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THE BIG PICTURE is David Graeber's picture: An anthropologist, anarchist, and activist based at Goldsmiths, University of London, Graeber adopts a bracingly wide-angle view in our era of specialization. His acclaimed 2011 book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* poses a sweeping rereading of obligation, exchange, and value; his numerous writings on the alternative political models provided by direct democracy and direct action have found a wide audience beyond the social sciences. He has also put his voice to use, having long participated in global protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and its myriad national and international offshoots (for which he has become a somewhat reluctant icon). Here, Graeber talks to *Artforum* editor Michelle Kuo about the uses and abuses of social and economic theory in the realm of culture—and the possibilities these disciplinary crossings may still hold for changing how we see and how we relate.

MICHELLE KUO: Many artists and critics have been reading your work on everything from the long history of debt, to

anarchism, to culture as "creative refusal." That interest seems to be a reflection of how the art world, at this moment, sees itself in parallel to politics and economics. Why does the art world want to call on economic theories of immaterial labor, for instance, or strategies of resistance tied to such theories and worldviews? We love to import terms from outside our discipline and, frankly, our comprehension. The misprision can often be productive, but it can also be very frustrating.

DAVID GRAEBER: Yes, it's similar to the relation between anthropology and philosophy—as seen by anyone who actually knows anything about philosophy.

MK: In a report on a conference of social theorists at Tate Britain ["The Sadness of Post-Workerism" (2008)], you debunked the term *immaterial labor* convincingly. You argued that it's confined to a very small view of history because it caricatures what came before, let's say, 1965 or 1945 in order to argue that everything is completely different now.

DG: Immaterial labor is a very reductive concept. It's also a very deceptive one: It combines the postmodern language of utter rupture, the idea that the world is completely new due to some grandiose break in history, in order to disguise a genuinely antiquated, 1930s version of Marxism where everything can be categorized as either infrastructure or superstructure. After all, what's "immaterial" here? Not the labor. The product. So that one form of labor that produces something I consider material is fundamentally different from another form of labor that produces something I consider immaterial. But the greatest strength of Marxist theory, in my view, is that it destroys that distinction. Art is just another form of production and, like all creative processes, necessarily is material *and* involves thought and ideas.

MK: So in a way, we're paradoxically reinforcing old binaries.

DG: Exactly, yes.

MK: What's interesting, too, is the entire notion of rupture. As historians or cultural critics, we're always taught that rupture is good and continuity is bad. It's still a reaction against [Leopold von] Ranke's narrative version of history. In other words, continuity is seen as a reactionary way of looking at history. But you're obviously interested in posing a more sweeping, long-range history or theory of history. Why did you choose to do so?

DG: As an activist it strikes me that some of the most radical, most revolutionary movements today base themselves in indigenous communities, which are communities that see themselves as traditionalists but think of tradition itself as a potentially radical thing. So the deeper the roots you have, the more challenging things you can do with them.

MK: But that's modernism, too, in a way—T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

DG: Well, to a large degree, what we call postmodernism is modernist. What we call poststructuralism is structuralism. It's because you have that static notion of structure that you have to have rupture.

MK: Which also still largely determines contemporary sociology and its foundation, however buried, in structural functionalism. In the art world, we still seem heavily indebted to [Fredric] Jameson looking at the long-range economic theories of [Ernest] Mandel and their relation to cultural shifts.

DG: Which is, again, infrastructure and superstructure … What's so fascinating to me is that Jameson first proposes that postmodernism is going to be the cultural superstructure of this new technological infrastructure that Mandel is predicting, which we forget now. It was going to be based on robot factories and new forms of energy, and the machines would be doing all the work—human work was supposed to disappear. This is what everybody was anticipating in the late '60s. Working-class politics will disappear when there are no more workers, and we're going to have to think of something else

on which to base inequality. And Jameson was describing the timeless, superficial culture that's going to emerge when we have flying cars and nanorobots produce everything.

You could just imagine things, and they would appear. Of course, those technologies never did appear. Instead, industrialists produced a similar effect by outsourcing the factories—but that was the timeless, superficial illusion. Your sneakers look more high-tech today but were created using even more low-tech processes than before. So in Jameson there is this fascinating play of infrastructure and superstructure; the play of images becomes a way of disguising the fact that the infrastructure has barely changed at all.

MK: In general, theories of labor and culture tend to revert to periodization, to impose a deterministic relationship between economic shifts and cultural ones. What do you think of the impetus to find moments of social revolution, for example, and then correlates in the cultural sphere?

DG: Well, I'm guilty of that myself, on occasion. Take the notion of flameout. When I first proposed it, I was drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein's notion that at least since 1789, all real revolutions have been world revolutions and that the most significant thing they accomplished was to change political common sense, which is what I like to think is also happening right now. Wallerstein himself is already talking about the world revolution of 2011.

It happens twice—it happens in the artistic field with the explosion of Dada right around the world revolution of 1917, and then it happens in the '70s in Continental philosophy, in the wake of what Wallerstein calls the world revolution of 1968. In each case you have a moment where a particular grand tradition, whether the artistic or the intellectual avant-garde, in a matter of just a few years runs through almost every logical permutation of every radical gesture you could possibly make within the terms of that tradition. And then suddenly everybody says, "Oh no, what do we do now?"

Which is what happens in economics when you say people are rational actors trying to maximize some utility. If you ask, "What about people who sacrifice themselves for a cause?" Well, they're trying to maximize the good feeling they get from sacrificing themselves for a cause. Why do they get a good feeling from sacrificing? That's psychology. They push all the meaningful questions somewhere else.

MK: But economics itself is incorporating that now. Contemporary economics has absorbed the nonrational actor into its models.

DG: But all economic actors are irrational—they have to be, because they have no reason to want what they want. Take the very notion of self-interest, which I describe in the book. Why are we using the word *interest*? The word comes directly from the idea of interest payments. It's the transformation of what Saint Augustine called *self-love*, and they decided to make it a little less theological so they called it interest. Interest is that which endlessly accrues and grows, so that Augustinian notion of the infinite passions and desires is still there—but in a financialized, rationalized form.

Rationality is always the tool of something. Anarchism, for me, moves beyond mere rationality to something else. I call it reasonableness. And reasonableness is a much more complicated notion than rationality, but includes it. Reasonableness for me is the ability to make compromises between formally incommensurable values, which is exactly that which escapes classic models of rationality. And it's what most of what life is actually about.

As a political radical myself, coming of age intellectually in the wake of such a moment, there was a profound sense of frustration that it was as if we'd reverted to this almost classical notion of a dream time, where there's nothing for us to do but to repeat the same founding gestures over and over again. We can return to this kind of creation in an imaginary way, but the time of creation itself is forever lost.

MK: That's reminiscent of artists who became involved in Occupy Wall Street, for example—talking to some of them, it was clear that they were searching for something. And in a way it seemed like a quintessentially modernist search for an antidote to alienation.

DG: 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—

MK: 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*]

MK: I'm not sure all medievalists would agree with you, but the parallel is interesting: It goes back to this caricature of a totalizing system. We live under what we assume is a totalizing system of capital today, and yet the medieval church was a hegemony that was in fact far more totalizing.

DG: Indeed.

MK: Nevertheless, tremendous cultural activity and thought occurred within those parameters. So for us the question becomes, In what ways can we operate under hegemony and still conceive of other possible worlds—worlds that, you've argued, are already present?

DG: That's one of the things I try to drive home in all my work—that the very notion that we exist in a totalizing system is itself the core ideological idea we need to overcome. Because that idea makes us willfully blind to at least half of our own activity, which could just as easily be described as being communistic or anarchistic. These are the other worlds already present in our daily life. But we don't acknowledge them. We don't call acts of sharing, or the state-supported industries all around us, communist, even though key aspects of them clearly are.

MK: What's interesting for the practice of art is that, of course, the very notion of critique is premised to a certain degree on a totalizing system. There has to be something to disrupt, combat, reroute. How do you understand critique more specifically?

DG: I think about this all the time. I mean, I am suspicious of [Bruno] Latour's volley in "Why Has Critique Run Out of

There is no overall totality. If there's an ideological illusion, it's the very idea that there could be—that we live in "capitalism," for instance, a total system that pervades everything, rather than one dominated by capital. But at the same time, I think it's deeply utopian to imagine a world of utter plurality without any conceptual totalities at all. What we need is one thousand totalities, just as we need one thousand utopias. There is nothing wrong with a utopia unless you have just one.

MK: Something that has perplexed me as well, not only about critique within the realm of artistic practice but also more generally about certain aspects of Occupy, is the reliance on instrumental rationality or, in other words, statistics. Even the "99 Percent" slogan—what's strange is that, of course, at a certain point in time those kinds of facts and figures would in fact themselves have been seen as suspect. Positivism or rationality itself was formerly under scrutiny. And they don't seem to be now in the same way. You may not buy Latour's bid to revisit empiricism, but it seems like protest movements today retain a fundamental assumption of quite traditional economic metrics and laws, when previously they would be associated with the attempt to overthrow such basic assumptions.

DG: In terms of rationality, that's interesting, because I think that the rationality debate is largely misplaced. If you think about what rationality is, it's a remarkably minimal concept. I mean, if you say someone is rational, all you're saying is they're not insane. They can make basic logical connections.

It doesn't take much to be rational. I think that the forms of democratic process we're developing, their strength lies in the fact that they're going beyond rationality, because any theory of society or human action that begins from rationality ultimately ends up with something like Hume, where reason is a slave of the passions, and passions are something that are utterly unassimilable to rational inquiry, prior in some way.

would instigate a revolution in society—that's as potent as any to follow. But whether you want to introduce frisson or cogs in the machine, or you want to slow things down or create friction or divert the flows of capital or redistribute the sensible, these all seem like ways of talking about defamiliarization, a kind of revelatory practice of changing one's perspective or sensation, or undoing the programmed gaze, or pulling back the curtain and demystifying some larger scheme.

I think we've turned to these notions as a way of seeking to articulate the kinds of political power art might actually wield—it has to do with debates in the art world now that evince very conflicted feelings about whether or not our discourse ascribes completely fantastical powers to a work of art, saying that a work somehow contests neoliberalism because of X, Y, and Z or whatever. And the sinking feeling that altering perception or sensation or flows of information is merely to repeat what already happens in consumer economies. But as we grapple with these questions, I wonder if we are condemned to rehearse this very old problem, and whether we need to think of another approach.

DG: It takes you back to the notion of critique. It relates to the Marxian notion in which you have the ruthless critique of everything that exists, where everything can be seen from the perspective of its role in reproducing some larger system of alienation or inequality or hierarchy, whatever it may be.

Then you can also argue that every human possibility is simultaneously present. [Marcel] Mauss thought communism and individualism were two sides of the same coin. But democracy, monarchy, markets—everything is always present. So in that case it's not so much a question of characterizing a system as of looking at which forms of relations are currently dominant and which ones have managed to present themselves as innate, given, the essence of human nature.

This is what I find most useful. If you take that as a starting point, what critique is *is not* revealing the totality of the system.

Steam?" [2004], which essentially said—I'm paraphrasing—"Let us critique the idea of critique. We must contest what's become of relativism with a renewed type of empiricism."

MK: Right, although it also was a valuable intervention to have made.

DG: Yes—if you apply the logic of critique too consistently, you create this almost gnostic notion of reality, that the one thing we can do is to be the person who realizes the world is wrong.

It may be incredibly rewarding intellectually, but it's also a terrible trap. I always go back to Marx's famous phrase from 1843, "Toward a Ruthless Critique of Everything That Exists." It was something he wrote when he was twenty-five, which is appropriate for that age. When I was younger, I felt that way, too. Now I feel that such ruthlessness has its price.

But it strikes me that radical theory has always been caught between that moment and the Marxian moment in which you try to understand the rule, all the hidden structures of power and the way in which every institution that might seem innocuous contributes to reproducing some larger totality, which is one of domination and oppression. And so, if you take it too seriously, critique rather loses its point because it becomes impossible to imagine anything outside. That's when you end up needing, relying on, the logic of total rupture. Something will happen, I don't know, a really big riot, and then during the effervescence a new world will just come into being. There are insurrectionists who say that outright.

In the anarchist movement, in fact, there was a movement back and forth between the emphasis on rupture and its opposite. During the global-justice movement, the big word was *prefiguration*—the notion of building the institutions of a new society in the shell of old. Then came the frustration after 9/11. A lot of people turned back to insurrectionism, which was posed as this radical new theory. Of course it was really going back to one model of anarchism from the 1890s, which incor-

porated the Marxist logic of fundamental rupture. They combined it with French theory from the 1970s and thought they had something new. It's a moment of despair.

MK: An exquisite corpse.

DG: Yes, and because of that model, they can't understand that communism has *always* been present, which is what I would argue, that it's the basis of any social relations, any ontological ground of sociality. Instead they see it as something new in the same way that they've suddenly discovered immaterial labor—

MK: Or biopolitics, as you've pointed out.

DG: Indeed, biopolitics is nothing new. The notion that the health and prosperity of the population are bound up in sovereignty is actually the founding notion of sovereignty.

MK: The question then becomes, What do these everyday moments of communism mean for a theory of the individual? How do they relate to individuality?

DG: I developed that relation in the *Debt* book, and it's been somewhat misunderstood. One of the ideas I was trying to pursue was how one comes up with something like the value of the individual without having to frame it within the rather mystical notion that you have a unique crystalline core, which is the basis of your value, irrespective of social relations. Because it struck me, if you look at matters like compensation for wrongful death and the ways traditional societies resolve feuds, there is very clearly an assumption of the unique value of the individual. But the uniqueness is predicated on the fact that the individual is a unique nexus of social relations.

And I think that's what we've lost—the notion that we're sedimented beings created by endless configurations of relations with others. I think individuality is something we constantly create through relations with others, and that, in a way, this very fact resolves [Émile] Durkheim's favorite problem, which is: How do I reward society for having allowed me to become an individual? Durkheim had this idea that we are all burdened

MK: It helps to explain why the history of anarchism within the visual arts encompasses some very unlikely suspects from very different milieus, like Seurat, Signac, Fénéon, Barnett Newman, John Cage, who were all distinct from histories of dissensus or of antagonism.

DG: It's not my area, but I could read up on it. [*laughter*]

MK: It seems that some of the artists who were involved in Occupy were looking for the possibilities that consensus posed with respect to ways of relating socially or ways of forging social bonds that were different.

DG: Precisely.

MK: But just as at any other moment in time that we've discussed, artists may dip into this kind of sphere in order to feel personally invigorated or emotionally validated in some way and then go back to their daily lives. Nothing really changes.

DG: And I still have publishers. I think it's all about the creation of firewalls between vertical organizations and horizontal organizations, individual celebrity and collective decision making; it's all about how to create membranes between different but simultaneous worlds.

MK: That sounds suspiciously like capitalist schizophrenia.

DG: Yeah, I realized I was moving in a certain direction there. But it's significant that Guattari came up with the notion of the machine when he was trying to think of a nonvanguardist form of political organization. And while I'm skeptical of what people have done with that legacy, Guattari's original formulation remains important.

MK: But to think of alternate worlds or, to a lesser extent, many of the propositions concerning culture and the political—it's all still a version of defamiliarization, in a way.

DG: It's still formalist.

MK: Maybe at its best.

DG: Not even that good. OK.

MK: Which is to say that the Russian Formalists came up with a theory of revolution—that a revolution in perception

collective, which is mostly women, insisted on collective authorship, and she feels unable to attach her name to the work. And it just brings home the tension a lot of women artists, in particular, feel, that they're much more likely to be involved in these collective projects. On the one hand, such collectives aim to transcend egoism, but to what degree are they just reproducing the same structural suppression women artists regularly experience, because here too a woman is not allowed to claim authorship of her best work?

How do you resolve the dilemma? Yes, it is the collective that makes you an individual, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't become an individual. It's a really interesting question. But I thought I would throw it out there because I don't know the answer either.

MK: That leads us to the model of consensus, which is interesting to me because I participated in consensus in a very dilettantish way, in college. And I've always wondered whether or not consensus actually promotes or risks a lapse into stasis rather than engendering action or even active thought.

DG: Consensus is a default mode to me. There is a consensus process with a particular form that has emerged through feminism, anarchism, different social movements. But what I always emphasize is that if you can't force people to do things they don't want to do, you're starting with consensus one way or another. The techniques you reach to get to consensus are secondary.

So when people talk about anarchist forms of organization and have assumed that either we are anti-organizational or we're only for very limited forms of collective, I always say, "Well, no." Anarchism believes in any form of organization that would not require the existence of armed guys whom you could call up if things really went wrong. That could include all sorts of social forms. And on the most basic level, that's all consensus really means.

by an infinite social debt, which he inherited from Auguste Comte—the idea that you owe society for allowing you to be an individual, that individuality is a kind of cosmic debt to society or to nature. I wanted to deconstruct the entire notion that one's existence can be conceived as anything like debt. Since, after all, a debt is a relation of jural equality. It's premised on the notion that there is a contractual relation between two equal parties. But how can the individual and society conceivably be posed as equal partners to a business deal? It's absurd.

So I wanted to move instead to a notion of the individual as a nexus of relations. But in order to do that you have to reimagine a lot of things, including, I suspect, our very notions of mind. A lot of the things we think of as the ultimate products of individuality are in fact products of relationships, of dyadic or triadic relations of one kind or another.

MK: It's one way out of the structure-versus-agency problem.

DG: Precisely, yes.

MK: And yet the legacy of critique within the art world seems to be all about structure and not about agency. It's as if there is no agency. And so many critics and artists arrive at this impasse because they're essentially stuck in those two categories.

DG: As is all social theory. Even though sociologists deny it.

MK: Even the most sophisticated Bourdevin perspectives.

Beyond the question of the individual, the other dimension in question is time. Do you think that anthropology and art can still help each other in some way to get a better picture of the *longue durée*?

DG: Definitely. That was one of the points of my book. I first was putting it together in a piece for *Mute* in the immediate wake of 2008, and I began by saying that when you're in a crisis, the first thing you have to do is to ask, What is the larger rhythmic or temporal structure in which these events are taking place?

So I decided to cast my net as widely as possible, to say, What if this is part of a genuinely world-historic breaking point, the sort of thing that only happens every five hundred years or so—my idea of a long oscillation between periods of credit—and, surprisingly, it worked. That's one reason I ended up writing the book. It might all seem contradictory, since I am arguing against the notion of rupture, but I also insist that this breaking point can only be understood by looking at continuities in the longest possible *durée*.

MK: In the same way, perhaps one can only look at shifts in culture right now in terms of a much broader time line. But those shifts, however we conceive of them, can't really be reduced to waves or cycles, just as, I think, virtually no contemporary economist takes Kondratieff waves seriously, or other comparable long-wave theories of the world economy. Yet no one seems to be posing an alternative.

DG: I think there is a reason for that, which is that it has become the almost obsessive priority of contemporary capitalism to make sure that no one is. Over the course of twelve years of activism, I've come to realize that whoever is running this system is obsessed with winning the conceptual war—much more so, in fact, than with actual economic viability. Given the choice between an option that makes capitalism seem like the only possible system and an option that actually makes capitalism a more viable long-term system, they always choose the former.

Oddly enough, I first picked up on this in an activist context. It was 2002, and we went to the IMF meetings [in Washington]. And we were scared, because it was right after 9/11. Sure enough, they overwhelmed us with police and endless security. Considering our numbers, it was shocking that they would devote all of these resources to containing us. And we all went home feeling pretty depressed. It was only later that I learned how profoundly we'd disrupted things. The IMF actually held some of their meetings via teleconference because

of the security risk we ostensibly posed. All the parties were canceled. Basically, the police shut down the meetings for us. I realized that the fact that three hundred anarchists go home depressed seems much more important to them than whether the IMF meetings actually happened. That was a revelation. As the whole thing falls apart in front of us, the one battle they've won is over the imagination.

MK: But how do you view attempts within or on behalf of art to engage in this "battle over the imagination"?

DG: Actually, when I was thinking about what I would say about the relation between the art world and Occupy Wall Street, I was struck by a remarkable pattern. I started thinking of all the conversations about the art world I've had in the process of Occupy Wall Street, which was surprising to me because I don't know that much about the art world. I thought, Who are the people who really led me to the events of August? I was based in England the year before, and the group I was involved with was Arts Against Cuts. And the person I worked with most closely was Sophie Carapetian, a sculptor. Then when I got here to New York, the person who brought me to 16 Beaver Street, where I found out about the Occupy Wall Street planning, was another artist, Colleen Asper. And there I met the artist Georgia Sagri, with whom I was intensely involved within the formation of the General Assembly. And then the first person I got involved, who ended up playing a critical role, was Marisa Holmes, who used to be a performance artist and is now a filmmaker. What do all these people have in common? They're all young women artists, every one of them.

And almost all of them had experienced exactly that tension between individual authorship and participation in larger activist projects. Another artist I know, for example, made a sculpture of a giant carrot used during a protest at Millbank; I think it was actually thrown through the window of Tory headquarters and set on fire. She feels it was her best work, but her