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Syria, Anarchism & Visiting Rojava

David Graeber

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DAVID GRAEBER: I was in Syria once. I was in southern Turkey. I was in Iraq. I was in a variety of different areas within the Kurdish territories that are experimenting with direct democracy.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about what brought you there, and certainly from the very beginning?

DAVID GRAEBER: It was less that I found them than they found me. There's people involved in the Kurdish Freedom Movement that ... it started ... it emerged from the PKK, which is a rather conventional, Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group in its origins. But something about its history took it in this radically new direction, and a lot of it was internal processes of women guerrillas sort of asserting themselves, and introducing feminism as a big theme. Part of it had to do with the particular intellectual evolution of their leader, Öcalan, who's become this ... since his arrest and imprisonment in this island prison in Turkey, has been reading a lot of Murray Bookchin and a lot of feminist theory, and kind of came around to a much more anarchist position, basically.

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They decided that rather than demanding a state of their own, they wished to simply make borders irrelevant and dissolve away states entirely. And it's kind of made sense to people in that part of the world. Remember the Kurds are a population who are divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

The idea they are somehow carving a government out of that seems unlikely. And they also make the rather ... a point you hear a lot of, actually, people will say, "Well, you know, we've come to realize in this part of the world, demanding your own country is basically the same as 'I demand the right to be tortured by secret policemen speaking my own language.'" It's not much of a demand. So they've come around to this idea of bottom-up direct democracy and sort of eliminating borders as the best way that they can come up with something like a Kurdistan that would make sense.

Interviewer: So the place is there? Can I even say the place is there? There is a physical place that you hinted.

DAVID GRAEBER: Kurdistan. I went to Rojava. Rojava – or west Kurdistan – is the Syrian part of Kurdistan. It's a large section of northern Syria along the Turkish border, and about two million people there engaged in what I think considered to be one of the great historical experiments. My father fought in the Spanish civil wars, so I kind of grew up in a place where the memories of what happened in Spain in '36, '37, '38 were very vivid. So one reason I came to be an anarchist is because, I always say, most people don't think anarchism is a bad idea. They think it's insane. No police, people just start killing each other. Nobody actually organized things without leaders.

And in fact, my father was in Barcelona when it was run by an anarchist principle. They just got rid of white collar workers, and sure enough they discovered these were basically bullshit jobs, that they didn't make any difference if they weren't there.

So having grown up like that, I understand that it's possible, but there hasn't been an experiment on that scale like what happened in Spain and the Republican-controlled area, especially anarchist

But they're acting in the knowledge that if they do something people don't like, those people will show up at the next meeting no matter how lazy they've been up until now. So in a way, they have to keep ... bear everybody's interests in mind because they don't have a right to represent them.

you're in Sweden or New Guinea or Ecuador or anyplace else. People want to have fun. They'll play around with the language.

But on the other hand, if you tell people they're doing it wrong, they'll believe you. So if you take a rule book for how language was in 1910 and say, "Look, look. You have corrupted the language." They'll say, "Oh my God, you're right. Teach us how to speak right." They'll all use slang and slack off and come up with funny new ways of talking, and then they'll believe you if you say that they shouldn't be doing that. And in a way, this is the fundamental dilemma that makes bureaucracy possible.

Interviewer: So you mean, for example language is something which happens to have rules, and if somebody comes in and says [inaudible 00:16:56]?

DAVID GRAEBER: But the rules are changing all the time.

Interviewer: Right. Do you think that we just like being dominated?

DAVID GRAEBER: I don't know if that's it. I mean, some people obviously do. Sometimes it's laziness; they just don't want to have the responsibility of having to decide things all the time. One of the reasons we like being dominated is because that way we can blame somebody else when something goes wrong. There's a certain heavy weight of responsibility when I constantly have to be part of ... the person making the decision.

I mean, the aspects of power that are pleasurable are balanced by the aspects of power which are scary, and to some people, definitely they think it's worth the risk and enjoy the pleasurable parts a lot more than they're scared by the scary parts, and other people are the other way. And that's one thing that allows power to emerge.

I mean, I feel very strongly, by the way, that compulsory participation in direct democracy is just as wrong as not allowing people to participate. In any example of successful, long-term democracy I know, some people don't show up. It's usually actually a quorum of maybe about a third of the people in a kibbutz or something like that. They're the process junkies. They're the political guys.

Kurd-held areas, since because everybody's so terrified of the people running things.

They don't mind if people say, "I hate you, I want to overthrow you" nearly so much as they say "You guys are ridiculous and unnecessary." That's what they really fear. So the enemies they like are the ones who try to replace the Marxists, basically. When those Marxists come, the police will still be there. There are probably going to be more of them, right? Anarchists come, the whole structure will be changed. People will be told that it's completely unnecessary.

So that kind of experiment they're really afraid of. They tend to stamp it out as quickly as possible. So this is the first time, I think, since Spain that you've had large area of territory under the control of people who are trying to do that; trying to create bottom-up direct democracy without a state.

Interviewer: Where else has that been tried?

DAVID GRAEBER: I mean, it's tried everywhere in the world for much of human history and worked fine. But under the modern industrial conditions, there have been various attempts. With most revolutionary history, you talk about the Paris commune, you talk about Kronstadt; you talk about Makhno in Ukraine. There have been attempts to do so. But usually everybody, on all sides including the left-wingers, turn on them and try to suppress it.

Interviewer: So what are the basic minimum things that have to organize or that [crosstalk 00:04:33]?

DAVID GRAEBER: They run the cities. It's a country of a real economy; it's a poor one and they're under embargo. But there are people driving cars, there is traffic rules, there's workshops and factories producing things, there's farms. It does all the things you have in a normal society. Roads have to be maintained.

But essentially, what they have done is created ... it's very interesting. I've said, I've described it as a dual power situation, but this is the first time in human history, I think, where you have a dual power situation where the same guy set up both sides. So they

have a thing that looks like a government; it's got a parliament, it's got ministers. They pass legislation.

But they also have the bottom-up structure. The bottom-up structure is what they "democratic confederalism." Every neighborhood has an assembly, and every assembly has working groups. They're people that handle issues and medical issues and security issues. And each one of those groups, each assembly and each working group, also has a women's group. They have to have 40 percent women or they don't have a quorum, but they also have an all-women's group that can veto anything they say. So it has to be ... everything is gender balanced. All officials, there's two: one male, one female of everything. Also, the army is like that. That's why they have all those famous images of women with weapons, but that's political, too.

People said very explicitly, they said, "Well look, we're anti-capitalist. We've always been anti-capitalist. But ..." I think they said, "but lesson of history we feel is that you can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of the state. And you can't get rid of the state without getting rid of patriarchy."

Well, how do you get rid of patriarchy? Well, making sure all women have access to automatic weapons is one place to start. You really can't push people around if they're armed. And they have their women's police forces, too, that like ... So they have direct democracy and that goes from these neighborhood councils, and those councils confederate into regional ones and then municipal ones, and they all send delegates, not representatives, to make decisions together in a big, elaborate system.

But the key is you have this top-down system, you have a bottom-up structure. Well, what they say is this isn't a state because anybody with a gun is answerable to the bottom-up structures and not the top-down. So the people on the top can't actually force anybody to do something they don't want to do. There's one exception, and that's women's rights.

disabled people, and that's a moral question." So that becomes a little bit of a political football. There's always things to debate and points of tension.

But nonetheless, you can be efficient when you have to, but you're efficient with the things that efficiency is more important than what is at stake.

Interviewer: I once asked you about bureaucracy in activist circles, had you ever seen it. And you told me that you could possibly talk about that forever. But if you could just tell me about that.

DAVID GRAEBER: That's exactly what I'm talking about. Now, people who don't understand that these are a set of principles around which one can improvise and find the thing which is best for a particular group of people and a particular thing they're trying to do, will tend to act like everything is a set of rules that you have to obey. And it's so frustrating to me.

I often had people within Occupy who were convinced that I was the guy demanding that there's a rule book of consensus, because I abhor consensus. I mean, I'm not for absolute consensus, modified consensus. There always has to be something ... there's always one or two people who are crazy or unreasonable or something. So, everything within reason, including reasonableness.

But nonetheless, there'll be some people thinking I'm the rule book guy, and other people saying I'm the crazy anarchist rip all the rules guy, which maybe that shows I'm hitting the right point in the middle. But yes, there is a tendency for creeping bureaucratization to set in and there's various reasons for that. I've actually ... one of the things I was interested in looking at in the book is why that happens.

Language is a great example of this. On the one hand, languages are always changing. There's no language on earth that's the same as it was 100 years ago. Why is that? Well, people like to play around. Everybody who is ... doing it a little different, they're having fun with it a little. And gradually, things ... doesn't matter if

have to come up and nobody can be compelled to do something; that's obviously stupid. You're going to have to make it a common sensical.

For example, consensus process. Everybody talks about it as if it's a complex set of rules, like Robert's Rules of Order, and they've had to press it. But they're doing it wrong. The idea is that nobody should be forced to do something that they violently object to. If you don't have the means to do so, whatever you do will be a consensus because you're going to have to listen to what everybody thinks, and you're going to have to come around to a position that nobody finds violently objectionable, which is basically all consensus is.

Interviewer: But what happens when people say, "We don't have enough time to listen to everyone?"

DAVID GRAEBER: Well then, that depends on the situation. If something has to be done, then it's okay to say all right, for the next three hours she's in charge. There's nothing wrong with that if everybody agrees to it. Or you improvise.

But consensus is the default mode, and all I believe in is taking that basic principal that if you can't force people to do things that they don't want to do or they think is absolutely wrong or idiotic, then you're going to have to develop a structure of hearing people out. That's the only thing I wouldn't compromise on. Everything else is like what's the most effective way to do that?

For example, in Kurdistan they actually came up with a very interesting and creative solution to this. They say that they make a distinction between technical matters, and moral or political matters. And they say with the technical things you can do a majority vote. "Are we going to meet at four or are we going to meet at five?" Then show of hands. If it's like, "Should we be violent or non-violent?" Well, then you have to have consensus.

And then of course, obviously the question is who gets to decide what's a moral question and what's the technical one? So somebody might say, "Well, the question of four or five bears on

So they'll have laws like abolishing child marriage or something like that, and they say some of these villages would probably reinstate it if we let them. But that's off limits. And they do have an enforcement mechanism, but that's an all-women police force that enforces this rule specifically relevant to women.

Interviewer: How long have they been going with these?

DAVID GRAEBER: Three or four years now.

Interviewer: And what was the inspiration? Was this the gentleman that you said in the prison named-

DAVID GRAEBER: Öcalan. Abdullah Öcalan. His picture is everywhere. It's interesting because generally speaking, they very much shun the cult of personality. In fact, they never have images of anybody who's alive except for him. They have pictures of people who are dead, so there's pictures of martyrs everywhere from the wars. But they'll never show an image of someone who's still around because that would be anti-democratic making someone out to be a charismatic leader. He is the exception, but that's because he's in prison for the rest of his life, so he's the leader and everybody accepts him as such. But the thing is, Turkey was going to execute him but they had still wanted to get into the EU at that point so they knew they couldn't do it.

And according to law, he could put any testimony relevant to his crime, he had the right to write it all down. So he decided that in order to explain and contextualize the crimes he's accused of, he would have to write 12 different books, including a three volume history of the Middle East.

And so this work has been coming out continually and is used as a sort of grounding for debate within the Kurdish movement. And he made all these declarations, "We need to get away from purely class struggle model and understand that the oppression of women is the most primordial and immediate thing we have to deal with. We have to understand that ecology is equally important to exploitation." So they've become this sort of ecological feminist army based on principles of direct democracy.

Interviewer: Are his works available in English?

DAVID GRAEBER: Oh yeah. Not all of them, obviously, but there's volumes coming out continually. And you know, from an anarchist point of view, to some degree it is a little creepy. You go there and there are all these pictures of the great leader; I came to refer to him as Uncle Eoj, like Uncle Joe backwards. He's the opposite because he's like the authoritarian leader telling everybody to read anarchism and stop being authoritarian. And it puts the old fashioned authoritarians in a terrible bind because they have to do everything the leader says. The leader's saying think for yourself.

Obviously, the young people are very enthusiastic. They're not anarchists, but they embrace a lot of anarchist ideas; they've been reading anarchism. They're anti-state, so what they call themselves doesn't really matter from an anarchist position as long as you're anti-state and anti-capitalism.

Interviewer: How do they protect the territory?

DAVID GRAEBER: They believe in the notion of defense. Well the thing is, they're the best fighters in Syria.

Interviewer: What's the difference between state and what they're doing? Because they've got their territory, so surely ...

DAVID GRAEBER: It's to protect society. They say that like ... the argument they have is ...

Interviewer: Isn't that a semantic difference, though?

DAVID GRAEBER: Well, they think not because what they would say is that as state is a monopoly of legitimate use of force, of course, in the territory. They don't have such a monopoly. It's a democratic bottom-up organization. There is no institution that can do that.

So then they say, "Well, any institution has to defend itself, anything in nature has to defend itself." Defense is a ... but it's waging aggressive war, attacking ... So their army is called the People's Defense Units. And it's also democratic; they elect their leaders. Every night they discuss the decisions and critique them and can remove them, and so it's all very much an experiment in democracy.

And you'd think this was like, "Great. As soon as they need a real army, let's see what happens." Well they always win. They've been completely defeating ISIS systematically on the ground, and at the moment, they're marching on the ISIS capital.

Interviewer: So this is "We've all got each other's back?" That's their vibe, yeah? That's their idea. And so you said they're marching on ...

DAVID GRAEBER: Raqqa. America is in the ironic position of having to back a bunch of anarchists. These are the only people who are good military fighters in the region who are actually trying to take out the fascists.

Interviewer: I thought it was quite strange, on my way here I thought I might be asking David about project management, given your work on bureaucracy and bullshit jobs. But in a way, these people are kind of exemplifying good project management, are they not?

DAVID GRAEBER: Oh, yeah. People misunderstand; they think that people who are against ... that anarchists are against all forms of anything that even looks like a bureaucracy; any form of administration, any form of management; any form of organization, even. This is ... I'm sure there are some individuals like that. But as Malatesta used to point out, "If you say that anarchists are crazy people who are just against everything, all people who are crazy people who are just against everything will start to call themselves anarchists." That doesn't actually mean much about what the other ones who are always calling themselves anarchists will say.

Anarchism isn't against organization; it means people don't have to be compelled to organize themselves. In fact, they believe in organization more than anybody else.

Interviewer: Okay, because actually the thing that I was wondering was, what are your tidbits of ... your tips on project management?

DAVID GRAEBER: Well, I think that accountability is key. If you have a system where anybody can say what they want, you'll