

Dialogues with David Graeber: Anarchy–In a Manner of Speaking

Review of David Graeber, *Anarchy–In a Manner of Speaking; Conversations with Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Nika Dubrovsky, & Assia Turquier-Zauberman* (2020; Zurich: Diaphanes Anarchies)

Wayne Price

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The late David Graeber was an influential anarchist and anthropologist, a theorist, a writer, and an activist. He died in September 2020, at the untimely age of 59. As far as I know, this may be his last published book. This little volume is a transcript of his discussion with three interviewers. They are artists of various sorts (two are actors), philosophers, and writers. Nika Dubrovsky was also Graeber's wife. The book is interesting because it covers a wide range of topics which concerned Graeber, although its briefness limited the extent he could go into any issue.

Modestly, Graeber begins by saying, *"I don't actually know all that much about the history of anarchist political theory...I'm not a scholar of anarchism in any sense; I'm a scholar who subscribes to anarchist principles and occasionally acts on them...I've largely avoided the books."* (7) This is demonstrated by his conversation, which frequently cites various philosophers and anthropologists but rarely any anarchists. This may lead to errors. For example, he states, *"anarchism...recognized women's liberation as important from the start."* (40) Actually, the first person to call himself an "anarchist" was P.J. Proudhon. He was an extreme, almost pathological, believer in women's inferiority (also a homophobe). This misogyny had a bad influence on the French anarchist and workers' movements for a long time. Over time European anarchists were to move beyond this to a feminist perspective. (This is certainly not to deny that Proudhon made major contributions otherwise. As Graeber points out, *"Anarchism is very different from Marxism, after all; it's not driven by heroic thinkers."*) (8)

Graeber's overall perspective rejects both atomistic individualism and totalitarian collectivism for a focus on dialogue. *"Twentieth century political theory has tended to pose the individual versus society...the individual mind versus some kind of collective consciousness....The dialogic approach suggests that most of the really important action takes place somewhere in between: in conversation or deliberation."* (10) *"Dialogue...[results in the] emergence of thoughts that no individual would have been able to have by themselves, which is ultimately what anarchy too is about...."* (204) This is a supremely important insight.

A dialogical conception of anarchy leads to a radical, participatory, conception of democracy—in which collective decisions are directly made through dialogue in face-to-face groups. “*Democracy is now seen to be largely incompatible with the state.*” (38) This is a controversial opinion among anarchists. Many reject “democracy” because they see it as the ideological rationalization used by the capitalist “representative” state. Graeber discusses how “democracy” came to be used as a justification for the state, even though it had historically been condemned by elite thinkers as “mob rule.” However, many anarchists who reject “democracy” do in fact act in democratic ways, calling this “self-organization” or “autogestion.” “*A lot of people who call themselves democrats don’t seem much interested in the practice (at least as I’d define it); a lot of people who live by the practice don’t call themselves democrats.*” (14)

While committed to anarchism, Graeber would agree with Daniel Guerin that anarchism and Marxism may be compatible in certain ways. “*Marxism and anarchism are potentially reconcilable...since if Marxism is a mode of theoretical analysis, and anarchism an ethics of practice, there’s really no reason you can’t subscribe to both.*” (15) However, “*while Marx ran circles around Bakunin theoretically, it was Bakunin’s predictions that all came true.*” (16)

There is much truth in these sentences, but it is too simplistic. Marx was not only a theoretician and Bakunin was not only an activist. If Bakunin was limited only to “*an ethics of practice,*” how did he manage to out-predict Marx about the dire results of Marx’s strategy of the workers’ taking state power? Meanwhile, Graeber rejects useful aspects of Marxism, such as the labor theory of value, and he misunderstands the fetishism of commodities. More importantly, he discusses the nature of the state without any consideration of class and the state’s role in the exploitation of a working class by an elite.

Revolution?

This conception of anarchism as primarily “an ethics of practice” is, in my opinion, a fatal flaw in David Graeber’s views. Its focus is on the immediate activities of anarchists, making them ethically libertarian and dialogical. This is all to the good, but it is self-defeating if that is **only** what we concentrate on. The broad anarchist tradition—from Bakunin and Kropotkin to the anarcho-communists and anarcho-syndicalists—agreed with Graeber’s dialogical-social conception. But their aim was to build popular movements of workers and all oppressed, to take away the wealth and power of the capitalists, to dismantle the state, and to replace capitalism and its state with a freely self-directed society of radically democratic associations. They did not believe that the capitalists would peacefully allow their wealth, social position, and political power to be taken away from them, without fighting tooth and nail to keep their rule.

As he has repeatedly discussed elsewhere, Graeber rejects this revolutionary perspective. “*We’re not going to have an insurrectionary moment where the state just falls away.*” (185) Revolutionary anarchists did not expect this either, since they thought there would be a build-up of tensions leading to an insurrection, and then a post-insurrectionary period of re-building society, not to mention continued dealing with counter-revolutionary forces. But they expected at some point there would have to be a direct confrontation with the forces of the capitalist state, to get them out of the way for the re-building period. This is something they aimed for, in their long-term strategy at least.

Instead, Graeber has advocated a gradual creation of “dual power” institutions which would gradually undermine the state and capitalism, with minimal if any direct confrontation. This is a non-revolutionary, and even reformist, strategy, although Graeber insisted that he was a “revolutionary” in some sense. In this book, he goes further by talking about his compatibility

with the reformists in the British Labour Party. “*Even as an anarchist I get along with a lot of the Labour left in the UK....They seem to be genuinely sincere about it. They want to figure out how the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left can find a synergy rather than undercut each other.*” (186) I am all for working together with anyone going in our direction, say, if the Labour left was to co-sponsor a mass demonstration against rent increases. But it is terribly naive not to see that their aim is to co-opt the anarchists. However sincere they may be, the reformist state socialists are our political opponents.

In this short volume Graeber and his interlocutors cover a raft of topics. For example, he has an interesting discussion of the influence of Native Americans on European and U.S. culture. Some subjects I had difficulty following, lacking enough background in European theorists. They discuss the influence of anarchism on religion and the influence of religion on anarchism (without actually considering the views of religious anarchists such as Tolstoy or Buber). There is little to no discussion of the state of the world economy or of political trends in the U.S. or Europe. Overall it is a hotchpotch of interesting discussions mixed in with not-so-interesting ones, of insightful commentary and of wrongheaded thinking. I recommend it to anyone who wants to explore David Graeber’s conception of a dialogical and democratic anarchism.

Note: Over the years, I have also written other reviews of David Graeber’s work.

Price, Wayne (2007). *Fragments of a Reformist Anarchism: A Review of David Graeber’s Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. www.anarkismo.net

(2012). Review of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* by David Graeber. www.anarkismo.net

(2015). *The Reversed Revolutions of David Graeber*. A review of David Graeber’s book, *Revolutions in Reverse*. www.anarkismo.net

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