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Notes on Desire

David Graeber

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David Graeber: The idea that alienation is a bad thing is a modernist problem. Most philosophical movements—and, by extension, social movements—actually *embrace* alienation. You're trying to achieve a state of alienation. That's the ideal if you're a Buddhist or an early Christian, for example; alienation is a sign that you understand something about the reality of the world.

So perhaps what's new with modernity is that people feel they shouldn't be alienated. Colin Campbell wrote a book called *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* [1987], in which he argued that modernity has introduced a genuinely new form of hedonism. Hedonism is no longer just getting the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll or whatever but it's become a matter of selling new fantasies so that you're always imagining the thing you want. The object of desire is just an excuse, a pretext, and that's why you're always disappointed when you get it.

Campbell's argument makes total sense when you first read it. But in fact, again, it's backward. If you look at history—at, say, medieval theories of desire—it's utterly assumed that what you desire is—

Michelle Kuo: God.

DG: Or courtly love, yes. But whatever it ultimately is, the idea that by seizing the object of your desire you would resolve the issue was actually considered a symptom of melancholia. The fantasies themselves are the realization of desire. So by that logic, what Campbell describes is not a new idea. What's actually new is the notion that you should be able to resolve desire by attaining the object. Perhaps what's new is the fact that we think there's something wrong with alienation, not that we experience it. By most medieval perspectives, our entire civilization is thus really a form of clinical depression. [laughter]

— *“Another World: Michelle Kuo Talks with David Graeber”*
in Artforum

Insofar as it is useful to distinguish something called “desire” from needs, urges, or intentions, then, it is because desire:

1. is always rooted in imagination
2. tends to direct itself towards some kind of social relation, real or imaginary
3. that social relation generally entails a desire for some kind of recognition and, hence, an imaginative reconstruction of the self; a process fraught with dangers of destroying that social relation, or turning it into some kind of terrible conflict

— David Graeber, *“Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire”*