

# David Graeber is Gone: Revisiting His Wrongful Termination from Yale

Joshua Frank

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*I am so very sad to hear that David Graeber died yesterday in Italy at the age of 59. David was not only brilliant, but he was genuine, accessible, and passionate. What a huge, immeasurable loss, could 2020 be any worse? Here is an interview I did with David in 2005 when he was wrongfully fired from his post at Yale. RIP friend. The world, and our movement, was so much better off with you in it. Your fighting spirit will live on. – JF*

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David Graeber, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, and the author of *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* and *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, among many other scholarly publications. Last week Graeber was informed that his teaching contract at Yale would not be extended. However, it was not Graeber's scholarship that was ever in question; rather it was his political philosophies that may have played a heavy hand in the administration's unwarranted decision. Graeber, a renowned anarchist scholar, recently spoke with Joshua Frank about the fiasco. As one of our other favorite anthropologists David Price put it, this "is a ghastly look under the hood at how academic knowledge is manufactured at America's 'finest' institutions."

JOSHUA FRANK: Prof. Graeber, can you talk a little bit about the circumstances leading up to Yale's decision not to renew your teaching contract? How much of their decision do you think was based on your political persuasion and activism?

DAVID GRAEBER: Well, it's impossible to say anything for certain because no official reasons were given for the decision and I'm not allowed to know what was said in the senior faculty meeting where my case was discussed. In fact, if anyone who attended were to tell me what I was accused of, they would themselves be accused of violating "confidentiality" and they would get in trouble, too. But one thing that was repeatedly stressed to me when I was preparing my material for review is that no one is really taking issue with my scholarship. In fact, it was occasionally hinted to me that if anything I publish too much, have received too much international recognition, and had too many enthusiastic letters of support from students. All that might have actually weighed against me. Again, I have no way of knowing if that's really true, because everything

is a secret. But I'd be willing to say this much: What happened to me was extremely irregular – almost unheard of, really. It happened despite the fact that I'm one of best published scholars and most popular teachers in the department. Does it have anything to do with the fact that I'm also one of the only declared anarchist scholars in the academy? I'll leave it to your readers to make up their own minds.

JF: If I am not mistaken, you have been up for review at Yale before, correct? What has changed since those reviews were held?

DG: I had an official third-year review and I had no problems with that, they told me I was doing fine. Then, after that, I started writing essays defending anarchism, and getting involved in big mobilizations against the IMF and G8 as well organizing with the peace movement. When I got back from my sabbatical, everything had changed. Several of the senior profs wouldn't even say hello to me. I was assigned no committee work. When I came up for review in my sixth year for promotion to term associate – normally a rubber stamp – suddenly, several senior faculty virulently opposed my promotion on the grounds that I didn't do any committee work. Not surprising since they refused to give me any. They also produced a whole panoply of petty charges – “he comes late to class,” that sort of thing – which, as usual, I was not allowed to know about much less respond to. Of course I was acting exactly as I'd acted for the first three years, too, but suddenly it was a terrible problem. The vote deadlocked so they took it to the Dean who told them they couldn't fire someone without a warning, so I was given a letter telling me I had to do something about my “unreliability” and do more service work. My contract was extended for just two years instead of the usual four, and I was told they would vote at the end of the next year to see if it would be extended (so that I would be able to come up for tenure.) So this year I've been running the colloquium series, doing all sorts of extra teaching – this term for instance, I effectively taught three courses instead of the required two because I had one weekly class with undergraduates who were all taking independent studies with me – taught one of the most popular courses in Yale (Myth and Ritual, with 137 students) ... But on Friday May 6, I was informed that they had voted not to renew my contract anyway and offered no explanation as to why.

JF: I know there is no union you can turn to at Yale for support, as faculty members are not allowed to unionize, but have you reached out to the Graduate Employee and Student Organization (GESO, Yale's graduate student union)? I know they are not recognized as a legitimate union by the university, but have they been an ally in all of this?

DG: To be honest, I actually tried to avoid getting involved in campus activism for many years. I figured we all have to make our little compromises, mine would be: I'd be an activist in New York, and a scholar in New Haven, and that meant avoiding the whole unionization question as much as I could. In the long run, of course, it was impossible. Our department is extremely divided, certain elements in the senior faculty hate GESO with an infinite passion and campaign tirelessly against it, the students are all factionalized; it's a mess. I supported the principle of unionization of course; I was also very critical of what I saw as the top-down organization of the union (after all, I'm an anarchist – my idea of a good union is the IWW); I just tried to be fair to all sides. But in the end I got drawn in. It all came to a head a few months ago, actually, when certain elements in the senior faculty tried to kick out a very brilliant graduate student who also happened to be one of the department's major organizers. As it turned out, I was the only professor on her committee willing to openly stand up for her during the meeting where they tried to terrorize her into leaving the program. She refused to back down, and with the help

of some of my colleagues, we managed to get her through her defense successfully, but after that, certain elements in the senior faculty seemed determined to take revenge.

I'm definitely working with some union people now. But almost all of the graduate students, the most pro-GESO and the most anti-GESO, seem to have been shocked and outraged by what happened. In fact, one of the things that has come of this, that's strangely wonderful, is that it's the first thing that really brought both sides together. The students are organizing and they've put together a petition and are already starting to take all sorts of action to try to pressure the university to reverse the decision.

JF: Do you think some of this extreme tension within your department, and the episode with the grad student you defended, played a role in your contract not being renewed? Or was this just an extension of an already contentious relationship? There seems to be a huge divide between some of the senior faculty and yourself. What else, if anything, have they done to show their dislike for your political persuasion – or is it more your activism that gets under their skin?

DG: I don't want to give the impression that the senior faculty are all the same: there are some amazing, wonderful scholars amongst the senior faculty here. We're really just talking about three, maybe four, who are atrocious bullies. I have five colleagues who were just awesome, and who fought as hard as they could to defend me. It's just that the bullies never give up – they're willing to throw all their time and energy into these battles, since after all, most have long since given up on any meaningful intellectual life – and of course since everything's secret, there's no accountability.

They can tell one lie about you, get caught in it, and then next time around just make up another one and eventually the majority of the faculty will say "it doesn't matter whether what they say is true. If they hate this guy so much, then clearly his presence is divisive. Let's just get rid of him." As for the episode with the grad student: absolutely. Again, some of these people have no intellectual life. In most departments there's one or two characters like that, you know. Their power is the only thing they really have. So anyone challenges that power in any way and they react like cornered tigers. That's why they hate the union so much. That's why they go berserk if anyone stands up to them.

One thing that I've learned in academia is no one much cares what your politics are as long as you don't do anything about them. You can espouse the most radical positions imaginable, as long as you're willing to be a hypocrite about them. The moment you give any signs that you might not be a hypocrite, that you might be capable of standing on principle even when it's not politically convenient, then everything's different. And of course anarchism isn't about high theory: it's precisely the willingness to try to live by your principles.

JF: So are academics not supposed to be activists then? I'm thinking of Ward Churchill's recent controversy at the University of Colorado and Joseph Massad's at Columbia. Do you think your case is symptomatic of a larger problem in the US where radical professors are being targeted for their unpopular political views? Or are these just isolated incidents?

DG: If you'd asked me six months ago, I would have probably said "academics can be activists as long as they do nothing to challenge the structure of the university," or anyone's power within it. If you want to make an issue of labor conditions in Soweto, great, you're a wonderful humanitarian; if you want to make an issue of labor conditions for the janitors who clean your office, that's an entirely different story. But I think you're right, something's changing. I mean, I'm sure it's not like there's someone giving orders from above or anything, but there's a climate suddenly where people feel they can get away with this sort of thing, and the Ward Churchill and

Massad cases obviously must have something to do with that. I've been hearing a lot of stories, in recent weeks, about radical teachers suddenly being let go for no apparent reason. They don't even have to dig up something offensive you're supposed to have said any more – at least, in my case no one is even suggesting I did or said anything outrageous, in which case, at least there'd be something to argue about.

If I had to get analytical about it, maybe I'd put it this way. We're moving from the neoliberal university to the imperial university. Or at least people are trying to move us there. It used to be as long as you didn't challenge the corporatization of the university, you'd be basically okay. But the neoliberal project – where the politicians would all prattle about “free markets and democracy” and what that would actually mean was that the world would be run by a bunch of unelected trade bureaucrats in the interests of Citibank and Monsanto – that kind of fell apart. And of course the groups I've been working with – People's Global Action, the DANs and ACCs and the like – we had a lot to do with that. It threw the global elites into a panic, and of course the normal reaction of global elites when thrown into a panic is to go and start a war. It doesn't really matter who the war's against. The point is once you've got a war, the rules start changing, all sorts of things you'd never be able to get away with otherwise become possible, whether in Haiti or New Haven. In that kind of climate, nasty people start trying to see what they can get away with. “Fire the anarchist for no particular reason? Maybe that'll work.”

That's why I feel we have to fight this. I don't think it would be all that hard for me to find another job. My CV and publications kind of speak for themselves. But if you let something like this stand, it hurts everyone. So when people asked me whether they should start mobilizing for me, I said, go right ahead. And the outpouring of support has been just amazing. We already have 1400 signatures from Argentina to Singapore and the petition has only been up for a couple days now. I hear that the European parliament is about to pass a bill specifically about my case. The teacher's union in the UK is going to consider placing Yale on their “gray list.” People are mobilizing all over the world.

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