

## David Graeber (1961-2020)\*

An anarchist and anthropological farewell to a “sudden thinker”

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When a friend messaged me a few days ago to ask me if I had heard about David’s death, before the news had been published, my initial reaction was to search for my cell phone to call him and laugh about the fake news.

Two or three years ago David and I were having a picnic in a London park. When I teased him about his fame, with his usual black New York humour he responded that until fake news of your death circulates, you are not famous enough. He laughed his distinctive laugh, tilted his head slightly, stared into the distance with his vivid eyes half-closed and then looked at me as he was continuing talking. I knew he was about to tell me something he was excited about and he duly shared an idea for a book that would address a theme on such a scale that it would have frightened the vast majority of anthropologists, but not David and his brilliant mind.

This is how I’d always known David. I still remember, in 2009, discussing the revolt of December 2008 in Athens. He started telling me about the book on debt that he was finishing and what an obscure idea debt is, but instead of presenting the book’s premise, he was interweaving the Greek case, the ancient Greek history of debt and the history of money throughout the Mediterranean in ways that only David’s mind could, drawing spontaneous connections between phenomena that the rest of us would need days of reading and drafting to bring together. I asked him to write a chapter for the book that our collective, *Occupied London*, was preparing about the revolt of

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December. He generously contributed a chapter entitled, *The Greek debt crisis in almost unimaginably long-term historical perspective*. A few months later, David published what is the most widely read book an anthropologist and an anarchist has written in the last four decades, if not longer: *Debt: the first 5000 years* (2011).

At the moment of our picnic, *Debt* was still a best seller in various languages and featured on many authoritative Top 10 lists. The first years after its initial publication you would walk in front of big bookstores from London's Charing Cross to Athens, Berlin, Amsterdam or NYC and see the book displayed in the front window. His book on bureaucracy *The Utopia of Rules* (2015) had also been recently published around the time of our meeting and was already becoming popular and influential and was being translated into several languages.

The entire discipline of anthropology has David's work to thank for much of its current popularity among younger generations who grew up in the post-2008 crisis world and the state of exception that has become a permanent form of governance. This generation are fed up with capitalism, and that American anarchist and anthropologist with the funny voice, who often dressed in extravagant second-hand clothes bought in the Portobello flea market, was writing in a way that spoke to them. David's books were introducing anthropological and radical political ideas to the general reader and at the same time innovating our entire discipline, teaching many of us not to be afraid to mix our politics with our anthropology. We are indebted to David for his novel approach to thinking and communicating that can be simultaneously scholarly, engaging and politicised.

As is well known, David grew up in a working-class family in NYC. His father fought in the Spanish civil war with the international brigades against Franco's fascists, then worked as a lithographer, while his mother was a garment worker actively involved in her union. David mastered Mayan hieroglyphic reading as a child and was therefore offered a scholarship from a private high school. He did his Bachelor in Anthropology at SUNY and his PhD in Chicago University, carrying out his ethnography in Madagascar – *The Disastrous Ordeal of 1987: Memory and Violence in Rural Madagascar*. As is the fashion in anthropology, he published this monograph a decade or so after completing the PhD, thereby offering us what many consider his best book: *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar* (2007). This came a few years after the influential *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (2001) and the celebrated *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004).

From 1998 to 2007 David was working as assistant and associate professor at Yale from where he was fired due to his politics both off, but mostly on, campus. Although Yale never admitted this, there are few who believe otherwise. Petitions and letters of support were signed by entire departments of anthropology all over the world, defending David in his struggle to retain his job.

In spite of the outcry however, and regardless of the fact that David had not broken any rules of academia or Yale, he spent two years applying for jobs in North America and not being shortlisted. Both progressive and conservative academia manages to ostracise and entrap its members who are classified as challenging the authority of those who hold managerial power within the academic workplaces, and this often has wider consequences in the job market. Yet it was very clear to most of us that if he was not already, he would soon become one of the most influential thinkers within the discipline, regardless of being refused academic positions. That was an experience David never forgot, and I know from first-hand experience that when he heard of colleagues who were facing trouble in their workplaces due to their politics on and off campus, he was there to help.

The department of anthropology in Goldsmiths College offered him a refuge in 2007. I still have vivid memories of a rainy Sunday when we first met in London. He had just arrived from the US to start the Goldsmiths job. I do not remember if he reached out to *Occupied London* or if we contacted him. But at that time, the magazine, with Antonis Vradis as its heart, was one of the best known anarchist publications in the British capital and beyond, so it made sense for both parties to be in touch. He came with his companion, smiling and waving from the end of the street as Antonis and I pointed to them from a distance. At that time I was still having Athenian anarchist mindset, and as he walked towards us, I remember saying to my companion that he looked to me like all those nutty American anarchists we had met the previous decade in the big alter-globalisation marches against the IMF, the WB and the G8 in Prague, Genova etc. He was a nutty American anarchist, but he was a very special one.

In London, David's presence did rock the boat of a well-established anthropological scene that was very set and rigid, having its Big Men and Big Women, as he came full of a new mix of ideas and energy that we desperately needed. Many European colleagues and comrades were excited to have him with us. The European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2008 was held in Ljubljana. One of the organisers, fellow anthropologist and anarchist, Rajko Mursic, asked me for David's contact details in order to invite him to be the plenary speaker. I passed it to him with a warning: "You will really

have to remind him and keep him in the loop, he is a creative spirit and his brain is full of good ideas, but he's travelling all the time for demos, for work for personal reasons and he is not always the most organised person in the world". David was announced as the keynote plenary speaker, but he had never made it to Slovenia, for personal reasons, to the explicit disappointment of more than 1,200 delegates from all over the world, with some of them coming to the huge lecture hall looking forward to hear him.

A good friend from the US anarchist scene told me a few years ago: "If you see Graeber in an American Anthropological Association meeting, give him a punch from me." In 2009 his ethnography of direct action groups came out. It is a rich and very pleasant ethnography, introducing and popularising ideas about direct action and even teaching such anarchist activist practices. Yet, some of our finest comrades were not happy with David; he did not efficiently anonymise them, and in the homeplace of the FBI and NSA, this can have serious consequences.

Fearless or reckless, that was David in times. In November of 2010, as the student movement in the UK was on fire due to the rise in student fees and many years of the Tories holding power dismantling everything, and as our throats were rough from screaming "Tory scum!" all morning, a large group of people ended up in the headquarters of the Conservative Party in Millbank. Soon the familiar sound of the smashing tempered glass was heard and the headquarters of the governing party of Great Britain were being stormed. An ecstatic crowd of 1,500-2,000 pushed forward in the building, cheering loudly in an atrium with echo that multiplied the sound ten times over. During that incredible moment I suddenly found David again in front of the building - I had seen him earlier outside the LSE. The most typical reaction of an experienced activist in such cases is to cover their face, but his face was uncovered and he was picking up a thick piece of broken glass from the smashed windows, putting it into his pocket, smiling. "Why is your face not covered? And why are you putting evidence of a felony in your pocket?" "Souvenirs!" he responded, and laughed loudly.

In 2011 came the Arab Spring, Indignados in Spain, Syntagma square in Athens, clashes with the police everywhere. People were increasingly resisting the authorities and their decisions worldwide. David was in *Occupy Wall Street*. His involvement with the *Occupy Wall Street* had cost him a painful eviction from his apartment in the city where he had grown up. He was credited as one of the leaders of the movement, a title I believe he was not very comfortable with, he was simply one of the knowledgeable, high profile people who happened to be there at the beginning of it all, he had mentioned once.

We did disagree often with David during our chats, mostly on politics, sometimes over anthropological issues, occasionally we also agreed, but it was always an interesting and rewarding experience talking with him. Although some people may disagree with me, I think David was modest and accessible for someone with his fame as you should expect from a person with an egalitarian ethos. He had many close friends within anthropology and the activist world, and many people had his phone number and knew him in a personal capacity. He was getting very excited that people read his books and by his participation in political projects, most recently his solidarity with Rojava and the movement for the liberation of Kurdistan, but otherwise he would not claim authority and would be one of us in those various contexts.

In 2013 David moved from Goldsmiths' to take a well-deserved full professorship in London School of Economics. He continued his writing and travelling to various fronts of the global resistance against capitalism and fascism and he will be remembered by many as a friendly, clever American intellectual and activist.

I did not share the information of his death immediately as I was very numb. I only could write "RIP" and upload a video of him from May 2020 giving a short talk about Covid and bullshit jobs. A newspaper approached me to write an obituary but I was not ready and I also know his feelings about newspapers – a feeling many anarchists are sharing: if the papers can get something out of us they will remember us, if not they will ignore us. Most recently I remember that, although it had hosted his op-eds many times, he was livid with the *Guardian* and its role in undermining Jeremy Corbyn. Then *Freedom* kindly approached me to write an obituary forcing me to absorb the news. *Freedom* feels right and cosy, an anarchist London-based magazine run by friends and comrades. Yet I do feel that no obituary can possibly do justice to David. What to refer to? David as an intellectual? As a comrade? As an anarchist grassroots activist? As an anthropologist? As a friend? As a personality? He was larger than life.

David was gifted in so many ways. Many people will talk about his magnetic personality and captivating ways of talking, which could also be scattered at times, but simultaneously full of good ideas that he explained clearly. He knew his anthropology, his history, his political science, his political economics, his history of art, and so much more – he would always surprise you with his depth of knowledge about subjects and phenomena you would never expect him to be aware of. He could operate at the abstract and theoretical level as easily as he could pin down, skilled ethnographer that he was, ideas grounded in the real life experience of regular people.

After I left England for Amsterdam in 2015 we no longer met that often, but each time would always feel as though we were simply continuing conversations from our previous meeting, ten months ago or more, as if we had met only the day before. In order to write this obituary, I went through the painful task of looking through our written communication. In July 2018, I received an email from David with the title “sudden thought”. It reads: “Hi Dimitris, I’m off to Greece for a couple of weeks. Mainly going to be hiding on islands but just in the very off chance you are around for summer ... David”. That was David full of sudden thoughts that were good thoughts and many people I know are already missing him and his sudden thoughts that would occur to him and he would not hold them back, but would instantly share them.

David Graeber’s brilliant mind will live through his writings and the legacy of his political actions for generations to come. He became one of the most influential thinkers of the Left of our time and he died in a hospital in Venice on the 2nd of September 2020. He is survived by his wife, the writer and artist Nika Dubrovsky.