

Farewell Comrade

David Graeber's Practical Anarchism

Octavio Alberola

2021

Perpignan, 18 September 2020

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

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 approach to anarchism strikes me as not merely relevant but, a logical approach consistent with anarchism's origins and valid in all times and circumstances.

Anarchism: the practice and thinking of action

Plainly, this was not some discovery Graeber stumbled upon, nor was he the first to have championed it with so much conviction.

The principles and practices (mutual aid, voluntary association, egalitarian decision-making) 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. 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 human thought.

It is not just the existence—since time immemorial—of such radically horizontal, self-organizing practices that mean anarchism can be looked upon as a theoretical construct, doctrine or ideology. The philosophy is spared from the catastrophic outcome of its praxis being whittled down to a declaration or some ideological posturing.

Anarchism, or the revolutionary movement of the 21st century

In their 2004 book of this title, David Graeber and the Yugoslav anthropologist Andrej Grubacic took the line that “the age of revolutions is not over” and that “the 21st century's global revolutionary movement is going to be one that is rooted, not so much in the Marxist tradition, nor even a narrow socialism, but rather in anarchism. This belief was based on the fact that “from Eastern Europe to Argentina, from Seattle to Bombay,” anarchist ideas and principles were “spawning brand-new radical visions and dreams.” 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, social networking, and above all the rejection of any notion of the end justifying the means, let alone of the aim of the revolution being to take over state power in order to impose one's own outlook."

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. The increase in forms of anarchist activism is actually the result of upcoming generations' interest in using more democratic forms of the decision-making process.

The upcoming generation is a lot more interested in practicalities than in arguing "about the minutiae of ideology" anticipating that world and battling to make it a possibility. It 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 colors 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 center 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.

Social inequality has become more apparent since the financial collapse in 2008 and issues relating to survival due to the catastrophic capitalist handling of the Covid19 pandemic have lent an added urgency to the crucial need to change the course of human history.

How does the course of history change?

In 2018, 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.

Basing themselves on in "process" history and the latest contributions of archaeology, their analysis showed—by contrast—the multiple reciprocal 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. This 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 idea 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 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 Wengrow frame it—may not be our queries about the origins of social inequality but the reasons for our acquiescence to it.

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, "all of the wherewithal is in place for the launch of a completely different world history."

So how can we fail to agree with them that "if we really want to grasp how it became acceptable for the few to turn wealth into power and for others to be told that their needs and lives are of no account, that is what we should be looking into." 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 backdrop to our lives. Hence the importance of remembering that "anarchism is a matter of doing, not being" and of our not making do simply with being.

In 1955, Octavio Alberola organized in Mexico in solidarity with the Cuban struggle against the Batista dictatorship; later, directly supporting preparations for Castro's landing on the island.

In 1962, in France, he coordinated Interior Defense, comprised of Spanish anarchists in exile, the CNT, the FAI, and the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth, to re-activate the struggle against Franco's dictatorship. They carried out sabotage, attempts on Franco's life, printed clandestine propaganda, and helped people fleeing Spanish fascism.

Today, he works with the Support Group for Independent Libertarians and Syndicalists in Cuba (GALSIC), among other activities. He is the author of *El Anarquismo Español y La Acción Revolucionaria* (1961–1974) and *Miedo a la Memoria*.

fifth Estate

Octavio Alberola
Farewell Comrade
David Graeber's Practical Anarchism
2021

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/408-winter-2021/farewell-comrade>
Fifth Estate #408, Winter, 2021

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)