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Opinion

Sport

Culture

Lifestyle

Int

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Rebecca Solnit

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David Graeber: 'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently.' Photograph: Frantzesco Kangaris/The Guardian

David Graeber was a joyful, celebratory person. An enthusiast, voluble, on fire with the possibilities in the ideas and ideologies he wrestled with. Every time we met – from New Haven in the early 00s to London a few years before his death in 2020 – he was essentially the same: beaming, rumples, with a restless energy that seemed to echo the constant motion of his mind, words tumbling out as though they were, in their unstoppable abundance, overflowing. But he was also much respected in activist circles for being a good listener, and his radical egalitarianism was borne out in how he related to the people around him.

He was always an anthropologist. After doing fieldwork among traditional peoples in Madagascar, he just never stopped, but he turned his focus to his own society. Essays such as [Dead Zones of the Imagination](#): On Violence, Bureaucracy, and 'Interpretive Labor' and his book [Bullshit Jobs](#) came from using the equipment of an anthropologist on stuff usually regarded as boring, or not regarded at all – the function and impact of bureaucracy. His 2011 [bestseller on debt](#) reminded us that money and finance are among the social arrangements that could be rearranged for the better.

He insisted, again and again, that industrialised Euro-American civilisation was, like other societies past and present, only one way of doing things among countless options. He cited times when societies rejected agriculture or technology or social hierarchy, when social groups chose what has often been dismissed as primitive because it was more free. And he rejected all the linear

narratives that present contemporary human beings as declining from primordial innocence or ascending from primitive barbarism. He offered, in place of a single narrative, many versions and variations; a vision of societies as ongoing experiments, and human beings as endlessly creative. That variety was a source of hope for him, a basis for his recurrent insistence that it doesn't have to be this way.

As Marcus Rediker wrote in his review of David's posthumous book *Pirate Enlightenment*, "Everything Graeber wrote was simultaneously a genealogy of the present and an account of what a just society might look like." He was concerned about inequality of all kinds, including gender inequality in this society and others, and the violence that enforces inequality and unfreedom, as well as how they might be delegitimised and where and when societies might have escaped them. He focused, in short, on freedom and its impediments.

He despised the tedium of academic bureaucracy but he loved activist meetings, and revelled in scheming and mischief

He was often credited with coining the Occupy Wall Street slogan "We are the 99%", but he insisted on paring his credit down to having contributed the 99% part to a phrase so compelling that "the 1%" remains a widely used description of the uppermost elite. "The 99%" is a hopeful phrase, in opposition to the old layer-cake description of the working, middle, and upper classes. It's an assertion that the great majority of us are working, and often financially struggling or precarious; that most of us have a lot in common – and a lot of reasons to oppose the super-rich.



Graeber is said to have coined the Occupy Wall Street slogan 'We are the 99%' – though he only wanted partial credit. Photograph: KeystoneUSA-ZUMA/Rex Features

David took joy in his work, and in how that work intersected with actualities on the ground – especially with the radical movements of the late 1990s and the new millennium, including the anti-corporate-globalisation movement that peaked with [the shutdown of](#) the World Trade Organization ministerial conference in Seattle in 1999, the Zapatista uprising in Mexico that began in 1994, and the many forms of radical egalitarianism manifesting as direct-

democracy experiments and resistance to unjust institutions and governments, especially 2011's Occupy Wall Street, in which he was deeply involved.

That joy: maybe this is how everyone should feel about ideas and the ways that they open up or close off possibilities. The way that, as he wrote, "The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently." If you truly believe that, if you perceive a world that is constructed according to certain assumptions and values, then you see that it can be changed, not least by changing those assumptions and values.

We have to recognise that ideas are tools that we wield – and with them, some power. David wanted to put these tools in everyone's hands, or remind them that they are already there. Which is part of why he worked hard at – and succeeded in – writing in a style that wasn't always simple but was always as clear and accessible as possible, given the material. Egalitarianism is a prose style, too. Our mutual friend the writer, film-maker, and debt abolitionist [Astra Taylor](#) texted him: "Re-reading Debt. You are such a damn good writer. A rare skill among lefties." He texted back that August, a month before his demise: "Why thanks! Well at least I take care to do so – I call it 'being nice to the reader,' which is an extension of the politics, in a sense."

In order to believe that people can govern themselves in the absence of coercive institutions and hierarchies, anarchists must have great faith in ordinary people, and David did. A sentence Lyndsey Stonebridge [wrote about Hannah Arendt](#) could apply equally well to him: "To fixate on her exceptional mind is to miss something that is important about her lessons in thinking: thinking is ordinary, she teaches; that is its secret power."



'The basic principles of anarchism – self-organisation, voluntary association, mutual aid – have been around as long as humanity' ... Graeber, pictured in 2018. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock

He had a strained academic career, despite his brilliance and originality – or because of them. In the first book of his that I read, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, a tiny book bursting with big ideas, he wrote, “In the United States there are thousands of academic Marxists of one sort or another, but hardly a dozen scholars willing openly to call themselves anarchists ... It does seem that Marxism has an affinity with the academy that anarchism never will. It was, after all, the only great social movement that was invented by a PhD, even if afterwards, it became a movement intending to rally the working class.” And then he argues that anarchism was not, by comparison, an idea created by a few intellectuals; instead, “the basic principles of anarchism – self-organisation, voluntary association, mutual aid” – have been around “as long as humanity.”

Hope is a tricky business among intellectuals and activists

David’s recurrent rallying cry as both a scholar and an activist was: “It does not have to be this way.” Where academia can be cool and guarded, pulling away from direct engagement, he was warm and enthusiastic, wanting to see ideas lead to actions that could change the world. Taylor notes: “While he despised the tedium of academic bureaucracy, he loved activist meetings, savouring the ideological debates and revelling in various forms of planning, scheming, and mischief.” He was hopeful, not foolishly so, but due to the evidence he had amassed that human societies have taken myriad forms, that the people who are supposedly powerless can together wield quite a lot of power, and that ideas matter. One of my favourite scraps of information in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* is about Madagascar’s Sakalava people, who officially revere dead kings – but these kings make their wishes known “through spirit mediums who are usually elderly women of commoner descent.” That is, a system officially led by elite men is controlled by non-elite women.

Hope is a tricky business among intellectuals and activists. Cynicism, though it’s often inaccurate about both human nature and political possibilities, gives the appearance of sophistication; despair is often seen as sophisticated and worldly-wise while hopefulness is seen as naive, when the opposite is not infrequently true. Hope is risky; you can lose, and you often do, but the records show that if you try, sometimes you win.

His essay *Despair Fatigue* opens: “Is it possible to become bored with hopelessness?” David’s superpower was being an outsider. He did not proceed from widely shared assumptions but sought to dismantle them, urging us to see they’re arbitrary, confining and optional, and inviting everyone into the spaces this opens up (while saluting those already there). So much of his writing says, in essence, “What happens if we don’t accept this?” – if we dissect it to see its origins and impacts, or if we reject it, if we lift it off like some burden we don’t have to carry, some outfit we don’t have to wear? What happens is we get free.