The movement as an end-in-itself?

An interview with David Graeber

Ross Wolfe

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On December 16, 2011, Ross Wolfe interviewed David Graeber, Reader at Goldsmiths College in London, author of Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology (2004), and central figure in the early stages of the #Occupy Wall Street Movement. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Ross Wolfe: There are striking similarities between the #Occupy movement and the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle. Both began in the last year of a Democratic presidency, were spearheaded by anarchists, motivated by discontents with neo-liberalism, and received the support of organized labor. As an active participant in both the anti/alter-globalization and the #Occupy movements, to what extent would you say that #Occupy is a continuation of the project inaugurated at Seattle? What, if anything, makes this movement different?

David Graeber: I think a lot of the people involved in the globalization movement, myself included, felt this was a continuation of our efforts, because we never really felt the globalization movement had come to an end. We'd smash our heads against the wall every year, saying "Oh yes, this time we're really back. Oh wait, maybe not." A lot of us gradually began to lose hope that it was really going to bounce back in the way we always thought we knew it would. And then it happened, as a combination of tactics of trying to create prefigurative models of what a democratic society would be like, as a way of organizing protest or actions that were directed against an obviously undemocratic structure of governance.

At the same time, I think one reason why the tactics seem appropriate in either case is because, in a way, we're talking about two rounds of the same cycle of really the same debt crisis. One could make the argument that the world has been in one form of debt crisis or another since the seventies, and that for most of that time, the crisis was fobbed off onto the global South, and to a certain degree held off from the North Atlantic, countries and places with the most powerful economies, which more or less use credit as a way of staving off popular unrest. The global justice movement ultimately was a quite successful form of popular uprising against neoliberal orthodoxy, Washington Consensus, and the tyranny of the debt enforcers like the IMF and the World Bank. It was officially so successful that the IMF itself was expelled from large parts of the world. It simply can't operate at all in many spaces within Latin America anymore. And it

eventually came home. So it's the same process: declaring some kind of financial crisis which the capitalists themselves are responsible for, and demanding the replacement of what are termed "neutral technocrats" of one type or other, who are in fact schooled in this kind of neoliberal orthodoxy, who've been in the economy for wholesale plunder on the part of financial elites. And because #Occupy is reacting to the same thing as the Global Justice Movement, it's not surprising that the reaction takes the same form: a movement for direct democracy, prefigurative politics, and direct action. In each case, what they're saying is that the tools of government and the administration are inherently corrupt and unaccountable.

RW: Against the malaise that followed from the dissolution of the anti/alter-globalization movement after 9/11, you argued that the primary reason for its eventual defeat was that it did not know how to handle the shock of its early victories, its participants had become "dizzy with success" along the way. "[O]ne reason it was so easy for [the global justice movement] to collapse, was…that once again, in most of our immediate objectives, we'd already, unexpectedly, won."[1] In other words, for you the path to defeat was largely paved by victory. In an uncanny way, this appears to mirror, albeit from the opposite direction, Karl Marx's counter-intuitive understanding of June 1848. Marx wrote that "only the June defeat has created all the conditions under which France can seize the *initiative* of the European revolution. Only after being dipped in the blood of the *June insurgents* did the *tricoleur* become the flag of the European revolution—the *red flag*!"[2] For Marx, then, the path toward victory was seen to be paved by defeat. How, if at all, are these two seemingly opposite views related? Do they mutually exclude one another, or are they perhaps complementary? Is it proper or even possible to speak of a "dialectics of defeat"?[3]

DG: That's an interesting analogy. One would have to ask: "Was Marx right?" He said that defeat was necessary for the ultimate victory, but it's not clear that that victory ultimately did occur. It's certainly true that certain sorts of defeat can be mythologized, and may turn into victory, or things that seem like defeats on the field are in fact victories that you didn't realize you had. I think that happens quite regularly in revolutionary history. In a way, tactical defeat is almost randomly related to strategic victory. There's no predictable pattern, kind of like Immanuel Wallerstein's idea of the series of world revolutions starting with the French revolution, the world revolution of 1848, which didn't achieve tactical victory anywhere, but radically transformed the way governments operated in Europe. That's where you get universal education, redistricting, etc.

RW: The French Revolution even failed internally, insofar as it was turned into an empire by Napoleon. But it still helped spread the nationalist and liberal/republican ethos.

DG: Absolutely. There were institutional, concrete forms that came out of that that have remained with us ever since. Same thing with 1917: It only was successful in Russia, but it had almost as much of an effect on other countries as it did at home. Nothing was the same afterwards. Basically, Wallerstein argues that 1968 was a similar revolutionary moment, sort of along the lines of 1848. He's now talking about the world revolution of 2011. But it really isn't clear which model this is going to resemble.

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[1] David Graeber, "The Shock of Victory," in *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2010), 17.

[2] Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1851,* in *Collected Works, Volume 10: 1849–1851* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 70. Available online at <www.marxists.org>.

[3] See Platypus' discussion at the 2009 Left Forum: *Dialectics of Defeat: Toward a Theory of Historical Regression.* Available online at <www.archive.org>.

This made me think of what neoliberalism is really about: It's a political movement much more than it is an economic movement, which is a reaction to those series of victories won by social movements in the sixties, whether the anti-war movements, feminism, the counterculture, and so on. That became a kind of a sanction, in achieving political victory by preventing any social movement from feeling that it had been successful in challenging capitalism in any great, empowered way, or providing any sort of viable alternative. So it became a propaganda war that was continually hierarchized, over creating an actually viable capitalist system. The way the Iraq War was conducted is another great example of that. It's very clear that the real obsession on the part of the people planning the war was to overcome what they called "the Vietnam syndrome," i.e., the wave of anti-war demonstrations in the sixties that had really prevented the U.S. from deploying large ground forces in any kind of major land war for 30 years. In order to get over that, they needed to fight the war in a way that would prevent widespread opposition and resistance at home. What they calculated was that "body count is everything," therefore they had to create rules of engagement such that few enough American soldiers would die that there would be no mass uproar in the form of an anti-war movement. Of course, in order to do that, their rules of engagement meant that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians died, which in turn pretty much ensured they couldn't win the war. But it seemed more important to them to prevent the anti-war movement than to win the war.

Of course, the anti-war movement of the last decade was put in a terrible situation by the attacks of 9/11, an attack on U.S. soil on a scale that hadn't ever happened. Now, it's also true that there's a pattern where 9/11 came at a very opportune moment, and had it not been for that attack, they probably would have tried to come up with some other excuse for an overseas war. Because it seems that when you finally see a grassroots political movement, whether it's the civil rights movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the global justice movement, or any kind of glimmering, that is what happens. The remarkable thing to me is how immediately the ruling class panicked and felt that they had to make massive concessions and invariably seem to commence some sort of overseas war. It seems like they've trapped themselves in something like a box. It's clear that we've got a situation here in America, but it's not really clear who they're going to attack, or who they could attack overseas.

RW: One of the central debates within #OWS is over the degree to which the movement remains ideologically inclusive and open to all. From early on, the demonstrations at Liberty Plaza drew a number of neoliberal ideologues: Ron Paul supporters, Tea Partiers, and right-wing conspiracy theorists. While their visibility within the movement has perhaps diminished in recent weeks, they remain an undeniable, if marginal, presence at #Occupy events. Some have rejected the very idea of being placed along the political spectrum of "left" and "right," as they both consider these categories to be too constrictive and fear that identification with one or the other risks alienating potential supporters. Would you say the language of "right" and "left" still have any utility with respect to #Occupy Wall Street? Does #Occupy represent a new popular movement on the Left?

DG: There is an unfortunate tendency to identify "the Left" not as a set of ideals or ideas but of institutional structures. A lot of individualists, anarchists, insurrectionists, and primitivists see the Left as the various leftist political parties, labor unions, what we would generally call "the verticals," and I can see why one would feel rather chary about wanting to identify himself with these. But at the same time, we've been hearing at least since the end of World War II that the difference between right and left is no longer relevant. It's something that's said about

every five years in making some great pronouncement. And the fact that they have to keep doing it so regularly shows that it isn't true. It's sort of the way that people keep making these grand declarations that the whole narrative of progress is gone. They make that about once every generation. But why would they have to announce this every generation if it was actually gone? So I think that these concepts remain.

The Tea Party was also claiming that they weren't a right-wing group and that they were a broad populist rejection of the structure of the existing political order, in the same way that people want to see #Occupy Wall Street. But one is a very right-wing populist rejection, while the #Occupy movement is inspired by left-wing principles. And a lot of it has to do not even with one's attitude towards market economics but corporate capitalism. It has this utopian ideal about what capitalism should be, which is actually far more utopian than any conception of what socialism, or whatever else would exist for the Left, would be. So the ultimate utopias of the Tea Party and #Occupy are profoundly different, which indicates a difference in their basic orientations. And #Occupy Wall Street is, in the end, anti-hierarchical. And I think that's the key. The Right is not, in the end, anti-hierarchical. They want to limit certain types of hierarchy, and promote other types, but they are not ultimately an egalitarian movement. So I think that ignoring that broad left legacy is kind of silly. It strikes me as patently dishonest. I understand that it is sometimes tactically useful to throw as broad a net as possible, because there actually is a lot of common ground. Many right-wing populists have certain sincere objections to, for example, the monopolization of culture, or the fact that there is objectively a cultural elite. A certain social class monopolizes those jobs whereby you get to engage or pursue forms of value that aren't all about money. The working classes have an overwhelming hatred of the cultural elite and a celebration of the army, to support our troops. It comes down to the fact that if you come from a working-class background, you have a very slim chance of becoming a successful capitalist, but there's really no possibility that you could become a drama critic for *The New York Times*. I think it would be wonderful if we could find a way to appeal to such people in a way that wouldn't be patronizing. But still, rejecting this split between the Right and the Left entirely, strikes me as going in completely the wrong direction.

What we have is this terrible synthesis of the market and bureaucracy which has taken over every aspect of our lives. Yet only the Right has a critique of bureaucracy. It's a really simple-minded critique, but the Left really doesn't have one at all.

RW: Some have characterized the #Occupy movement as sounding the alarm for "class war." They cite the now-ubiquitous #Occupy Wall Street motto, "We are the 99%!" as evidence of this fact. As the ostensible originator of this slogan, do you believe that #Occupy Wall Street is an outward manifestation of the latent class struggle underlying civil society? Whatever its rhetorical effect, does this metric provide an adequate framework for the analysis of class struggle?

DG: I don't think of it as an analysis so much as an illustration. It's a way of opening a window on inequality. Of course, a slogan doesn't ever answer the real structural question of how social classes get reproduced. What a slogan does is point you to how you can start thinking about a problem that you might not have even known existed. It's been remarkably effective at that, for two reasons: one, because it points out just how small the group of people who have been the beneficiaries of the economic growth, of our productivity has been. They basically grabbed everything. Also, the slogan has successfully made #Occupy inclusive in a way that other social movements have had trouble with before. So I think that's what was effective about it. Obviously there are infinite shades of difference between us, and class is a much more complicated thing

than just the fact there is a certain group of people that is super rich or has a lot of political power. But nonetheless, it provides people with a way to start talking to each other about what they have in common, thus providing the form in which the other things can come to be addressed. You have to start with what you have in common. And that's one thing we've had a really hard time doing up till now.

RW: Most within the #Occupy movement recognize the raw fact of dramatic social inequality, but disagree over the method to pursue in looking to resolve this problem. Many hope that #Occupy will provide the grassroots political momentum necessary to pass a set of economic reforms, which typically would come by way of legislation passed through the existing channels of government. Others see #Occupy as potentially revolutionary, as pointing to something beyond the merely "economic." These two perspectives seem to indicate radically different directions this movement might take. Would you characterize this movement as "anti-capitalist"? Should it be? If so, what is the nature of its "anti-capitalist" politics?

DG: I'll start by saying that the people who were originally involved in the creation of #Occupy were overwhelmingly anti-capitalist, very explicitly. Whether we thought we were going to be able to overthrow capitalism in one go, well, obviously no. We're working toward that as an ultimate goal. That's why it's key to have an effect that will genuinely benefit people's lives. #Occupy certainly doesn't contradict that revolutionary impulse, and helps move us in a direction towards greater freedom and autonomy, by which I mean freedom from the structures of both the state and capitalism. Now, to create broad alliances along those lines, you'd have to be very careful about your organizational and institutional structures. Because one of the things that is revolutionary about the #Occupy movement is that it's trying to create prefigurative spaces in which we can experiment and create the kind of institutional structures that would exist in a society that's free of the state and capitalism. We hope to use those to create a kind of crisis of legitimacy within existing institutions.

Of course, I can only speak for myself. But most of the people I was working with, who were putting the vision together, had this belief in common: that the great advantage we had was that people across the political spectrum in America shared a profound revulsion with the existing political system, which they recognize to be a system of institutionalized bribery that has very little to do with anything that could be meaningfully called democracy. Money clearly controls every aspect of the political system. Thus, we would only had to delegitimate a system that has already almost entirely delegitimated itself. We adopted what amounts to a "dual power strategy." By creating autonomous institutions that represent what a real democracy might be like, we could provoke a situation for a mass delegitimation of existing institutions of power. Obviously, the ones that are the most violent are the hardest to delegitimate. In American society, for various ideological reasons, people hate politicians, but they have been trained to identify with the army and police to a degree that is hardly true anywhere else in the world. There's been relentless propaganda to create sympathies for soldiers and policemen, ever since the cowboy movie turned into the cop movie. I think that it would be a terrible mistake to go from these prefigurative structures to running some sort of political candidate. But even the idea of turning into a lobbying group pursuing a specific reformist agenda is wrongheaded. The moment you engage with a system, you're not only legitimating it, you're delegitimating yourself, because your own internal politics become warped. Even accepting money has pernicious effects. But the moment you're interfacing with vertically organized structures of power, which are ultimately based on coercion, it poisons everything. By actively delegitimating the structure, we are in a

position, perhaps as a side effect of our actions, to create the forms that will actually be of the most benefit to ordinary people.

RW: One division that emerged early on among the occupants concerned the need to call for demands. You have in the past rejected the idea of politics as policy-making, feeling that demands focused on electoral reform or market regulations would only steer the movement in a conservative direction. If not demands, what kind of "visions and solutions," as you've put it, do you think the #Occupy movement should provide?

DG: There is a profound ambiguity in the language of protest politics. I always point to the grammar of signs or slogan. Someone says "Free Mumia" or "Save the whales." But who are you asking to do that? Are you talking about pressuring the entire system do so? Or are you calling on us as a collectivity to pressure them to do so? So yes, one could make the argument that the distinction between "visions," "demands," and "solutions" is somewhat arbitrary.

When we were first putting together the idea for #Occupy Wall Street, there were some who argued that we could make a series of demands that are part of the delegitimation process, by making demands for things that are obviously commonsensical and reasonable, but which they would never in a million years even consider doing. So it would not be an attempt to achieve the demands, but rather it would be a further way to de-structure the authority, which would be shown to be utterly useless when it came to providing what the people need. What we're really talking about here is rhetorical strategies, not strategies of government, because #Occupy Wall Street does not claim to take control of the instruments of power, nor does it intend to. In terms of long-term visions, one of our major objectives has already been achieved to a degree which we never imagined it could have been. Our goal was to spread a certain notion of direct democracy, of how democracy could work.

For spreading the idea, the occupation of public space was very fruitful. It was a way of saying, "We are the public. Who could possibly keep us out of our space?" They adopted a Gandhian strategy. By being studiously non-violent, a group of people who couldn't possibly pose a threat to anyone might bring out how much the state is willing to react with extreme violence. Of course, the problem with the Gandhian strategy has always been that you need the press to cover it that way. One reason the window-breaking in Seattle happened was that a majority of the people involved had been forest activists who had previously used exclusively Gandhian tactics — tree-sitting, chaining themselves to equipment to prevent the destruction of old-growth forests, etc. The police reaction was to use weaponized torture devices. So these activists had decided that Gandhian tactics don't work; they had to try something else. Now suddenly the Gandhian approach has been relatively successful. There has been this window, and it's interesting to ask yourself: "Why?"

RW: One of the tropes of #Occupy Liberty Plaza was that its participants were working together to build a small-scale model what an emancipated society of the future might look like. This line of reasoning posits a very intimate connection between ethics (changing oneself) and politics (changing the world). Yet it is not difficult to see that most of the services provided at Liberty Plaza were still dependent on funding received from donations, which in turn came from the society of exchange: Capitalism. Since the means for the provision of these services can be viewed as parasitic upon the capitalist totality, does this in any way complicate or compromise the legitimacy of such allegedly prefigurative communities?

DG: I think the "capitalist totality" only exists in our imagination. I don't think there is a capitalist totality. I think there's capital, which is extraordinarily powerful, and represents a certain

logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn't exist. I think Marx veered back and forth on this score himself. He did, of course, support the Paris Commune. He claimed that it was communism in action. So Marx wasn't against all experimental, prefigurative forms. He did say that the self-organization of the working class was "the motion of communism." One could make the argument, if you wanted to take the best aspects of Marx (though I think he was deeply ambivalent on this issue, actually) that he did accept the notion that certain forms of opposition could be acted out prefiguratively. On the other hand, it's certainly true that he did have profound arguments with the anarchists on this matter, when it came to practice.

I think that the real problem is Marx's Hegelianism. The totalizing aspect of Hegel's legacy is rather pernicious. One of the extremely important disagreements between Bakunin and Marx had to do with the proletariat, especially its most advanced sections, as the necessary agent of revolution, versus the peasants, the craftsmen, or the recently proletarianized. Marx's basic argument was that within the totality of capitalism, the proletariat are the only ones who are absolutely negated and who can only liberate themselves through the absolute negation of the system. Everyone else is some kind of "petit-bourgeois." Once you're stuck with the idea of absolute negation, that opens the door to a number of quite dangerous conclusions. There is the danger of saying that all forms of morality are thrown out the window as no longer relevant. You no longer know what form of morality will work in a non-bourgeois society, thus justifying a lot of things that really can't be justified.

The point I'm trying to make is that it's much more sensible to argue that all social and political possibilities exist simultaneously. Just because certain forms of cooperation are only made possible through the operation of capitalism, that consumer goods are capitalist, or that techniques of production are capitalist, no more makes them parasitical upon capitalism than the fact that factories can operate without governments. Some cooperation and consumer goods makes them socialist. There are multiple, contradictory logics of exchange, logics of action, and cooperative logics existing at all times. They are embedded in one another, in mutual contradiction, constantly in tension. As a result, there is a base from which one can make a critique of capitalism even at the same time that capitalism constantly subsumes all those alternatives to it. It's not like everything we do corresponds to a logic of capitalism. There are those who've argued that only 30–40% of what we do is subsumed under the logic of capitalism. Communism already exists in our intimate relations with each other on a million different levels, so it's a question of gradually expanding that and ultimately destroying the power of capital, rather than this idea of absolute negation that plunges us into some great unknown.

RW: The version of anarchism that you subscribe to stresses this relationship of means to ends. You've written that "[anarchism] insists, before anything else, that one's means must be consonant with one's ends; one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; in fact, as much as possible, one must oneself, in one's relations with one's friends and allies, embody the society one wishes to create."[4] It seems that you tend to endorse a "diversity of tactics" approach to direct action. If one insists upon a strict identity of means and ends, might not a violent course of action violate the principle of attaining a non-violent society?

DG: The idea of the identity of means and ends particularly applies to the way revolutionaries deal with one another. You have to make your own relations with your fellow comrades, to be

[4] David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 7.

an embodiment of the world you wish to create. Obviously, you don't have the liberty to make your relationship with the capitalists or the police into an embodiment of the world you wish to create. In fact, what I've found ethnographically is that this boundary has to be very clearly maintained. People used to criticize the global justice movement because it would use terms like "evil," but really what that word indicated was a borderline. There are certain institutions that we can at least deal with, because they're not fundamentally inimical to what we're trying to do. There are others that are irredeemable. You just can't talk to them. That's why we refused to deal with the WTO. "Evil" meant, "we can't extend that prefigurative logic to them." When dealing with people who are "in" the circle of our prefigurative practice, you have to assume everyone has good intentions. You give them the benefit of the doubt. Just as (and this is another anarchist principle) there's no way better to have someone act like a child than to treat him as a child, the only way to have someone act like an adult is to treat him as an adult. So you give them the benefit of the doubt in that regard, as well-intentioned and honest. But you have to have a cutoff point. Now, what happens at that cutoff is where all the debate takes place. What would one do in a free society if he saw people behaving in ways that were terribly irresponsible and destructive?

RW: While the democratic ideology it represents has certainly helped popularize the #Occupy movement, many have complained that within the consensus decision-making model, process ultimately becomes fetishized. The entire affair can be massively alienating, as those with the greatest endurance or the most leisure time can exert an inordinate amount of influence the decision-making process. Another perceived problem with consensus decision-making is that only the most timid, tentative, or lukewarm proposals end up getting passed. Either that, or only extremely vague pronouncements against "greed" or "injustice" get passed, precisely because the meaning of these terms remains underdefined. The structure of consensus, passing proposals that most people agree upon already, tends to favor the most unambitious ideas, and seems to me an inherently conservative approach. Do these criticisms have any legitimacy with regard to the #Occupy movement?

DG: You can't create a democracy out of nothing without there being a lot of kinks. Societies that have been doing this over the long term have come up with solutions to these problems. That's why I like to talk about the example of Madagascar, where the state broke down, but you couldn't even really tell. People carried on as they had before, because they were used to making decisions by consensus. They'd been doing it for a thousand years. At the moment they have a military government. But in terms of the day-to-day operation of everyday life in a small community, everything's done democratically. It's a remarkable contrast to our own society, ostensibly more democratic in terms of our larger structures. When was the last time a group of twenty Americans (outside of #OWS) sat down and made a collective decision in an equal way?

Yes, you're right: you'll only get broad and tepid solutions if you bring everything to the General Assembly. That's why we have working groups, empower them to perform actions, and encourage them to form spontaneously. This is another of the key principles in dealing with consensus and decentralization. In an ideal world, the very unwieldiness of finding consensus in a large group should convince people not to bring decisions before this large group unless they absolutely have to. That's actually the way it's supposed to work out.

RW: To what extent do you think that the goal of politics should be freedom from the necessity of politics? Is ethics even possible in a world that hasn't been changed? Theodor Adorno remarked in *Minima Moralia* that "the wrong life cannot be lived rightly." In other words, can we

even speak of ethics in the Aristotelian sense of the good life within the totality of the wrong? Or would this require a prior political transformation?

DG: I think that kind of totalizing logic ends up requiring a total rupture. Perhaps after the revolution we can *imagine* a rupture, whereby we now live in a totally different society, but we all know it's not going to happen through a total rupture. And if you really adopt that Hegelian logic, it begins to seem as if it's not possible at all. It almost necessarily leads to profoundly tragic conclusions and extremely quietist politics, as indeed it did with the Frankfurt School. I don't think that politics can be eliminated. And just as the perfect life cannot be achieved, the process of moving toward it *is* the good life.

I think that in terms of ethics that is the case. I can't imagine a world in which we aren't revolutionary ourselves, and revolutionizing our relations with one another, and revolutionizing our understanding of what is possible. That doesn't mean that we will not someday—perhaps someday soon, hopefully—achieve a world whereby the problems we have today will be the sort of things to scare children with stories of them. But that doesn't mean we'll ever overcome the need to revolutionize ourselves. And the process by which that comes about *is* the good life.

RW: So does the movement itself become the goal? Must this process become an end in itself?

DG: It has to be. I mean, what else is there to life?

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