

Building new horizons of value, care and freedom

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I met David Graeber in 2009 at Goldsmiths in London. I had started my PhD in 2006 and returned from the field in 2009. In those days, there were many corridor talks among students in the department regarding the recent arrival of the anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber. I remember talking with students from other departments on the campus and realising how thrilled they were about the possibility of listening to, speaking to and learning from someone who students considered to be a brilliant mind and engaged activist. Since the beginning of his arrival at Goldsmiths, I always had the feeling that students were enthusiastic about the many possibilities that thinking with David Graeber offered. He was a lively presence in our weekly PhD seminars in the department. I met him often throughout the 2010 student protests in the UK against spending cuts in higher education and increasing the cap on tuition fees. I remember once that students at Goldsmiths decided to occupy the library and arrange a public assembly at the hall of entrance. I remember seeing him and thinking to myself, “good to know he is here”. Students admired David, and this was one of the reasons: exercising solidarity, caring with and for us, and making us feel that our struggles were valuable. In this brief piece, I want to pay tribute to David Graeber for how he articulated the relation between value, care and freedom as a path toward more equal and fair livelihood horizons. I will consider the broad contribution of one of his most widely read books about value and more recent short pieces and public interventions about care and freedom.

During 2009 and 2010, my days were mostly filled with writing up my dissertation on neoliberal precarity, value and call centre labour in Portugal. The dynamics, expansion and internal premises of neoliberalism was a central focus of anthropological attention. David Harvey’s *Brief history of neoliberalism* (2005) and his update of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation

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through the notion of accumulation by dispossession was a particular used tool to contextualise and explain the inherent contradictions of neoliberal forms of value extraction in time and space. I was trying to reconcile the brilliance of Harvey's analysis with Silvia Federici's *The Caliban and the Witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation* (2004) and her astute suggestion that capital accumulation is not only accumulated labour, it is also "an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as 'race' and age, become constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat" (Federici 2004: 63-64). I have to admit my disquiet and irritation for realising how Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession was getting so many converts while Federici's impressive and historically detailed re-reading of Marx's notion of primitive accumulation by looking in particular at women's bodies during the witch hunt had much fewer disciples. At this point, I began re-reading Graeber's *Towards an anthropological theory of value* (2001). I wanted to subject Harvey and Federici different takes on capitalism and value extraction to the ethnographic record, within and beyond capitalism.

Each chapter of Graeber's book on value is a testimony to his writing capabilities of marrying theoretical erudition with ground-to earth commentaries of daily life, constantly signalling to the reader, this is also about you, not just about going through old theories which need to be amplified and renovated. Amid my writing-up ordeal, Graeber's book kept me enthusiastic, intrigued and curious about his proposal to understand value as "the importance of actions" (Graeber 2001: 49-89). To my mind, Graeber's proposal was at the same time theoretically sophisticated, elegant and straightforward: value should be understood as consisting of all the socially embedded actions human beings enact with the intention and purpose of pursuing and expressing what a meaningful life is or should be. Before arriving at this simple reasoning, Graeber revisits Marx, linguistic theory, critical realism, the classical monographs of Jane Faján and Terry Turner. But he does so without making the reader losing sight of the most crucial thing an anthropological theory of value should retain: how human beings are creatures of meaning, intentionality, purpose and imagination. Reading Graeber's book was essential for me not only because of the ways it enlarged my knowledge about the value question in anthropology but perhaps more importantly because of how it offered me the opportunity to start reflecting about the irreducible logics, calculus, and affects through which people pursue horizons of value, with and against a present which often doesn't seem to offer the possibility of a valuable life for the largest majority of the population.

Before Graeber's book, the value question was not unexamined in anthropology. But as Jane Collins (2016) recently noted, although there were important debates around the labour theory of value in anthropology throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the theme of value suddenly disappeared. This was perhaps a consequence of the (unintended?) mutual reinforcement of post-modern theory and neoliberal doctrine. Arguably if there is one aspect which neoliberal ideology was particularly effective was in its efforts to make us believe, by any means necessary (including extreme violence as the one experienced in Chile), that the whole world, people, relations and capacities could be reduced to a single standard of value: the market. David Graeber's book reinstated the value question in contemporary anthropological debates with a strong and explicit political critique. There is a passage of the book to which I often return:

The ultimate stakes of politics, [...], is not even the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value is. Similarly, the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living. In the end, then, politics is about the meaning of life (Graeber 2001: 88).

The most outstanding achievement of capitalist neoliberal hegemony has been to convince us that value begins and ends in the commodity, thus preventing us from seeing that it begins and ends with people's intentions, practices, motivations, purposes. "The importance of actions" and how they come to be recognised or sidelined in particular culturally recognised forms is at the core of the struggle to define what value is, what is it that makes life worth living.

Graeber's ambitious projects of articulating a synthesis from anthropological theories of value anticipated and encouraged works, within and beyond anthropology, which in more or less recent years have expanded reductive notions of value and valuation processes, focusing, for instance, on valuation struggles (De Angelis 2007), the entanglement of value realms in flexible capitalism (Narotzky 2015), the dynamics of re-evaluation projects (Collins 2017) and socio-environmental conflicts (Pusceddu 2020). Graeber may not have been the only inspiration for these later works. Still, I often feel that his early re-examination of the value question in anthropology has left an underground current of inspiration, only waiting for others to pick it up, expand it, and update it.

I left London in 2011, returned to Lisbon for three years and then moved to Barcelona. Throughout the years, I kept following Graeber's prolific publications, including his major work on debt or the more recent book on the phenomena of bullshit jobs. However, often it was some of his public

interventions focused on care that caught my attention. In 2014, when austerity was devastating the livelihood possibilities of so many people in Europe and beyond, Graeber wrote a short commentary for *The Guardian* titled *Caring too much. That's the curse of the working classes*¹. In this piece, Graeber starts with the often-heard question, made by wealthy people, on why people were not rioting on the streets against the violence of austerity. Graeber suggests quite simply that one of the reasons is related to the fact that contrary to wealthy people, the working classes are much less self-obsessed, they care for one another, they care for their families, friends and communities:

If you think about it, is this not what life is basically about? Human beings are projects of mutual creation. Most of the work we do is on each other. The working classes just do a disproportionate share. They are the caring classes, and always have been. It is just the incessant demonization directed at the poor by those who benefit from their caring labour that makes it difficult, in a public forum such as this, to acknowledge it.

For Graeber, austerity had not only deprive people of the essential instruments to satisfy basic human needs, but it had also severely undermined and demonised the labour of solidarity, support and mutuality of the “caring classes”: “Our caring has been weaponised against us. And so it is likely to remain until the left, which claims to speak for labourers, begins to think seriously and strategically about what most labour actually consists of, and what those who engage in it actually think is virtuous about it”.

In 2018 Graeber gave a conference at the Collège de France titled *The Revolt of the Caring Classes*², in which he invites the audience to rethink and reimagine the working classes as a class of people whose primary work is care work, broadly defined as the work put into augmenting or expanding people’s capabilities of freedom. He asks: what kind of economy would we have if we focused on care as the primary basis of human freedom? and further, if we were to reimagine the working classes around care, what kind of claims could be made? It is inspiring to hear Graeber aligning himself with a long tradition of feminist perspectives and struggles to reinstate the political potentials of care. In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when narratives about “essential labour” and “essential workers” started to

1. Cfr. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/26/caring-curse-working-class-austerity-solidarity-scourge, accessed on 17/6/2021.

2. Cfr. www.college-de-france.fr/site/grandes-conferences/David-Graeber.htm, accessed on 17/6/2021.

emerge, I remember a poster circulating on the internet showing a group of nurses with the sentence “we don’t want clapping what we want is a wage rise”. This sentence, and recent works on the relevance of care (The Care Collective 2020), made me go back to Graeber’s talk. Listening to him has helped me think about care as something that enables survival and human flourishing and what ultimately enables people’s agency needs of livelihood conditions of being and possibilities of becoming by nurturing their abilities of interdependence, relationality, obligation and affect.

The vital thread connecting the themes of value, care and freedom in Graeber’s academic work and public interventions was recently revealed to me by a 1st year undergraduate student in anthropology. In the fall of 2020, I began teaching an undergraduate course on Themes of Anthropological Thought to first-year students in anthropology at the New University of Lisbon, with one of the classes being focused on neoliberalism and value. I was worried that first-year undergrad students would not yet be prepared to deal with the complexities of Graeber’s synthesis of anthropological theories of value. I highly underestimated the reach of students intuition, and Graeber’s work appeal to a non-specialist audience. During a seminar session, one student, referring to Graeber’s work on value, commented: “I had to read that chapter more than once (referring to chapter 4) but in the end I was struck to realise how value is only an illusion, what really counts are OUR values, and the capacities we have to put them into action for ourselves and for others in the present and the future”. In his way and vocabulary, the student was stressing what I think is an important thread connecting Graeber’s synthesis of anthropological theories of value up to more recent work on the caring classes: his immense hope in human being’s capabilities of being at their best when they are given the possibilities of caring for and imagining a different and better livelihood horizon for oneself and for others. I like to believe that David Graeber would have liked to know that his ideas, writings, political interventions, and proposals are being cared for and helping others imagine and build new horizons of value, care, and freedom.

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