

David Graeber and Anarchism

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The untimely death of anthropologist and activist David Graeber has triggered a wave of emotion in social networks and in the world press, generating lots of headlines, in recognition of the intellectual worth of his wide-ranging and priceless work as well as his militant activism.

An acknowledgement that is fully merited. Not just because of the interest that his research in the field of anthropology and political philosophy aroused inside and outside academic circles, but also because it represented his indefatigable and consistent militant activism. Two inseparable facets which opened up a sweeping panorama of the human experience and findings useful in the battle against the authoritarianism and inequality in our societies.

Made up for the most part of academic research on the ground and well documented, his output has had a huge impact on the world of science and culture, turning him into a famous and world-renowned anthropologist. Not that that stopped him from making his thinking and erudition accessible to the vast majority of readers.

His was a labour of investigation and open disclosure that was very quickly picked up and endorsed in radical left circles. Not just on account of his public stances but also because of his active engagement with social disputes and struggles. So much so that he became a media “celebrity” around the world as an activist and “anarchist anthropologist”. At all times he harnessed this fame in the service of his causes.

Which is why, in the posthumous tributes, there have been frequent references – more or less well-meaning – to his anarchist activism and his conception of anarchism. Although it needs to be highlighted that he did not enjoy being classified as an “anarchist anthropologist” because, in his view, anarchism is a practice rather than an identity: “anarchism is a matter of *doing*, not of *being*”. This notion of anarchism prompted him to be an activist for alternative movements, later for Occupy Wall Street and latterly for Rojava, as he thought these movements wide open to anarchism in their praxis and their struggle against inequality and domination. Increasingly, that struggle is driven by ethical and humane precepts and less and less by ideological tenets. Not just because of the machinery of persuasion and coercion widely mobilized – over the past thirty years – to win the ideological war and impose the system by force, but also because the current mode of production is based on consumerist “moral” principles (the right to consume) rather than economic ones and because the objects of desire are always imagined objects. Hence the increasing importance of the imagination in the fight against the capitalist system.

On all of the above grounds, this approach to anarchism strikes me as not merely pertinent and highly relevant but, besides its being the mind-set of David Graeber and fully consonant with his activist militancy, I see it as a logical approach consistent with anarchism’s origins and valid in all times and circumstances.

Anarchism: the practice and thinking of action

Plainly this is nothing new and not some discovery that David Graeber stumbled upon, nor was he the first to have championed it with so much conviction. Before him, long before him, not to mention at all times, anarchism has been thought of as a non-authoritarian mode of behaviour and of fighting against all forms of authoritarianism and of rejecting dogma and orthodoxy. As a youth, I was chided – in the review published by the ‘Grupo *Tierra y Libertad*’ made up of Spanish anarchists living in exile in Mexico – for arguing in one article that anarchism was a praxis rather than a philosophy, doctrine or ideology.

It may not be out of place for us to bear in mind that, even though anarchism and Marxism, depicted in conventional history as ideologies that are very close in terms of time and purposes, the truth is that, unlike Marxism, which emerged from Marx's mind as a theoretical construct, anarchism sprouts from no mind in particular, albeit that there are lots of thinkers who have claimed to be anarchists. The evidence for this is: as a general rule, the various schools of Marxism (Leninist, Maoist, Althusserian ...) and their trends (Lacanian, Foucaultian ...) have had founding fathers, whereas anarchism has almost always been the product of organizational principles or practices (anarcho-syndicalist, anarcho-communist, insurrectionist and platformist, cooperativist, individualist, etc.).

Principles and practices (mutual aid, voluntary association, egalitarian decision-making) that are in fact as old as humanity itself. And the same can be said of the repudiation of the State and all forms of structural violence, inequality or domination thrown up ever since the State and those forms have been around. So this has nothing to do with any overall ideological theory or startlingly new doctrine, but has been a lingering presence throughout the history of humanity and human thought.

Therefore it is not just the existence – since time immemorial – of such radically horizontal, self-organizational practices that means that anarchism can be looked upon as a theoretical construct, doctrine or ideology, but this also spares it from the catastrophic outcome of its praxis's being whittled down to a declaration or some ideological posturing. The need for theoretical reflection upon such ancestral, spontaneous practices as a means of boosting their spread through today's society is a different kettle of fish; thinking and living out anarchism as a coherent, everyday practice of freedom and equality is therefore obviously not enough to alter the course of history. Nor even for avoiding the trespasses of power against our day-to-day lives.

Anarchism or the revolutionary movement of the 21st century

In their 2004 work of this title,¹ David Graeber and the Yugoslav anthropologist Andrej Grubacic took the line that *"the age of revolutions is not over" and that "the global revolutionary movement in the twenty first century, will be one that traces its origins less to the tradition of Marxism, or even of socialism narrowly defined, but of anarchism."* This belief was based on the fact that *"from Eastern Europe to Argentina, from Seattle to Bombay"*, anarchist ideas and principles were *"generating new radical dreams and visions"*. So, even though their protagonists may not profess to be anarchists and may go by different labels (*"autonomism, anti-authoritarianism, horizontalism, Zapatismo, direct democracy ..."*) the underlying principles in all these locations were: *"decentralization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the network model, and above all, the rejection of any idea that the end justifies the means, let alone that the business of a revolutionary is to seize state power and then begin imposing one's vision at the point of a gun."*

In their estimation, anarchism, as the "ethics of practice" (the notion of building a brand-new society inside the old one) had become the underlying inspiration of the *"movement of movements"* (of which the authors were part), the aim of which was, from the outset, *"exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy and participatory management within it"*.

¹ Article in Z Magazine theanarchistlibrary.org (It has also appeared as a pamphlet).

Now, even though the growing interest in anarchist ideas at the beginning of the 21st century is real and derives largely from the anarchist generation gap that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, as the younger generation denounced the sectarian practices of the last century and got actively involved in feminist, ecologist, counter-cultural and indigenous movements, that increase in the forms of anarchistic performance is actually the result of the upcoming generations' interest in trialling more democratic forms of the decision-making process. Meaning in conjuring up an alternative democratic culture rather than some glimpse into the world they want to create through it.

And the reason is obvious. The upcoming generation is a lot more interested in the modus operandi and the practicalities than in arguing "*about the finer points of ideology*" in anticipation of that world and battling to make it a possibility. That, in principle, is a pragmatism that is legitimate and, in the longer term, promising; but, in the shorter term, it leaves institutional politics a free hand – operating under the colours of "participation" in institutional decisions and talk of a "*participatory economics*" – to defuse such anarchistic practices.

Plainly this political recuperation cannot stop anarchism from returning once more to the centre stage of revolutionary creativity, nor its promoters from being forced to acknowledge, or at least, stress the proximity of their political thinking to an anarchist vision of democracy. But obviously this is not grounds for asserting that anarchism is "*the revolutionary movement of the 21st century*". Although, as the authors of that work state in their conclusion: "*it is a long-term process*" and "*the anarchist century has only just begun*".

Besides, the exacerbation of the issues with social inequality having become more apparent since the financial collapse in 2008 and issues relating to survival due to the catastrophic capitalist handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, have lent an added urgency to the crucial need to change the course of human history.

How to change the course of history

In another work with the above title released in 2018,² David Graeber and the young British archaeologist David Wengrow attacked the great (Rousseau-inspired) yarn of the "origins" of humanity and the main teleological account of "civilization" that goes with it. Not merely because they have refuted that narrative by means of a stunning mass of archaeological and anthropological data, but by pushing [aside] the idea that we are merely "impotent onlookers" when it comes to tinkering with "the reality and hierarchies" that are supposedly inherent within it.

Basing themselves on "process" history and the latest contributions of archaeology, their analysis showed – by contrast – the multiple each-way switches between nomadic society and sedentary ones, between sprawling communities and narrow ones, between hierarchical social organizations and egalitarian ones. In addition to noting that equality is not only achievable in the context of restricted communities and that inequality has not necessarily been the price paid for growth in human societies and in our comfort. Which changes the notion that personal interest and the accumulation of power were and are the immutable forces behind the growth of human societies. Besides bolstering the notion that the oscillation between equality and inequality, between authoritarianism and horizontalism, was dictated by changing seasons in prehistoric social life. Seasonal variations having been, right from the very beginnings of humanity, what allowed

² How to change the course of human history, essay at www.eurozine.com

human beings to consciously experiment with different social possibilities in accordance with their needs.

This institutional flexibility is evidence of the capability that we male and female humans have to free ourselves from any social structure whenever the circumstances require us to. Hence the real issue – as Graeber and Wengrove frame it – may not be our queries about the origins of social inequality but the reasons for our acquiescence in it. And this even though there is nothing to show that the structures of pyramidal power are the necessary outcome of large-scale organization and that social circumstances require a radical change in the course of history if our very survival is to be assured.

The fact is that the most painful loss of freedom begins at a low level – at the level of gender relations, dealings between age cohorts and domestic servitude – and that is where we act out our relationships amid great intimacy, whilst also accompanied by the most deep-seated forms of structural violence. But this falls short as an explanation of the reasons why the human race fails to kick against an authority and system that threaten its very survival. So, despite this being a vital necessity as far as our species is concerned, there is no sign of any such kicking, even though, as Graeber and Wengrow appositely remind us, “*The pieces are all there to create an entirely different world history.*”

So how can we fail to agree with them that “if we really want to understand how it first became acceptable for some to turn wealth into power, and for others to end up being told their needs and lives don’t count, it is here that we should look.” However, it seems to me that it is going to be very hard to engage in such work unless we first shrug off the existential inertia that keeps us all bound to the capitalist normality that is the backdrop to our lives. Rather than our being – out of convenience or fear of breaking with normal practice – “too blinded by our prejudices to see the implications”. Even though we now know where ‘normality’ is leading us.

Hence the importance of remembering that “*anarchism is a matter of doing, not being*” and of our not making do simply with being.

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