

How to Bring the Ivory Tower Back to Earth

Can an anarchist anthropology survive in academia?

Steve Izma

2022

a review of

Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology by David Graeber. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004

This early short book by the late David Graeber provides us with several edifying topics. Its 105 pages contain a concise summary of anarchist principles, an overview of anarchist ideas that have already shown up in conventional anthropology, a critique of both academic leftism and academia itself, and the idea that anarchist imagination and activism can benefit from anthropological work.

Graeber identifies some 20th century anthropologists who, without considering themselves anarchists, revealed anti-authoritarian aspects of the cultures of various Indigenous societies. Yet explicit anarchism rarely shows up in the halls or offices of academic anthropology.

This hints at basic problems with the scientific method, including the observer effect (methods of observation affect the behavior of people being observed) and biased interpretation. Different researchers may measure the same data, but their conclusions can vary dramatically because of their differing mental frameworks. Those fixated on the idea of progress and natural hierarchies deprecate anti-authoritarianism as a primitive (in the pejorative sense) inability to develop complex systems. A minority of academics make a contrariwise proposition: a culture that prohibits the accumulation of power by individuals insists on collectivity.

Graeber, co-author of the posthumously published *The Dawn of Everything*, spends much of this text elaborating the differences between these two groups. His arguments converge at frequent points throughout the book on the key question of how autonomous groupings of people create decision-making processes that strengthen both their autonomy and their cohesiveness. Since Graeber was writing soon after the rise of the Zapatista movement and the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization actions, he consequently promoted these concepts when playing a very active role in the Occupy movement a few years later.

Similar to economic inequality, the distance between street-level activity and the ivory tower of academia continues to increase. Graeber reminds us that the very dynamics of academic life not only lack co-operation, but are whipped on by the dominance of neoliberalism. This ivory tower competition resembles a Hobbesian hell. In the race to reputation supremacy, a faculty member can be pigeon-holed as an outsider by, for example, spending more time with students instead of engaging in publishable debates. As a result, one's career becomes "nasty, brutish, and short."

More than ever, bureaucratic-minded people from the hard sciences or business schools rise to the top of academic institutions. They see the humanities and social sciences as irrelevant relics of a medieval past, hardly worth the space on the financial statements from which educational policies emerge.

On the other hand, Marxists and social democrats dominate teaching and research positions involving political and social justice issues. Their definition of political change too often means clawing their way into powerful positions within the state apparatus.

According to Graeber, this hierarchical and competitive day-to-day grind combined with the tension between activists and academics, immerses them in the problem, very familiar to anarchists, that “one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means.”

Graeber writes with an engagingly light style, with witty asides that contrast refreshingly with conventional academic writing. We see a good example of this in his discussion of the two basic principles an anarchist anthropology needs: a utopian vision and a rejection of any trace of vanguardism.

Noting the bad reputation utopians have in a scientific environment, he blames the failure of the left’s rhetoric. He points out that, “Stalinists and their ilk did not kill because they dreamed great dreams—actually Stalinists were famous for being rather short on imagination—but because they mistook their dreams for scientific certainties. This led them to feel they had a right to impose their visions through a machinery of violence.”

Modern-day technocrats come close to having the same faith in the certainties of their own thinking, and while they don’t resort to putting bullets through skulls they do have other state-enforced methods for marginalizing utopians.

With the above two principles as the basis of discussion, Graeber suggests that anarchism has historically debated many topics already part of anthropological discourse. He names nine, including a theory of the state, a theory of non-states, capitalism, hierarchy, pleasure, and alienation. Anarchists could move these ideas forward without the kind of aggression that’s typically found in academia.

Rather than taking up the flag of vanguardism, an anarchist science would join in the interplay between those building their autonomous communities and those reflecting on the successes and failures of the societies they’ve observed. Graeber says this could bring two processes into play: “one ethnographic, one utopian, suspended in constant dialogue.”

Towards the end of his book, Graeber makes strong points about what he considers the most evident aspects of contemporary anarchism: a strong critique of voting and representative democracy, struggles against globalization, and a creative perspective on the minimization of work, although with a few inconsistencies, such as his mention of robots as somehow improving the situation of coal miners.

Despite these strong arguments, it’s surprising that Graeber dismisses or avoids mention of certain controversies that encumber the debate around anti-state societies. He has no use for the primitivist strain of thought, especially that of ecophilosopher John Zerzan, whose writing frequently appears in the *Fifth Estate*.

Graeber sets up a straw man, arguing that primitivists idealize a static non-hierarchical culture as the definition of pre-civilized groupings. But Graeber can’t get past his bias against primitivists, arguing that the celebration of anti-statist principles of pre-civilized peoples means giving up all aspects of modern culture, including agriculture, writing, and language itself.

Not only does this indicate a misreading of primitivist positions, but Graeber also comes dangerously close to behaving in the anti-utopian manner that he criticizes earlier in his book. He could have engaged these ideas in dialogue. Instead, he treats primitivists as absolutists, failing to see the nuances in Zerzan’s arguments about the relationship between representation such as writing and the arts, and alienation they create.

Equally surprising is his treatment of the work of Pierre Clastres. Even though Graeber names Clastres as the 20th century’s most avowed anarchist anthropologist, he calls him a “naive romantic.” The single reason he gives is that Clastres ignores gang rape among the Amazonian peoples.

I have not been able to find any references either by Clastres or by others to gang rape among the people mentioned. Graeber goes on to state: “Perhaps Amazonian men understand what arbitrary, unquestionable power, backed by force, would be like because they themselves wield that sort of power over their wives and daughters.”

Considering the detailed descriptions Clastres gives of gender relations he observed over a long period of time in the Amazon basin, Graeber’s statement lacks credibility. He grossly generalizes about an Indigenous people, whereas Clastres constantly refers to the variations in the ways in which Amazonian people adapt to external pressures, but only yield up their autonomy at the point of cultural destruction.

This autonomy applies not only to the social grouping but also to individuals, both male and female. Graeber mirrors the critique of Clastres by people who claim, as does American anthropologist Bartholomew Dean, that Clastres’s studies are irrelevant to the needs of contemporary Indigenous people.

According to Dean, "Given its unabashed pristinism, Clastres' Chronicle...remind[s] us of anthropology's intellectual legacy of primitivism, which needs to be checked before the discipline can continue to fulfill its mission as a critical voice in the shaping of contemporary local and global affairs." Too often, this accusation of the sin of "pristinism," like that of "romanticizing" and "universalizing," comes from the kind of critic suffering from an inability to read nuance; in other words, a shallow reading.

When critics like these accuse anarchists of romanticism, they usually demonstrate their unwillingness to grapple with the concept of the state. Just as capitalism is transparent to bankers, the state is transparent to bureaucrats. The dogma in both cases states, "there is no alternative."

The position of these so-called romantics may, however, be far more complex than the bureaucrats acknowledge. Perhaps the bureaucrats are taking a determinist position, one that has difficulty with the Indigenous notions of circularity and balance.

The latter is explicitly antagonistic to the Marxist view of historical progress, one that sees opposition as a struggle to the death, of the new conquering the old. Such a polemic ends up as a blocked dialectic, one that never reaches the kind of synthesis that can only come from complex thinking mated with a desire for mutuality.

This connects to what Clastres says of the Atchei's mode of thinking, the indigenous people of Paraguay: the ongoing process of the counterbalance of opposites. Both Clastres and Graeber died young, a generation apart; Clastre in 1977; Graeber in 2020.

One wonders what might have come about had they been able to engage directly in dialogue.

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