Interview: David Graeber, leading figure of Occupy

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The anarchist movement in the United States has had the support of leading libertarian intellectuals, such as Noam Chomsky; but it has lacked a figure who could transform its guiding principles into something resembling a political movement. In the autumn of 2011, David Graeber seemed to be the man who could drag anarchism into mainstream politics.

Graeber, along with other leading figures in the Occupy movement, coined the term 'we are the 99 percent'. The catchphrase caught on, and within weeks — with the assistance of social media — Occupy transformed a small group of idealists with little support into a radical network occupying 800 cities around the world.

Graeber's latest book *The Democracy Project* includes some details about the Occupy movement, much of his argument is concerned with philosophical questions bound up in history. What does democracy actually mean? And how can we aim to live in a society where everyone has an equal input into the decision-making process of how government works?

The crux of the polemic is to dispel the vague myths that have been created around the anarchist movement. Graeber says that anarchism is essentially about giving the voting population the power to self-govern through egalitarian decision-making, therefore erasing systems of hierarchy. Graeber asks the reader to suspend their cynicism and imagine a place where decisions are taken communally through a process called consensus.

I spoke to Graeber in the staff canteen of Goldsmiths University in London, where he currently teaches Anthropology. We discussed politics, history and many other ideas.

You say euphemisms and code words pervade every aspect of public debate in American politics presently. Is there any reason why the language of politics has today become so bland or restrictive?

[In politics] it used to be actually possible to think big. To think about things like: the U.N., space programmes, the welfare state, and so on. Nowadays, no governments are thinking on anything like that scale, and they seem to be completely incapable of doing so. Statesmen seem to have given up on the idea that they can create anything fundamentally new or bold. I think language has a lot to do with that. Obviously it's a symptom, but not the disease.

You also look at the history of the word democracy. You say that between 1770 and 1800 it was a term of abuse, but between 1830 and 1850 France and the United States began to identify themselves as democrats. Why did this change?

That is one of the most curious historical puzzles there is. What happened in America was Andrew Jackson [the seventh President of the United States] called himself a democrat, and it was incredibly successful as a branding exercise.

There was a time when people would identify with the term, but it was usually for shock value. Robespierre even called himself a democrat at one point, but that was just to scare people. The socialists did it in France; people started adopting the term in Canada, and they won. People realised that this was incredibly effective.

For some reason — despite the fact that nobody had ever heard about democracy coming from the educated classes — most people actually liked the idea. So there was this rapid change over the course of a decade in most countries, where people who had been claiming that they were Republicans, and that they hated democracy, then actually renamed the republics. They called them democracies, and everybody had to be a democrat. So now, paradoxically, we end up with this institutional structure that was created to repress the dangers of democracy being called democracy.

You argue that democracy should be a matter of collective problem solving. What do you say to those who claim that this idea is just an unachievable utopian pipedream?

I think we have created institutions to make us think that this is impossible. And one of the things that autocratic regimes always do is to try to convince us that we are not behaving like reasonable people. It's essential to the technique of any top-down rule.

Could you give an example to help explain your argument?

Well compare the Athens Agora and the Roman Forum: the two major places where people gathered in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome respectively. In ancient Athens they came to public assembly, discussed issues of public concern and tried to come up with solutions to common problems. Ultimately, it was about bringing out what is constructive in people.

Rome, on the other hand, had no interest in democracy and was an autocratic government. Rome's way of doing business is saying: do you really want to be in charge of a government, this is the way that people act? They try to turn [the masses] into a lynch mob. And this idea carried on for 2000 years, people said, oh we can't have democracy, people act like guys in the Roman Forum. In any autocratic regime — and I include Europe and America in this — there are institutions like that. It's called the ugly mirror effect: which is essentially there to tell you that you would act badly if you had any sort of responsibility. So it's better to leave it to those who know best.

Do you think it's possible — given the relatively short time span that states have existed in human society — that we might actually go back to a society without states?

I would go further than that. The thing we call the state is a fortuitous convergence of several different elements that have no necessary relationship with each other.

They happened to have come together, but later on, they will drift apart. There are two things going on with the association of government, which have separate origins if you look at them historically. The first is bureaucracy and administration, which can exist without centralised authority. The other is the principal of sovereignty: in other words, the central power that has coercive power over everybody. So you can have sovereign states with no bureaucracy, and you can have bureaucracy that is completely without the existence of sovereignty.

This competition between political figures looking for support and ways to come up with political projects, have totally separate origins, and it comes from aristocratic cultures. Somehow out of this mess comes "the state". So it's easy to see how these things might drift apart.

If you want an example from today, just look at the global administrative system we currently have (the IMF, the World Bank, etc), which isn't backed up by a principal of sovereignty.

What is your opinion of property destruction as a method of implementing civil disobedience: do you think it's effective, if used in the correct way by anarchists?

Well I think most of the people who were originally involved in creating Occupy at the very beginning probably hadn't been involved in property destruction previously. However, I would suspect that they don't think it was evil either. But we just all understood immediately that it would not be appropriate in this context of Occupy. For me personally, morality means not hurting people. And I think most people who consider property destruction a legitimate tactic don't think it's legitimate if someone is going to suffer as a result. So if it's a shopkeeper you don't want to mess up his livelihood. There are ethics involved in this.

Speaking about what the Occupy movement is trying to achieve you come back to the term 'consensus': as a process where everyone should be able to weigh in on a decision. Could you discuss this idea in more detail?

Well this has a really interesting history because this form of decision making is practiced almost everywhere in the world where they have the idea that everyone should have equal say but they don't have the means to force a minority to go along. Generally speaking, you get one or the other. If [the people in power] have a mechanism to make the majority go along, they don't really care what most people think because they are autocratic. And if they do care what everybody says, it's because they can't force everyone to go along. Therefore you set up a system where you work things out that everyone will go along with.

And the Occupy movement is trying to reconstruct that, right?

Yes. Over the years, there have been attempts — in both the pacifist and feminist movements — to develop formal processes whereby you can do this. And it makes sense, because in doing so they are trying to come up with decisions that would not threaten anybody else with force to reach decisions. But it's important to remember that the process is just a way to get there. It's ultimately a principal that we need to hear what everybody thinks, everybody has equal say, and if somebody feels there is a fundamental principle that they don't want to go along with, they cannot be compelled to go along with that decision if they don't want to. If you have those principles what you are going to come up with is something like consensus.

Can you explain how this might work in a real life political protest or everyday situation?

Let's say you are protesting in relation to a building being knocked down. So if you say, 'A majority show of hands, should we all lay down in front of the bulldozer, or shall we not?' And 60 people say, 'Let's lay down in front of the bulldozers.' What possible reason is there that the 40 other people should go along with that? You have majority rule when you have joined a group, and you have basically consented by joining and being bound by the majority.

So in a sense, even majority voting is based on consensus, if there is nobody to force you to go along. So if you say: does everybody agree that we will be bound by the decision, and then everybody decides that we can take a vote, it's ultimately based on consensus.

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