Teach Me if You Can

An Interview with David Graeber

Steven Durel

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David Graeber: It's not really Yale's leadership so much as the Department of Anthropology and senior faculty who decided to cut me off. For a long time I really tried to avoid getting involved in campus politics. I thought that I had come up with a nice formula, that I would be an activist in New York and simply a scholar here in New Haven.

Generally speaking, the academy really doesn't care what you say and think or what you write, so long as you don't do anything. If you're willing to be a hypocrite, they're fine with you, whatever you espouse. On the other hand, if there's any sign that you might actually live by your principles, you're called a loose cannon-you can see that John McCain is called a loose cannon among Republicans because he actually has principles.

Anyway, I felt that taking on global neoliberalism was probably more important than taking on the administration. So I concentrated my efforts on that, but I was taken by surprise by the reaction. I had a sabbatical two years ago and, before that, everything was going fine. During the sabbatical I got involved with various groups that were, for example, organizing against the World Economic Forum in New York right after Sept. 11, as well as other broadly anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist groups. I got quoted in the press a fair amount.

When I came back here, suddenly demeanors completely changed. This isn't a warm and inclusive group of people; I wasn't really expecting them to say "Welcome back" or anything, but maybe "Hello." A lot of people wouldn't say hello to me, they just passed me by as if I wasn't there. We even had one person here who started telephoning undergraduates' parents to warn them that their daughters were falling under the sway of some dangerous radical.

So it seems very clear that there was a political component involved, but I think that things became a total crisis when I got drawn into campus issues. It's very difficult to hold yourself completely apart from these things. There come certain situations where you essentially have to choose sides. There eventually came a point where they tried to kick out one of the [student] union organizers on obviously trumped-up, ridiculous charges. They wrote a bad recommendation for her and accused her of ethical violations for not using it. They tried to kick her out. It was a personal challenge for me: Am I going to go along with this or am I going to try standing in their way? It wasn't even a political decision. She was a good student, in fact, one of the best I've had. I felt I had to do the right thing and stand up for her.

SD: If an acclaimed scholar is being targeted and removed from office like you are, what does that mean about the state of political discourse in this country?

DG: I'm not sure how far I'd generalize from here to other places. Yale is almost the very center of the empire in a way. I've written elsewhere that there are only three institutions that have survived more or less intact from the European Middle Ages-the Catholic church, the British monarchy and the university system.

Concerning trials, we always hear about the right to face your accuser or to be tried by a jury of your peers. It always seemed a little odd to me. It's all become a little clearer after this. Here at Yale we actually have the old medieval system. People can say anything they want about you. You are not allowed to know who they are, what they are saying and you cannot respond in any way. You are not allowed to be judged by anyone of the same status; only people who outrank you get to even know what is being said and vote on your case. It's very old fashioned and, speaking as an anarchist, it is the kind of system that cannot help but cause injustice. It's guaranteed to produce abuses of power by giving certain people complete impunity and total domination over others. The people who have the lowest motives tend to end up with the most power institutionally.

It's more a reflection of basic power dynamics than it does about America now. However, I do think that there is a climate by which people think that they can get away with things that they might not have five or 10 years ago. I think the whole War on Terror is a reaction to internal dissent internationally.

Years ago there was a very effective grassroots movement against global neoliberalism. It completely threw global elites for a loop. The whole thing turned out to be a house of cards. I think that what happened was, the global elites were thrown into a total panic. They thought that they had achieved complete consensus and hegemony internationally, but it crumpled immediately. Normally, when global elites panic, the first thing that they want to do is start a war. It doesn't really matter who the war is with, it just creates new opportunities for them, especially in repressing dissent. They had actually been trying to find an enemy for some years that would justify wartime mobilization and finally Osama bin Laden seems to have obliged them.

It enabled them to create a climate where more of these measures are against us than they are against terrorists. The people who are posing much more of a direct challenge to the rule of global capital are not the people who want to reestablish the medieval Caliphate in part of the world. The people who are really posing a direct challenge to global capital are the people who are actually trying to abolish global capital. The problem was that those people were doing it nonviolently, so it became difficult to justify war mobilization and a suppression of rights. This gave them the opportunity that they wanted. In a way, what happened to me is a product of that climate, rather than any conspiracy.

SD: You mentioned to me earlier that after *The New York Times* quoted you you had some other troubles.

DG: It's funny. When I was giving a press conference before the World Economic Forum protests, Mike Dolan said to me, "If you get quoted in *The New York Times* your taxes will be audited for the rest of your life." At the time I didn't really think much of it. I laughed it off, but almost immediately thereafter I started receiving these messages from the IRS. They basically went through everything. I started getting audited every year.

I've been caught in this dilemma because I overpaid in Connecticut. As a result, I can't prove that I paid something in New York. They're demanding that I turn over $10,000 that I don't owe,

so now they're garnishing my wages. Actually, I'm stuck with only the $17 in my pocket at the moment. It's basically harassment, but it's effective harassment and I hear it happens to activists all the time.

SD: What is your favorite activist group? What do you think accomplishes the most?

DG: That's hard to say. Peoples' Global Action (PGA) is a great mother network that everything else came out of. Because it's this sort of network, it doesn't have as much institutional presence. It's not a group. The criteria for being part of PGA is simply to agree to PGA principles. Anybody who agrees is part of PGA, so nobody even knows all the people who are in PGA. Nonetheless, I think it's the most inspiring one.

PGA was founded at a conference in Barcelona. It involved groups like the Zapatistas (EZLN), the landless peasants in Brazil (MST) and various Gandhian socialist direct action groups in India (KRRS). It also involved a lot of anarchists and anti-authoritarian radical groups in Europe, also some labor unions-for example, the Canadian Postal Workers Union and Argentine Teachers' Union.

It's little known that PGA was the group that originally gave the call to action in Seattle. It's fascinating because networks like this have literally changed the course of history but nobody even quite knows that they're there.

SD: How would you advise the average kid to fight for freedom and equality? What kind of actions do you think are permissible? Graffiti? Theft? How far do you feel revolutionary actions should be taken?

DG: I think everybody needs to investigate their own conscious on such matters. The reason that I am an anarchist, I guess, is because I believe that we are in complete debt to the world. Everything that we hear or see or eat or do was invented by other people and given to us. I also believe that no one could possibly tell us how to repay that debt. It's completely up to you. How you fight for equality and justice should also be completely up to you.

I strongly believe in a code of nonviolence. However, I am sympathetic to the argument that certain forms of property destruction are nonviolent activities, like what happened in Seattle. One can damage private property and not personal possessions-a personal possession is something you want because you want to use it, private property is something that you want because others want to use it. Even when it comes to private property, though, corporate property is different than an owner-operated shop, because then you are hurting someone. A lot of anarchists agree that corporate property is pretty much fair game.

SD: You are a noted anthropologist. Could you highlight any communities that exist without capital or hierarchies of authority?

DG: There are a lot of very egalitarian, of course many societies referred to as egalitarian still have inequalities between men and women, between older and younger people, although often not as marked as they are here. In anthropology, there are thousands of such societies.

There are anthropologists who have argued that many Amazonian societies are self-consciously organized to prevent anything like what we may recognize as political power from possibly emerging. Everywhere you go in the world you can find things like that. There are plenty of places in the world, enclaves that fall in between the cracks, where states essentially break down. There are one or two cases where states have broken down and result has been horrible civil war, like in Somalia, but for every case of Somalia there are probably twenty where state authority breaks down and people do not start killing each other, they just go about there lives more or less as they had before.

I lived in an area of Madagascar at a time when nobody was paying taxes, the police would not come and most of the countryside was outside state authority. These people were simply governing their own affairs in a relatively civilized fashion and not doing anything to attract attention, basically hoping that no one would figure it [the lack of government] out. We have no idea how many places exist like that in the world today. People talk about the prospects for what people would do if there was no State. Many have the conception that if there was no State we would have instant Somalia. In fact, no, we know and have empirically observed that even in the radically imperfect situations where States break down today, where there is poverty and inequality, often what happens is much better than when the State was around.

SD: I don't know how familiar you are with Venezuela and what is going on down there. I talked to Noam Chomsky about it a little bit and he seemed to believe that they are rapidly making a lot of progress. What do you think from your observations?

DG: I know that a lot of anarchists are suspicious of anything that is organized around a charismatic leader. On the other hand, I think it is always a mistake to assume through a "Great Man Theory" that Hugo Chavez is responsible for everything that is going on and we dislike him for that reason. I think it is unwise to do that. There has been a massive social movement that has made it possible for someone like Chavez to come about.

There are a lot of people who are working with Chavez, coming up with ideas, reigning behind the throne-a lot of them are genuine radicals who are trying to see what can really be accomplished in terms of profound social change under current neoliberal conditions. I think they've done some amazing things.

I think someone like Chavez, if he had taken power fifty years ago, could have had a very State-centered policy. Nowadays, what he's actually trying to do is create autonomous institutions that will be there even if he isn't. I am very excited by the possibility that something might come out of it.

SD: In the world of politics, philosophical ideas of individualism and collectivism seem to play out. Even within anarchism there are the extremes of both. I was just wondering, where do you stand on these concepts?

DG: In a way, I think it's a false dilemma. It's a dilemma that's thrown up by the market as an institution. The market is a really weird thing because it creates the illusion of a kind of individualism that doesn't really exist. I think that it is sort of a strange, aberrant technology in human relations.

Freedom isn't a matter of choice between things that come out of nowhere. Freedom is the freedom to choose what kind of commitments you want to make. So, that idea that commitment to others and individual self-expression are somehow being completely opposed terms is an illusion caused by the aberrant form of society we live under, the market-consumer society. You don't put yourself together with pieces you find in a store. Life isn't really like that and, if you weren't thinking in market terms, you would realize that, unless you want to be a hermit in solitude, the only meaningful thing is the freedom to choose in what ways you can relate to other people.

Like numerous other "radicals" throughout history, from Thoreau to Gandhi, Prof. David Graeber will not only not be returning to his place of employment next year, he will probably also continue being attacked by every institution that views him as a threat for the rest of his life.

Graeber can find solace, however, in knowing that he ranks among the heroes of times passed, amongst men who not only had principles, but also acted accordingly.

Property destruction is not really a moral question but a tactical one-no one would argue that breaking some Starbucks windows is wrong if they knew for certain that it would save the lives of babies. The problem is you can't know for sure: will this prove an effective way of raising awareness or otherwise blocking economic projects that will kill babies, will it alienate so many people it will backfire? In the real world you can never be sure. That's why I myself draw the line at hurting anyone, because you can never be sure what the effects of your actions will be. If you break a bunch of windows and it turns out you were wrong, it backfired, then so what? The world has lost some Starbucks windows.

You've also created a litter problem. But that's about it.

On the other hand you start throwing Molotovs and set someone on fire, or set a bomb and blow someone's legs off That's an entirely different matter. Philosophers might argue forever whether it's right to murder one person to save a hundred but even if you're one of those people who think it would be, in the real world you don't really get to make that decision because you don't really know if your action is going to work. Of course, states and armies reserve for themselves the right to make that kind of decision but that's one of the reasons I'm against them.

Of course circumstances vary, too. Sometimes people simply have no choice. I'm certainly not going to condemn, say, the Zapatistas for their insurrection against the Mexican State. But the most admirable thing about the Zapatistas is that they stopped shooting the moment they thought they could get away with it; they used exactly as much violence as they felt they had to in order to put themselves in a position where they didn't have to use violence any more. Otherwise, violence tends to take on its own logic, and you end up with the FARC, or worse, any of those endless guerilla armies in Africa that might have started for some sort of noble cause but by now exist just for the sake of existing and wreak havoc on the lives of the very poor people they were originally formed to protect.

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