The Political Vision of David Graeber

Marissa Holmes

2021

Throughout his life, David Graeber remained an eternal optimist who refused to accept the world as it is, and saw only what it could be. He envisioned international, directly democratic, and egalitarian politics. To achieve this required practice.

An Hypothesis

In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Graeber made an hypothesis: majoritarian democracy was in its origins essentially a military institution, a coercive political process in which the minority was compelled by force to do as the majority wanted. Often the "majority," as in the case of Ancient Athens, was comprised only of white property-owning men. A real democracy could be found in non-Western examples, where people made decisions based on consent rather than coercion. He wrote, "If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose." Thus, in communities where the mechanism of coercion, most commonly the state, was absent, there was no reason to engage in a majoritarian process. Instead, he claimed, they operated by not only a formal consensus decision-making process, but a culture of consensus.

Graeber saw the advancement of this culture as strategic. He wagered that if what is called democracy is not really democratic at all, but people value democratic practice, then encouraging the practice could aid in de-legitimizing the state. If not anarchist in name, a stateless, borderless, society, would be anarchistic. The seeds of his approach to revolutionary strategy are present in *Fragments*, but the fruits can be seen in the Global Justice Movement, Occupy Wall Street, and his support for Rojava.

Democracy v. The WTO

Graeber was active in the Global Justice Movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which was responding to the increasing consolidation of corporate power through such entities as the World Trade Organization (WTO). In the face of this neoliberal world order, in which all pretenses of democratic participation were subsumed by the market, there was a need for an alternative

In 1994 the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government, but did not attempt to seize power. Instead, they took territory, which they defended and held as *caracoles* (autonomous municipalities). This served as an example for activists in the "global north" of a revolution from below, and beyond the state. The Global Justice Movement emerged in large part as a solidarity effort with the Zapatistas. The convergence in Seattle against the WTO, and the Direct Action Network (DAN) that followed were organized using similar directly democratic structures and processes. Graeber argued that there was a rapid growth of an anarchist movement, but one that was more rooted in practices than platforms. In his 2002 essay, "The New Anarchists," he wrote that the global justice movement "is

not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology." He called this *small-a-anarchism.*

In *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, Graeber explained, "During my first year in DAN, I spent a lot of time trying to understand what this 'spirit of consensus' was really all about. It was clearly not just about decision making. It wasn't even just about conduct during meetings. It was more an attempt—inspired by reflections on the structure and flow of meetings—to begin to reimagine how people can live together, to begin—however slowly, however painfully—to construct a genuinely democratic way of life." More important than everyone identifying as an anarchist was the cultural shift through the practice itself.

Occupy

In 2011, occupations manifested across the globe. In North Africa and the Middle East, neocolonial and neoliberal subjects rose up against decades-long dictatorships. They went out into the streets and central squares, where they engaged in direct and consensual democratic processes. Inspired by their example, activists in Europe began calling for real democracy. It was only a matter of time before a democratic uprising happened in the United States.

On September 17th, the first day of Occupy Wall Street, David Graeber and I huddled in a circle of facilitators at Zuccotti Park. At first we encouraged small groups to form to discuss the current crisis and envision a new world to live in. By mid-afternoon the crowd had swelled to easily 2,000 people, so we called for a general assembly. After much deliberation, overwhelmingly, the crowd decided to stay, and Occupy Wall Street was born.

In the first few weeks of OWS, there were lots of meetings, by design. Each day there would be at least two general assemblies—one in the afternoon, and one in the evening; the former often flowing into the latter, which would then go late into the night. After much discussion and drafting, we adopted *The Declaration of the Occupation*. Rather than a list of demands, it was a long list of grievances against the corporate overlords who claimed to govern us—a document asserting our independence.

It ended with the call:

"To all communities that take action and form groups in the spirit of direct democracy, we offer support, documentation, and all of the resources at our disposal. Join us and make your voices heard!"

As we had hoped, occupations took off around the country, and by mid-October there were over 1,000 camps, each with their own general assemblies and working groups, practicing direct democracy and self-management. Occupy was a form of rapidly spreading *democratic contagion*. Graeber wrote in *The Democracy Project*, "The whole project was based in a kind of faith that freedom is contagious. We all knew it was practically impossible to convince the average American that a truly democratic society was possible through rhetoric. But it was possible to show them."

Most people in the United States associate the term democracy with an electoral process in which political parties run candidates, raise a great deal of money, and sell people an image of who they are and what they stand for. This process has nothing to do with an actual practice of democracy—in fact the history of the United States is one of suppressing democratic uprisings. As Graeber said, "There's nothing that scares the rulers of America more than the prospect of democracy breaking out."

Free Rojava

After OWS, Graeber became deeply connected to the Kurdish struggle and the project of Rojava in Northern Syria. He made multiple trips to the region, raised awareness, and built political support for it. In 2015, he wrote in *The Guardian*, "The autonomous region of Rojava, as it exists today, is one of few bright spots—albeit a very bright one—to emerge from the tragedy of the Syrian revolution. Having driven out agents of the Assad regime in 2011, and despite the hostility of almost all of its neighbors, Rojava has not only maintained its independence, but is a remarkable democratic experiment."

In an interview with *Real Media*, Graeber described this as a world historical event on the level of organization during the Spanish Civil War. "This is the first time, I think, since Spain that you've had large area of territory under the control of people who are trying to do that; trying to create bottom-up direct democracy without a state." In Rojava even the people's defense units, operated democratically and elected temporary leadership. A state would enforce a monopoly on violence separate from the people, and he said, "They don't have such a monopoly. It's a democratic bottom-up organization. There is no institution that can do that."

The cantons in Rojava never described their project as anarchism, but Graeber was fascinated by how they actually organized and made decisions. Like the *small-a-anarchism* of the Global Justice Movement and the consensus process in assemblies during Occupy Wall Street, Rojava was another real life example of a society functioning without a state.

How to Live

There are life cycles of movements. The above examples, while beautiful, have been fleeting. Even the fate of Rojava now hangs in the balance as Turkey escalates its war and extends into the regions of Northern Syria. It can be heartbreaking to see the horizon of possibility and then have it disappear as if it were a mirage.

This is something that David Graeber would never do. He always maintained, even in the darkest moments, that another world was not only possible but happening all around us. Even this year, in the midst of a pandemic. One of his last projects was organizing a virtual assembly of activists across the globe, to discuss what an ideal system of healthcare might look like. In fact, the night he died, we had scheduled a meeting about it. Until the very end, he was working on democratic processes. He never stopped dreaming. David Graeber lived as if he were already free.

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https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/408-winter-2021/the-political-vision-of-david-graeber
Fifth Estate #408, Winter, 2021

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