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Afterword

Putting Pluralism into Practice: You Have To Be There

Bill Maurer

Maybe I'm feeling the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, when so many relationships moved online and conferences and classes went virtual, but it is striking to me how many contributions to this volume on the work and legacy of David Graeber reference in-person meetings, conversations, or events. David Pedersen starts with a 2001 panel of the American Anthropological Association meetings, and discusses a seminar offered by Terence Turner at the University of Chicago. Sharad Chari mentions Graeber's response to a speech at Occupy Wall Street in 2011 by Gayatri Spivak. Josh Reno recounts protesting alongside Graeber in London in 2010, with Graeber the next day presenting him with the gift of a fragment of glass from a window, smashed during the *mêlée*, from the Tory party headquarters. Despite his voluminous corpus, and the range and depth of his own reading, David Graeber was profoundly shaped by his encounters in the conference hall, the seminar room, or the conclave and conflict in the streets, and in turn gave back to those forums something of his practical theorizing.

The stylistic conceit of including in one's chapter "memorable moments with David Graeber" is to be expected given the unavoidable element of hagiography that will always creep into a retrospective like this volume (and for that reason, I exclude my own). But I want to suggest in my reflections on these thought- and action-provoking chapters that these moments that flash through this book and stick with the reader long after the eyes have left the page themselves have something to teach us about the specificity of Graeber's contribution to anthropology and its political praxis that he sought to realize, to enact, and to nurture. This is his repeated assertion that the way to refuse the idiocy of capitalist bureaucratic "bullshit jobs,"¹ the route toward recapturing the imagination, reawakening our "capacity

to act,”² and realizing expansive possibilities in the face of “violent simplifications”³ of white, capitalist culture, is through dialogue. “As he saw it,” write High and Reno in their introduction, “if you weren’t prepared to go out and encounter people and treat them as equals, you were stuck in the labyrinth of the library stacks forever.”⁴

This is not to say that Graeber did not wander that labyrinth: another striking thing about these collected essays is the map they draw of his bibliographic meandering, and mainly through the classics of the anthropological canon, from Tylor and Lowie to Leach and Lévi-Strauss. This is also not to deny that there is a very high degree of privilege associated with access to that archive, uncritical acceptance of its own lineaments of mostly heteronormative male whiteness undergirding its authority, and facility with its historical complexity and ethnographic and theoretical nuance. Of course, Graeber developed that facility through the privilege of access to the spaces of the institutions that he, despite being characterized as having been outcast by the discipline, nevertheless occupied (Chicago, Yale, the London School of Economics, Goldsmiths ... as opposed to, say, North Carolina Central, where Zora Neale Hurston finally found an academic appointment), not to mention his career-long interaction with his own “big men,” exemplified by Marshall Sahlins and Terence Turner.⁵

At the same time, however, as this volume demonstrates, Graeber’s scholarly works and his political activism evidence a continual striving toward experimentation, play even, by relentlessly holding open the possibility for dialogue. His work can be bracing—even irritating at times—given the simultaneous recitation of and irreverence toward the anthropological canon. His refusal of incommensurability and embrace of a “commonality in human experience”⁶ went hand in glove with the insistence that we should strive toward a politics where “humans are fundamentally equal and [should be] allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion, using whatever means appear most conducive.”⁷ This applies, too, to his generous reading of those classic anthropological texts, as High and Reno discuss, alongside his general lack of attention to their colonial contexts of production, or to postcolonial and antiracist critiques of ethnographic representation. Though he plays with the canon, you can tell he loves it. That is not necessarily a vice, though I often wish he had been more transparent about the sources of his own genealogy, and open to others.⁸

The dialogic mode of inquiry is simultaneously a mode of critique, too, though, through which people, even differentially situated in relations

of power and domination, recognize the capacity to become otherwise. Insofar as dialogue is always processual, it is also potentially always open-ended, expanding the horizon of possibilities. The everyday communism Graeber repeatedly extolled in his writings—the “gestures so tiny ... that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all,” like his example of tiny dinner table debt created when one asks a companion to “pass the salt”⁹—betrays a moral economy obscured by modern bureaucratic capitalism. Graeber’s analytical and political challenge was to linger in the moment of those tiny gestures, dilate the spacetimes of their performance, to tarry in the pluralism of the present so often foreclosed by the “condition of structured ignorance”¹⁰ of the dominant mode of production. For, as I have argued elsewhere,¹¹ that mode, considered in the statistical sense of the term, is just a central tendency. There are always other possibilities at the tails of the distribution.

In this volume these new social possibilities often take the form of inversion. The king becomes clown; the idiot, the wise man (Reno). But this is also the carnivalesque (High), the “festive misrule”¹² celebrated by François Rabelais, the French Renaissance writer who figures in both *Debt* and in the work of the twentieth-century Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin whose concept of dialogism Graeber so deftly exploited. This is the world upside-down sense of revolution in Edwards’ chapter, an unending turning around and around, again signified by the Burmese term *taw lan ye*.¹³ Or the as-if quality of revolution in Eritrea, conveyed by Michael Ralph.¹⁴ Graeber, following Bakhtin, might say that if we are ready so willingly to suspend disbelief and accept the totality of the world within a novel, then why is it so difficult to do the same in the spacetime of a planning meeting, a protest, or politics?

For Graeber, what forecloses possibility is the active production of ignorance by the bureaucratic state. Graeber’s anarchism rejects any rule-based order enforced directly or indirectly by violence and not of a community’s active, engaged design. Oppression limits creativity, sterilizing or short-circuiting the generativity of the dialogic moment. An explicitly anarchist activism, then, strives to reanimate our dulled creative potential, to thrust us into new relations and reawaken and amplify those tiny moments of elementary communism. Activist practice reveals other ways of being/doing in the present, and anarchism amplifies this revelation, allowing us to experience, together, what we can collectively do without a state.

As Peebles demonstrates in this volume, however, the state (or its corollary, the central bank) might also be the sovereign source of a collective commons—the money supply, in this case, as a public good. And despite its “hiding behind the veneer of a ‘public institution,’” the privatized public university still has the potential to “tip ... towards life-enhancing possibilities,” writes Chari.¹⁵ Rather than churn out docile “widgets,” it can still afford a space for the creation of full, relational, persons precisely because, I would argue, so much of the work going on within it—even by the bureaucrats!—still often has the character of the gift.¹⁶

Graeber’s model of “oppression” signals the belief in human creativity and potential, and also human freedom. Graeber and Wengrow make this explicit in *The Dawn of Everything*, where they ask how the potential for freedom got shunted (they repeatedly use the word “stuck”) into the affairs of the state or, more specifically, the triumvirate of “sovereignty, bureaucracy, and a competitive political field.”¹⁷ Yet complex social systems do not have to be governed by the violence of this triumvirate. *Dawn* is full of examples of large-scale, stateless societies that did not evidence it, as well as societies where people took up, say, agriculture for a while, and then decided it wasn’t worth it and moved on. Their point is to underscore “the possibility that human beings have more collective say over their own destiny than we ordinarily assume,”¹⁸ that the state as we know it is not inevitable; that other ways of being are possible.

The challenge with this understanding of oppression for me, however, is that it presumes its opposite is freedom.¹⁹ But I have a hard time seeing freedom in, for example, the aristocratic hierarchies of the Nuer.²⁰ For Graeber and Wengrow, because those hierarchies did not seem to pervade every aspect of a person’s life, they deem them “largely theatrical.”²¹ “Domination,” they write, “first appears on the most intimate, domestic level. Self-consciously egalitarian politics emerge to prevent such relations from extending beyond those small worlds into the public sphere.”²² When such egalitarian politics do *not* emerge, people are “free” insofar as they have the option of exit: “The freedom to abandon one’s community, knowing one will be welcomed in faraway lands; the freedom to shift back and forth between social structures [...]; the freedom to disobey authorities without consequence—all appear to have been simply assumed among our distant ancestors.”²³

I mean, I guess so? Seen one way, exit is an expression of an inherent autonomy. Seen another, however, I can’t help but think of Jean Briggs’ ostracism from the Utku Inuit community up in the cold, far North,²⁴ or

Jane Collier's remarks on so-called "egalitarian" societies that "A woman, because she is defined within political discourse as giveable, may be killed by the men who give or receive her,"²⁵ even if women are otherwise relatively autonomous. Being killed does not sound "theatrical" to me; and if exit is fleeing the possibility of murder, is it really "freedom?" (This is partly why Collier rejects the term "egalitarian.")

My long-standing beef with Graeber is precisely this: in his search for the origins of the fusion of bureaucracy, political competition, and sovereignty that gave rise to the modern state, he presumes what Michelle Rosaldo called "a faith in ultimate and essential truths."²⁶ For him, it is the ultimate and essential truth of human freedom. For me, however, the opposite of oppression is not the freedom of free and equal (Enlightenment) subjects. It is the expanded possibilities for organizing inequality so as to see how others have done so, and so that we can challenge our own and create a system where the inevitable inequalities among people can be fairly, justly, humanely managed. The gift is always a debt; but a system of generalized reciprocity and mutually enmeshed debts might just sustain a society and everyone in it regardless of ability.

Josh Reno asks us to reflect on the inevitability of a condition of disability for all humans. But is the radical freedom of Reno's son, the "becoming-moron" Reno advocates as a means of throwing a wrench in the machine of bourgeois society—no matter how liberating—actually an act of equality? Reno writes, following Danilyn Rutherford, that a post-liberal disability justice is about a radical opening of "new ways of being with one another."²⁷ To me, this requires an expansion of our vocabulary for modes of (inevitable) inequality.

Graeber seems to have gotten this point in his activist practice—indeed, it's captured in the title of this book: not "free" but "*as if already free*." And I've noted before the tension between Graeber "in the books" and Graeber "in action."²⁸ High and Reno relate Graeber's experience of consensus-based decision making, and the pleasure of the sense of giving oneself over to the collective even if one's own position does not carry the day. For me this is still not "equality" or "freedom" or the absence of "oppression," but simply a decision-making mechanism that organizes the relations between winners and losers in a manner that leaves people feeling whole, heard, one might say respected. And respect is an idiom for organizing inequality; it is not the same as autonomy, or equality. It is an acceptance of difference, and a mode of honoring it.

On the one hand, my argument might be just quibbling with definitions. On the other, however, I want to hold on to Graeber's own practice—flawed, fragmentary, privileged, provoking—of “being there.” I think the distinctions I am drawing are important because if anthropology and the social sciences are “the ideological arms of sociopolitical arrangements,” as Esther Netwon put it in the first ethnography of queerness, changing the terms of anthropology has the potential to pluralize possibility in those arrangements (to queer them, one might say).²⁹ Even if “trying to change them is like to crawl out of your own bones.”³⁰ In Newton's case, it was about trying to change the university (see Chari, this volume), and thereby change the world. I am not sure if Graeber thought the university was a proper site for activism except to abolish it (although again, see Zora Neale Hurston's professional journey, receiving a degree at Barnard and teaching at two historically Black colleges). Nevertheless, in his account of his experience in the streets the thrill of “being there” is part and parcel of the fragmentary condition of the politics of protest. Nothing is ever tied up with a bow; there are always loose ends; and it's good that those ends are loose, because that implies the give in the system—the opening of unthought of possibilities.

Perhaps that fragment of glass from the Tory HQ is an apt metaphor for Graeber's life and works, as well as where he left us after his death. Dialogue, too, is always fragmentary. There can be mishearings, misquotings, misunderstandings, contradictions and opposites held close and at the same time.³¹ Picking up those fragments, bringing them somewhere new, contains the potential to create new configurations and establish alternative sets of relations among them. But you have to be there—wherever you are—to do the work.

Notes

1. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).
2. Holly High, “Birthing Possibilities,” ch. 2 this volume, 53.
3. Georgina Tuari Stewart, “Ka Mate, Ka Ora: On Truths, Lies, and Knowing the Difference,” ch. 4 this volume, 99.
4. Holly High and Joshua Reno, “Introduction: David Graeber in the Library Stacks,” this volume, 3.
5. Turner is particularly interesting given my argument, insofar as it was from his seminars and mimeographed papers—not his published work—that he developed his cult following. You had to be there, in other words.

6. High and Reno, "Introduction," this volume, 15.
7. Ibid., 20, quoting Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, 184.
8. Take Irma McClaurin's genealogies of Black feminist anthropology, which do not seem to intertwine with Graeber's much at all. Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001). And it has always amazed me that someone who so carefully pored over the ethnographic literature on "egalitarian" societies seemed to have missed the feminist debate about "universal sexual asymmetry." See Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 17–42. This perhaps also says something about his various institutional locations and what works were circulating where and when.
9. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 89.
10. Sharad Chari, "Actualising the Public University: For Debt-Free, Antiracist, Accessible, Quality Higher Education," ch. 5 this volume, 123.
11. Bill Maurer, "Late to the Party: Debt and Data," *Social Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (November 2012).
12. Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
13. Michael Edwards, "Reading Graeber, Leach, and a Revolution in Myanmar," ch. 6 this volume, 149.
14. Michael Ralph, "Debt and Political Possibility in Eritrea," ch. 7 this volume.
15. Chari, "Actualising," ch. 5 this volume, 122.
16. On this point, I would direct readers to Frederick Wiseman's film, *At Berkeley*. This is not to deny the very real questions of labor exploitation and unfair compensation at universities.
17. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 507.
18. Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn*, 206.
19. Holly High (personal communication) pointed out to me that Graeber argued something similar in his essay on cultural refusal: "Acts of creative refusal can lead to new ideals of equality, new forms of hierarchy or, often, a complicated mix of both," David Graeber, "Culture as Creative Refusal," *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2013): 4. Perhaps I can take a phrase from the title of this volume, however: where I still think Graeber held out the idea of bringing into being an actually existing equality, I would prefer analytically and politically to treat that equality "as if already free," simply because I see all societies as necessarily systems of inequality—though inequality plays out always in "nonnecessary" ways, as Rosaldo always put it. For example, as High also indicated to me, "The idea of up and leaving takes on a whole different dimension when

thought of through the lens of care and dependency [of children or of disability], rather than autonomous adults.”

20. Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn*, 132–133.
21. *Ibid.*, 131.
22. *Ibid.*, 209.
23. *Ibid.*, 133.
24. Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
25. Jane F. Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 56.
26. Michelle Z. Rosaldo, “The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding,” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring, 1980), 393.
27. Joshua Reno, “On Morons,” ch. 1 this volume, quoting Rutherford, 48.
28. Bill Maurer, “David Graeber’s Wunderkammer, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*,” *Anthropological Forum* 23, no.1 (January, 2013): 91.
29. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), xvi.
30. *Ibid.*
31. I think this would resonate with Graeber’s understanding of Heraclitus in: David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

As if already free

Edited by
Holly High and
Joshua O. Reno

Anthropology and
Activism After
David Graeber



As If Already Free

“A fundamental contribution containing precious insights into what made David Graeber the most innovative social thinker of our time, and why the legacy of his ideas will continue to inspire projects of emancipation, for generations to come.”

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As If Already Free

Anthropology and Activism
after David Graeber

Edited by
Holly High and Joshua O. Reno



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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Series Preface</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
 Introduction: David Graeber in the Library Stacks	 1
<i>Holly High and Joshua O. Reno</i>	
1 On Morons	28
<i>Joshua O. Reno</i>	
2 Birthing Possibilities	52
<i>Holly High</i>	
3 Actually Existing Anarchist Anthropology	79
<i>Holly High and Joshua O. Reno</i>	
4 Ka Mate, Ka Ora: On Truth, Lies, and Knowing the Difference	96
<i>Georgina Tuari Stewart</i>	
5 Actualizing the Public University	114
<i>Sharad Chari</i>	
6 Reading Graeber, Leach, and a Revolution in Myanmar	130
<i>Michael Edwards</i>	
7 Debt and Political Possibility in Eritrea	155
<i>Michael Ralph</i>	
8 Collectivized Hoards and the Regulation of Money	174
<i>Gustav Peebles</i>	
9 Notes on Confronting the System	193
<i>David Pedersen</i>	
 Afterword	 202
Bill Maurer	
Notes on Contributors	210
Index	213

Illustrations

Figures

2.1	“At the Childbed,” detail from “The Severall Places Where you May hear News,” c. 1600	71
5.1	Drop in underrepresented minorities (Black, Latinx, Indigenous) since Proposition 209	118
5.2	The “Elephant Curve” of global inequality and growth, 1980–2016	119
7.1	Martyr certificate	164

Table

5.1	Comparing “public Ivy” fees and endowment-to-undergraduate-enrollment ratios	115
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