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Imagination – the Solution for Society’s Problems

Interview: David Graeber, anthropologist and
anarchist

Milenko Srećković

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According to the testimony of his older colleagues, David Graeber is "one of the best anthropologists of his generation". By political conviction, he is an anarchist that advocates real, direct democracy, and is widely regarded for his contribution to the Occupy Wall Street movement especially in the early days of its creation when the organizational structure was decided; Graeber worked in the favor of more horizontal movement that would break with the tradition of hierarchical way of organizing. His book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, published in 2011, is a work of the great importance for social movements that oppose harsh austerity measures which international financial institutions impose on countries stuck in debt crisis. Graeber in his book recalls forgotten institution of "debt forgiveness", for centuries present in social relations, even since the time of Ancient Greece statesman and poet Solon, who delivered

Greek peasants from debt slavery simply by abolishing their debts and by carrying out an agrarian reform, distributing the land among them.

Most of the reports about beginning of Occupy Wall Street movement are pointing out that without anarchist intervention into this mostly spontaneous grassroots rebellion it would be one more old-style hierarchical leftist protest that definitely wouldn't be inspirational enough to spread to other cities and wouldn't become so influential. In your opinion, what suggestions to the unsatisfied and protesters would be helpful to inspire people to fight for transforming the society and how to make these horizontal transformations more permanent and stable?

For me what's critical is the gradual creation of a culture of direct democracy, and direct action. One thing those who take part in movements like the Alter-Globalization movement or OWS quickly realized is that citizens of supposedly "democratic" societies actually have no idea how to actually engage in even the most basic sorts of democratic decision-making. Sure enough, once we started doing so on a large scale, in public, the authorities started cracking down very quickly and very violently. There's nothing that scares the American authorities in particular more than the threat of actual democracy breaking out.

But these are a series of experiments in freedom. The assemblies were just one moment, one such experiment. Any time you self-consciously organize something on a non-hierarchical basis, from cooperative farm to a bicycle repair shop to a musical group for that matter, acting in a ways that wouldn't require threats of violence to enforce, you're really practicing anarchism – or democracy, or whatever you prefer to call it.

It's funny, Americans don't know much about democracy, they have to learn it all from scratch and it's difficult and painful. They do know a lot about communism. They do it all the time. Because of course it's equally true that any time you carry out a project

in terms of the principles “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” you’re practicing communism – real communism, that is, rather than the kind of authoritarian state socialism normally associated with the term. That kind of communism is the real basis of all human societies, though it’s never the only principle operative in a society and presumably never will be. We all have experience of that. It’s experience of democracy most of us need to create, since we don’t have it, in every aspect of our lives.

Who should be involved in the struggle for erasing or “forgiving the debt”? Only social movements or would you also allow that state apparatus could play important role in demanding debts to be erased?

The activists involved in Strike Debt, which is part of OWS, spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to create an effective form of civil disobedience against finance capital. But ultimately we realized that huge numbers of people are already practicing civil disobedience against finance capital. After all, what would be a more direct and effective way to do so than simply not to pay one’s debts. But probably a third or more of Americans, for example, are already doing that. One in seven are being pursued by a debt collector. You count in mortgages, student loan default... the numbers are genuinely high. The question is how to bring them together to a common force. This is one reason we created the DROM, the “Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual”, simply to help those who were already defaulting, or thinking of doing so.

How does all this translate into a demand? Well, one reason I think it’s appropriate for an anarchist like myself to talk about debt cancellation is that it’s a negative demand. We’re not really asking the state to do anything. We’re asking it to stop doing something. Because much though governments like to make it sound like it would take all sorts of mumbo-jumbo, taxes and money-printing or whatnot, to cancel debts, really all they’d have to do is agree to no longer enforce the obligations. Say “all right, if you want to pay

back any of these loan, if you feel it's a matter of personal honor or you think it's important to maintain a certain reputation, go right ahead and repay, but no court will force you to." It's a withdrawal of state interference rather than asking for more of it. So the way we see it, a movement of those already refusing to pay their debts, or better, choosing for themselves which debts they wish to honor, are demanding that the government cease interfering in the process, and stop using it's coercive mechanisms to back up the creditors.

Do you think that military interventionism is sometimes conducted against those countries that are refusing to take loans and put themselves in debts seeing it as a means of repression imposed by globalized financial system? Are there some links between the debt and military interventionism?

Well, I do believe that the international financial system is ultimately held in place by US military power. That's obvious. It's not that somehow, weaker countries are so naive and foolish that they get tricked by the equivalent of three-card monte games to send enormous amounts of wealth in the direction of the US, and its close allies, without getting anything back for it. No one is that dumb. So in the very largest sense one could say that's true. One might even say there's an outright tribute system in some cases. But the exact way that military power translates into maintaining that system is often quite complicated and subtle. Occasionally it's direct and explicit. But usually it's a thousand types of more subtle card game played where all players are playing with the constant knowledge that the guy who insists on being the dealer is also holding a very, very big gun.

How do you see the future of our society? Do you have hope, and do you believe people are capable to overcome the problems of capitalism, climate changes, imperialism and wars?

Absolutely. Our leaders don't. In fact it's quite remarkable how utterly helpless world leadership seems to be, faced with such obvious immediate demands for coordinated action. It seems they have boxed themselves into a hole, trying to destroy any sense that any-

thing other than existing institutions, existing arrangements, are possible, to destroy any sense that imagination has a role in political life, they've even done it to themselves. It's impossible to imagine any of these people operating with the kind of vision one saw even in the mid-20th century, the creation of the UN, the space program, the welfare state. They've rendered themselves pathetic and helpless. But ordinary human beings are for the most part much more capable than their current leaders. For me, the most pressing problem of our age is how to unleash that popular imagination that has been squashed and silenced over the past 30 years. How many billion people are there on earth? Is there even one of them that couldn't come up with one idea about how to solve a practical problem that you or I wouldn't have thought of? This is what I always say when people ask how I would solve this or that outstanding economic or social problem. The world doesn't lack in people who have all sorts of ideas. The problem is that 99.9% of them spend their entire lives being told to shut up all the time, even threatened with all sorts of dire consequences if they suggest anything. That's an incredibly dysfunctional way to run a planet. It's like we are applying constant violence to suppress our own collective intelligence. The moment we figure out a way to stop doing that, I don't think these problems will seem imposing in the least.