

David Graeber

some tributes

David Graeber obituary

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/sep/06/david-graeber-obituary>

The anthropologist David Graeber, who has died suddenly aged 59, was remarkably successful in marrying research with direct action. He was influential in the Occupy Wall Street movement and is reputed to have coined the statement: “We are the 99%.”

In 2011, for instance, he wrote a classic work of anthropology, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, in between organising with Occupy Wall Street in New York. In the book Graeber called for a biblical-style “jubilee”—meaning a wiping out of sovereign and consumer debts. “Debt,” he wrote, “is the most efficient means ever created to take relations that are fundamentally based on violence and violent inequality and make them seem right and proper.”

He noted that many of the people who protested with him, as well as those who took to the streets in Egypt and Spain in 2011, had one big thing in common: “Most of them were people who had gone through the educational system who were deeply in debt and who found it completely impossible to find jobs. The system has completely failed them ... If there’s going to be any kind of society worth living in, we’re going to have to create it ourselves.”

Indeed, he described the Occupy movement as an “experiment in a post-bureaucratic society”, telling the Guardian in 2015: “We wanted to demonstrate that we could do all the services that social service providers do without endless bureaucracy. In fact at one point at Zuccotti Park there was a huge plastic garbage bag that had \$800,000 in it. People kept giving us money but we weren’t going to put it in the bank. You have all these rules and regulations. And Occupy Wall Street can’t have a bank account. I always say the principle of direct action is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.”

Born in New York, David was the son of working-class Jewish parents. His Polish-born mother, Ruth (nee Rubinstein), had been a garment worker who played the lead role in *Pins and Needles*, a 1930s musical revue staged by the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. His Kansas-born father, Kenneth, who at college had been a member of the Youth Communist League, later fought with the International Brigades in the Spanish civil war before returning to New York to become a plate stripper for offset printers. David was raised in a co-operative apartment building that he told one interviewer “was suffused with radical politics”.

By the time he was 16, he called himself an anarchist, though – as he made clear on Twitter – he never cared to be described as an anarchist anthropologist: “I see anarchism as something that you do, not an identity, so don’t call me the anarchist anthropologist.”

He attended local state schools before winning a place at what he called “a fancy boarding school”, Phillips academy in Andover, Massachusetts. The scholarship came through some archaeologists discovering his precocious hobby of translating Mayan hieroglyphics.

His BA in anthropology from the State University of New York at Purchase (1984) led to his master’s and doctorate at the University of Chicago. Ethnographic field research for 20 months in Betafo, in the Arivonimamo district of central Madagascar, resulted in his PhD thesis (1997), on a community divided between descendants of nobles and slaves. A decade later it resurfaced in the book *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*.

He taught at Chicago, New York University and ultimately at Yale, where he wrote *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001), and a short book, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), musing on why, apart from David Graeber, there were so few anarchists in the academy. In 2004 Yale decided not to renew his contract. The university, he claimed, gave “no reason for its decision other than dissatisfaction with my scholarship, but some felt it may not have been entirely irrelevant that I was by this time quite active in the global justice movement and other anarchist-inspired projects”. Asked if he would have got further at Yale if he had not been an anarchist, Graeber replied: “Maybe. I guess I had two strikes against me. One, I seemed to be enjoying my work too much. Plus I’m from the wrong class: I come from a working-class background.” After Yale, he claimed to find himself unemployable in the US, but in 2007 Goldsmiths, University of London, took him on, and in 2013 he became a full professor at the London School of Economics. It was in London that the exiled American wrote much of his best work, while still engaging in direct action.

His later books included *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2013), a study of the global justice movement, which, he claimed, “hardly anyone ever reads” and *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, “which virtually everyone seems to have read”. *The Utopia of Rules* (2015) argued that since the 70s there has been a shift from technologies based on realising alternative futures to investment technologies that favour labour discipline and social control. “The control is so ubiquitous that we don’t see it. We don’t see, either, how the threat of violence underpins society,” he claimed. It was striking too that, while no cure has been found for cancer, the most dramatic medical breakthroughs have been with drugs such as Ritalin, Zoloft and Prozac that are “tailor-made, one might say, so that these new professional demands don’t drive us completely, dysfunctionally, crazy”.

In 2018 he wrote *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, arguing that most white-collar jobs were meaningless and that technological advances had led to people working more, not less. “Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they believe to be unnecessary. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it,” he said. Did that imply, I asked him once, that his work was unnecessary. “There can be no objective measure of social value,” he replied.

In 2019, he married Nika Dubrovsky, a Russian-born artist and blogger, saying disarmingly: “I have never been more moved than that someone who actually knows me would want to be with me for ever.” The couple founded Yes Women, an art group that sought justice for ostracised women in the former East Germany.

Late last year, Graeber fell out with *the Guardian*, tweeting that he would never write for the paper again after its treatment of the then Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, during the general election campaign. In particular he defended Corbyn against the charge that he was antisemitic. “If you look at the people who have left the party over antisemitism,” he told an interviewer, “most of them weren’t Jewish and a lot of the people who still remain close to Jeremy Corbyn are Jewish. It’s absurd.”

He remained a busy figure until he fell ill in Venice at the end of last month. At the time of his death he was working with the archaeologist David Wengrow on a series of works on the origins of social inequality. He had also been working with the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

Graeber described himself as an “eternal optimist” who hoped in 50 years a new system would be in place that was not capitalist. He wrote in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* that “as the Brazilian folk song puts it, ‘another world is possible’. That institutions like the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance are not inevitable; that it would be possible to have a world in which these things would not exist, and that we’d all be better off as a result.”

He is survived by Nika.

An Everyday Anarchist: David Graeber, 1961-2020

Paul Mason

5 September 2020

<https://novaramedia.com/2020/09/05/an-everyday-anarchist-david-graeber-1961-2020/>

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that there are “no second acts in American lives”. The life of David Graeber, which ended in Venice on 2 September at the age of 59, had both a second act and a third. Born in New York in 1961, Graeber grew up in a leftwing secular Jewish household. His father, a skilled printworker, had fought in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War; his mother was a garment worker and labour activist. Thanks to an “odd hobby I had developed of translating Maya hieroglyphics”, he gravitated to anthropology, graduating from the University of Chicago in 1984.

His first career, then, was that of an academic anthropologist who was also, he would admit vaguely, an anarchist. He spent two years doing fieldwork in Madagascar, where as he put it, “refugees and rebels from all over the Indian Ocean [...] created this wildly subversive cultural substratum”, making most attempts to form a state both fragile and temporary. In Madagascar he developed the intuition that cultures are basically social movements that have succeeded, and that what happens within the social movement is important for the outcome that movement is trying to achieve.

His second life, as an influential political thinker and activist, began with the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organisation in 1999: “I walked out of the class,” he remembered, “saw one of those newspaper boxes with the headline ‘Martial Law declared in Seattle’, and I thought ‘What? Martial law? Huh?’ And I discovered the political movement I’d really like to have existed had come into being when I wasn’t paying attention.” Graeber threw himself into the movement that had mobilised for Seattle, the Direct Action Network, becoming its New York City organiser. Later, he wrote an extensive ethnographic account of the movement and its role in the international mobilisations that culminated in the Genoa protest of July 2001. By now he was teaching at Yale University, but in 2004 – following months of ostracism by pro-establishment colleagues who, as he later said, were incapable of thinking a dangerous thought – his contract was terminated.

In *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009), he summarised a method of consensus-based, networked protest which had by now become embedded among large numbers of activists. And when the next wave of anti-capitalist unrest began in 2011 – this time mass, transnational and epoch-making – the events propelled Graeber’s life into its third phase – as a globally respected public intellectual.

In *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011), published with the world still reeling from the financial crisis, Graeber delivered a materialist deconstruction of debt as a social relationship. He showed that debt, and the coercive state apparatus needed to enforce it, “is the most effective way to take a relation of violent subordination and make the victims feel that it’s their fault”. With governments laying waste to the public sector, using high public debt as the rationale for austerity, Graeber’s book taught a generation of activists that debt is a form of exploitation and repression; and that the progressive outcome of a class struggle over debt is its cancellation.

Alongside the analysis of debt itself, Graeber developed the concept of an “everyday communism”, observable in clan-based societies but underpinning all human endeavours based on cooperation. Though under-developed in the book, the idea found an immediate resonance among the networked anti-capitalist activists who had been occupying the squares of major cities, determined to break with the gradualism and timidity of the official left.

That was how Graeber came to play a central role in the creation of the Occupy movement. Moving back to New York, amid the tumult of 2011, he was among the core of activists who prepared and organised the occupation of Zuccotti Park. It was Graeber who originated the idea of a “99% movement” – representing the vast majority of Americans shut out of prosperity by financialised

capitalism: “If both parties represent the 1%, we represent the 99% whose lives are essentially left out of the equation,” he suggested. Graeber was modest about his own role in the movement, but his analysis of why it worked, outlined in the *Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (2013), remains essential reading for activists.

Once the networked protest movements of 2011-2013 were repressed and subsided, as the empowered young activists matured, they gave way to a new leftward turn in politics, propelling old left parties like Syriza into power, creating new ones like Podemos, and creating strong left currents in both the US Democratic party and Britain’s Labour party. In this phase of the struggle Graeber’s anarchism and movementism sat uneasily, always critically and sometimes abrasively, against the need for party-style activism, electoral work and the inevitable bureaucracy involved. In *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2018) – spun out of an influential 2013 Strike! magazine article – Graeber argued that capitalism has reached a stage where millions of people “spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed”; that this was a form of political and cultural violence; and that the solution was a rapid reduction of work time. Though resonant among the youth, and in tune with the post-work ethos of much of the green movement, the argument put Graeber (and those of us who agreed with him) at odds with the pro-work culture and politics of left liberalism, trade unionism and social democracy, with their emphasis on full employment and the ‘jobs guarantee’.

Graeber spent the years 2007-2013 at Goldsmiths University, and was professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics from 2013 until his death. Inspired by memories of his father, Graeber visited Rojava, the liberated area of Kurdistan, in 2014, detailing its social and political achievements, and flaying both the mainstream media and the international left for their failure to support and publicise the Kurdish struggle.

To the end, Graeber was actively and combatively engaged with left strategy and politics: in one of his last articles, in *The Big Issue*, he tried to communicate the project of an anti-hierarchical left to a mass audience in just three demands: eliminate bullshit jobs, “batshit construction” and planned obsolescence.

He was dismayed at the witch-hunt of Jeremy Corbyn and remained to his death a proud anti-Zionist: “One of the things I find most offensive,” he told *Double Down News* last month, “is that I am a ‘self-hating Jew’ if I am loyal to that tradition within Judaism that has produced Karl Marx, Baruch Spinoza, Jesus – all those Jewish heretics – somehow all those guys are freaks and Bibi Netanyahu represents my true soul.”

Graeber was part of a generation of working class kids from the 1960s, who learned their leftism from their parents, carried the ethos of solidarity and agency into an era where it had been suppressed, and then found themselves unchained once neoliberalism began to fragment and destabilise after 1999.

His most profound insight was, for me, not the need for prefigurative activism, but a critique of Marxism’s totalising claims and the all or nothing strategy that flows from them. Graeber’s antidote to the fatalism of a generation who thought themselves trapped in capitalism’s inescapable matrix was to reject the idea of a “capitalist totality”: there is capital, and it subsumes other things – like friendship, co-operation, consumption and culture. “Communism already exists in our intimate relations with each other on a million different levels,” he told an interviewer in 2012, “so it’s a question of gradually expanding that and ultimately destroying the power of capital, rather than this idea of absolute negation that plunges us into some great unknown.”

At the time of his death, he had completed a new book – *On Kings* – and was working on a major project to retell the entire story of social inequality from the late stone age to the present. This, he claimed jokingly, “is most likely to be the first volume of a subsequent trilogy that will easily outsell the *Lord of the Rings*”. Tragically, there will be no fourth act. As a lifelong fighter for social justice, David Graeber’s ultimate achievement will be in the “everyday communist society” we create. He is survived by his wife, the artist and writer Nika Dubrovsky.

David Graeber, 1961–2020

David Graeber, the anthropologist and activist, died aged fifty-nine on September 2, 2020. The New York Review, to which he began contributing last year, is collecting tributes from his friends and colleagues:

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/09/05/david-graeber-1961-2020/>

Astra Taylor

I was supposed to talk to David this past week, the beginning of September, and record a conversation for this magazine. We were going to reflect on a few recurring themes of our friendship: the still-evolving legacy of Occupy Wall Street, the politics of debt (especially given the current economic calamity), how leftists should engage with and push beyond electoral politics, and the prospects of small-d democracy. The conversation was something I'd been looking forward to and meaning to arrange for months, but the pandemic gave me plenty of reasons to delay. And delay I did until last week, the end of August, when David and I finally decided to set a date. He told me he was going to Venice, and that he'd be there until September 7, but that we'd make time. It turned out to be a trip from which he would never return. After sharing some lines over text message from a piece he was writing for this publication about the upcoming election, his last and final note to me read: "No idea of time, time is being reinvented."

Looking through my emails and texts from David over the last decade, I'm struck by how instantaneously we became friends. A single coffee in the West Village in 2009 or so was all it took. We knew lots of people in common, so there was a sense we were part of the same extended community, but that was also just how David operated. There was an openness about him, a willingness to let people in and give strangers a chance. Given how knowledgeable and prolific he was, it's clear David spent a lot of time engaged in the solitary activities of reading and writing. But he was also wonderfully gregarious—he always seemed up for a phone call to check in, a ramble through an antique market, or a night on the town to talk shop or gossip. For some reason I keep thinking of David on the day I visited with him in London in 2014, when I was on tour playing with my partner's band, Neutral Milk Hotel. He dressed up for the show, in a long jacket, with these ridiculous colorful John Lennon glasses that made everyone laugh. He was a fun person, and his mischievousness suffused everything he did, including his writing and his activism.

David changed my life, and he did it without my realizing it. In August 2011 he tried to get me to go to the planning meetings of what would become Occupy Wall Street. I shrugged it off, but promised to come to the first day of the protest. I did. I remember how pleased he seemed that afternoon, like a radical maître d' going around welcoming people, checking in on our progress as we held the first assemblies. He didn't push me into the movement, but he kept opening doors that I kept walking through, steadily becoming more deeply involved and invested. Before long, he had roped me into an initiative that would be known as "Strike Debt." One of our opening salvos was a propaganda video featuring a dozen of our friends in balaclavas dancing around a burning trashcan igniting their debt notices; David can be spotted amongst the throng and wrote the voice-over. Those were the early days of a project we called the Rolling Jubilee—David named the effort—that bought portfolios of debt in order to abolish them, erasing tens of millions of dollars overdue medical bills and payday loans belonging to tens of thousands of people. The group also collaboratively wrote the *Debt Resisters' Operations Manual*, a radical financial guidebook, and gave away thousands of free copies at Occupy Wall Street's one-year anniversary protest. David never lorded the fact that he had written *Debt* over his co-authors, many of whom had not written a single article; he understood that mastering five thousand years of history doesn't mean you necessarily know the best tricks to evade bill collectors or the most effective ways to fight our modern-day form of mafia capitalism. We were all learning and experimenting together.

After David relocated to London in 2013, the effort kept going and evolving. In 2014, a small group of us launched the Debt Collective, a union for debtors, which I remain involved in to this day. David's work provided a potent critique of the dominant financial morality, which sees debtors as blameworthy or even criminal. "There's no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt—above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it's the victim who's doing something wrong," David has written. Building on his conceptual intervention, the Debt Collective has devised a comprehensive theory of debtor organizing, including an analysis of debt's centrality under conditions of financialization and the development of concrete strategies that have helped win over a billion dollars of debt relief while opening up a national conversation about the need for mass debt cancellation. We've always taken heart knowing David was cheering us on from afar and ready to brainstorm or scheme—it pains us to know he won't be able to witness all the campaigns and revolts he helped inspire.

David had very strongly held views, but he wasn't dogmatic or sectarian. Disagreeing was part of the fun. David proudly called himself an anarchist while I could never embrace that label; we argued about things including consensus decision-making (I think it rarely works) and the role of the state (I want a strong one). We both embraced the word "democracy," analyzing it and writing about it and trying to actualize it, but I was more critical of what I saw as our movements' failed attempts to manifest the concept. And yet David pushed me to think in new ways every time we debated, and he expanded my view and helped me change my mind many times. In a conversation we did last October at the LRB Bookshop he spoke about the pleasure of changing one's mind through deliberative processes, and said that it was an underappreciated form of "political happiness"—as in, "Oh, I don't have to think what I think, why don't I think something else!" He was one of the only people I could count on to credibly make an even more far out, hopeful, utopian argument than I do—I'll miss getting to play the curmudgeon in our duo.

"Credible" is the operative word, with David. His conviction that our society could be organized another way was empirically based, after all. As an anthropologist and generally curious person, he was well aware that human societies and value systems vary wildly across space and time. Very often, the stories we tell ourselves, or are told, about why things are the way they are simply aren't true; our political and economic arrangements can be transformed and remade. But David also understood that you can't produce such seismic shifts alone. A brilliant, best-selling book like *Debt* can help expand readers' understanding and imaginations, but words on a page are no substitute social for movements, for collectivities, for rebellions and riots. David engaged in activism with extraordinary humility, as a peer among equals (his in-person kindness contrasted rather dramatically with his persona on Twitter, where he could be a bit punchy). In organizing meetings, he sat quietly and listened to others, never pulling rank. It was in one long grueling activist session that it hit me just how profoundly he embodied his egalitarian principles and how much I respected him for that. He despised affectation and abhorred hierarchy, even one that might put him at the top. Over a decade in, it seemed like we were still at the beginning of our comradeship. David thought in millennia-long spans, after all—I was so sure we were just getting started.

I don't understand how the body can give out on a mind and spirit that alive, that excited and alert and full of passion and conviction and ideas and plans. I have no doubt that we'd all be grieving the loss of our friend David Graeber under normal circumstances, but the awfulness of this moment compounds the anguish. We've lost a central member of a precious tribe: activist academics are a rare breed, and rarer still are ones as eccentric, ingenious, and committed as he was. His perspective remains vital: his insistence on seeing things differently, siding with the underdog, engaging as an equal, challenging the pompous and powerful, finding joy, and keeping a utopian horizon in sight. Despite the gathering storms, let's channel David's astonishing and heartfelt faith in his fellow human beings and refuse to lose sight of the possibility, not inevitability, of our collective liberation.

David Wengrow

David Graeber died three weeks after we finished writing a book together about human history, which had absorbed us for more than ten years. It will be called *The Dawn of Everything*, because he wanted that. David and I became friends around 2007, an in-between time for us both. We used to meet on my regular visits to New York. David would say that every time we talked he learned something new. It's how we bonded—but in truth I was learning much more, and soon we were learning together. He opened horizons. “We will change the course of history,” he said, “starting with the past.” I wasn't keen. My mentor, the archaeologist Andrew Sherratt, had recently died, just as suddenly as poor David now has, and I was without direction. David sprinkled magic dust, and changed all that. He restored my faith in knowledge, but more, he gave it purpose, because he lived his social science; if you couldn't inhabit it, share it, practice it, then it was trivial theorizing. “When Occupy was taking off,” he used to tell me, “the most common objection I heard was, well, this kind of thing is great, but it could never really work on a large scale.” Was that actually true? The history of the last few centuries, perhaps even the last few thousand years, would suggest so. But what if you dug deeper? That's why he needed an archaeologist like me, and to some extent to become one himself. We bracketed the Iron Age, and went below the surface. As David predicted, we were soon under attack for having “political motivations.” He wasn't fazed. Neither was I. I knew what bonded us.

We questioned ourselves relentlessly; researched each point to death; read everything we could get our hands on; used our academic standing to access the top specialists on every subject. We were systematic (we have a thing called “the archive”). We published in the toughest scientific journals first—he insisted on that. We could see the cherry-picking going on elsewhere, often among those who shout most loudly about their “scientific” credentials. We just wanted to know why so much of what seemed to us important knowledge about the human past, all the stuff researchers found out in recent decades, still lay hidden from the view of most ordinary folks. It's relevant here that neither of us came from academic backgrounds, far from it; we bonded over that, too, over being weird Jews, and over Kurdistan, where I was running archaeological excavations at the time.

In theory, universities were all for it—having what the bureaucrats call “impact.” I always found it hilarious how David could be churning out mind-bending op-eds in the *New York Times*, or travelling to war zones to sit on revolutionary committees, or finding other ways to inspire countless people to try and live differently, but somehow none of that “counted” in any official sense. It all proved his points about bureaucracy. I can't conceive of *The Dawn of Everything* being published without David here to see it. He was so looking forward, and had already started a sequel—one of three, he insisted. He wanted a movie.

It all started as a game really, an escape from our more “serious” responsibilities. Our only rule was no rules: no deadlines, no funding applications. Just a free space to ask questions and seek answers. It was somewhere to go when we felt like it, which turned out to be pretty much daily, often in the small hours of the night, after real life ended. The world threw a lot of personal pain our ways in those years. It changed around us, mostly for the worse. “For a very long time,” David wrote, “the intellectual consensus has been that we can no longer ask Great Questions. Increasingly, it's looking like we have no other choice.” We shared it all with each other, every day, the good stuff too, of course. And the book kept us going, transcending everything, making us feel safe when the safety of home eluded us. It made us family. We didn't want it to end, this unexpected journey.

Beka Economopoulos

David had a way of communicating ideas considered radical that made them sound like common sense. And with an unassuming sense of humor. I first met him in Philadelphia in 2000, at the protests against the Republican National Convention. I was coordinating a “protester PR” operation out of the Independent Media Center space, pairing reporters with activists who could act as tour guides: an early experiment in embedding, I suppose. David showed up to volunteer, with his bad

teeth, disheveled dress, and fast, mumbling manner of talking and laughing at his own jokes. I wasn't sure about him at first, but he proved himself to be sharp, media-savvy, and a hardworking and caring soul.

After that, we saw each other regularly at weekly New York Direct Action Network meetings, events, protests, and parties. His life was academia, movement politics, and caring for his mother. He was an activist-scholar, an insurgent anthropologist—deeply involved in the movements his ethnographies explored. This freaked Yale University out and they effectively gave him the boot—a move that was widely understood to be politically motivated. He took this hard, but soon landed on his feet, moving to the UK to teach at Goldsmiths and then at the London School of Economics. He resurfaced as a figure in New York in the lead-up to Occupy Wall Street, facilitating many of the meetings in the summer of 2011 at Tompkins Square Park. The plans seemed harebrained to me, but they blossomed into a social movement that I and countless others poured blood, sweat, and tears into—one that continues to have ripple effects, birthing new infrastructures and organizations (including The Debt Collective and the organization I co-founded, The Natural History Museum), renewing class consciousness, and helping to shape several subsequent social movements. David and I understood the Occupy movement differently. He was invested in its “general assemblies” as spaces for direct democracy; I saw their power as largely performative. Nonetheless, I appreciated his tireless activism, his writing and thinking and global movement-building. Given his anarchist politics, I was intrigued by David's recent support of the UK's Labour Party and its socialist candidate for prime minister, Jeremy Corbyn. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk shop with him amidst the seismic socio-political shifts we're living through. Throughout the years that I knew him best, he longed for a life partner. A lack in his life that he seemed to feel deeply. With a lump in my throat, it gives me solace to know that he found a true love and comrade in the artist, writer, and activist Nika Dubrovsky, and I feel her grief from afar for a life taken too soon.

David Graeber, *presente!* Rest in power my friend.

Isabelle Frémeaux and John Jordan

Dear David, It's midnight. Tears come and go like tides. Last night under the full moon, you passed away suddenly and left this world that you have been so much part of transforming for the better. In the library on the ZAD (*Zone à Défendre*, Zone to Defend)—built where the French state wanted to put an airport, in the shadow of an illegal lighthouse erected on the site of a planned control tower—there are eight books on special display. One of them is the French edition of your *Bullshit Jobs*. The library is crammed with books about anarchism, occupation movements, the Paris Commune, utopias, territorial and peasant struggles. Strangely, next to the display copy of your book there was a half-empty shelf: the only half-empty shelf in the library. That shelf seemed to be the place to mark your senseless passing, with just enough space to make a small shrine to your memory, your friendship, your brilliance and quirkiness. We adorned it with candles, flowers from the meadow where they wanted to put the runway, a paving stone from an old barricade from the forty-five-year-long struggle here, and a photo of you smiling and looking up to your left into the air, as if calling the spirits of joyful rebellion to your side. If we followed your gaze, up from the photo across the books, it landed on the shelf marked ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards). You would have laughed your trickster laugh. Not many libraries have an ACAB shelf, or are built on an occupied autonomous zone against an airport and its world, which worked with self-organization without police for six years. You would have loved the ZAD; it embodied your ideas where direct action became entangled with everyday life. We had often spoken about you and Nika visiting us, giving a talk here, spending time together walking through these farms and wetlands saved from destruction. But life, like revolution, is always unexpected. You were not to visit these four thousand acres which politicians once called the territory lost to the republic. We still can't believe that we have lost you. Tonight we shot a firework toward the moon for you.

One of the first anarchist thinkers, William Godwin, wrote that old books are the bodies of ghosts. Your books are not old, yet already ghosts' bodies—bodies that will continue to inspire so many in these dark times where we needed your radical imagination more than ever. In 2018, we were working on a book to support the ZAD after the evictions following the victory against the airport. We asked you to write the preface. Via telegram from the Rojava border you replied, saying you could not write because you were smuggling drones into the Autonomous region, which gave us all so much hope about living without the state. “Ghostwrite the preface,” you wrote, which was a terrifying honor, and which JJ did, trying desperately to channel you like a kind of distant medium. It speaks volumes about how open and humble you were. You joked afterward that you should get comrades to ghostwrite you more often to give you time to learn the guitar.

The last time we hung out with you and Nika, we were running from teargas in the streets of Paris on the biggest day of action of the Yellow Vests uprising, when Macron was ready to evacuate the Elysée Palace by helicopter (which, sadly, he never did). You were one of those rare intellectuals whose acts and forms of life corresponded with your ideas, who took risks in thought and deed, and whose words had such a clarity about them that they opened doors to radicalism to so many. You once wrote to Isa that one of your rules was to “be kind to your reader.” We miss that kindness already much too much. We will always love you, as a body and as a ghost. ■

Ayça Çubukçu

David and I first met in New York City. It was the summer of 2001. Soon, the Twin Towers would fall, and we would spend our nights at Charas Community Center in anti-war meetings organized by the Direct Action Network. David was an anthropologist at Yale. At first, I was uncomfortable as an object of his analysis, a fellow anarchist writing an ethnography of direct action. He would accept the cynical tease or two, keep his cool, and carry on organizing like a bull. We last communicated a few days before he died. He said he was feeling unwell, was going to Venice to see if that would help. David was dependable, hardworking, heart-warming, a caring friend. He was brilliant and sometimes difficult to understand. He lived and loved life utterly, as if it was the only one he had. We will miss you sorely dear friend, darer, dreamer, internationalist, scholar, lover of life and all its possibilities. Comrade, colleague, revolutionary thinker. David Graeber, *presente!*

Andrew Ross

Because David opened so many doors in people's minds, it was common to hear it said, on his tragic death, that we owe him so much. He might appreciate the sentiment, but would strongly disapprove of the way it was phrased. For him, no one should have to feel indebted to individuals or institutions—and least of all, to banks. Whatever we owe, we owe to each other as a daily act of love and mutual aid. He devoted five hundred pages of his paradigm-shattering *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* to reaffirming this bedrock anarchist principle. The timing of its publication, just before Occupy Wall Street, turned out to be impeccable. Not only because debt, and debt resistance, emerged as a frontline preoccupation of Occupy, but also because, in Occupy, we all agreed, for a while at least, to abide by the anarchist playbook. Though David is often associated with the “We are the 99 percent” slogan, his contribution to the theory and practice of Occupy's conduct and tactics was much more profound and formative for the movement.

When Occupy devolved, due to ruthless suppression by city police departments across the US, some of the energy and talent in the movement was channeled into debt resistance initiatives. David and I were among the founder members of Strike Debt, which launched two mutual aid projects—the Rolling Jubilee (which ended up abolished over \$30 million of debt) and the Debt Resisters' Operations Manual (which debtors of all types used to reduce their unjust financial burdens). Both were collective efforts, but they drew a great deal of their practical zeal from David's knack for innovative forms of organizing and public education.

The last time I saw him was in a vintage clothing store in London's Portobello Road Market. He was trying on a fur coat. We were so surprised to encounter each other in that place that we never got around to talking about the fur coat. But the incident reminds me now of an earlier contribution of his to political theater. On April 25, 2012, the Occupy Student Debt Campaign staged a showy demonstration to mark the day that aggregate US student debt passed the trillion-dollar mark. To call out the debt profiteers, some of us were dressed up as bankers, and the agitprop group Billionaires for Bush were decked out, as usual, in tuxedos and top hats, evening gowns and long gloves. David showed up wearing the uniform of a Roman centurion, a costume that had nothing to do with his scripted role of destroying a giant loan statement. No one asked why he looked like he had come from rehearsals in a *Julius Caesar* production at Shakespeare in the Park (he showed up later in the day, still in costume, to debate David Harvey.) In retrospect, I believe it was in his mind to pay homage to the ancient origins of the tradition of the Debt Jubilee. More than anyone, David helped to revive and push into public consciousness the idea that debts should be wiped clean in a single act of abolitionary justice. It will be his greatest legacy if we can see that day come to pass.

Marshall Sahlins

Some years ago, when David was chosen to give the prestigious Malinowski lecture in London, his introducer, Olivia Harris, called to ask about my experience as his PhD adviser. He's a fountain of ideas, she said, how did you supervise David Graeber? "You didn't," I told her. In any case, how would you supervise an anarchist? David was the most creative student I ever had, constantly turning the conventional anthropological wisdom inside out, often to show how ostensibly dominated peoples, by their own means, subverted the states, kings, and other coercive institutions afflicting them to create self-governing enclaves of community. His two years of fieldwork in a Malagasy village only confirmed that the people filled out tax forms but didn't pay taxes, that the reports of the existence of the state in the countryside had been exaggerated.

David's activism and his anthropology were of a piece, inseparable. The pamphlet *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* is his anarchist manifesto. It's not about bomb-throwing or insurrection; it's about how peoples around the world, from Amazonia to the African Congo, have slowly created asylums of self-determination in the face of spectral or governmental powers. Advocating thus for a global reconstruction, David became in many senses a global person in his own being. During 2016, when we were writing a book together, he sent email comments on it from Nablus in the West Bank, from Syria, and from somewhere in Turkey, where he had joined local anarchists in their respective good fights. The most generous of persons, with time, knowledge, and compassion for all in need, David became global in the extent of his personal and intellectual presence, the central figure of an international network of sympathetic comrades.

His politics, likewise, were global, including demands for the abolition of borders, giving free movement to peoples everywhere (and incentives to erstwhile metropolises to make Laotians happy in Laos), as well as the cancellation of all national debts in a worldwide "Jubilee Year." And in all this, David remained a profound anthropological scholar, global also in his science, one of the last anthropologists with an encyclopedic knowledge of world cultures and a deep command of the variety of the human experience. Upper Paleolithic hunters, West African kingdoms, Polynesian chiefs, Malagasy states, and Pirate Republics, among many others, were not foreign to him. They were instructive.

One of David's books is titled *Possibilities*. It is an apt description of all his work. It is an even better title for his life. Offering unimagined possibilities of freedom was his gift to us.

Brooke Lehman

To remember my friend and comrade David Graeber is to remember mass action organizing over the last twenty years. I met David in 1999 as we built the New York chapter of the Direct Action Network. He used to say, “To be a member of DAN, you don’t have to be an anarchist, you just have to act like one.” David was one of the most truly anarchistic people I have ever known. David would sit in our weekly spokescouncil meetings at Charas Community Center in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, participating in our decision-making with all his heart, as he also quietly ethnographized our movement. Though miles ahead in both knowledge and clout, David delighted in being one simple cog in a directly democratic wheel. A decade later, David called me down to Occupy Wall Street, where he was again organizing shoulder to shoulder with people half his age. He reveled in the seductive—and largely unwashed—energy of revolution. And with this, I will choose to remember David in his happy place: leading a crowd of thousands through the winding streets of Wall Street, arm-in-arm with his young comrades, under a shiny black flag.

Thomas Gokey

I first encountered David through his 2008 book *Direct Action: An Ethnography* and some shorter essays, but it was *Debt* that really blew the lid off my head. I was in debt myself, I knew the vampiric power of debt, but I didn’t understand what debt really was. David’s book was like finding a secret decoder ring, or the blueprints to the bear trap that was cutting off your leg. Later, during Occupy, I ended up on a listserv for people scheming about debt resistance. David sent a message about how debts were bought for pennies on the dollar, and said we could just buy some debt and burn it. This couldn’t be, could it? It seemed too good to be true. How could such a thing work? The next thing I knew I was down the rabbit hole. It took nine months of research, but eventually I was able to tell him I had figured it out.

I bought a small amount of debt as a test. The timing was perfect, as a new debt resistance group was just forming that would take this idea and run with it. We ended up surprising ourselves. It was thrilling, at first, just to purchase and abolish millions of dollars of debt. But the scope expanded quickly, and as soon as we started organizing debt strikes we were able to force the government to discharge over a billion dollars of debt. Now it seems realistic to dream about getting rid of all \$1.7 trillion of student debt. I fully expect we will keep surprising ourselves.

What most struck me most about David was how curious, playful, and all around goofy he was. He was brilliant but his mind and manner were childlike. He was deeply supportive and generous with his time. He never made me feel stupid for asking him to explain, and then reexplain, and then reexplain again, how is it that money is just debt, or how exactly banks create money by lending it. I don’t think there was a single conversation I had with him where I didn’t end up seeing the world differently afterwards, which was exhilarating. I often turned to him—either to his writings or to the man in conversation—when I didn’t know what to do, assuming he would have some helpful insight. With David, the really fun thing was trying to figure things out as a group. He could help us look at things in a new way, not so much because he had answers as because he had a faith that, with enough people, we could discover and invent our own solutions—that we have it within ourselves to take care of each other, and that it would be riotously fun to help everyone flourish. The future needed David. I think we all have a sense of how difficult the next few years are going to be, and just how much work there is for us to do. David really believed that the future was full of possibilities, that it was up to all of us to make the world we want to live in together, and it was going to take all of our love and creativity to win. And David really wanted to win!

That work is going to be harder now without him. Things could get so much worse. At the same time, we have never been closer to a number of major shifts. Our society is on the verge of collapsing, and everything is up for renegotiation. I was looking forward to being able to celebrate some big victories with him. I want to make him proud.

Nicholas Mirzoeff

When news broke that David Graeber had died, I felt incredulous that this could happen to a person who seemed to embody the concept that another world was possible. David always lived as if he were free, with a zest for life that brought out the best in those around him. Themes like grief, mourning, pessimism, and trauma, widely discussed among other scholars, were not at the heart of his work or activism, for all his awareness of failure and defeat. David was motivated by twin pillars, the radical capacities of the imagination and the need to place care at the center of any community. That's what we will have to hold onto.

Reading David's writing is like being in conversation with him: funny, incisive, and insightful at once, whether he's talking about Batman, debt, direct action, or kingship. Like Stuart Hall, David was "in the university but not of it." For all the times I heard him speak, I now realize none of them were in a university.

His capacity to transform and subvert the underlying concepts of established fields, as well as his sheer readability, made David to me the last great New York Jewish public intellectual. He often described growing up in public housing in a radical Jewish family with ties to the Spanish Revolution, the trade union movement, and Broadway alike. He did his undergraduate degree at SUNY Purchase and spent decades as an activist on New York City's streets.

And let it be said that this background embedded within the radical anti-capitalist Jewish tradition underscored his recent engagement with the Palestinian cause, and his rejection of the media-generated moral panic over anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Notably, Jeremy Corbyn and his former deputy, John McDonnell, posted moving tributes last week.

But this starts to feel too dry. Here's a real David moment: I was giving a talk in London, as we used to do before the pandemic, and he appeared without warning, dressed as the Artful Dodger in a waistcoat, checked trousers and a flowing coat. On the way out, he pulled us into a Bloomsbury shop, which turned out to be a magic bookstore. I had walked down that street countless times and had never before noticed this marvelously eccentric place. The people there knew him, of course, and embraced him. He pulled one esoteric text after another off the shelves while talking to everyone. He bought some obscure, leather-bound book, and it disappeared into the capacious pockets of his coat. And then he was gone.

David Graeber pushed us to imagine greater human possibilities

Rebecca Solnit

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/08/david-graeber-pushed-us-to-imagine-greater-human-possibilities>

8 September 2020

The anthropologist, who died last week, had cheerful, insurrectionary verve as a scholar and direct-action activist.

This week has mingled, for me, the sadness of losing David Graeber the person, and the joy of immersing myself in David Graeber the writer, by diving into his many electrifyingly original essays and books, though their brilliance makes the loss all the sadder. The anthropologist and activist died in Venice on 2 September, suddenly and unexpectedly, and waves of grief, remembrance and gratitude streamed in from around the globe.

He was a remarkable person, both a distinguished scholar and a committed direct-action organiser. The latter ranged from the global justice movement of the late 1990s to Occupy Wall Street in 2011, up to his support in recent years of the beautifully anarchic autonomous Rojava region in northeast Syria.

After the news came, the Kurdish activist Hawzhin Azeez said: “David was a friend to the Kurds at a time when we had none. As the oppressed, we needed intellectuals of such giant proportions to stand in solidarity and unwavering support with us. The greatest act of love that we can in turn do is uphold his legacy by reading his seminal writings and to keep him alive and ever present in our work and struggle as Kurds, activists, leftists, as anarchists and as lovers of freedom and hope. Yet David Graeber is not lost to us; his legacy, his values, his ideas live in the olive orchards of Rojava, in its communes and in its cooperatives.” Friends in France say he smuggled drones into the Rojava region.

Many of the people I heard from knew and loved him because they had organised and protested with him. They spoke of how cheerful and patient he was in organising meetings, and what a good listener he was. One person fondly remembered how 20 years earlier David “bought me my first riot helmet when I was 19. What an inspirational weirdo he was.” He walked his talk, generous in life as well as in his ideas, which tended towards the liberatory and encouraging. In a text exchange with the political thinker Astra Taylor shortly before his death, she told him what a “damn good writer” he was, adding that it’s a “rare skill among lefties”. He thanked her, and said: “I call it ‘being nice to the reader’, which is an extension of the politics, in a sense.”

Words of praise and loss poured in from Japan, the Middle East, the US, Europe: fond reminiscences of his enthusiasm, his kindness, his eclectic, sometimes theatrical, usually rumpled dress. I didn’t know David well, though we had several wonderful afternoons of wandering in words and walks over the years, but I had been inspired over and over again by his work, ever since the tiny (in size) and huge (in ideas) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* came out, a book that more than one person said led them to choose a scholarly career. He had one himself, but as someone remarked in a Zoom memorial gathering last week, he was in the academy but not of it. Academia rewards orthodoxies, and David’s erudite unorthodoxy swept in like a fresh wind from an accidentally open door.

His 2011 book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* overturned the conventional explanation of why money exists and provided beautiful arguments to delegitimise the production of debtors. He followed through on that as a debt-resistance activist in various initiatives springing from Occupy Wall Street (which he helped organise in the months leading up to the 17 September 2011 occupation near Wall Street). This in turn led to thousands more Occupy movements around the world and changed the global conversation about economic injustice and its alternatives. Though he was always quick to credit the others who collaboratively generated the Occupy Wall Street chant “We are the 99%”, it was he who came up with the 99% part, and it’s typical of David in its optimism. It says that, actually, most human beings are on the same side against the really rich – whom we still call the 1%, a very different framework from the conventional pitting of a nebulous working class against an equally nebulous middle class.

There’s a section heading in a piece David published in 2018 that embodies his cheerful, insurrectionary verve: it says, simply, “*Time for a re-think*”. Actually it’s a collaborative work, an essay he co-wrote with his fellow anthropologist David Wengrow that is, apparently, the seed for their forthcoming book. That essay had a humorously ambitious title, “How to change the course of

human history (at least, the part that's already happened)". It did so by questioning the conventional idea that human beings originated in egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands and then somehow fell from grace into inequality; that small is egalitarian, and big is hierarchical; and that, since we're 8-billion big, we're doomed. Like so much of his work, it looked at the wild variety of human societies as an invitation to ... Well, as he said in *The Utopia of Rules*: "The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently." His body of work is a series of invitations to make differently.

Possibilities was the title of a book of essays he published in 2007, with these opening lines: "I decided to call this collection *Possibilities* because the word encompasses much of what originally inspired me to become an anthropologist. I was drawn to the discipline because it opens windows on other possible forms of human social existence; because it served as a conscious reminder that most of what we assume to be immutable has been, in other times and places, arranged quite differently, and therefore, that human possibilities are in almost every way greater than we ordinarily imagine."

Nearly everything he wrote, from a 2014 essay about the police in Ferguson, Missouri and his reconsideration of revolution, to his spry assault on bureaucracy and, to quote another book title, *Bullshit Jobs*, was meant as a gift to the rest of us: an encouragement to imagine and see those expanded possibilities.

Remembering My Friend, David Graeber

Michael Hardt

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/09/remembering-my-friend-david-graeber>

David Graeber will remain for me a model for how to live to the fullest a scholarly and activist life.

David Graeber was an exemplary scholar-activist. We all know plenty of professors who will occasionally participate in demonstrations and sign petitions; and activists who conduct research and teach. David, however, was so deeply engaged in both realms that it would be impossible to assign one a primary role. Clearly, for him, scholarship and activism enriched and informed one another in a constant exchange.

I first met David during the great season of alter-globalization struggles following the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. He stood out for the intelligence of his interventions at meetings and demonstrations, undoubtedly, but what most impressed me was his dedication to practical militancy, his patience at interminable meetings, and his willingness to travel wherever the next struggle erupted. Indeed, over the past twenty years, he has been seemingly omnipresent at activist encounters.

He is widely celebrated for his 2011 role at Occupy Wall Street, of course, and his more recent support of struggles in Rojava have been very visible, but he has also participated in innumerable less visible events and encounters, large and small. I have never interpreted David's dedication to militancy as an obligation, as if he were making a sacrifice and fulfilling a duty. Instead, he is one of the lucky ones who has discovered the rewards and pleasures of an activist mode of life, regardless of its rigors and hardships.

I remember joining David in Tokyo in July 2008 before the G8 meetings in Japan. I was beleaguered and exhausted not only from the trans-Pacific flight but also from the hours of detention and interviews upon arrival at the Tokyo airport. The Japanese authorities had a list of

international activists to detain and question. I quickly abandoned any self-pity, however, when I learned that David had just returned from participating in an activist encampment outside the city, sleeping in a tent under the rain, where he had gotten food poisoning. He was pale and weak, understandably, but his spirits were not dampened. He forged ahead enthusiastically with his speech at the counter-summit and all the planned street protests. It was hard not to be propelled forward by his energy.

One aspect of David's writing that I greatly admire is the way it combines serious academic research with popular and accessible – and often genuinely humorous – writing. This combination of research and writing styles is, indeed, another facet of his figure as a scholar-activist. He does not hesitate, in his writings, to delve into complex arguments in the history of anthropology, for instance, but these are always brought to bear on the contemporary political problems at hand, such as debt or capitalist exploitation. This is part of what accounts, no doubt, for his extraordinarily wide readership.

Another element that contributes to the great attraction of his work is often cast as optimism, although I do not think that term is adequate. What is key is that his analyses and critiques of contemporary forms of domination (including capitalist social and economic relations, state and police violence, today's deadening work culture, and more) are always accompanied by the affirmation of real, democratic alternatives. He was always highly attuned, undoubtedly due to his anthropologist's eye, to the democratic social relations that are already present in our daily interactions.

Such experiences of democratic alternatives, then, are intensified and multiplied in activist organizations and, particularly, in the experiments that constitute the occupations and encampments that have formed in recent decades. David had great belief that even small experiments in new democratic relations could prefigure powerful future developments. I am reluctant to call this optimism since, whereas as that term implies mere hope that another world is possible, I find David's confidence in a democratic future entirely realistic, precisely because of the many struggles that have so long aimed to bring it about.

David will remain for me a model for how to live to the fullest a scholarly and activist life.