old", as the Wobblies used to put it. Rather than doing whatever it takes to overthrow the current regime, figuring something new will somehow just spontaneously emerge afterwards, you try to make the form of your resistance a model for what the society you are trying to create might actually be like. This also means you can't put off, say, question of women's rights, till "after the revolution," you have to address those things right now. Obviously, what you come up with will never be an exact model of a future free society – but at the very least it's a social order that *could* exist outside coercive or oppressive structures, it means that people can have some immediate experience of freedom in the here-and-now.

QBM: You suggest that academics need to get in touch with activists to overcome the impasse in which much academic analysis lies. However, are they not two seperate projects? I mean, while the task to change the world is there. The analysis of the world and the possibility of change is a separate task? One can do one without the other?

I've never suggested all academics have to work with or become activists, have no idea why anyone would think that, and have often remarked that I don't even think it would be a good idea. I am in fact very much attached to what one might call the utopian, or if you like prefigurative, notion of scholarship – studying things just because they are interesting as ends in themselves. However I think those scholars who consider themselves radicals and especially who try to base all or part of their intellectual prestige on their radical credentials ought to pay some attention to what those actually trying to change the system consider interesting and important.

Zaki Abbas: You have mentioned that the role of an ideologue or theoretician is not important because it makes more division and produces new 'ism' thus weakening the movement on a whole and you prefer the 'consensus' over one person authority. In this regard how would you access the role of Abdullah Ocalan as a vanguardist of the Kurdish movement in areas such as Rojava?

DG: Well, what I said was that I am suspicious of movements that derive from one person's ideas.

Ocalan is a curious figure. On the one hand, seeing his picture everywhere in Rojava was certainly unsettling for someone like myself, who is instinctually suspicious of any cult of personality. On the other hand, he's also in prison, and not precisely in a position to dictate anything to anyone. It's clear that the adulation is in part directly related to that: he's seen almost as a living martyr. Intellectually, yes, his ideas are very much seen in the old-fashioned sense as guiding principles, but they're also intentionally open-ended in ways that classical Marxist positions aren't, they're designed to be frameworks that would be hard to turn into doctrine, but which rather are meant to encourage certain forms of creative debate. Will it really work that way over time? I don't know. I guess it remains to be seen.

ZA: Can you explain what you mean by the concepts 'old anarchism' and 'new anarchism'?

DG: Actually that was the editors of New Left Review who made up the phrase 'new anarchists' I never used it myself. I've never talked about "the old anarchism" or "the new anarchism" at all. I do talk about "small-a" anarchism, as in, the non-sectarian kind that sees anarchism as

a set of practical orientations and horizons rather than as a doctrine. But I don't think that's entirely new.

ZB: You have mentioned that revolution will not come in a day or two but its a life long process which needs tactics and strategies to confront the reactionary forces. Are you eliminating the role of full scale attempt at seizing power?

DG: Well if "seizing power" means grabbing hold of the coercive apparatus of the state within a specific demarcated territory, then I think we have seen this almost never leads to overall positive social results. Anyway, even if it happened in one nation-state it's obvious that would just be a stage in a larger process of revolutionary transformation and not necessarily all that important a one. Like it or not if we want to really transform basic economic, social and political structures we're going to have to realize that there's not all that much one can accomplish by seizing political power under current conditions, where you have a planet-wide capitalist bureaucratic system and deep state structures answerable directly to it, rather than to any popular constituency, whoever is elected or otherwise comes to power. And indeed people around the world do appear to be increasingly realizing that. Sure, having allies in power can be useful to those trying to make change from below. But it's clear that's just not the be-all and end-all of politics any more. It's just one small element.

ZB: How is Anarchism an ethical discourse for revolutionary practices? Does it teleologically suspends all the socially constructed values for the greater good?

No it does the exact opposite of that. It rejects the notion of ends justifying means.

ZB: Nietzsche is sometimes thought of as an anarchist – at least in the sense of not following given moralities and he does talk of construction of new value. Do you think of Nietzsche as an anarchist?

I don't think Nietzsche thought of himself as an anarchist. It's true that a lot of social theorists working in the Nietzschean tradition – Foucault, to some degree Deleuze – would occasionally say they were anarchists in some sense or another. But it's never entirely clear to me what they meant by that. To me, Nietzsche represents the quintessence of a kind of aristocratic ethos or charismatic self-creation, one that goes back to the societies that inspired the great epics, Homeric, Indian, Germanic, and so on, which is anti-state, and especially anti-commercial and anti-bureaucratic, and could be seen as similar to anarchism in that sense, but also utterly rejects any sort of ethos of egalitarianism or solidarity. I think that aristocratic ethos remains to some degree enshrined in what we now call "democratic" decision-making, that is, representative democracy, and as such has been grafted on top of what are essentially bureaucratic and extremely undemocratic, indeed, anti-democratic societies. We don't live in democracies. We live in republics with a kind of Nietzschean-aristocratic overlay. But I don't think this ultimately has much to do with anarchism as I myself conceive it.

ZB: You have written that, "revolutionary coalitions always tend to consist of an alliance between a society's least alienated and its most oppressed." Can you explain how 'less alienated' are not vanguardist?

Well there's all sorts of meaning of "vanguard." If you take the position that anyone who thinks they are in any way more "advanced" than the average person, either in their understanding of the ills of society or in their willingness to do something about it, is a vanguardist and that vanguardism is always bad, then all revolutionaries are bad and we should forget the idea of radically changing society. My objections to vanguardism are, rather, the idea that there should be a revolutionary elite that comes up with a "correct" analysis and therefore has the responsibility

to bring the benighted masses to the appropriate level of consciousness. This model has had disastrous consequences. But going from there to saying no one should claim to ever have a better understanding, or better practice, than anyone else in any way gives you no way to say that you're any better than capitalists, or fascists, or racists, or whatever other evil you care to name. It's more a case of being open to the knowledge that the fact that you may be ahead of someone in one sense doesn't mean you're necessarily ahead of them in any other.

The point about alienation and oppression was simply a reflection on why 19th century Marxists turned out to be so wrong about the revolutionary potential of the "advanced" proletariat, which they insisted would spearhead the expected revolution in England, France, and Germany. Instead, it turned out the Anarchists were right, when they predicted actual revolutions would happen in Spain, Russia, and the Global South, spearheaded above all by recently proletarianized peasants and craftspeople, or peasants and craftspeople threatened with proletarianization. This is what I meant by unalienated: people with some experience of cooperative production not mediated by the wage relation, for example. Obviously this doesn't mean devoid of power relations, oppression, but it's not entirely alienated in Marx's sense. It also helped explain, at least for me, why artists and others involved in analogous forms of production even in capitalist metropolises seemed the most likely to embrace revolutionary politics – even when no one else seemed to be embracing them. I had long noted that almost everyone involved in most activist groups I worked with had some experience of making music, art, something of that nature. Now, in this case, there were fairly elitist groups. But for that reason they also weren't especially effective. They couldn't pull off a politically effective alliance with those who were the most oppressed precisely because of their relatively elite backgrounds. However, if you look at history, when revolutions actually happen, its often because those two groups – those with experience of cooperative production, whether artistically, economically, or both – and those who are the most oppressed in society, tend to most systematically overlap.

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