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March 2021

Retrieved on 2021-03-20 from https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/03/david-graeber-posthumous-essay-pandemic

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After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep

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In an essay penned shortly before his death, David Graeber argued that post-pandemic, we can't slip back into a reality where the way our society is organized — to serve every whim of a small handful of rich people while debasing and degrading the vast majority of us — is seen as sensible or reasonable.

Before he tragically died at the untimely age of fifty-one in September 2020, the anarchist, anthropologist, and organizer David Graeber wrote this essay on what life and politics could look like after the COVID-19 pandemic. *Jacobin* is proud to publish Graeber's essay for the first time.

At some point in the next few months, the crisis will be declared over, and we will be able to return to our "nonessential" jobs. For many, this will be like waking from a dream.

The media and political classes will definitely encourage us to think of it this way. This is what happened after the 2008 financial

crash. There was a brief moment of questioning. (What is "finance," anyway? Isn't it just other people's debts? What is money? Is it just debt, too? What's debt? Isn't it just a promise? If money and debt are just a collection of promises we make to each other, then couldn't we just as easily make different ones?) The window was almost instantly shut by those insisting we shut up, stop thinking, and get back to work, or at least start looking for it.

Last time, most of us fell for it. This time, it is critical that we do not.

Because, in reality, the crisis we just experienced *was* waking from a dream, a confrontation with the actual reality of human life, which is that we are a collection of fragile beings taking care of one another, and that those who do the lion's share of this care work that keeps us alive are overtaxed, underpaid, and daily humiliated, and that a very large proportion of the population don't do anything at all but spin fantasies, extract rents, and generally get in the way of those who are making, fixing, moving, and transporting things, or tending to the needs of other living beings. It is imperative that we not slip back into a reality where all this makes some sort of inexplicable sense, the way senseless things so often do in dreams.

How about this: Why don't we stop treating it as entirely normal that the more obviously one's work benefits others, the less one is likely to be paid for it; or insisting that financial markets are the best way to direct long-term investment even as they are propelling us to destroy most life on Earth?

Why not instead, once the current emergency is declared over, actually remember what we've learned: that if "the economy" means anything, it is the way we provide each other with what we need to be alive (in every sense of the term), that what we call "the market" is largely just a way of tabulating the aggregate desires of rich people, most of whom are at least slightly pathological, and the most powerful of whom were already completing the designs for the bunkers they plan to escape to if we continue to be

foolish enough to believe their minions' lectures that we were all, collectively, too lacking in basic common sense do anything about oncoming catastrophes.

This time around, can we please just ignore them?

Most of the work we're currently doing is dream-work. It exists only for its own sake, or to make rich people feel good about themselves, or to make poor people feel bad about themselves. And if we simply stopped, it might be possible to make ourselves a much more reasonable set of promises: for instance, to create an "economy" that lets us actually take care of the people who are taking care of us.