

David Graeber's Anthropology of Human Possibilities

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I first encountered David Graeber in the eventful year of 2001 at *Direct Action Network* meetings during a searing summer in New York City. At the time, he was a forty-year-old professor of anthropology at Yale University conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the “living utopianism” of anarchist action. As a young activist educated in the extractive history of the academy, I was initially suspicious of his anthropological gaze, of the constant note taking and the oddly attentive listening, before arriving at the conclusion that Graeber was a genuine rebel. His book, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, documents in fine detail those days and nights of living “in the constant awareness of the possibilities of revolutionary transformation, and amongst those who dream of it” (2009: xix). Over the following two decades, until his shocking death in 2020, Graeber would become my precious friend, comrade, and colleague at the London School of Economics and Political Science and establish himself beyond the bounds of the academy as a global public intellectual.

Reading his foundational *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) together with his posthumously published magnum opus, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021) which he co-authored with the archaeologist David Wengrow, I would like to reflect on David Graeber as an anthropologist of human possibilities. Graeber was not a scholar of anarchism in any sense, but, in his own words, “a scholar who subscribes to anarchist principles and occasionally acts on them, though usually in fairly limited ways” (2020: 7). His commitment to anarchist principles informed Graeber’s scholarship through the conviction that

human beings could collectively arrange their social and political lives otherwise—in the past, present, and future—and as a scholar, it was such human possibilities that Graeber conjured, archived, and analyzed. Originally, Graeber was inspired to become an anthropologist because of these possibilities (2007: 1). He was drawn to anthropology because “the discipline opens windows on other possible forms of human social existence; because it served as a constant 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” (1). First and foremost, then, I read Graeber’s own scholarship as an anthropology of human possibilities.

Possibilities of an Anarchist Anthropology

Published in 2004 in the inspirational context of a veritably exploding anarchism around the world, Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (referred to here on as *Fragments*) is a tiny and mighty, genre-defying text. Graeber calls it a pamphlet, “a series of thoughts, sketches of potential theories, and tiny manifestos” (2004: 1). The pamphlet is impossible to summarize and discuss fully in a few pages not only because of its fragmentary nature, but especially since in hindsight, it bears the seeds of many of the major arguments Graeber was to develop later in life. I will therefore limit myself to sketching some basic elements of the kind of social theory that Graeber proposes in this spirited text. Broadly, *Fragments* seeks to outline a body of radical theory that would, in Graeber’s words, “actually be of interest to those who are trying to help bring about a world in which people are free to govern their own affairs” (9). This is characteristic of Graeber: the desire to render social theory—particularly anthropology—

usefully interesting to radical movements, and radical movements—particularly anarchism—useful and interesting to social theory.

In *Fragments*, Graeber explores what he names the “strange affinity” between anarchism and anthropology (12). He observes “there was something about anthropological thought in particular—its keen awareness of the very range of human possibilities—that gave it an affinity to anarchism from the very beginning” (13). Graeber himself was fascinated by this, the range of human possibilities in the past and the present, which could unravel the seeming inevitability of our current social and political institutions while grounding hope for living collectively with greater freedom in more egalitarian arrangements.

Graeber is able to observe the strange affinity between anthropology and anarchism in *Fragments* because in his version, anarchism is not about a body of theory bequeathed in the nineteenth century by “founding figures” such as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon that one would have to adopt wholesale. Instead, it is more about a particular attitude, even a *faith* that is shared among anarchists (4). Anarchism can be thought of as a faith, Graeber asserts, which involves “the rejection of certain types of social relations, the confidence that certain others would be much better ones on which to build a livable society, [and] the belief that such a society could actually exist” (4). Likewise, the “founding figures” of anarchism did not think they invented anything new; they simply made a faithful assumption that, in Graeber’s words, “the basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid—referred to forms of human behavior they assumed to have been around about as long as humanity. The same goes for the rejection of the state and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination” (3). Arguably, it is this assumption about human history that *The Dawn of Everything* sets out to prove valid seventeen years later.

In Graeber's vision, in any case, anthropology as a discipline could strengthen faith in the possibility of another world by offering an archive of alternative ways of organizing social relations, of reconstituting them consciously, or of abandoning them altogether. But to be able to strengthen this faith in the possibility of another world free from "the state, capitalism, racism and male dominance" (10), social theory itself would have to assume another world is possible. In fact, Graeber asserts this as the first assumption that any radical social theory has to make. "To commit oneself to such a principle is almost an act of faith," he finds, "since how can one have certain knowledge of such matters? It might possibly turn out that such a world is *not* possible" (10). In a move that resembles a sophisticated theological argument about the existence of God, he then declares, "it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes a commitment to optimism a moral imperative" (10). I nevertheless wonder, however, if anthropologists or others can be drawn into such faithful optimism by argumentation. Perhaps one could be *inspired to have faith in the possibility of another world* and inspire David Graeber did along with the radical movements he dearly treasured.

Graeber's second proposition is that any radical, particularly anarchist, social theory would have to self-consciously reject vanguardism (11). To his mind, ethnography as an anthropological method provides a particularly relevant, if a rough and incipient model of how "nonvanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice may work" (12). The goal of such a practice would *not* be to "arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then lead the masses to follow" (11), but to tease out the implicit logics—symbolic, moral or pragmatic—that already underlie people's actions, even if they are themselves not completely aware of them (12). "One obvious role for a radical intellectual is to do precisely that," Graeber writes in *Fragments*, "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” (12). Not prescriptions, but contributions, possibilities, gifts. That is what Graeber offered in his work—particularly in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009) and *The Democracy Project: A History. A Crisis. A Movement* (2013)—whether his gifts were accepted or not by everyone he wrote about, thought and acted with, or, for that matter, was read by. After all, gifts, too can be rejected, and as Graeber recognized, not much of what he proposed or practiced as an anthropologist had “much to do with what anthropology, even radical anthropology, has actually been like over the last hundred years or so” (2004: 13).

Nevertheless, in *Fragments*, Graeber turns to anthropologists, most notably Marcel Mauss, to reflect on his influence on anarchists, despite the fact that Mauss had nothing good to say about them. “In the end, though,” Graeber writes as if speaking about himself as well, “Marcel Mauss has probably had more influence on anarchists than all the other [anthropologists] combined. This is because he was interested in alternative moralities, which opened the way to thinking that societies without states and markets were the way they were because they actively wished to live that way. Which in our terms means, because they were anarchists. Insofar as fragments of an anarchist anthropology do, already, exist, they largely derive from him” (21). To my mind, Graeber’s own interest in developing an anarchist anthropology too was driven by an appreciation of and fascination with “alternative moralities” that underpin people’s self-conscious determination to live otherwise—in the anarchist case, free from capitalism and patriarchy, free from the state, structural violence, inequality, and domination.

“This is what I mean by alternative ethics” Graeber explains in a critical section of *Fragments* where he theorizes revolutionary counterpower and foreshadows a core argument he co-authors in *The Dawn of Everything*: “Anarchistic societies are no more unaware of human capacities for greed or vainglory than modern Americans are unaware of human capacities for envy, gluttony, or sloth; they would just find them equally unappealing as the basis for their civilization. In fact, they see these phenomena as moral dangers so dire they end up organizing much of their social life around containing them” (2004: 24). This is a remarkable proposition. First, it is determined to cast ethics and morality as the constitutive, self-conscious grounds of social organization. Second, it intimates this to be the case across human history, “modern” or “pre-modern.”

In fact, Graeber argues that “any really politically engaged anthropology will have to start by seriously confronting the question of what, if anything, really divides what we like to call the ‘modern’ world from the rest of human history” (2004: 36). In *Fragments*, as well as in the *Dawn of Everything*, Graeber passionately rejects familiar historical periodizations and evolutionary stages such that the *entirety of human history*—along with every society, people, and civilization across time and space—becomes populated by examples of human possibility enacted by decidedly imaginative, intelligent, playful, experimental, thoughtful, creative, and politically self-conscious creatures.

For Graeber, human history does *not* consist of a series of revolutions (2004: 44)—be it the Neolithic Revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, the French Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution—that introduce clear social, moral, or political breaks in the nature of social reality, or “the human condition” as he prefers to think of it. If this is the case, and if anarchism is above

all an *ethics of practice* (95), as he asserts, such an ethics becomes available for anthropological study and political inspiration across human history.

It is important to note however that Graeber passionately disagrees with primitivist anarchists inspired by his anthropologist mentor Marshall Sahlins' influential essay "The Original Affluent Society" (1968), anarchists who propose that "there was a time when alienation and inequality did not exist, when everyone was a hunter gathering anarchist, and that therefore real liberation can only come if we abandon 'civilization'" (Graeber 2004: 55). In *Fragments*, and the *Dawn of Everything*, he instead draws a more complex history of *endless variety* where, for instance, "there were hunter gatherer societies with nobles and slaves," and "agrarian societies that are fiercely egalitarian" (2004: 54). Graeber insists, first in *Fragments* and then again in *The Dawn of Everything*, that "humans never lived in the garden of Eden" (2004: 55). The significance of this finding is manifold. Among other things, it means that history can become "a resource for us in much more interesting ways," and that "radical theorists no longer have to pore endlessly over the same scant two hundred years of revolutionary history" (54).

Writing of revolution in *Fragments*, Graeber rejects its commonplace definition which "has always implied something in the nature of a paradigm shift: a clear break, a fundamental rupture in the nature of social reality after which everything works differently, and previous categories no longer apply" (42). Instead, he urges us "to stop thinking about revolution as a thing—'the' revolution, the great cataclysmic break—and instead ask 'what is revolutionary action?'" (45). He stresses that "revolutionary action is any collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination and in doing so, reconstitutes social

relations—even within the collectivity—in that light” (45), without necessarily aiming to topple a government, or for that matter, the head of an anthropology department.

I mention this possibility in the playful spirit of Graeber to bring us back to the here and now, and to the final section of *Fragments* titled “Anthropology,” in which he “somewhat reluctantly bites the hand that feeds him” (95). Graeber observes how, instead of adopting any kind of radical politics, anthropologists have risked becoming “yet another clog in a global ‘identity machine,’ a planet-wide apparatus of institutions and assumptions,” whereby all debates about the nature of political or economic possibilities are seen to be over, and “the only way one can now make a political claim is by asserting some group identity, with all the assumptions about what identity is” (101). And bitinglly, he declares, “the perspective of the anthropologist and the global marketing executive have become almost indistinguishable” (100).

But what does Graeber propose for anthropology instead? Observing that “anthropologists are, effectively, sitting on a vast archive of human experience, of social and political experiments no one else really knows about,” he regrets that this archive of human experience is treated by anthropologists as “our dirty little secret” (94). Of course, it was colonial violence that made such an archive possible in the first place as Graeber recognizes without reluctance: “the discipline we know today was made possible by horrific schemes of conquest, colonization, and mass murder—much like most modern academic disciplines,” he writes (96). Nevertheless, Graeber makes the daring proposition that “the fruits of ethnography—and the techniques of ethnography—could be enormously helpful” for radical movements around the world if anthropologists could “get past their—however understandable—hesitancy, owing to their own often squalid colonial history, and come to see what they are sitting on not as some guilty secret (which is nonetheless their guilty secret, and no one else’s) but as the common

property of humankind” (94). Getting past this hesitancy, many years later, Graeber and Wengrow offer for scrutiny and inspiration alike a vast archive of human possibilities in *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021).

Humanity and Freedom in *the Dawn of Everything*

The Dawn of Everything rewrites the history of humanity as a procession of bold social experiments that materialize in “a carnival parade of political forms” (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Covering thousands of centuries across the world over some six hundred pages, the book challenges familiar evolutionary theories of human history, which posit that human societies were confined to small egalitarian bands before the advent of farming; that agriculture meant the inception of private property and marked the irreversible step towards inequality; and that the emergence of cities set class differences in stone and led to the need for authoritarian rulers, warrior-politicians, and domineering administrators (4). According to Graeber and Wengrow, human history is more varied, interesting, and “hopeful” than what such teleological accounts suggest (8). While there were hunter gatherer societies with nobles and slaves, for instance, many of the first farming communities were relatively free of ranks and hierarchies, and the inhabitants of the world’s earliest cities organized them around egalitarian lines with no need for authoritarian rulers and administrators (4).

“In this book we will not only be presenting a new history of humankind, but inviting the reader into a new science of history, one that restores to our ancestors their full humanity” (24), Graeber and Wengrow write. “This book is trying to lay down foundations,” they assert, “for a new world history” (25). In the authors’ version, world history is a stage where various societies,

peoples and civilizations appear across time and space as *exemplary instantiations* of “human possibility” (21), as decidedly imaginative, experimental, creative, and politically self-conscious collectivities. Graeber and Wengrow insist that the questions we are accustomed to asking about the essence of humanity (“are we, as a species, inherently cooperative or competitive, kind or selfish, good or evil?”) blind us to “what really makes us human in the first place, which is our capacity—as moral and social beings—to negotiate between such alternatives” (118).

Correspondingly, the authors people *The Dawn of Everything* with civilizations and societies that offer countless examples of such “negotiations” undertaken since the Ice Age.

Graeber and Wengrow state decisively that *The Dawn of Everything* “is a book mainly about freedom” (206). “What ultimately matters,” they write when introducing this tantalizing book, “is whether we can rediscover the freedoms that make us human in the first place” (8). What are these freedoms that make us human in the first place? Are we no longer “fully human” if these freedoms are now lost—lost even to our imagination—as the authors repeatedly lament? Graeber and Wengrow name three freedoms which “appear to have been simply assumed among our ancestors, even if most people find them barely conceivable today” (132). These three freedoms are “the freedom to abandon one’s community, knowing one will be welcomed in faraway lands; the freedom to shift back and forth between social structures, depending on the time of the year; [and] the freedom to disobey authorities without consequence” (132). If this is the case, an irresistible question at once appears: *how can we know* what freedoms our ancestors simply assumed? In posing this question, I am not intimating that “our ancestors” are essentially unknowable because they are too alien (ontologically different, one might say), but that even if archaeology and anthropology, and the humanities and the social sciences more broadly, may have as their purpose the reshaping of our “conceptions of who we are and what we might yet

become” (525), it remains unclear whether they have the capacity to do that without deploying some kind of “myth”—including new myths about “what being sapiens really means” (118). Nevertheless, to the extent that myths are necessary to give shared—that is, social—meaning to human life, the ones Graeber and Wengrow devise with reference to new archaeological and anthropological findings may prove more inspiring ones to “believe” than teleological theories of social evolution which uphold current social and political arrangements as irrefutable “progress.” After all, “humanity,” too—as an ostensibly distinct species, ideal, community, actor—may require a new myth, a “new science of history” (24), to bring and hold it together. With *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow first and foremost call humanity into being by writing its history, by exploring its possible pasts and futures, by making “it” a scientific, and no less metaphysical, fact.

When articulating humanity’s three freedoms, Graeber and Wengrow position them as “first principles” (362): “We have already talked about fundamental, even primary, forms of freedom,” they write, “the freedom to move; the freedom to disobey orders; the freedom to reorganize social relations” (362). Here, another question appears: In which sense are these forms of freedom “fundamental” and “primary”—are they historical facts, or are they moral and political prescriptions about the forms of freedom being human *ought* to entail, including what the authors call “that most basic element of all human freedoms, the freedom to make promises and commitments and thus build social relationships” (426)? It seems to me that humanity’s three freedoms are neither indisputable facts from the past, nor political prescriptions for the future, but something more promising: possibilities we can collectively realize. Rhetorically, Graeber and Wengrow ask, “Is not the capacity to experiment with different forms of social organization itself a quintessential part of what makes us human? That is, beings with the

capacity for self-creation, even freedom?” (8). Note how, in such formulations, what all humans share across time and space is the *capacity* to experiment with different forms of social organization—that is, humanity has the potential for self-creation and freedom, not necessarily freedom itself. The latter requires more imagination than what most contemporary humans can exercise in their “conceptual shackles” (9).

Graeber and Wengrow assert that “human beings [are] fundamentally imaginative creatures,” at the root of which lies our proclivity for excess. “One of the things that sets us apart from non-human animals is that animals produce exactly what they need; humans invariably produce more. We are creatures of excess, and this is what makes us the most creative, and the most destructive, of all species” (128), they write. This collectively created surplus, the authors observe, poses “fundamental questions about what it means to be human” (128), even as the ruling classes incessantly attempt to close this question and organize society “in such a way that they can extract the lion’s share of that surplus for themselves, whether through tribute, slavery, feudal dues or manipulating ostensibly free-market arrangements” (128). But there is nothing inevitable about all this. Graeber and Wengrow offer a multitude of examples in *The Dawn of Everything* which show alternative social arrangements throughout human history, social arrangements that prioritize mutual aid and collective care. In fact, the authors dare to suggest the possibility that it may be “mutual aid, social co-operation, civic activism, hospitality and simply caring for others [that] are the kind of things that really go to make civilizations” (432).¹

According to Graeber and Wengrow, it is a kind of *communism*, understood “as a certain presumption of sharing, that people who aren’t actual enemies can be expected to respond to one another’s needs” (66)—a communism of the principle, “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”—that is the very grounds of human sociability (47). While what

they conceptualize as “baseline communism”² is a universal feature of all human societies throughout history according to Graeber and Wengrow, “what varies is just how far it is felt that such baseline communism should properly extend” (47). Whereas the European conception of individual freedom comes to be “tied ineluctably to notions of private property,” the indigenous critique of European societies developed during the colonial encounter by Native American intellectuals such as Kandiaronk demonstrates how the exercise of individual freedom may be *premised upon* some level of baseline communism (66).

Historically, the authors observe, the understanding that indigenous Americans lived in “generally free societies, and that Europeans did not, was never really a matter of debate” in exchanges between settlers in North America, indigenous intellectuals, and indirectly, Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau (40). Strikingly, Graeber and Wengrow argue further that “there is a reason why so many key Enlightenment thinkers insisted that their ideals of individual liberty and political equality were inspired by Native American sources and examples. Because it was true” (37). Of course, these Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Rousseau, espoused a different philosophical anthropology than what Graeber and Wengrow develop in *The Dawn of Everything*. Rousseau invented a purely imaginary age—the State of Nature with its free and innocent “savages”—in which “each individual wandered alone among the trees” until the earth was divided into individually owned plots, which then gave us, so the story goes, our laws regulating private property and the state itself (67).

For Graeber and Wengrow, however, the real “toxic element” in Rousseau’s thought was his promulgation of the “myth of the stupid savage—even if one he considered blissful in its state of simplicity” (73). It is this myth which created the conceptual space (embraced by actors propagating nineteenth century imperialism, Darwinian evolutionism, and “scientific” racism

alike), where the judgements of Indigenous peoples no longer seemed threatening (73). In fact, against the grain of European intellectual history, Graeber and Wengrow propose that “theories of social evolution—now so familiar that we rarely dwell on their origins—first came to be articulated in Europe as a direct response to the indigenous critique” (61), a piercing critique that emphasized the lack of freedom and mutual aid in European societies.

Nevertheless, “Rousseau was not entirely mistaken,” Graeber and Wengrow insist, “something *has* been lost” (2). Towards a conclusion then, the authors formulate what this loss entails: “It is clear that something about human societies really has changed here, and quite profoundly. The three basic freedoms have gradually receded, to the point where a majority of people living today can barely comprehend what it might be like to live in a social order based on them” (503). And how did this happen, the authors ask repeatedly, how did “humans come to largely to lose the flexibility and freedom that seems to have once characterized our social arrangements and ended up stuck in permanent relations of dominance and subordination”? (140). Their answers are at once speculative and provocative, particularly when they explore “the convergence between systems of violence and systems of care” (517) as a critical, even a causal explanation for this loss. Graeber and Wengrow suggest things may have begun to go wrong “precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence” (502). If it is certain freedoms that make us human in the first place, what does it say about these freedoms that they need “rediscovery,” and what does *that* say about us contemporary humans? Are we no longer “fully human” if these freedoms are now lost as the authors repeatedly declare? With *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow create a spectacular event for thinking through human possibilities and acting on our “primary” freedoms to move, to disobey, and to rearrange social relations today.

Returning to where I began, I would like to submit that anarchism and the anthropological knowledge of anarchist ethics, practices, and imaginaries across human history are part of “the common property of humankind” (Graeber 2004: 94), which now includes Graeber’s own contributions to anarchist theory and practice along with his astounding imagination of their possible pasts and futures. Allow me to conclude then with a strikingly imaginative passage from *Fragments*, which we could receive as a call to think and act towards the possibility of an anarchist future:

[A]narchist forms of organization would not look anything like a state. ... [T]hey would involve an endless variety of communities, associations, networks, projects, on every conceivable scale, overlapping and intersecting in any way we could imagine, and possibly many that we can’t. Some would be quite local, others global. 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. And that, since anarchists are not actually trying to seize power within any national territory, the process of one system replacing the other will not take the form of some sudden revolutionary cataclysm—the storming of a Bastille, the seizing of a Winter Palace—but will necessarily be gradual, the creation of alternative forms of organization on a world scale, new forms of communication, new, less alienated ways of organizing life, which will, eventually, 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 (2004: 40).

In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, writing of Madagascar, Graeber observes how “it often seems that no one really takes on their full authority until they are dead.” To my mind, we now have to deal with Graeber’s “full authority” in an anarchist spirit. The task at hand cannot be petrification through idolization or canonization, but the extension of an invitation to think, play, and experiment with his contributions to anthropology and anarchism alike.

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¹ David Wengrow elaborates this argument in David Wengrow (2018), “A history of true civilisation is not one of monuments,” in *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/ideas/a-history-of-true-civilisation-is-not-one-of-monuments>. I thank him for pointing me towards this essay.

² David Graeber develops the idea of “baseline communism” in his *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011).