

THE PROMISE OF AN ANARCHIST ANTHROPOLOGY: THE THREE BURIALS OF THE ANARCHIST PROJECT

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ABSTRACT. In this article I discuss David Graeber's proposition of an anarchist anthropology. I focus on three key issues: Graeber's understanding of ethnography and its role within the politics of anthropology, his reading of the anarchist tradition, and his involvement with the Occupy Wall Street movement as a concrete example of the limitations of the political project of an anarchist anthropology. The argument of the article is that rather than broadening the debate on political alternatives, Graeber's representation of the discipline of anthropology, together with his partial reading of the anarchist tradition, run counter to a political and analytic focus that centralizes the notions of class and exploitation. Graeber's "small a anarchism" together with his uncritical disciplinary positioning eclipse the richness of the anarchist tradition in favour of a model of knowledge production which, at heart, remains an unreformed practice of academic domination.

Keywords: ethnography, anarchism, academic praxis, Occupy Wall Street

*"Such claims are, to use an appropriately earthly metaphor, bullshit."
(Graeber, 2007: 95)*

A revolutionary spectre has been haunting the halls of anthropology departments at elite universities: the promise of an anarchist anthropology. By now common currency among anthropology students, the association of the terms anarchism and anthropology has gained unexpected popularity as David Graeber was fashioned into a leading voice of Occupy Wall Street. The term has insinuated itself into discussions about the relationship between anthropology and political praxis to the point where the affinity between anthropology and anarchism is closer to being assumed rather than questioned. If almost 20 years ago we were being warned that anthropology's disdain for addressing non-academic audiences explains part of its own marginality (Shore 1996), it now

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appears that the discipline has recovered much of the impetus to project itself outward. And although the labour markets might still be unmoved in the face of a graduate degree in anthropology, more and more the eyes of the radical students shine as their lips utter the word “anthropology”.

In what follows² I will explore the proposition of an anarchist anthropology across David Graeber’s work, in an attempt to understand what the proposition means in methodological and epistemological terms, and the kind of political possibilities an anarchist anthropology opens. This article engages the proposition of an anarchist anthropology as articulated in Graeber’s work. While the topic itself is certainly broader, this text is based on the assumption that the major figure in the current discussion about an anarchist anthropology is David Graeber, and that most of the questions regarding the problems of the theory and practice of a contemporary anarchist anthropology are traceable to his influence. Through this discussion I also aim to question the political agenda of an emerging politics of self-representation, in which the anthropologist has finally abandoned her shame, and has, instead, proudly taken up the label of the discipline and its supposedly unique advantages, perhaps as news of David Graeber having been named one of the most influential global thinkers of the moment reaches her³.

My intention is to question the supposed affinity between anarchism and anthropology and identify the very partial readings of both the anthropological and the anarchist tradition this is supported by. A recent review of *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* identifies Graeber’s engagement with anthropology as a counterweight to the kind of flirtation with anarchism symptomatic for James Scott’s work (Schulze, 2013). While the review does justice to that which is certainly less apparent in this article, namely the contribution Graeber’s writing has made to contemporary debates about the theory of value and to a broadening of the mode of production debate, what I take to be the main point of contention is the claim that although lacking a serious treatment of class, the proposition of an anarchist anthropology in Graeber’s formulation is compatible with a view that centralizes it. In the words of the reviewer, Graeber makes it clear that “anarchism is a serious and complex challenge to capitalism and hierarchy with particular theoretical claims.” (Schulze, 2013:138).

A different interpretation, but equally important for the discussion on the relationship between academic practice and revolutionary strategy, is offered by those who question the viability of Graeber’s political agenda and use it as an entry point for critique of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement (see Neveling, 2013). This article takes seriously the warnings within such a reading, but my intention is to also look at the way in which Graeber’s representation of OWS has been

² I would like to thank Dan Cîrjan and Patrick Neveling for sharing with me their thoughtful comments, patient feedback and polemic insight. Our conversations are reflected in the smarter thoughts. Most of the shortcomings are also failures in addressing some of their sharp remarks and pointed criticism.

³ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/2013_global_thinkers/public/graeber (Accessed: 01.05.2014).

substituted for the movement at large, and interpret this phenomenon as unstable, contested process, rather than a given reality. My argument here is placed in a dialogue with these opposite positions. Addressing the supposed political possibilities of an anarchist anthropology, I argue that rather than opening up the discussion about the anarchist tradition and political dilemmas regarding the production of knowledge as reflected in the history of ethnography, Graeber's reading greatly distorts the richness of anarchist praxis and obscures the tensions between anthropology and the anarchist tradition. In contrast to those who substitute critique of OWS with critique of Graeber's representation of it, I argue that his reading of OWS speaks only to a particular moment within the development of the movement and does not do justice to the range of debates and dilemmas that have marked the movement. If it has managed to inscribe itself as the hegemonic interpretation, that in itself is something to be understood and challenged within our political and academic practice, and must be seen as a question to be addressed within the broader conversation about the contemporary politics of self-representation in critical anthropology.

A note on imaginary warfare

The most generous reading of any text appears to me to be that which takes as criteria for its evaluation the criteria established by the work itself. One such criterion, repeatedly rearing its head from the work of Graeber, would be that of judging a work by the degree to which it puts itself in the service of the democratization of academic practice. We should write as if we were able or at least would like to leave "the academic ghetto" (Graeber, 2007: 10). This call is based on a diagnostic that saturates Graeber's work: "Vanguardist, even sectarian, attitudes have become so deeply ingrained in academic radicalism it's hard to say what it would mean to think outside them" (Graeber, 2007: 301). We are, however, invited to believe that we could imagine academic practice or theory refashioned in a way that would make it resemble anarchist decision making processes more.

Whenever I find myself objecting to that which might appear as the form of Graeber's writing my political concerns are usually met with my interlocutors' dismissal of that which appears as an excessive, and unnecessary preoccupation with style, which, presumably, is nothing but the shell of otherwise respectable content. However, I do believe that attention to the way Graeber presents his arguments is a very serious dimension of the debate about the potential of an anarchist anthropology. His writing is permeated by the air of being at war with the academia. Many of his claims are meant to appear, in the logic of his writing, as daring statements in an otherwise ossified, intolerant academic landscape. Most likely the best known anthropologist of the moment seems to be constantly busy trying to convince us of the courage of challenging hegemony from the margins of the academia.

Moving beyond the question of who has access to the use of the word 'bullshit' and whether David Graeber has turned AK Press into his own HBO, this raises essential dilemmas about knowledge production practices. The way Graeber constructs his antagonists reflects more than the occasional fall back upon straw man fallacies that temporarily get one out of trouble. It reflects the privilege of academic seniority: writing in authoritative voice half a page summaries of the entire history of poststructuralism (2001: 26-7) or statements that most often would have an undergraduate sociology student fail a more rigorous introductory state theory course - "In a way it's kind of amazing that such a theoretical literature doesn't already exist" (Graeber, 2004: 68) are now the weapons of an academic revolution.

The production of pseudo-antagonists is not just decorum in otherwise good writing. The Graeberian trick, namely the constant effort at constructing his own interventions as novel interventions in a battle against liberal hegemony, is not merely unpleasant, but otherwise benign form. Becoming the hero in a story dominated by villains is as much internal to his anthropological practice as the selection of fieldwork locations. It results in a loosely told story of the perversion of mainstream social sciences and an excessively forgiving and distorted history of anthropology. It influences source selection. If one looks at Graeber's eclectic use of sources, to take but an example, it will immediately be revealed as not simply the result of a lack of a systematic overview of distinct academic problematics, but as precisely the kind of idiosyncratic assemblage required to tell the story of an unlikely battle. The kind of story that makes Graeber appear lonelier than he is, the kind of story that illuminates cunning anti-intellectualism as an academic strategy. It is ultimately the same logic that unfolds in Graeber's making of the self project and his construction of the history of anthropology. One in which the systemic logic and the functioning of a field is obscured by histories written through the reassembling of individual voices. This, as I will try to show in the following section, has particularly troubling consequences for the way we understand the limits and possibilities of ethnographic practice.

The reason I find all this relevant is that, far from democratizing academic practice, it appears to me to be a conventional formula for reproducing the inequalities of academic production in the guise of oppositional practice and theory building. But, as said, I will treat Graeber's proposition as an honest one, and believe that we could all potentially enjoy or that at least we are hypothetically entitled to the advantages of writing in the voice of an angry senior scholar. Perhaps a commentary on the use of the word bullshit is where graduate students begin to smuggle in their right to write like David Graeber.

Ethnography - wither vanguardism? (The First Burial)

As I have tried to suggest in the previous section that which might appear as mere questioning of the textual form is actually something very different from textual fetishism. It is an attempt to open, through looking at the construction of

the objects of a polemic, questions pertaining to the politics of knowledge production. Turning to Graeber's understanding of ethnography allows us to observe the way the form of an argument is indissolubly related to an author's systematic refusal to critically engage the history of anthropology and his preference for the naturalization of the objects of anthropology.

For Graeber, anthropology is, at its origin, an attempt at the systematic investigation of cultural difference. A preoccupation with difference and alternatives is inscribed in the very constitution of it as a discipline. And its defining methodological instrument, ethnography, should be the model for refashioning social theory, or, in his words, "such a project would actually have to have two aspects, or moments, if you like: one ethnographic, one utopian, suspended in a constant dialogue." (2004: 12). Let us try to better understand the ethnographic moment. What constitutes the privileged terrain of ethnography, if anything? Some sort of correspondence between ethnography and anarchism is postulated in Graeber's work over and over again, and it appears to be mostly related to the necessity of finding an instrument for decoding the hidden logic of practice:

If anarchism is not an attempt to put a certain sort of theoretical vision into practice, but is instead a constant mutual exchange between inspirational visions, anti-authoritarian attitudes, and egalitarian practices, it's easy to see how ethnography could become such an appropriate tool for its analysis. This is precisely what ethnography is supposed to do: tease out the implicit logic in a way of life, along with its related myths and rituals, to grasp the sense of a set of practices. (Graeber, 2009: 222)

Let us further follow the potential convergence between ethnography and anarchism as we try to understand what ethnographical practice is about:

When one carries out an ethnography, one observes what people do, and then tries to tease out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logics that underlie their actions; one tries to get at the way people's habits and actions make sense in ways that they are not themselves completely aware of. One obvious role for a radical intellectual is to do precisely that: to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities – as gifts. (Graeber, 2004:12)

The text is quite straightforward, but for one, most likely, deliberate slippage. It does not take a very attentive reader to notice that Graeber conveniently lets slip an undergraduate student error, that in which the sheer idea of the gift is supposed to evoke a superior logic of exchange, or at least one of superior morality. Supposedly the theory of the gift should help us break precisely such logic, something no doubt well understood by Graeber, except when such underspecification serves his agenda. The reader should now supposedly move

on, with the impetus of having been offered some sort of a political alternative. In reality, all he has acquired is the theoretically erroneous and the politically disingenuous language of gift giving, revealing an all too familiar academic trick: the suggestion of analytic power behind increasingly elusive language, increasingly out of check for the non-specialized reader.

But other than the suspiciously convenient slippage, the text is quite straightforward. Anthropology, and anthropologists, represent instruments in a process of unravelling a world riddled with possibilities (ethnography, we are led to believe, is a powerful instrument in the fight against the hegemony of economic models of social reality). To do so, ethnographers *observe* a space of already existing possibilities and decode hidden meanings, those which the protagonists are not fully aware of. Essentially *distance* seems to be the prerequisite for the ethnographic moment, and the ethnographer appears as the one who must inscribe the meaning of the local, or the contextual, into a broader reading: “larger implications”. Essentially, the ethnographic method is a function of distance and of looking at that which is unknown, or alien, by an observer who can carry out an act of detachment and subsequently return his interpretation to the initial context of observation. This is a specialized observer, the ethnographer – anthropologist, whose field of expertise has been crowned as the queen of sciences:

There’s more to it, though. In many ways, anthropology seems a discipline terrified of its own potential. It is, for example, the only discipline in a position to make generalizations about humanity as a whole – since it is the only discipline that actually takes all of humanity into account, and is familiar with all the anomalous cases. (Graeber, 2004: 97)

That this synchronic, cleansed account of ethnography and its engagement with anthropology can be the basis for the supposedly radical project of an anarchist anthropology is at the very least impressive through the mystification of the history of anthropology that it is built upon. That ethnography’s preoccupation with diversity and participant observation in the Malinowskian paradigm is a methodological revolution that was intimately linked both to the demands of the 20th century nation state and the ideological reproduction of the British empire is common knowledge among those ever so slightly interested in the history of the discipline. Yet, almost no such scrutiny finds its place in Graeber’s work. Rather, the interest in diversity has been now placed at the mythical origins of the discipline in something that can be hardly seen as anything else than a distinctly chauvinist act of asserting the merits of his discipline. Such anthropological chauvinism is only matched by Graeber’s preference for pitting this cleansed history of anthropology against a generic mainstream and the overall alienated social sciences: from cardboard Marxists

(the diversity of the tradition only seems to serve Graeber when he must justify his own foraging into the theory of value) to evil economists, the academia seems to be lost terrain.

As the history of anthropology confirms over and over again, overcoming ethnocentrism is not a guarantee for breaking the power asymmetries which characterize the ethnographic model of knowledge production. In the words of an anthropologist concerned with the investigation of the history of ethnography through the lens of the politics of knowledge production, "(...) if theory belongs to the things we do in the real world we must take a further step: Theory has no place unless it has time. In the real world *theory happens*. And that is the reason why critique that targets only the place that is claimed for theory falls shorts of its aims." (Fabian, 2001: 5). This is to say that any critical ethnographic endeavour that claims itself as anthropological must include a conversation with the history of the discipline and the power relations which are embedded in the selection of its objects of inquiry. If we ask what are the conditions of possibility of ethnographic knowledge and how has the practice of ethnography been articulated in the history of anthropology we are bound to reach results that are very different from the unmeasured appraisal of anthropology's potential for opening up a discussion about alternatives.

The discipline's concern is not merely a given, and assuming that "making generalizations about humanity as a whole" is the timeless prerogative of anthropology obscures the origins of the anthropological project of the systematic investigation of cultural difference. It does not merely obscure its roots in the European Enlightenment and Romantic tradition and the contradictions emerging with different lineages, which would immediately alert us to the need of seeing how historically similar preoccupations have marked other disciplines, but it mostly obscures the contentious history of ethnography as a certain model of knowledge production. In Graeber's case this seems to have a particular affinity with his preference for looking at the history of anthropology as if it would consist merely of the sum total of its individual practitioners (among whom he has a taste for handpicking the supposedly progressive), rather than a field of practice structured by power relations.⁴ Of course, the anthropologists' engagement with ethnography has resulted in a salutary pervasive preoccupation with the

⁴ I am grateful to Dan Cîrjan for his most useful and entertaining comments on Graeber's writing style. In his most generous reading, Graeber's attempt at a general inventory of 'progressive alternatives' might constitute an elaborate stylistic commentary on the pre-Malinowskian anthropologist's data generating practices and writing habits, as well as the discipline's questionable attempt at formalizing everyday observation practices. Upon further reflection we seem to converge with regard to the unlikelihood of such an interpretation. Nonetheless, I find very important the warning that Graeber's writing is dominated by the aggregation of disparate anthropological examples, united not in an effort at abstraction on the basis of the concrete, but rather by the overall impulse of generalization across cases. A basic empiricist practice, the critique of which is all too familiar.

mediation of knowledge through experience. Certainly, formalizing participant observation marked a turning point in the engagement with the empirical and has had lasting political consequences. But for most of its history ethnography has maintained intact “the assumption of a hierarchical relationship between knower and known, or more exactly between knowing knowledge and known knowledge” (Fabian, 2001: 25). The systematic study of the non-Western world, often as it might have claimed for itself an unsettling of ethnocentrism, has for most of its existence been predicated on a model of knowledge in which *externality*, manifested in the distance of the observer from the observed, is the fundamental condition of knowledge production. And it appears that indeed, in Graeber’s view the ethnographic investigation is initiated “simply by turning our gaze on objects that are given.” (Fabian, 2001: 25), be those non-state political entities or consensus oriented communities.

The well meaning reader of Graeber’s work would here say that such systematic reflection is absent from his work because it is implicit in his ethnographic investigation. Is that so, though? First, if we look at the role he assigns to the “radical intellectual” we can again certify that this is merely a rhetorical twist: the offering back to the community of the gift of the “interpreted reality” does not in any way alter the classical model of subordinating the investigated reality (in this case the investigated community, to make matters worse) to the investigator. The language of the vanguard has returned in the language of gift giving. What used to be known as the historically advanced faction returns as the condescendingly advanced faction, in a typical slippery employment of language meant to create the illusion of the act of gift giving somehow eluding the asymmetry between the anthropologist and the communities he turns upon. Aside from metaphorical language, the evidence for a qualitative break between the times of “nineteenth-century caricature of the anthropologist as a gazing explorer-hero adventuring amidst the ‘gazed upon’” (Shore, 1996:4) and today’s benevolent anthropologists bestowing gifts upon the movements that have elevated him to popularity seems to be lacking. And there is no reason the attentive reader should be fooled by elusive language. Neither is there good reason for not asking: “who’s gifting who?”

The systematic investigation of alternative social arrangements has now been naturalized as the preoccupation of anthropology and has completely overshadowed the task of disrupting the narrative of anthropology’s benevolent concern for diversity. Nonetheless, asking fundamental epistemological questions about the relationship between the knowing subject and the object of analysis appears to be ever more pressing in the case of ethnographic work that has systematically walked the contentious line between activism, ethnographic investigation and academic interest. But that of course is not distinctly convenient for a project the purpose of which is to crown anthropology as the queen of sciences. If we look at why it is that anthropology has arrived at “making generalizations about humanity as a whole”, how it has arrived there and

what power arrangements underline anthropology's systematic preoccupation with the non-Western, non-capitalist, non-statist political forms of organization its political potential might, all of a sudden, appear less effortlessly progressive. Now some of this might sound banal to the reader accustomed to the critique of anthropology, but the necessity to bring back the discussion to this level rises out of the notorious absence of a critical engagement with the history of ethnography in Graeber's work.

If we take seriously the assumption that ethnographic practice must question its conditions of possibility, its flirtation with anarchist practice already appears confusing, since historically most strands of anarchist practice have been hostile to knowledge production models that are rooted in the function of the distance between the observer and the observed, and have sought the instruments to overcome the unevenness which permeates knowledge production practices. Historically, revolutionary anarchism (I use revolutionary anarchism to designate the political thought and practice the objective of which is the establishment of libertarian communism) has had at its core a preoccupation with emancipation, and the belief that this is unattainable in the absence of popular education and a general concern for radical pedagogy. But that the plea for anthropologists to come bestow upon us the symbolic meaning of our anarchist practice did not emerge closer to the colonial roots of anthropology is not exactly surprising. That is because most of the anarchist models for knowledge production and education are essentially also ways of challenging the division of labour. They are more often than not rooted in the assumption that together with the socialization of the means of production and the abolition of the division of labour what we need is a socialization of our critical instruments and methods, and that those who are affected by events should be able to produce the critical assessment that needs to accompany our political practice.

That is to say that the attempt to overcome the distance between the observed and the analyst is inscribed in the anarchist tradition. This is why the athenaeum, the popular school, the collectively authored pamphlet and instrumental anonymity are the easily recognizable terrain of anarchist knowledge production. Because they are statements about the need to take seriously the task of socializing our critical instruments, about not locating the instruments of analysis in the body of an external observer, but in a set of critical tools which should be made available as broadly as possible, and which ideally should account for the social character of knowledge production. This is a far cry from the belief that the discipline of anthropology is a complete inventory of "anomalous cases", the tool kit of the anthropologist in the business of gift giving. And it is also why if one looks at some of the contemporary political movements that claim for themselves some anarchist roots she would more often than not be surprised by the amount of critical reflection about the movement that has emerged from



within the movement. This is also the case with Occupy Wall Street, a movement within which a constant preoccupation for producing critical accounts from within is easily attestable, a case to which I will return later.

A clarification is necessary: this is not an argument that tries to do away with the reality of currently unevenly distributed resources for producing critical accounts. It is clear that the distance from necessity that many academics enjoy can be put in the service of perfecting our critical instruments, since most people who actually take part in political movements do not enjoy the privilege of paid reflection time. Neither it is an argument about the necessity to turn all those united by a political project into analysts of the movement. The brightest of our post-revolutionary horizons should still leave room for some people to devote themselves to writing and others to carpentry. But it is an argument about how historically anarchist practice has been at odds with assuming that analysis should rely on an external observer or that it is a function of distance, that it has been a medium for the socialization of and reflection about instruments of critical analysis, that it does not stand (and hopefully will not stand) in a comfortable relationship with traditional forms of authorship, and that essentially it has been historically suspicious of the model of knowledge production that is at the core of Graeber's understanding of the ethnographic-anthropological tandem.



Anarchism or praxis as political form (The Second Burial)

"Conversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism"
(Graeber 2011: 97)

Having briefly sketched some sources of tension between anarchist practice and the ethnographic model of knowledge production, I will further look at the proposition of an anarchist anthropology by trying to delineate Graeber's understanding of anarchism. The origin of the proposition of an anarchist anthropology derives ultimately from a particular reading of the anarchist tradition. In trying to sum up the difference between anarchism and other forms of revolutionary thinking on the left, Graeber returns across his work to a version of this formulation: "1) Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. 2) Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" (2007: 304). In this reading, anarchism is essentially about the compatibility of means and ends in political practice, about prefigurative politics and about "prioritizing an ethic of organization and of practice over a focus on strategies for seizing power" (2007: 322). So if anarchism is essentially about an ethic of organization, the next step is to understand what kind of ethic of organization this is. And it is here that over and over, anarchism is, in Graeber's reading, a matter of the *form* of politics.

Unlike Marxist parties, which have always tended to demand ideological conformity combined with top-down, usually highly authoritarian, decision-making structures, anarchist-inspired revolutionary 'networks' and 'convergences' employ decision-making processes which assume that no ideological uniformity can and should be possible. Rather, these forms become ways of managing a diversity, even incommensurability, which is seen as a value in itself. The assumption is that this can be managed through a spirit of reasonableness and mutual compromise that emerges from commitment to shared projects of action. That is, anarchist-inspired groups tend to studiously avoid political arguments about the definition of reality, and assume that decision-making structures should concentrate instead on immediate questions of action in the present, on maintaining egalitarian process in doing so, and making these forms of process the main model of (or, better perhaps, elementary, germ-like template for) their vision for a just society. (Graeber, 2007: 323)

So, once again, anarchism is about the decision-making *process*, about the incommensurability of difference, and is essentially present-oriented. Again, it appears to be about the *form* of politics, and the belief that a certain form of politics carries within it the germ of a future society.

On the question of ideology, and the lack thereof, Graeber also provides what appears to be the common place reading of a NY Times columnist, except the twist is now on celebration, rather than on the mourning of the lack of a unitary course of action in contemporary anarchist-inspired politics:

What I am saying, then, is that it is precisely what most outside observers take to be the foolishness and naiveté of the movement (their apparent lack of a coherent ideology) has turned out to be a token of their most sophisticated accomplishment and contribution to revolutionary theory. It was not that the new movements lack ideology. As I have argued in the past, these new forms of organization, which presume and are ways of articulating a diversity of perspectives, *are* its ideology. (Graeber, 2007: 323)

And, quite obviously, this leads to imagining a social reality in which a plurality of free floating communities, of whatever sorts, internally organized upon horizontal bases, we assume, miraculously bring about an anarchist future:

There is a way out, which is to accept that anarchist forms of organization would not look anything like a state [...] Perhaps all they would have in common is that none would involve anyone showing up with weapons and telling everyone else to shut up and do what they were told. [...] make currently existing forms of power seem stupid and beside the point; that in turn would mean that there are endless examples of viable anarchism: pretty much any form of organization would count as one, so long as it was not imposed by some higher authority, from a Klezmer band to the international postal service. (Graeber, 2004: 40)

A fundamental understanding of anarchist politics and its political project as the old age liberal definition of “freedom from”, except that instead of the empowered individual we now have a sum of collectivities which appear to be nothing but the individual writ large: individual units (although not individuals), which are brought together in a negative relation rather than the affirmation of a political project the ethical foundation of which is justice. That in the real world the international postal service might have freely decided not to hire women and that it might have built its offices in the centre of the city while the Klezmer band is still surviving at the margins of the town while figuring out how to replace some of its broken instruments (after having ordered new ones which the international postal service refuses to deliver on account of the workers not wanting to go to a shitty part of town) appears to be a problem that has miraculously not tainted our make believe anarchist “society” (though to still talk about society when all we are facing are independent units that turn inwards upon the object of their activity, without apparently any kind of question about systemic inequality or any concern for coordinating human activity in what resembles a political project strikes me as somehow improper).

Now, when Graeber allegedly says “As for being a liberal, this one always makes me smile. If people really wanted to prove I was a liberal they might point to some liberal position I’ve taken, you know? If I actually were a liberal, they wouldn’t be very hard to find”⁵, he is right. The clues to this are indeed not very hard to find. Far from trying to merely throw around the word “liberal” as if it was a self-understood political execution, there is something deeply meaningful in identifying the affinity between Graeber’s understanding of anarchism and liberalism, because it allows us to see why a certain reading of anarchism might have opened up itself to a wave of criticism that sees it as void of political alternatives. When Graeber identifies anarchism with the management of diversity under horizontal, anti-authoritarian decision making processes, he is essentially subordinating anarchist politics to the form of anarchist practice. Naturally, his argument throughout his work is not that there is a hierarchy between the form (or the means) and our political goals, but that they are indissoluble, and more importantly, the present form is essentially prefigurative, it carries within it the germ of transformation. But at this level of confrontation this is mere rhetoric. The way we can actually see whether in practice Graeber’s view of understanding of anarchism reproduces the liberal subordination of political goals to the form of politics, at the cost of the political goal of justice disappearing in a first world bacchanalia of diversity, is by seeing how his own analytical categories allow the reading of contemporary political situations. And



⁵ Statement supposedly attributed to David Graeber on <http://libcom.org/forums/general/david-graeber-james-c-scott-19112011?page=2> (Accessed 20.10.2013)

for this I will turn in the last part of the article to Graeber's involvement with and analysis of Occupy Wall Street, which I believe is the medium for testing the limits of Graeber's presentation of the anarchist tradition.

Before I do so I would like to sketch in a nutshell that which it seems to me is the main danger in the way Graeber sets up the conversation about anarchism. In his concession that anarchism is at heart an "ideology of the diversity of ideologies", Graeber does not fight the erroneous mainstream representations of anarchism, he reproduces the terms of the conversation as set up by the critics of anarchism. Except now the focus is on celebration rather than mourning. In this, what he essentially does is to substitute his own provisional, particular reading of a moment in the contemporary history of anarchism for that which is the infinitely richer history of twentieth century anarchism. Contemporary North American anarchist practice, as reflected in the Occupy movement, and as understood through Graeber's reading has now become the face of anarchism. David Graeber, the ethnographer, has gone on a colonial mission of substituting the rich history of the anarchist tradition for his locally derived template. It is the same subordination of anarchist practice to a particular vision of anarchism as an ideology of the form of political process that allows him to see anarchism where others would see mere state retrenchment; it is the same vision that allows him to see Occupy Wall Street as the one true revolutionary movement sweeping through our global politics.

Combined with a deeply ahistorical vision of the ethnographic model, this results in a vision of anarchism constructed out of the building blocks of its critics. The conversation about anarchism is essentially reduced to the struggle against hierarchy and a concern with the formal aspects of the political process. Ethnography is summoned to provide the proof of the existence of the alternative, as it turns our attention to consensus oriented communities, issues of authority and non-state forms of political organization. Anarchism, having internalized the ethnographic lesson, can then project, through the borrowing of a political form, a future society. It is certainly true that the anarchist tradition has had at its core a preoccupation with the congruence of political ends and means. But historically revolutionary anarchism has been built upon the need to *affirm* a political project built around the acknowledgment of class struggle, the quest for the emancipation from wage labour and the fight against exploitation. This political quest, in the anarchist tradition, has been tied to the belief in revolutionary change being conditioned by popular emancipation and bottom-up organization models. But historically it does not rest on a belief in the incommensurability of difference. Quite the contrary, the principles of autonomy and self-organization have been historically safeguarded not by a politics of democratic compromise, but by one of *affinity*. And the perpetual slippage which Graeber cultivates between explicitly anarchist politics and consensus oriented decision-making processes in non-state political organizations appears to do little to clarify this.



Equally, while interested in the historical dialogue about alternatives to capitalism and fundamentally concerned with unsettling ethnocentric perspectives, the anarchist tradition (again, used here to include those explicitly rallying under the anarchist flag) has not simply relied on cataloguing non-state forms of political organization. That is because historically the great challenge for anarchism has not been to prove that alternatives to the nation state are possible (a reality which is certainly better understood by historians than by anthropologists, as much as Graeber would like to have us believe otherwise). Probably the most important historical challenge of the anarchist tradition has been to prove that political forms *superior* to state-organization are possible.

Now this is not about asking whether Graeber and his community of followers are entitled to calling themselves anarchists or not. It is about understanding that the way he sets up the conversation, regardless of what he calls himself, is pernicious. And that is because it obscures the much more serious, historically profound ways in which the question of diversity and political process has been debated within the anarchist tradition; because it obscures the profound contribution anarchist praxis has had to questions of power, political process and decision-making structures and essentially reproduces the problematic terms in which mainstream criticism of anarchism is most often formulated. The change of emphasis does not change the fact that the discussion is set up on the terrain of the mainstream critics of anarchism: anarchism as devoid of an affirmative political project, as unconcerned with demands and assuming that the fight against exploitation can be merely subordinated to that against hierarchy.

Understanding Occupy Wall Street – Where the authoritarian chicken comes home to roost (The Third Burial)

I will now move on to discussing the way in which some of the propositions behind the project of an anarchist anthropology are reflected in Graeber's analysis and involvement with the Occupy movement. That Graeber became the poster child of Occupy Wall Street is by now old news. That so often he was assimilated to the informal leader of a movement which he represented as the pinnacle of horizontalist experimentation appears to be more than the side product of a media which was unable to understand something alien to its mainstream political models. The most well meaning reader of the "The Democracy Project" (2013) will find it, I believe, very difficult not to find the author distinctly disingenuous in his refutation of the claims of leadership attributed to him. Graeber refutes only to affirm. Of course, he warns us that in most accounts his "own importance has been vastly overstated" (2013:4) to then remind us immediately that his role was "that of a bridge between camps" (2013:4). Luckily, his aim is not that "of setting the historical record straight" (2013:4), so we guess the world will just have to live with the accidental error of

having him assimilated to the central figure of the Occupy Wall Street movement. It is true that we are all inclined to wonder why that would not be the case, since in the first chapter of the book he recounts how He came up with the idea of the 99%. Now this is not to doubt that the actual email exchange in which he suggests using the 99% label occurred. But this is very much reflective of how Graeber's refutation of academic vanguardism is nothing but a surface scratch in an intellectual practice that otherwise reproduces the worst of academic habits. A fully honest account would have probably been "Well, I had heard of this previous '98%' campaign but then I remembered Stiglitz talks about the 99% and thought that sounds better, so I sent this email in which I suggested this thing that probably a million other people were thinking of at the time, and since I was already known as Graeber, leading anthropologist, people happened to pick up the idea." But this, indeed, is not about the minutiae of the historical record. This is to ask why is it that the idea of the 99%, one which strikes most people as a fairly evident interpretation that happened to have been in the air, needs crediting. Why is it that rather than letting it float as a signifier the origin of which is most likely collective, the interpretation of which is within reach of most of the participants, and the critique of which is abundant, we are confronted with a very clear paternity: David Graeber, is, after all, the one behind the idea of the 99%. This is academesse at its worst: it is the enclosure of symbolic commons for the purpose of advancing one's reputation.

The reason I find this relevant is not simply because someone needs to point out another unsurprising instance of academic hypocrisy, but because I believe this needs to be recounted so as to finally shift the focus in a question we have been asking. This question has mostly been "Isn't it surprising that a well known academic wrote a book about Occupy?". But if we take our commitment to prefigurative political processes seriously, if we extend it to practices of knowledge production, then the real question we must ask is "Isn't it completely expected that the one who ended up *writing* an analysis of Occupy is a well known academic?". Which is to say the question is not how come he wrote it, but why is it that he wrote it to begin with. Why is it that in a movement which essentially claimed itself, and has certainly been described by Graeber as a revolution in political practice and as a victory of horizontal experimentation, one of the most pervasive forms of symbolic subordination in anything that resembles progressive politics has been reproduced: the academic speaks on behalf of the movement.

I would like to again qualify this doubt by saying that this is not an excuse for academics not sharing their analytical resources or for ignoring the conditions which might produce better accounts of events or analysis of phenomena. And certainly, in an uneven world, academics, more often than not, have the privilege of accessing resources that can improve our critical accounts and we should strategically employ these resources in our movements. But our goal should not

be to imagine how we can tame the academic beast so as to every now and then stop pretending it knows everything. Our goal should be to fight for the democratization of access to critical resources and break the link between authoritative accounts and academic affiliation. This is notoriously difficult, as the unevenness of access to the resources needed for producing critical accounts is very much a reality: more often than not workers on strike don't have the time to write ethnographic diaries, unemployed students don't get grants for writing books about Occupy. But there are certainly developments that point more in that direction than the platform of an anarchist anthropology does. Occupy Wall Street is an excellent illustration of this. Within the movement there was from the very beginning an effort to reflect on it and open up a critical space through the efforts of organizers and participants, rather than externalizing the critical tasks. *Tidal* and *The Occupied Wall Street Journal* were the medium for much of this reflection, and similar attempts across the movement can be immediately identified even by the occasional observer. It seems to me the argument that we were in critical need of an academic writing another history of Occupy Wall Street can hardly be made. Of course, this could be made if indeed the analysis would be revealed as a genuine contribution to serious reflection about the movement. But the argument for an account of Occupy Wall Street by David Graeber, in the form in which has chosen to do it, is mostly his fame. After all, most organizers did not sit down at the end of the day to write a memoir of their experience of "living at the fulcrum of such historical convergence" (2013: 4). Which brings me to that which I believe is the best illustration of the kind of analysis Graeber's confusing (and most of the times conveniently slippery and ambiguous proposition) of an anarchist anthropology fails in. If throughout the rest of his work the reader is always inclined to assume that perhaps his categories of analysis could slip this or that way, that it is unclear how much Graeber actually endorses a version of anarchism that claims for itself an affirmative process of building a just society, we can test our doubts in his vision about Occupy:

The remarkable thing is that the closer the insurrectionary wave spread to the center of power, to the 'heart of the world's financial empire' as our Chinese friends put it, the more radical the claims became. The Arab revolts included every sort of people, from Marxist trade unionists to conservative theologians, but at their core was a classically liberal demand for a secular, constitutional republic that allowed for free elections and respected human rights. The occupiers in Greece, Spain, Israel were more often than not studiously anti-ideological – though some were more radical than others (anarchists played a particularly central role in Athens, for example). They insisted that they were focusing on very specific issues of corruption and government accountability, and thus appealed to perspectives across the political spectrum. It was in the United States that we saw a movement kicked off by revolutionaries that began by posing a direct challenge to the very nature of the economic system. (Graeber, 2013:108)

And in case one might be inclined to believe this is some freak accident in otherwise respectable analysis, one can read further to learn how it is only under the structural determinations of capitalism perceived as an internal menace, only in the United States, that is, that such revolutionary change could have occurred to begin with⁶.

Now this, indeed, makes us smile, since we went looking for proof that Graeber is a liberal and what we came across was a monumental load of bullshit. The anthropological project has now travelled full circle and returned to its colonial origins: the ethnographer has vanished into his armchair of reputation as he spurts the most vulgar deformations about social movements across the world; things truly worthy of attention ultimately happen at the heart of empire; people at the margins of the empire are lagging behind on the timeline of the revolution since structural conditions do not allow them to fully grasp the logic of global capitalism; and, most importantly, we learn that Occupy Wall Street is the only contemporary political movement (except for two or three of Graeber's Greek friends) that has struck capitalism at its core: somewhere on the statistical point between the 1% and the 99%, we assume. That most readers confronted with this account of Occupy Wall Street probably feel like liberals smiling in front of their daily update from *The Onion* is certainly less surprising than the fact that the empty shell of the revolution has radically altered the world without us ever having noticed.

These conclusions do not appear to be an accident in an intellectual career. Rather, it appears to me, they represent the culmination of the assumptions behind the proposition of an anarchist anthropology; assumptions now taken to their logical conclusion: the organizational forms of direct democracy can produce revolutionary outcomes on their own, anarchist politics can dispense with the content of politics and our politics can now do away with the urgency of affirming a political *project* since its form essentially warrants its success; questions of class and its relationship to the ownership of the means of production, emancipation from wage labour and the fight against exploitation vanish in the rhetoric of the 99%. And we learn all this from the famous academic who just happens to be the bridge between OWS and the world at large. The proposition of an anarchist anthropology gives us a fairly good estimate of the limits of Graeber's "eggshell theory of revolution". We could have probably estimated them without having Graeber test them in his analysis of Occupy Wall Street.

⁶ In part, this is simply because Americans really had no one else to blame. An Egyptian, a Tunisian, a Spaniard, a Greek can all see the political and economic arrangements under which they live – whether U.S.-supported dictatorships, or governments completely subordinate to reign of finance capital and free market orthodoxy – as something that's been imposed on them by outside forces, and which therefore could, conceivably, be shrugged off without a radical transformation of society itself. Americans have no such luxury. We did this to ourselves (Graeber, 2013: 109).

Is there hope in this grim landscape of ubiquitous power and paralyzing contradictions? Where does the anarchist reader go, once he finds himself dissatisfied with the evaluation of Mondragon as a successful case of workers' self-management (Graeber 2004: 39) and seems unwilling to concede that OWS has already carried out the anarchist revolution? That ethnography can be put in the service of anarchism, and that when critically employed it can be turned into a meaningful political act is proven by the analysis in *Translating Anarchy* (Bray 2013). The analysis strikes me as the perfect counterweight to Graeber's analysis of OWS. The reader will find, I believe, the conclusions to be not only significantly different but infinitely more insightful when it comes to the relationship between the anarchist tradition and OWS. While acknowledging the political openings OWS has created and standing in solidarity with the movement, the author of *Translating Anarchy* helps us understand the way in which the particular historical moment represented by OWS is a partial reflection of the richness of the anarchist political tradition, as both praxis and theoretical reflection. This, I believe, is made possible by a very different starting point: rather than labouring in the service of the hegemonic pretensions of the project of an anarchist anthropology, the author sets out to critically employ analytic instruments he has acquired within a privileged academic space. In this, the conversation becomes not a flirtation with the history of the imperial pretensions of anthropology, but a political gesture bringing us one step closer to the socialization of the instruments of critique.

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