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David Graeber Interview with ReadySteadyBook

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David Graeber is an anthropologist and activist still, technically, employed as an associate professor at Yale University, though he lives in New York. He has written a number of books, including Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology, a forthcoming ethnography of Madagascar entitled Lost People, and an ethnography of direct action called *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. He is currently active with MDS, the IWW, and various PGA-related projects.

Mark Thwaite: Are radical anthropologists all the heirs of Pierre Clastres and Marcel Mauss? And how many of you are there!?

David Graeber: Oh, not at all. For many years, Mauss was assumed to be a rather conservative figure (people didn't know about his political commitments), and Clastres was an oddball railing against the Marxists of his day. The first wave of self-consciously radical anthropology was mainly Marxist, you know, and there was something of a fad for French Marxist models in the English-speaking world in

the ‘70s and early ‘80s. That kind of fizzled. Nowadays most anthropologists write it off, but I think that Marx has a lot of useful ideas for anthropologists, and that those guys just used a clumsy version of Marxist thought. Anyway, since the ‘70s most anthropologists have *claimed* to be radicals of some sort or another, but most have preferred Foucault or some other version of French “’68 thought”. A lot of people are down on me for critcizing Foucault but really what frustrates me is not Foucault himself (who was an extremely multifaceted figure, always changing his mind and proposing new ideas), but the way he’s been appropriated as a kind of demigod in certain quarters in the academy: basically, by scholars who find themselves trapped in extremely hierarchical but also well-paid academic environments who are in no way involved with social movements, but wish to think of themselves as actually more radical than those who are. I.e., to argue that if they go off and buy expensive bondage equipment or something they’re really far more subversive than people who are actually risking their necks out on the streets. That annoyed me.

I think though the world is starting to call our bluff — the radical academics, that is. More and more one has to choose between working for NGOs, or government, or marketing, or for departments that are run like corporations and openly trying to bust their unions — or, alternately, actually connecting in some way with real social movements that do not want us to simply impose ourselves as their vanguard. I think in a way that’s a good thing. Most of those people posing as wild postmodern radicals in the ‘80s and ‘90s were actually classic liberals: that is, interested in increasing personal freedoms and minority rights without actually challenging institutions like the state or capitalism. That’s fine. Who am I to tell people what they should think? But it does annoy me when people like that claim to be the super-radicals. Increasingly such people are starting to admit that, well, yes, actually, they are pretty

and starting to work out a project with some fellow anthropologists to go back to Madagascar to do a study of these people called the Zana-Malata, who are descended from Caribbean pirates that settled there in the late 1600s… And a bunch of other projects, actually..

MT: Anything else that you would like to say?

DG: Thanks for having me. This was fun.

much liberals. For me that's refreshing. It's like, finally we can start to have a real conversation.

It's in that context that anarchism is suddenly appearing on the academic horizon. Though it's starting with young people — who actually are coming out of some experience with activism, where anarchist ideas and forms of organizing are becoming more and more important everywhere. There are very few anarchist professors — a tiny, tiny number of senior ones, probably more junior ones with their heads low, not admitting it mostly, then a good number of grad students and a very large number of undergrads. I know because they write me all the time, asking where I'll be next year (I have no idea), where they should apply… So, you can see the historical shift happening right in front of you.

MT: Do you think that anarchist thought is peculiarly useful for the anthropologist or are wider applications possible? Is the radicality/energy of anarchism what might save critical thought in the Academy? Can anarchism be the saving of marxism?

DG: It's quite conceivable. There's no necessary contradiction between the two, since Marxism is at its best when it's about theory, and anarchism is mainly about the ethics of practice. As I always say, there's no anarchist theory of the commodity form. Once at Johns Hopkins I was at a seminar with Giovanni Arrighi — the Marxist/Braudelian world-systems analyst, a man whose work I respect a great deal — and I suggested maybe we should have a division of labor. The Marxists can tell us why the economic crisis happened in (say) Argentina; the anarchists can decide what to do about it. It was kind of a joke, but perhaps in that spirit, he was perfectly amenable. Why not?

I object strongly to the forms of organization that have developed within many strands of Marxism and the intellectual habits of sectarian condemnation that tend to accompany them, but there have always been strains of Marxism that weren't like

that (just as there have always been strains of anarchism that, unfortunately, were.)

MT: And talking of the Academy, you've just been kicked out of it! Tell us about that David.

DG: Well, I've been kicked out of one, notoriously conservative institution. I'm kind of hoping that doesn't mean I'm out of the academy in general! And one should bear in mind too that it was leaked to me that one reason the senior faculty at Yale had it in for me was I had too *many* publications (also too much support from grad students). I would like to think that institutions exist where these are points in your favor.

MT: Your anthropological research work serves to suggest that anarchists are correct: we could live together (indeed, humans often have done) without a state. But by taking the state as the "enemy" don't anarchists put the cart before the horse!? To be very crude, doesn't the economic base create the state superstructure and not the other way around?

DG: I don't really think such base/superstructure distinctions mean much, to be honest. You might think it strange, but I really think such distinctions are not really materialist. They're idealist.

Let me explain.

Look at it in terms of action. What reality consists of — and this is in the best spirit of Marx, of course — are processes and actions. We are all busy making things, producing the world we live in, every day. But if you look at the world that way, a base/superstructure model doesn't really make any sense. It only makes sense if you look at *products* of action: here are some people and they're making fishcakes, or pottery, so that's material, here are some people and they're making laws, or poetry, and that's ideal. But of course the *process* of making laws (or poetry) is just as material as the process of making fishcakes. There have to be buildings to make laws in, and someone has to clean them, and paper and transport and funky wigs and all sorts of other things. And likewise the process of making

— "wait, this isn't an ethnography! It's more like halfway between an ethnography and a long Russian novel." One reason it took so long to publish because academic publishers don't like long books. Then I've always been a science fiction fan: Lem, LeGuin, Dick… I think my favorite book of poems is probably *Tulips and Chimneys* by e.e.cummings. Or it's one of them. But I also like Blake. And silly Russian prose-poets like Danil Kharms. But I am also an enormous fan of some folk traditions: I've memorized probably thirty different stories about the Mullah Nasruddin. They're even better than the really subversive Malagasy folktales (that first drew me to the place) about all the kids who are always playing tricks on God. My theory tastes shift around too. The person who really propelled me into anthropology was probably Edmund Leach. He was another eccentric Graves-type, completely irreverent, always managed to come up with something brilliant and startling by largely ignoring where you were supposed to start and what you were supposed to say. But in grad school I was about equally draw to Terry Turner, one of those brilliant Marxians who had a total theory of everything but somehow could never publish it, and my advisor Marshall Sahlins.

MT: What are you working on now?

DG: A bunch of things. My Madagascar book is just coming out in June and I have a two-volume ethnography of direct action that's looking for a publisher. But at the moment I'm mainly working on a history of the idea of debt. It seems to me high time someone write one. After all, modern governments run on debt, consumer economies run on debt, international relations are based on debt. But no one has even looked into what debt is, or even really what money is (some people after all say that money *is* debt; others have completely different interpretations; no one integrates them). It's kind of meant to be the sequel to the value book. But I'm also working on a book developing an anarchist version of world-systems analysis with my friend Andrej Grubacic, a Yugoslav sociologist/historian,

how young I was, since they were used to the French system, and assumed I was working on my Third Cycle which you usually get in your 40s) — but in material terms, most people had good food and houses and not much else. I guess from a political perspective, what was interesting was that state power had basically disappeared in most of rural Madagascar at that time: unless you were right along the highway, anyway, nobody was paying taxes and the police wouldn't come. It took me almost half a year to figure it out because everyone was pretending the government was still there — I mean, there were offices and people would go and file forms, but it was all kind of a charade. That's why it was so clever in a way. What I was really ended up studying though was magic. And mortuary ritual, the famous famadihana rituals where people would take their ancestors out of the tombs and rewrap them in silk shrouds; and spirit possession; and the endless quarrels about history between the descendants of nobles and descendants of slaves. It's funny: it makes it sound all exotic but it's not really all that exotic when you're there. It's just a bunch of ordinary people, like you might know anywhere, who like to sit around drinking and telling funny jokes, who are in most ways all much more different from each other than they all are collectively different from people in say England or America, except, they happen to live in a world where everyone assumes there are people know how to blast you with lightning or seduce you with love magic or drive you insane by getting you possessed by an evil ghost. Except you never know who because most people who suggest they might know how to do something like that are obviously lying.

MT: What is your favourite book (non-fiction and fiction)? Who is your favourite author (theorist and novelist)?

DG: Hmmm. My tastes tend to shift around. I was a big Pynchon fan in college. When I went to Madagascar, I was reading lots of Dostoevsky (also Gogol). It had an effect: it was only much later I was reading my dissertation and realized

fishcakes obviously involves people thinking about all sorts of things. It's only if you imagine products that float apart from the processes that you can say one is more material, or less cerebral, than the other. But this is why I say it's an idealist position: that's what elites always say. They're always claiming that what they do is somehow higher and purer and more abstract, that it floats above the muck and mire of real material life. To which I think the only appropriate response is (to use an appropriately earthy metaphor): bullshit; no, it isn't! The old lady cleaning the bathroom is just as much a part of the process of making law as anything else. In action, these distinctions have no meaning.

Even if you look at the history of Marxism, you notice something strange. Most Marxists have felt obliged to pay at least lip service to the base/ superstructure model since it appears in Contribution to a Critique of the Political Economy and all. But what do they do? (Note: action again). Well, Western Marxists mainly write about art and literature. It's hard to find a Marxist analysis of a new method of iron production, but easy to find Marxist analyses of legal systems or essays on the poetry of William Blake. You might say that old Leninist or Stalinist regimes were more hardcore on this point, but their actions were even more contradictory. They would insist that the base is determinant and lock up anyone who said otherwise. Sorry: if you really believe the material base determines ideological production, then you don't go around locking people up or shooting them because they write a poem you don't like. There would be no need to. So, in their actions, these regimes acted like extreme idealists, obsessed with the writings of intellectuals, whereas it was capitalists — who often claimed to believe in idealist philosophies — who acted like they actually believed in material determination, since they assumed that as long as they controlled the means of production, there was no need to arrest poets: everything else would largely take care of itself.

But perhaps I wander.

I guess your real question was much simpler: are we really at a point where we could just make the state disappear. Would alternative institutions simply arise immediately and spontaneously or would we have to slowly build them first. There's a lively debate about that as you might imagine. I don't know. But anarchists are certainly trying to help build alternatives. Our only proviso is that we don't want to do it *through* the state, because we think the state is a form of violence and you can't build freedom at the point of a gun.

MT: How can anarchism stop itself from simply being a reformist movement for just a bit more democracy? Something that sounds radical, but practically simply posits the small against the large and little more than that?

DG: Funny, in the US, we never get that question. We're the ones accusing others of reformism usually. I think the answer is: we don't engage with institutions that, as I mentioned, we consider forms of violence. We won't be coopted. We directly challenge institutions like the IMF and WTO, for example, but we won't sit down with them and negotiate compromises — we want them abolished. We don't ask for immigration reform, we ask for the abolition of borders. We believe in direct action: that is, insofar as possible, we act as if those institutions, those borders, state authority itself, does not exist. Ultimately that opens on a dual power strategy: wherever and whenever possible, we try to establish autonomous enclaves that operate outside the state and capitalism entirely, and we throw all our support to people in other places who are doing the same thing.

MT: You characterise Marxism as theorising, but anarchism as ethics. Do we need ethis more than theory?

DG: Well, theorists with no ethics can do some pretty horrible things. We've seen a lot of that in the twentieth century, whether it's from Stalinists or Neoliberals (and notice how easy it is for one to turn into the other.) Ethics without theory, however, is not even really possible. I mean, sure, we can pretend. But any way you look at the world implies some sort of the-

plays into the hands of the status quo, in the same way that protest, say, on some level implies that you're recognizing the authority of those you're protesting against. If you go around waving a sign that says "free Mumia" or "save the whales" — who are you addressing anyway? Are you calling on George Bush to do it? Kind of yes, but kind of no, you don't really want to think that's it, so you keep the grammar ambiguous — but still, in the end, you kind of are calling on those in power to cut it out or straighten out their act and that's a recognition of their power. That's why anarchists reject the logic of protest and prefer direct action — which means, in effect, insisting on your right to act as if you're already free. If someone is doing something bad you try to stop them, in the way you'd hope anyone would act in a free and just society — that is, if at all possible non- violently, but still, if a bunch of cops intervene, you do not treat them like authorities, you act as if they were a bunch of guys in blue costumes with weapons — that is, basically, a violent street gang. Anyway, so that's why I like people like Graves. He left the game. Walked out. Instead of rebelling, precisely, he insisted on his own right to make up a world he preferred, to make his own judgments about anything, and act largely as if structures of authority didn't exist. Milton? Hmm… not really a very good poet is he? Skelton? Much better! Iliad? Obviously a satire. Odyssey? Excellent, but not written by the same guy, clearly must have been written by a woman. I think it's a cultural version of what I like to do myself politically.

MT: How was Highland Madagascar? I understand that was where you have done much of your fieldwork. How did you find "living amongst the primitives"?

DG: Well, the people I knew in Madagascar weren't in the least sense primitive. They were certainly poor. Well educated, on average — if I explained to the average rice farmer that I was there as part of my doctoral work in anthropology, they would certainly know exactly what I meant (some might exclaim on

nated.) But all his essays are like that. He tries to demonstrate that figures like Virgil or Milton were actually terrible poets. One of my favorite essays of all time claims to reconstruct how Milton wrote *L'Allegro*: i.e., well, he started just writing about a milkmaid, and then he realized his father wouldn't approve so he turned her into a nymph, but then he realized that he'd used that rhyme before so he threw in this meaningless padding, etc etc… By the end of the essay he proves conclusively, at least to me, that towards the end of the poem Milton got his pages mixed up and that's why a story that's supposed to be about a mythic ogre is attributed to a chicken and again, hundreds of years have gone by and no one actually noticed.

His political ideas are just as odd: as I remarked in my Fragments book, he seems to have invented *both* primitivism (the kind that looks forward to industrial collapse as saving the planet and leading to the rebirth of a new society with reasonable, limited technology) and goddess-worshipping feminism, at the same time, though neither really want to see him as an ancestor in part because it's impossible to figure out if he was really serious. It's funny because a lot of the literary biographies seem to me to completely miss the point. They treat him like this wimpy guy obsessed by strong controlling women and justifying it by making up this weird mythology — where if you just read his essays, you're immediately in the presence of man who's obviously having as much fun as anyone can possibly have in the literary business, saying whatever he wants to say at any given moment no matter how outrageous, who respects absolutely nothing except his (usually numerous) lady loves. He was an utterly unsystematic thinker as a result. I spent much of my teenage years trying to figure out the system, since he kept insisting there was one. Then finally I felt I was in on the joke and that was even better.

You know, I'm thinking about this now. I hadn't really thought it all through before. But I think the characters I really like are not the ones who are exactly rebellious. Rebellion

ory about it. And if you don't apply any sort of critical theory to the world, at least implicitly, then you're just going to end up reproducing the dominant assumptions of the day and age which in our case is largely neoliberalism. Still, I find I agree with Holloway on this: good, critical theory doesn't start from a series of propositions about the world, from distanced reflection, from musing on how things might be better, but from an instinctual feeling that something is deeply, deeply wrong. He calls it "the scream", which is his own idiosyncratic expression, but it's not such a bad one. You look at the world and your first reaction is simply horror. At least for a lot of us — probably most people — it is. Something just seems terribly wrong. Then you start theorizing trying to figure out why. It's an initially ethical instinct, some kind of gut instinct, that starts you on the road to theorizing to begin with. I think it's important not to lose sight of that.

MT: Does this overlap with your concern to unite the ideas of value in Mauss and Marx?

DG: You know, I hadn't really thought about that quite so explicitly! Well, yes, Mauss was something of an ethical thinker. In this he was much closer to the anarchists. Marx of course had only contempt for morally based (as opposed to "scientific") critiques of capitalism, since he considered them nothing but petty bourgeois morality. We can't think outside the system, he said: the best we can do is to observe its own internal contradictions. From our current perspective, it seems easy to see how naive a lot of this was: the very idea that there can be an objective, scientific, approach to social problems is just as much a product of capitalist habits of thought — in fact, a lot more so — than, say, a 19th century Swiss watchmaker and reader of Bakunin who felt that wage labor was a bad deal and therefore favored the abolition of the wage system. And we have all had the opportunity to observe where cold- blooded utilitarianism in the pursuit of revolution can lead. Hence Mauss, who argued (like Marx's anarchist rivals)

that certain ethical principles are not simply the products of a particular socio-economic period but basic to humanity, and will always be there to some degree or another in any period of history, feudal or capitalist or anything else. That's why Mauss emphasized the gift. Feeling honor-bound to return or outdo a gift is supposed to be the product of an archaic habit of thought, the sort of thing you observe in the Trobriand Islands or Icelandic sagas, but in fact, if you buy dinner for a free-market economist, he'll act the same way: he'll feel like he really ought to take you out to dinner too, even if his theory tells him he should be happy he got something for nothing.

So, from a Maussian perspective, I suppose you could say that rather than there being one total system at any given time that determines everything — capitalism, or modernity, or whatever you want to call it — there's a bunch of minimal elements, basic types of social relationship with their own morality. There's reciprocal exchange — which could be market-type, or could be gift type. Those are all about autonomy. Then there are other types of gift relationship too: for instance, hierarchical relations, which aren't reciprocal at all. It you give something to a beggar or a child, you don't expect anything in return, it's more likely to be taken as a precedent and people will expect you to give it to them again the next time they see you. Because there's no assumption of equality. Gifts from peasants to feudal lords worked the same way. Then there are communistic relations: from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs. We all treat our closest relatives or best friends that way. The question is how they're all put together. So I'd say: genuinely capitalist relations are not even all that common in what we call capitalist systems. Most people working for a capitalist firm are acting like communists, at least to each other. (That is, if someone says "hand me that wrench," the other guy doesn't say "so what's it worth to you?") From that perspective,

capitalism isn't a total system — it's actually parasitical on communism and always has been.

MT: You mention Robert Graves' radical essays in your book. I didn't know about those: do tell me more.

DG: Oh, Graves was such a weird character. I used to love his stuff when I was a kid. Politically it was all over the place, some of his ideas were actually completely reactionary, others very radical indeed. In retrospect I think what really drew me to them was the sheer subversive fun of this guy who felt he didn't have to respect received wisdom on anything. He would write essays on famous poets and say how bad they were. Or for instance, the Iliad, say, why has no one noticed it's obviously a satire? I mean, it makes perfect sense it should be. Imagine you are a poet, a man of delicate sensibilities, and you live in early Iron Age Greece so the only way you can make a living is to sing the praises of a bunch of drunken thugs. Well, of course you're going to make fun of them, but make it subtle enough the idiots are not going to pick up on it and maybe skewer you with a sword. So he points out: why has no one noticed people always act the exact opposite of their epithets? Odysseus is always the just, and he's the guy who lies and murders in cold blood. Nestor is always the wise counsellor. Yet no one seems to have noticed that every single time in the Iliad that Nestor gives advice and people take it, it's always the worst thing anyone could possibly do and ends in complete catastrophe. And so on. So Graves translated it as a comedy and in fact it's hilarious. Actually that point really impressed me, because, if it's true, it gives us an important lesson on the nature of irony. That is: irony doesn't make any difference. Or often it doesn't. I'd always said actually that the difference between saying "the natives do this" and "the 'natives' do this" is actually none. But this is much more telling: here is this guy writes a hilarious satire of iron age society, and it takes almost three thousand years for anyone to even notice. (I mentioned this to one of the Yes-men incidentally and as you might expect he was fasci-