The Reversed Revolutions of David Graeber

Review of David Graeber, Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination. (2011)

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May 08, 2015

Contents

The anarchist writer and anthropology professor, David Graeber, has written a number of thick volumes. This is a smaller work, a collection of essays written between 2004 and 2010. They have, Graeber assures us, a "*unifying theme*." They focus on questions of strategy for the global justice movement, including "revolution", what Graeber means by the term, and what he thinks about it. In my opinion, this book, like his other writings, combines intelligent insights with muddled thinking and a non-revolutionary perspective (see Price, 2007; 2012).

Graeber's main concern is that movement activists seem to be discouraged by the failures and limitations of the various struggles against the states and the corporations. Graeber wants to tell them to look up, actually they have done pretty well, made significant gains, and may even be said to have "won" in some ways.

This is a very important point, to the extant that it is true. Popular struggles have not simply "lost," but have had significant victories. Our rulers are aware of this and do their best to demoralize and discourage us. Instead radicals should be aware of the positive results of what has been gained, not in order to hold a premature victory celebration, but to maintain our spirits and hopes.

He gives the example of the anti-nuclear power movement of the late 70s, "*map[ping] out its full range of goals: Short-Term Goals: to block construction of the particular nuclear plants in question (Seabrook, Diablo Canyon—-); Medium-Term Goals: to block construction of all new nuclear plants, delegitimize the very idea of nuclear power and begin moving towards conservation and green power.... Long-Term Goals: (at least for the more radical elements) smash the state and destroy capitalism.*" (14)

Graeber concludes, "Short-term goals were almost never reached…the plants…all ultimately went on line….Long-term goals were also obviously not obtained. But…the medium-term goals were all reached almost immediately." (14) Especially after the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown, "it doomed the industry forever." (14) No new US plants have been built for decades. This has been a real victory.

He makes a similar analysis for the global justice movement. While it may be in decline, this is only because it won great victories. "…We didn't destroy capitalism, but we…did arguably deal it a larger blow in just two years than anyone since, say, the Russian Revolution." (19) Exaggeration aside, what he claims is that the movement did blockade and shut down particular summit meetings, and did "destroy the 'Washington Consensus' around neoliberalism, block all new trade pacts, delegitimate and ultimately shut down institutions like the WTO, IMF, and World Bank…." (24)

He makes similar claims for the Civil Rights/Black Liberation movement of the 50s and 60s, which did destroy legal racial segregation (Jim Crow) and won other benefits for African-Americans. He notes the feminist movement, which won legal abortion rights, anti-discrimination laws, and a social awareness of women's equality.

Oddly enough, however, he downplays the movement against the war in Vietnam or any other antiwar struggle, saying, " Organizations designed…to oppose wars will always tend to be more hierarchically organized…." (16) "…An antiwar movement…pretty much invariably is far less democratically organized." (34) This contradicts the thousands of local antiwar groups formed in communities and on campuses during the 60s. They played a major role in the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam. Anarchists, libertarian socialists, and radical pacifists played a part in the creation of the "Vietnam Syndrome" (unwillingness of the US population to support another long war) which hobbled the US military for decades.

Victories, even if partial, have been won by popular struggles, with an important element being the anti-heirarchical, anarchist, semi-anarchist, and direct action wing of the movements. David Graeber is absolutely right to remind us of this, to tell us to learn the lessons of our successes as well as of our defeats, and to maintain hope in the possibilities of the future.

But what were the consequences of failing to achieve the "long-term goals [of] smash[ing] the state and destroy[ing] capitalism"? It meant that the capitalist class (the "1%") kept their wealth, their capital, their factories and offices, their factory-farms, their real estate, their banks, their media and propaganda outlets, and so on. They kept their state with its bought politicians, bureaucrats, judges, police forces, jails, military forces, and spies. The corporate rich continue to exploit the working class and to pile debt onto everyone.

Among other things, this means that no victory can be final, so long as we remain under the system of capitalism, with its state and other forms of oppression. Whatever has been won, can be taken back, when political power swings back to the default position.

For example, considering the fight against nuclear power, President Obama has spoken of the virtues of starting new plants, and leading environmentalists have argued that at least nuclear power does not create greenhouse gases! Capitalist society did not "begin moving towards conservation and green power" but towards fracking and deep sea drilling for oil. Graeber writes that he had worked with the libertarian Marxists of the Midnight Notes collective. Together they developed a prediction that the world capitalist class would "declare [a] global ecological crisis, followed by a green capitalist strategy designed to divert resources…." (3) This failed prediction shows a limited understanding of capitalism's deep drive to accumulate value even at the expense of nature. (See Price 2010)

Of the other causes Graeber refers to, women's rights are still under attack, especially reproductive rights, which have been drastically whittled away. African-Americans, are still at the bottom of the economy and society. Even their right to vote has been once again assailed, and their lives are still in danger from the police.

After exploring the victories over international capitalism, even Graeber reminds us, "All this does not mean that all the monsters have been slain….China and India are carrying out devastating 'reforms' within their own countries, European social protections are under attack, and most of Africa…is still locked in debt….The US…is frantically trying to redouble its grip over Mexico and Central America." (23) He only comments, "The question is why we never noticed the victories we did win." (23) Fair enough, provided that we do not forget that without achieving the "long-term goals" of defeating capitalism and the state, no victory can be said to be really, finally, won.

Consider the consciousness of the liberals and social democrats in the German Weimar Republic after World War I. They must have said to themselves, "See, it doesn't matter that workers influenced by Rosa Luxemburg did not succeed in making a socialist revolution; we got rid of the monarchy and now live in a lively democratic republic! " Or so they may have thought up until the Nazis took over.

In its decay, capitalism does not merely threaten to take back the benefits it granted (under popular pressure). It threatens to go beyond what the planet's biosphere can maintain. Through climate change or other forms of global ecological catastrophe the capitalist states threaten all civilization, human life, and all planetary life. "…In a generation or so, capitalism will no longer exist; for the simple reason that (…) it's impossible to maintain an engine of perpetual growth forever on a finite planet." (30) To which he adds, "There is also always a small risk that some

miscalculation will accidentally trigger a nuclear Armageddon and destroy the planet." (16) (Considering that capitalism and its states need war, I think that over time this is more than a "small risk.") The question then is what will replace capitalism: a new, stateless and classless, society, or mass destruction. The capitalist class' blindness "might well mean not just the death of capitalism, but of almost everything else." (10)

Graeber's Concept of Revolution

How then shall we get from the short-term and medium-term goals, to the final goals of getting rid of the state and capitalism and all forms of oppression—and replacing them with "a world worth living in" (7)?

Historically, anarchists and other socialists have raised two possible basic strategies. One is to propose a series of step-by-step changes, gradual and mostly peaceful reforms, until a new social system exists. This approach has been called "reformism." It is not to be confused with its cousin "liberalism," the desire to make improvements in the existing society, without fundamental changes. Reformist anarchists generally advocate building up alternate institutions, economic and otherwise, to gradually replace existing institutions. (As if it were possible to create enough cooperatives to replace the steel industry, automobile producers, multinational corporations, and giant banks—without the state interfering!) Some declare that this is a "new" anarchism, but in fact it goes back to the strategy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the first person to identify himself as an anarchist.

The other viewpoint has been called "revolutionary." This is not just because it desires a transformed society nor because it opposes reforms (which it generally does not). But it believes that at some point in the process of transformation, some sort of social upheaval will be necessary, to confront the established powers, to overturn the state and the ruling class. It requires mass struggle by the self-organized workers and their allies among all the oppressed. It reflects the belief that the capitalist ruling class is very unlikely to give up its power, wealth, and prestige merely because the big majority of the population has decided it wants a new system, cooperative and radically democratic. This does not necessarily mean much violence—that depends on the extent of the capitalists' resistance. This viewpoint has been "the broad anarchist tradition" (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009). That is how I understand the historical distinction between reformism and revolution, made by both anarchists and Marxists. (As will become clear, Graeber does not accept this interpretation.)

Where does Graeber stand? He is no liberal: he wants a transformed society without capitalism or the state or other oppressions. However, his exposition is muddled. He frequently uses the term "revolutionary" positively while rejecting the very idea of revolution.

"…Many '60s radicals…felt that all this was inevitably leading up to a great insurrectionary moment—'the' revolution, properly speaking.…There can be no such fundamental, one-time break.…What seems strikingly naive is the old assumption that a single uprising or successful civil war could…neutralize the entire apparatus of structural violence.…" (57-58) "…There are no clean breaks in history…the one moment when the state falls and capitalism is defeated." (29) "None of us have much faith remaining in 'the' revolution in the old 19th or 20th century sense of the term" (27) "…The old apocalyptic version of revolution—the victorious battles in the streets, the spontaneous outpouring of popular festivity, the creation of new democratic

institutions, the ultimate reinvention of life itself—never quite seemed to work itself out, and there is no particular reason to imagine it ever could have." (6)

Why does Graeber reject the concept of an "insurrectionary moment—'the' revolution…a single uprising or civil war"? At no time does he address the main argument for the need for a revolution—namely, that the ruling class will not permit its wealth and power to be taken away without using its state forces to fight the people. The people must defend themselves, that is, make a revolution. (By the way, neither Graeber nor I am discussing those current theories which have been labeled "insurrectionary anarchism.")

One argument he raises is that the idea of revolution is tied to the aim of creating a revolutionary state, as proposed by the Leninists. "…The total view of revolution, that there will be a single mass insurrection or general strike and then all walls will come tumbling down, is entirely premised on the old fantasy of capturing the state. That's the only way victory could possibly be that absolute and complete…." (27)

But for revolutionary anarchists the issue is not "capturing the state" nor building a new state, but getting rid of the state. The state of the capitalists stands as a roadblock in the way of building a new society. It cannot be ignored. It must be removed if social evolution is to continue (not a "total, absolute and complete" victory, but the continuation of social evolution). In the place of the state, anarchists (from Bakunin on) have advocated building federations and networks of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and popular militias (an armed people). This would not be a state—that is, it would not be a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine to rule over the working people. It would be the self-organization of the working people and all the (formerly) oppressed.

Another argument Graeber makes is that the transformation of society from statist capitalism to a stateless, classless, non-oppressive society is a long drawn-own process. This is true enough. But a lengthy process may include sudden upheavals, insurrections, and rebellions, as a necessary part of the overall process. Graeber is really thrashing a straw man here. All theorists of revolutionary anarchism or socialism have known that apparent calm and stability will be followed by periods of rebelliousness among the people, before bursting out into the actual "insurrection or civil war"—and that the post-insurrectionary period would take a great deal of time for working out the actual functioning of the new society.

Peter Kropotkin (who certainly did not share what Graeber calls "the old fantasy of capturing the state") explained, "…The anarchists recognize that…slow evolution in society is followed from time to time by periods of accelerated evolution which are called revolutions; and they think the era of revolutions is not yet closed. Periods of rapid changes will follow the periods of slow evolution, and these periods must be taken advantage of…." (1975; 110)

Another argument Graeber seems to raise is "the anarchist insistence that we can no longer imagine revolution solely within the framework of the nation-state…." (6) Whatever this means, the original anarchists and Marxists advocated international revolution—beginning wherever it may and spreading to all lands. Those who declared "Workers of the world unite!" did not "imagine revolution solely within the framework of the nation-state." (If anything, the early anarchists and Marxists overlooked just how strong a hold nationalism had on the working class.)

Graeber's Strategy: Revolutions in Reverse

Since Graeber rejects "a great insurrectionary moment—'the' revolution, properly speaking," then what (if anything) does he mean when he writes about "revolution" ? Essentially he means the long, drawn-out, historical process, during which there are movements and struggles, the building of alternate institutions, a few, limited, insurrections, and the winning of limited victories, mostly through peaceful means. Whether this will get anywhere, he does not know, but he regards the process of struggling collectively, democratically, and locally as good in itself.

"Any effective road to revolution will involve endless moments of co-optation, endless victorious campaigns, endless little insurrectionary moments and moments of flight and covert autonomy. I hesitate to speculate what it might really be like. " (30) "…Dramatic confrontation[s] with armed representatives of the state…serve more as…momentary advertisements…for a much slower, painstaking struggle of creating alternate institutions….Action is seen as genuinely revolutionary when the process of production of situations is experienced as just as liberating as the situations themselves. It is an experiment…in the realignment of imagination…." (64) If any sense can be made of this mish-mash, it is that Graeber is not using "revolution" to mean, well, revolution, an "insurrectionary moment—'the' revolution, properly speaking." As he admits.

Instead, Graeber raises a perspective he calls "revolutions in reverse." As he sees it, previous revolutions began with insurrections and were followed by the people organizing themselves into autonomous councils, factory committees, cooperatives, soviets, and so on. But now, he advocates that people first organize autonomous councils, workplace committees, and other associations, and only then, if necessary, go on to have their "little insurrectionary moments." (30)

"In practice, mass actions reverse the ordinary insurrectionary sequence. Rather than a dramatic confrontation with state power, leading…to an outpouring of popular festivity [and] the creation of new democratic institutions,…in organizing mass mobilizations, activists…create new, directly democratic institutions to organize 'festivals of resistance' that ultimately lead to confrontations with the state…." (42—43) This would lead to a string of "insurrectionary moments on an ongoing basis." (43)

Only, Graeber's model of classical revolutions, of "the ordinary insurrectionary sequence," is all muddled. There is no such rigid sequence, if we go through the history of revolutions. For example, the 1917 Russian Revolution was preceded by years of organizing done by the minority of revolutionary socialists, including building labor unions and cooperatives. The revolution as such began with workers, soldiers, and peasants organizing committees (soviets) which led to an insurrection overthrowing the Czarist semi-feudal state (the "February revolution"). This created a "dual power," the official (bourgeois) Provisional government versus the continually expanding immediately-elected soviets (rooted in committees in factories, barracks, and villages). At a certain point, the Bolsheviks (in alliance with the anarchists and others) used their support in the soviets to overthrow the Provisional government—a second insurrection (the "October revolution"). This created what was supposed to be the rule of the soviets. It was followed by several years of civil war (the results of which are another story).

The 1936 Spanish revolution/civil war was preceded by years of anarchist organizing of grassroots community groups as well as radical, extremely democratic, unions (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009). When the fascist army rebelled, the workers and peasants made an insurrection, took over the factories and farms, created a militia, and coordinated their activities. Several

years of civil war followed. Unfortunately there never was a second insurrection to overthrow the state of the bourgeois Loyalist Republic.

And the sequences are all different, if we look at the earlier bourgeois-democratic revolutions (the English, the US, the French, the Latin American, Haitian, etc.) or the more recent Stalinist and nationalist revolutions (China, Cuba, Yugoslavia, Algeria, India, Ghana, etc.) Of course, while much can be learned from studying these revolutions, none of them was an anarchist revolution, so there are limits to how they apply to today.

So far as I can see, the point of Graeber's "revolutions in reverse" is to justify a focus on current organizing while downplaying, if not ignoring, the need for an eventual insurrectionary revolution. I do not criticize his emphasis on current organizing—Graeber is known as an activist and participant in struggles, as well as a theorist. But I completely disagree with his rejection of an eventual insurrectionary-revolutionary goal.

Graeber is entirely correct in viewing the revolution as a lengthy process. But compare his views with the Italian anarchist, Errico Malatesta (late 19th to early 20th century). As a revolutionary, he rejected reformism (or "gradualism"). While he supported all struggles for limited reforms, he insisted that anarchists maintain the goal of revolution. However, "after the revolution—that is after the fall of those in power and the final triumph of the forces of insurrection? This is where gradualism become particularly relevant." (2014; 472) When the obstacles of the state and capitalists are removed, then the people can make changes in a gradual, experimental, and pluralistic fashion, as they work out the best ways to organize a new society.

Who Will Make the Revolution?

Some anarchists react strongly against what they think is Marx's overemphasis on the the working class, his "privileging" the workers. They deny any role at all for the workers, regarding them as the one part of the population which will definitely not rebel against capitalism (turning Marx on his head).

This is not Graeber's approach. He appears to regard workers as at least one possible part of a potentially revolutionary people. He was especially impressed by "a surprising convergence and recognition of a common cause between the climate protestors and petroleum workers, during the French strike wave of October 2010." (9) From what he saw, he concluded that "many of the greatest cleavages we imagine to exist within the movements ranged against capitalism at the moment—the one between the ecological, direct action movement, and trade unionists…might not be nearly such a cleavage as we imagine." (9—10) That is, in potential, under the right circumstances and with the right political approach by radicals.

Graeber expresses an appreciation of the working class. "…Working class people and sensibilities [are] the source of almost everything of redeeming value in modern life—from shish kebob to rock'n'roll to public libraries…." (111) "…We are all workers insofar as we are creative, and resist work, and also refuse to play the role of the administrators—that is, those who try to reduce every aspect of life to calculable value." (114)

However, he misses the full potential of the working class. For one thing, "we are all workers" in that most adults work for a wage or salary and are non-supervisory employees (as blue-collar or white-collar workers). And non-waged people usually depend on the income from paid workers (such as full-time women homemakers, most children and students) or are retirees or

unemployed workers—which is to say they are all part of the "working class" as a class. This covers most of the population and overlaps with every other sector of oppressed people (People of Color, immigrants, women, GLBT people, Deaf people, etc.) So, against the power of the capitalists and their state, the working class has its own power of numbers and the potential of integrating distinct oppressions.

Further, against the rulers' power, the workers have their hands on the means of production, transportation, communication, and services. Workers can shut down society if they chose—and start it up again in a different way.

In passing, Graeber mentions the problem of having "an anticapitalist revolution without gun battles in the streets…since…if we come up against the US army, we will lose." (26) But the working class, besides having numbers and a potential industrial power, also can appeal to the ranks of the military, who are generally the daughters and sons of the working class. (In almost every successful revolution, a significant part of the military was either neutralized or went over to the people's side.)

Graeber does not quite get the importance of the working class—as the working class (which is not to deny the importance of all other issues and oppressions that the people face). Thinking about the need for an immediate strategy for struggle, he suggests focusing "on struggles over debt….Debt has shown itself to be the point of greatest weakness of the system…." (38) Debt is an important issue which does affect most people. But it is a mistake, I think, to bypass a focus on issues which relate directly to work, including issues of pay, working conditions, and time off. Since the capitalists are the enemy, then there is no one with as much reason to fight them as their workers—those whose labor supports the capitalists and the whole system. Neither store keepers, police, independent professionals, nor college presidents have as much of a direct interest in opposing the capitalists and their managing agents.

Conclusion

Graeber's book combines intelligent insights with muddled thinking. He makes an important point about the victories which have been won, particularly by the direct action, anarchist, wing of the justice movements. It is important to remember these victories, whatever their limitations, in order to maintain hope and to prepare for the future. (Among other intelligent aspects of his book are brief but good discussions of the concepts of "immaterial labor" and "the biopolitical" as "transparently absurd" and "extremely dubious.") (87 & 92)

On the other hand, his discussions of "revolution" and "insurrection" are quite muddled. He appears to reject them in favor of a gradualist, lengthy, drawn-out, process (which I can only regard as reformist). But he seems to insist on using "revolutionary" and even "insurrection" as part of his non-revolutionary perspective of "revolutions in reverse." He wants to reject his revolutionary cake but to eat it anyway. Of course, what matters is not the terms he uses but the conceptions behind them. Graeber realizes that the planet is in a bad way and needs a drastic change, but his program is gradualist and unclear. He never criticizes the main argument for a revolution—that the rulers will not give up their power and wealth without a fight—but raises all sorts of other, lesser, objections. To some extent he appreciates the potential of the working class, but he still underestimates its possibilities. This is an interesting book but a murky one.

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