

Beyond the Hellish Choice of Process Documents or Social Capitalism

William Gillis

June 10th, 2015

One of the best things about *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* is that David Graeber finally tackles issues directly relevant to anarchists. While his prior work has had value, it's also largely been about rather obvious topics and punctuated with a need to apologize for or defend anarchism. Graeber has rarely written *to us*. His usual intended audience is much broader, much more liberal, and this has led to a kind of ever-present defensiveness and basics-covering that bogs everything down and taxes one's patience. You can only read about the liberatory power of direct democracy so many times before your eyes roll away permanently. And yet, suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere comes a book that grapples with John Zerzan, Foucault, structural violence, the Tyranny of Structurelessness, and even name-checks "no future".

It's kinda like Graeber has finally caught up with Anarchism circa a few decades ago ...or maybe just visited the West Coast.

On a less snarky note, I get the impression that Graeber is being badly pressed to write by the eldritch forces he made deals with. And now, having churned out the mandatory and completely unremarkable "*I Founded Occupy But Not Really*" book of anecdotes and arguments to reach shitty liberals, he's taken to rambling about anything he cares about in a sloppy but slightly more sincere and original fashion. As fond as I've grown of *struggling for academic acceptance while nursing a poor-kid grudge Graeber*, this is more in the direction of *geeky hanging in the back of the infoshop with other anarchists Graeber*. There's still a few liberals in the conversation, and he hasn't stopped trying to persuade them, but he's speaking to us as well.

Any anarchist who's ever attended a meeting knows the gut-clenching and heart-sinking horror attendant to the dark invocation of "process" or "the process document." Here be monsters indeed. Otherworldly catastrophes of the mind, songs of torment the singers cannot quit, rips in the fabric of sanity that eat even the strongest among us. A few hours later our bodies are regurgitated, what brains remain turned to a blinking traumatized gruel. Perhaps, if we are "lucky", we return with a couple simple and utterly meaningless responsibilities scribbled into our planners. Cheap gems snatched from the bowels of the process monster.

The Utopia of Rules is not a magical dagger capable of piercing the exoskeleton of this beast and freeing us forever more, but it does have productive things to say about the nature of the

monster and its power, and Graeber uses it as a starting point to examine our world as a whole and recast anarchist critiques of the existing power structures and psychologies.

Why are we pulled to add more rules, more process? And why does so little get accomplished the more we add? These are simple, seemingly deafeningly obvious dynamics we're all familiar with, but they're too infrequently interrogated explicitly or probed for deeper dynamics.

Along the way in *The Utopia of Rules* Graeber conjures a number of reframings that are particularly succulent, possibly even useful. My favorite of which is that the best way to define the police is as armed bureaucrats. Having never really been about stopping trespasses between citizens so much as maintaining the power system, cops are in so many ways the violent force by which the state asserts its need to categorize and make complex or chaotic contexts simple.

The police truncheon is precisely the point where the state's bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schemes and its monopoly on violence come together.

This is of course not fundamentally new territory, libertarian theorists have a long and rich discourse on the computational limits faced by states and corporations, and the irrationality and violence that result. And, closer to Graeber's audience, James C. Scott has written extensively on the state's need for a certain type of directed legibility. But Graeber's subject here is far more sweeping.

Graeber takes bureaucracy to denote a very wide array of formal and impersonal systematizing, so sweeping a definition that there can be no pat answers. Impersonal systematizing is after all not inherently a source of stupidity and irrational logjams, it can seriously augment accessibility and transparency. And we *enjoy* making certain things less personal. Sometimes you want to focus your attention on complexities in other places. If the picture of bureaucratic activist meetings forever is repulsive, certainly so too is a life made of nothing but friend and roommate drama. Sometimes you just want to go off and write songs or equations or travel on your own and not have to deal deeply with people to do so. Impersonalizing interactions with other people is often a necessity. Think of what a hellish world it would be if we had to listen to everyone's life story before completing some trivial interaction with them. Or — worse — being confined to the small town hell of communes and land projects (ie anarchist suburbia) where there are no strangers to ever meet and every last interaction is baked with piles of implicit social tensions.

While any systematizing necessarily involves simplifications from full case-by-case particulars those simplifications can be useful, they *can* free creative energy from having to detail out or navigate informal and personal systems and end up allowing greater creative complexity in other places.

The crux is that while collective process documents, food stamp applications, and corporate paperwork may have originally been intended to provide greater transparency and accessibility, such bureaucracies tend to promptly move to make themselves indispensable by monopolizing access to the information they were intended to make available. This doesn't always occur in directly hypocritical ways, but through a roundabout creep due to the game theoretic pressures on all parties. The centralization that used to force transparency is too great a target to pass up and so is inexorably captured by power. Those capable of dominating the new *formal* power structure may be different from those who ruled the informal power structure prior, but the power relations remain. Rules made and frozen in place to stop arbitrary personal authority end up

leading to a negative sum game in which both sides can only compete to enact more constraints to stop whoever currently benefits more by the current formalization, until everything organic is choked out or the rules are bypassed or they're just violently overridden by whoever has significant power from sources external to the bureaucracy.

Outright violence is even more distortionary, it severs and strips away our capacity to recognize or integrate vast amounts of context and complexities, often in the interest of making things easier for the wielders of such violence. Violence creates ridiculous simplifications and has limited capacity to process complex realities. Our present world of poisonous bureaucracy thus emerges in two ways: to assist the violent in forcibly simplifying the realities around them, but *also* to seek to rectify its own idiocy by providing a way for violent systems to accept and process complex realities in a manner slightly less stupid than raw violence.

What's most frustrating about *The Utopia of Rules* is that it's a book about complexity theory that stubbornly refuses to come out and admit that's what's being covered. Granted this refusal means today's culture of math-hating leftists will actually read the book, but one can't help but be frustrated at the refusal to shed all the self-indulgent and tenuous handwaving about "play" and "fantasy" and just get to some of the obvious roots of the whole affair.

Of course the populism is for a reason: Graeber's attempting some rather audacious restructuring of the political landscape here and while I doubt he will be successful — too many doors have closed on his face since he refused to play ball with the Marxists after *Debt...* — it's an interesting attempt to be sure. Graeber flirts with setting Bureaucracy, and all it signifies as a suppressor of imagination and possibility, as a major if not *the* nemesis of the left. The question here is whether or not that's remotely true beyond anarchist circles. I remain unconvinced there's anything of value in the left outside anarchism, or much meaningful overlap between the two. And I don't just mean in terms of stuffy unimaginative bureaucratic hell that "leftism" connotes for most of the world these days. Even taking into account anti-authoritarian strands like council communism and autonomism, the primary lens of the left has always been political, and the anarchist lens ethical. They think exclusively in terms of sweeping macrostructures and we think in terms of the underlying psychological and interpersonal dynamics of which those macrostructures are epiphenomena. As such it's incredibly hard to convey critiques of things like formal process or organizationalism to a leftist, inclined as they are to sweep over such "particulars" with their eyes only on the big institutional bugaboos.

Communist: "We're all on the same team, we both want a classless society, so why won't you obey us — I mean ally with us."

Anarchist: "Uh we want so much more than a merely classless society, we want a world where people don't control and limit each other."

Communist: "Hold the fuck up."

I can't help but be suspicious of any left that might be repolarized in the spirit of '68 as an opposition to bureaucracy. It's not enough to reject structure and organizationalism, if we are to call ourselves anarchists as anything other than a joke we must tackle informal power dynamics too. And this will necessarily involve navigating the tensions at play in attempts at openness that so often lead to bureaucratic feedback loops. A left that doesn't strike at the root, at power relations themselves, will only ever be able to approximate the advances of anarchism, and thus allying with them only acts to chain us down. What we've seen play out time and time again is

the fossils of the left being forced kicking and screaming to adopt new modules of analysis on particular issues, but never delving beyond such themselves. They may eventually arrive at similar conclusions as anarchists, but only through the pressures of history, rarely if ever in advance of them. And when it comes to as deep a root as interpersonal power dynamics themselves we've seen that the old patriarchs who litter the movement have little interest in anything that leaves them no dynamics of power to hold onto.

One of the chief charges Graeber levels at bureaucracy is its violence to imagination and general suppression or imprisonment of creativity, inquiry, science, invention, etc. Yet this kind of suppression is hardly unique to formal bureaucracy, it's on display in virtually every case of interpersonal abuse. As anarchy-feminists have long argued there's an asymmetry to acts of imagination in social hierarchies. Those on the top do less than those on the bottom, and those on the bottom end up having their imaginative energies channeled and directed by those on the top. Not necessarily in the marxist sense of expropriated labor, but in the sense that the imaginative lives of those on the bottom revolve around those on the top. The caged person spends their time thinking about the cage and the mental states of their jailer. All their modeling, all their creativity is channeled by the conditions of their enslavement. Or made incapable of interacting with the rest of the universe beyond the cage. What I remember most about being homeless as a child was sitting in waiting rooms terrified and bored while filling out paperwork or watching my mother anxiously fill out paperwork. Constantly trying to think of all the possible things that could go wrong, all the possible reasons we could be fucked over, and what next steps we might have to take. Desperately pleading with the social workers to make sure there wasn't some other form we didn't know about. The faceless bureaucracy creates a system that can only work because those under its thumb do all the contextualization and intellectual heavy-lifting. All the tentative sorting of complicated realities into categories and check-boxes. But this asymmetry is not unique to formalized systems or macroscopic systems, it exists in interpersonal relations too and a leftism that internalizes opposition to bureaucracy as yet another module will still fall short of the anarchist critique.

Still the macroscopic is certainly important. One of the most potent questions Graeber poses in *The Utopia of Rules* is the very good question: Why has there been ANY innovation in our bureaucracy-strangled world? This is the sort of question I wish people would ask more often. Why on earth has there even been what scant innovation there has been despite our regime of intellectual property? (Which we know quite well dramatically suppresses innovation.) Why has innovation even happened despite the state capturing almost all basic research in a crippled academia and working hard to limit any scientific education that wasn't just tradeschool bullshit? Why and how has anything persisted or filtered through?

Part of Graeber's answer is that the innovation crest around the 50s was the result of tax structures whereby corporations looking to decrease their taxable income faced the choice of either reinvesting in either their workforce or research and chose research. This is an interesting nuance to the typical story that states only poured funds into research because some idealists had managed to get the Soviet Union to invest in basic research, if ultimately for propaganda purposes, driving a negative-sum competition between governments that often hurt their long-term interest in controlling their populaces.

Today, of course, the natural allegiances of power have reasserted themselves and basic research has grown an ever-smaller portion of budgets as those in power press endlessly to eradicate it completely.

Graeber however uses some rather demagoguish rhetoric to paint the suppression of science as more desperate than it really is. As a physicist I found this disgustingly underhanded and problematic in its misrepresentation. Graeber holds up quantum mechanics and general relativity as the last great advancements of physics, but the reality is incredible advancements have continued, they just haven't been popularized or focused on the same way by the public. In part since quantum mechanics and general relativity are where physics' insights started to diverge from the common intuitions of every day people. When your intuitions from biologically inherited heuristics or everyday experience are deeply misguided it takes a lot of work to update them and it becomes impossible to accurately Explain It Like I'm Five. The universe is under no obligation to organize itself according to our intuitions, and the reorganization of our minds necessary to understand it can involve some complex work. This is why, after all, so much nonsense flies around the public discourse about modern physics, from quantum mysticism to that phrase universally abhorred by physicists, "the god particle." Yet major advances have continued. Emmy Noether's work on symmetry was just as titanic as quantum mechanics and relativity but no one outside physics wanted to hear about some abstract mathematics from a girl. Field theory saw absolutely significant and inspired work in the creation of chromodynamics in the 70s, string theory has advanced so unexpectedly and awe-inspiringly in certain respects that mathematicians are still shellshocked, holographic and AdS/CFT have been so successful it's terrifying, and black hole research continues to spit out astonishing and challenging insights. Don't even get me started on quantum error correction and entanglement entropy. If anything the tiny almost-entirely-choked-out-of-existence physics community has suffered from a singularity of *too much* advancement. We're so overwhelmed and there are so few of us allowed to exist that parsing these developments back into a language the intentionally-badly-educated public can understand is daunting. There's simply no way to do so as sound bytes or even quick lectures without spawning even more terrible misperceptions than currently float around.

In general Graeber flounders when attempting to examine the intersection of science and complexity. His askance, "*why no cure for the common cold and cancer?*" is more inane and embarrassing than provocative. It shouldn't be hip to just blithely handwave away science's insights into issues of relative complexity. Not all problems are on the same level. Many of the early predictions or dreams about future developments date back to before we had things like television, when there was a lot less knowledge about their complexity and so it was reasonable to group things like "a cure for all diseases" in with "a machine that plays all music." The low hanging fruit was promptly harvested but the things that were revealed as many many many orders of magnitude harder have remained in our minds as in some rough sense equivalent to the invention of television. Why can't you just throw more researchers at it? Well what if what you're asking couldn't be solved on a mathematical complexity level by more researchers than there are atoms in the sun? This kind of thinking treats science as a magic box and scientists as either chumps or capricious magicians. It's the sort of smug ignorance that declares silly shit like, "The NSA has lots more money to pour into research than the anarchist squatter hackers writing crypto, so they can surely break any encryption."

Enough of that please.

Still, obviously there are an intense amount of institutional chains holding science down. Graeber focuses at length on the role of forced competition under bureaucracy within the sciences and academia and this is certainly impedes science and is all kinds of fucked up for those put through the wringer, but I'd argue that the real underlying dynamic that competition is but one

symptom of is *immediatism* — a pressure by the power structures that have captured research for immediate results or measurements that is deeply hostile to theory and imagination. Measuring scientific research from an administrative perspective is as silly and impossible a task as claiming that science is a simple procedure rather than an underlying orientation or desire that gets instantiated in complex ways. Scientists are hardly unaware of the horrors that have accrued from attempts to quickly “measure” how much science is being done. The superficiality of such is the same beast as the superficiality at play in popscience journalism, the pressures of the state, of capital, and of bureaucracy’s need for instantaneous simple visibility without work on the part of the observer is a matter of fetishized immediacy.

The macrosystems of our society are obviously deeply opposed to the disruptive effects of science, hence why they insist so strongly on continuing to trot out long abandoned scientific models or postulates as truths. It never stops being amusing that the symbol the Dawkinsite Atheists use as self representation is an image of the atom as orbited by discrete electrons that was invalidated a century ago, that has no real value even as an approximation, and that no one, not even chemical engineers, use. But this is tied to cultural and personal pressures within our society for immediate results, immediate “understanding”, etc that are antithetical to science. This is deeper than just a bureaucratic need to simplify for the stupid authorities. It’s an entitled demand for the suppression of any complexity we as individuals don’t feel like engaging with.

Graeber turns around at one point and nuances in an optimistic way that, “inconvenient discoveries cannot be suppressed,” but like *please tell that to the primitivsts!* Or to their allies in power who have successfully suppressed many inventions and discoveries via intellectual property and are currently strangling almost every field of science that isn’t reducible to a highly-manageable and docile pet that only engineers nonthreatening consumer goods. There are reasons to be slightly optimistic about tendencies for discoveries to creep out to the periphery, but we must be realistic about the challenges we face and the bald-facedness of power’s hostility to disruption from science and technology. They’re already openly stumping about outlawing encryption and general purpose computing. And citizen science is being increasingly outlawed.

The last step in the ideology of conservatism has finally been revealed these last two decades as the destruction of technology and science. Making sure none of this imagination stuff can ever destabilize or disrupt the power relations between humans ever again.

And here Graeber brings up the welcome reminder of how reactionary Marx was. Too often we forget that Marx was ideologically opposed to theory and theorizing. And juxtaposed them against a call for immediacy in all arenas (after you’ve first taken the time to read his big books presumably). Marx’s hostility to imaginative blueprints and insistence on immediate means and inclinations mark deep parallels with the most problematic currents in today’s insurrectos and nihilists. Such violent hostility to theorizing rather is an understandable defensive move. If Marx *had* been down with modeling and theorizing about root dynamics he’d have been capable of understanding Bakunin’s critique. Or perhaps it’s better to say that if Marx’s *followers* had stopped for a moment and looked ahead seriously or in depth theoretically they would have seen the jaws of the monster that ended up swallowing them. Marxism’s point of departure from anarchism is then, in Graeber’s account, its pillars of anti-theory, anti-imagination, and anti-utopian reactionism.

Claiming you’ve already found the correct theory (or perfect clarity regarding your own desires) is a dead-end to thought, permanently removing any need to compare with other models. Of course there might be a most optimal theory — to the point where all others are essentially

trash — but marxism takes shortcuts in its quickness to generate an explanation and then avoid all investigation into alternative models. Such an “anti-theory” approach is ultimately about stripping away meta context.

One of the things I found most interesting in Graeber’s book is his account of the way the word “imagination” has been plucked from all embedded context and wafted away to mean some kind of disconnected flight of fancy. In today’s paradigm there’s this free floating imagination thing and then there’s immediatist proceduralism. Despite the fact that “imagination” originally meant something more like creativity and the search for possibilities. Since in our world there are to be No Other Possibilities, “imagination” can only be left meaning self-delusion. In the same way that “without rulers” can only be left meaning “fractured rulership where everyone attempts to rule everyone else”. This is what they want to do to us. To kill all science or hope and shove everything into either highly manageable engineering or into tractionless art and escapism.

I want to take a moment and turn this around on one of Graeber’s most favored canards, however. In the early 00s with the explosion of activism accompanying the counter-globalization movement we started hearing repeated refrains that “anarchism is a process.” Bullshit. Such a horrifying defanging of anarchy could only come from shellshocked cultists to “the process document.” Stockholm syndrome is not an argument. It’s ludicrous to suggest anarchism is some kind of simple process or formula we just have to cleave to. If we all follow “the process” that’ll be anarchy? What utter bureaucratization of our hopes and desires. Anarchy is an ideal, a value — not a strict method *OR* an end point. No, anarchism is not about not some terminal utopia, but the notion that our only choices are a fetishized idealic endpoint or an immediatist proceduralism is an absurd dichotomy. A *direction* on a manifold is different from an *endpoint* or a *local gradient*. Anarchy is not a thing you do or a process, nor a place you arrive at or an elaborate blueprint, but a *value*, a *direction*, that can motivate different tactics, strategies, and processes in different contexts. And that never terminates at some arbitrary endpoint. There is no “good enough” that anarchists would ever settle for.

The same is of course true for science. As the string theorist Sean Carroll has loudly pointed out the institutional pressures are to turn science into an immediatist mechanical method that can be continually checked up on and controlled, and this has suppressed science’s path-exploration. It can be important to let one’s rigorous modeling grow out and not just instantaneously prune it demanding immediately verifiable experimental results. This is a topic I’ve been writing in depth on for years now and my “Science As Radicalism” will be out pretty soon.

In fairness, Graeber is certainly quite aware of some of the complications inherent in such a sweeping conceptual bundle as “bureaucracy” and his whole book is about trying to pick them apart. His primary instinct though is to turn to the tropes of anthropology to do so.

One of his main lenses is that of play and games, which he wants to distinguish as two separate concepts. The former more free-form and the latter a temporarily agreed upon structure or process. Calvinball versus chess.

Bureaucracies often emerge in part, Graber argues, from a fear of play. *And sometimes this is legitimate*. Top-down play is horrifying, literally terrorism. The sociopath playing with a tortured mouse. When play happens in the context of strong and directed power relations it’s a form of abuse, and the impression it leaves is one of capriciousness, randomness, cruelty, etc. Games on the other hand create sandboxes, they confine what we need to think of to a limited subset of variables (or they bias the things we already pay tons of attention to in new directions), allowing us to stretch our brains around entirely new contexts and creatively build new strategies or ways

of thinking. As such bureaucracies are often an attempt to limit the arbitrariness wielded by those with power.

This lens on the interrelation of the creativity in play with the violence attendant to sociopathy is highly overdue. I admire Graeber's very practical take on the right being enviably clearheaded about this. Power and order (or ossified structures of low variability) are grounded in violence whereas creativity is fun but destabilizing. The conservative fear of random violence from destabilization leads them to try to confine both creativity and violence, and often treat the two inseparably. In a bureaucratic world the only ones capable of true creativity are the violent. Hence the shrinking of all art and imagination in conservative culture to things centered on or arising through violence. The conservative position is that violence and creativity are hugely beguiling and attractive, and the only tolerable way to let people engage in them is in order to suppress other violence/creativity. In the reactionary mind imagination unleashed can *only* lead to violence and destruction. Conservatives wish to use violence to minimize this. Fascists to embrace it. But both swallow the lack of alternatives wholesale. And both appreciate the nature of the present system far better than liberals.

Graeber seeks to navigate these tensions by gravitating towards a definition of freedom as both play and transparent rules. But I think this is insufficiently nuanced. Freedom is not mere negative freedom, freedom to wallow in disconnected delusions and fantasies locally. The only coherent notion of freedom is positive freedom, the freedom to act. And freedom requires means to transmit one's intentions into actions, to impress one's desires upon the world. Turning your head to soup may give a ton of local degrees of freedom, but it makes it impossible for that freedom to extend outward in effects. The difference between rules-as-constraining and rules-as-enabling must be judged in terms of their efficiency at maximizing the capacity for agents to act. Recognizing the "rules" of gravity makes it easier to walk. And negotiating some kind of process for mediating in conflicts makes it easier to avoid acting at loggerheads with one another.

I would and have argued that power is about cutting off degrees of freedom, ossifying, isolating, and generally reducing informational content. It's nice how well this approach is independently generated by Graeber who notes that in many ways solitary confinement is one of the ultimate expressions of this tendency, cutting off a node from communication, or stopping it from questioning and exploring the space of possible models and dreams.

The natural next step in this is to talk about the internet.

Yet Graeber, while a fan, is dismissive about the internet not measuring up in comparison to promises of jetpacks. In one passage he astoundingly dismisses the internet as merely a "super fast and globally accessible combination of library, post office and mail order catalog."

It's always a bit stunning when someone in the anarchist milieu reveals their sheer level of antiquated disconnect. It's like when John Zerzan says, "I can't understand what anyone would ever find appealing about the internet, email is quite boring" There's too much being glossed over in a willful shallowness. Folks will get to the point where people are directly connecting their brain tissue and these grandpas will describe it as, "a really fast form of texting."

Graeber's dismissal at the developments of the internet era is a sharp hypocrisy. One second he's going on about the importance of imagination and the next second he's getting mad about our increasing complexity of thought and the advent of the meta. Simulation, information tech, etc. are but phantasms to Graeber. I mean it's jaw-dropping to hear an anthropologist write off exponential feedback in cultural complexity as no big deal. Or ignore the fecund possibilities for

resistance that such a singularity of social complexity opens up. Of all the concessions to make in the service of rhetoric this really seems extreme.

Graeber presents the internet as a series of filling out forms, which is a cute lens for maybe a couple seconds until you really think about it. What the internet is really about is communicating better, in expanding a vast array of possible avenues by which to communicate, about establishing new languages and protocols. Any language requires condensing or translating down the concepts in our heads into what limited impressions of these can survive in words. So yes, there are whole new means, whole new paradigms available to communicate and within them we will need to express desires, and these must in some sense fit within protocols or languages in order to be parsed by anyone, and so this sometimes involves filling our name and password in boxes. And yes, we are focusing a chunk of our expanding desires on economic particulars (the arrangement of things) and thus we need economic languages.

Within the programming world there have been pressures to cut down on bureaucracy and form-filling by automating. But what radicals in tech have quickly discovered is that this removes agency. The push within the cryptography or cypherpunk community fighting the NSA has been to make crypto tools more accessible by removing distracting options, to get things down to “one big button” for security or trust. But this is insane. Human trust is an incredibly complex array of dynamics impossible to automatedly parallel without input from the user; no tool will meet every threat model out of box. To get something that works for each person and doesn’t fuck over certain demographics we need users to make choices. And this requires checkboxes and the like. How these are presented is of course no small issue and there’s lots of room for transparency as well as better communication and education. Because, yes, people will need to integrate some comprehension of the tools they’re using to use them best. But this is like comparing learning how to chip stone tools with filling out foodstamps paperwork. With proper tools the user has full agency and comes to an appreciation of its dynamics sufficient for them; with bureaucracy someone else makes those decisions and you are forced to make haphazard guesses about how to fit yourself into those boxes. The internet, the programming and cypherpunk worlds, have generated many examples drifting in either direction.

So why then does Graeber make this mistake with the internet? What is chaining him into adopting this sloppy rhetoric? Well he wants to argue that modern technological advancement is a farce, and this argument is deeply tied to old counter-globalization narratives. But — to don my market anarchist hat briefly — the fact of the matter is that the limited degree of free trade that *does* exist under neoliberal globalization *is* improving a lot of those factories established in the global south. Eventually they run out of people willing to work at the same or lower standards and improvement is forced to continue. I am certainly not remotely excusing the horrors of neoliberalism, or the intolerable slowness by which such tiny progress occurs, or arguing that it occurs everywhere. But there just isn’t some infinite pool of non-american workers in dispossessed destitution with no other options and they haven’t yet locked down a sufficiently large outright slave population. Although countries like Malaysia and Bangladesh are effectively slave colonies there is resistance on a lot of fronts that is limiting the capacity for such on a global scale. Of course the capitalists will and are trying to find new ways to harvest slaves but there are counter-pressures. There’s a reason a lot of exploitation has to be dressed up in the trappings of market freedom and personal agency. It’s not cuz they’re omniscient conspirators creating an ever more unassailable slavery, it’s because they’re under pressures that are only increasing. It’s an empirical fact that wealth is slipping out into the families of sweatshop workers and we’ve

seen that wealth turn around and force improvements to conditions. When sweatshop owners are beheaded by their workers I grin — admitting that advancements in factory technologies have happened rather than just constantly churning through an endless supply of slave workers does not mean lessening our hostility to neoliberal slavery. We certainly don't need to turn to preposterous arguments and rhetoric claiming that no meaningful or positive technological developments are happening.

While Graeber has the intellectual honesty to have said nice things about markets in the past and repeats some of these in *The Utopia of Rules*, I'll just direct you to my coverage of this in my review of *Debt* rather than rehash the same points here. What I will say is that Graeber's acknowledgement that impersonal relations can be convenient and called for should lead toward a better appreciation for the appeal of freed markets.

Indeed many left market anarchists have in the last decade taken to critiquing anarcho-communists on the grounds that markets provide *less* room for informal power dynamics, that they can make things clearer and more accessible and traversible to those autistics and the like who are systemically marginalized in the typical social capitalism of communal societies. This is new and productive work that I would love to see more discourse on. What we choose to invest cognitive or symbolic complexity in and what we simplify by default in order to explore complexity in other areas is a deep and important discussion for anarchists and there will obviously be no universal answers.

Graeber is at pains to point out that the interpretive depth of a subject does not relate to its significance. The most interesting dynamics are not always the most important, and frequently the really basic realities get overlooked by social theorists hungry for things they can spend forever nuancing or complicating.

The problem is that by appealing to a very big and abstract bundle of associations like "bureaucracy" and using the messy language of anthropologists and social theorists Graeber is partially engaging in precisely this sin. He's aware of it, and it enables him to flesh out an entire book tracing the complexities (and thus fend off the lovecraftian horrors he's made deals with for another year), but it creeps in as a kind of sloppiness time and time again.

It's not enough to merely map out the idea space traversing around endlessly, but to probe it and restructure models of it to get down to the roots. Graeber seems to desperately want to do that, which is highly encouraging, and he gets part of the way in audaciously whittling away towards the underlying dynamics but he frustratingly stops short before tackling the issues of informational complexity in any rigorous way.

Still you should read this book. It's pretty good.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis
Beyond the Hellish Choice of Process Documents or Social Capitalism
June 10th, 2015

<https://c4ss.org/content/38077>

theanarchistlibrary.org