

The Democracy Project by David Graeber

Graeber, D. (2013) *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, New York: Allen Lane, pp. xxi + 326 pp. ISBN: 9781846146633. £14.99

Review by Lasse Thomassen¹

The Democracy Project is a book about big issues and big words like democracy, revolution, capitalism and anarchism. It is also a book about the nitty-gritty of how to organise direct action in an anarchist fashion. One of the attractions of the book is that its author, David Graeber, understands well the connections, and potential tensions, between the two, between the ideals and the micro-level organisational issues of direct action. Another plus is that, like other contemporary anarchists such as Todd May, Graeber is concerned with the question of organisation. This goes to show that, like everybody else, anarchists are concerned with organisational issues, if only in a different way. It takes the joke out of the old joke about anarchists: ‘that all sounds very well, but now tell me: how do you organise yourselves!?’

The basic thesis of the book, as I have read it, is that, in the Occupy movement, we witnessed a prefigurative politics of social and political change. By ‘prefigurative politics’, Graeber means ‘the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create’ (23). The means cannot be divorced from the end. The occupiers created spaces of freedom where democratic problem solving became possible. This is what anarchism is about, according to Graeber: changing the process of making collective decisions, rather than providing a blue print for a future society. As he himself puts it: ‘I am less interested in working out

what the detailed architecture of what a free society would be like than in creating the conditions that would enable us to find out.’ (193)

David Graeber is a practitioner, and a theorist. He has been engaged in activist politics for decades and was very much part of Occupy Wall Street. He uses his experiences as an activist for theoretical reflection, placing Occupy in its contemporary context (neoliberalism, the society of debt, the alter-globalisation movement, and so on) and in its historical context (the tension between republican government and democracy, debates within anarchism, and so forth). It is worth highlighting the importance of practice in Graeber’s work because not many social theorists – anthropologists like Graeber, economists, sociologists, political scientists – are so informed by practice in their academic work. Of course, for Graeber it could not be otherwise. Practice comes first and must inform theory, not the other way around. This is where I want to raise the first of three critical questions.

In the Acknowledgements, Graeber thanks ‘everyone in the movement, who taught me everything I know’ (303). I do not want to make too much of a single sentence, let alone in the acknowledgements, but it is symptomatic of Graeber’s approach, so I shall use it as my starting point.² What is Graeber telling us with this acknowledgement? He seems to be saying that he did not know anything about activism and direct action before meeting the people in the Occupy movement and engaging in direct action with them. I am not so interested in whether this is true or not – it clearly is not: Graeber has engaged in activism in other movements for many years. Nor am I simply saying that Graeber already knew about direct action (from reading about it, studying it) before being part of Occupy Wall Street. For Graeber, the issue here is whether you can actually learn about something by reading about it. To be more precise, the question is whether you can have a *theory* of direct action, or whether you can only

learn – and have knowledge about – it by doing it and learning from your failures and successes.

I would say that practice is always a part of it, but your practice is always informed by theory. ‘Theory’ may have different names: perspective, worldview, preconceptions, prejudices, and so on. We face a tension between our theories and our practice. Whether held consciously or not, our theories about the world are challenged by our experiences, and vice versa; but our theories also shape our experiences, and vice versa. And we face tensions among different experiences and among the different theories that we hold. But we never escape theory; there is no immediate relationship to experience or to an object of research. That means for me that we must examine and acknowledge the ways in which our experience and practice are framed by our theories about the world. My wager is that, going into Occupy, Graeber already had some knowledge about direct action – some ‘theories’ that shaped what he experienced, what he did and what he thought about it. For instance, his assessment of the tactics and strategy of the movement is framed by empirical and normative theories of social movements, as is evident in the descriptions of the first steps of the movement.

The second critical question I wish to raise concerns the issue of human essence, or human nature. This is an old issue of contention in anarchist thought, and traditionally anarchists have relied on a notion of human essence, mostly arguing that human beings are inherently good, collaborative, and so on. Many contemporary anarchists reject the very notion of a human essence, above all so-called post-anarchists inspired by post-structuralism (for instance, Lewis Call, Todd May and Saul Newman). David Graeber does not make any explicit mention of human essence in *The Democracy Project*. However, there is something else in the book. First of all, Graeber draws on archaeological and anthropological work about historical and contemporary societies to

argue that societies organised according to anarchist principles have existed and still exist. Among other things, Graeber draws on his own anthropological work in Madagascar to support this argument.

There is another argument about anarchism (and communism, properly understood). This is the argument that we are already anarchists (and communists) in what we do when we go about our everyday lives. Why? Because we organise our lives together in spaces of freedom and equality where there is no threat of violence, and where each contributes according to their abilities and enjoys according to their needs: ‘We are already practicing communism much of the time. We are already anarchists’ (295). This does not mean that society is anarchist or communist in its entirety, or that we act like this in all aspects of our lives: ‘We are all communists with those we love and trust the most; yet no one behaves communistically in all circumstances with everyone, or, presumably, ever has or will.’ (294) However, it means that anarchists can and must ‘[build] on what we are already doing, expanding the zones of freedom’ to ever wider parts of social life (295).

Graeber uses the archaeological and anthropological research, as well as the argument about anarchism and communism, to argue that ‘sociality of any sort always assumes a certain baseline communism [and anarchism]’, and that ‘[a]ll societies are communistic [and anarchistic] at base’ (294). While Graeber avoids saying anything about human essence, the question is whether he assumes that human beings are (at base) everywhere and at every time the same. In his description of human society, there seems to be a sort of default – collaboration, consensus, equality, freedom, democracy, anarchism, communism, and so forth – which is taken as natural rather than something to be instituted and institutionalised, and where the opposite is seen as a deviation. This is just the crux of the matter for anarchists: if freedom and equality are not natural, they

must be institutionalised, and can only exist as such. In that case, norms and limits are necessary for freedom, and then it is not a matter of freedom or not, but a matter of what, and whose, freedom one institutionalises in some mixture of freedom and unfreedom. I am not saying that Graeber could not subscribe to such a view of freedom and equality, but it would not sit well with the view that freedom and equality are the default for social relations.

The third critical question is related to the issue of freedom and to the issue of organisation. For Graeber, anarchism is about the creation of spaces of freedom where people can organise themselves without the threat of violence. Such spaces are egalitarian and horizontal rather than vertical. They are characterised by consensus decision making although this does not mean that all decisions are made by unanimity, but concerns the process of giving everybody a voice. Graeber is a small a anarchist; he is looking for ways to pursue democratic change, rather than presenting us with an image of what a future society will look like: ‘I like to call myself a “small-a” anarchist. I’m less interested in figuring out what sort of anarchist I am than in working in broad coalitions that operate in accord with anarchist principles’ (192). He has no problem with alliances with non-anarchist groups as long as those alliances do not interfere with the horizontality of the movement: ““small-a” anarchists such as myself – that is, the sort willing to work in broad coalitions as long as they work on horizontal principles’ (89).

Against this background, I would like to raise the following question. The first concerns the way we think about freedom, whether the freedom of individuals or the autonomy of the spaces of freedom, especially in relation to the state.³ I read *The Democracy Project* as suggesting that freedom should be understood in terms of the absence of the threat of violence, whether explicit or implicit, and that it is this that

makes possible people's democratic self-organisation. My question is to what extent we can think this freedom and autonomy in these terms of negative freedom or freedom from the threat of violence. I do not think that anarchists in general, or Graeber in particular, need to fall back on a negative conception of freedom, but there seems to be a risk of doing so. If, instead, we consider freedom and autonomy as always embedded in relations, which are always at once horizontal and vertical, then my identity and freedom, and the autonomy of the people or of a group of individuals, always depend on a relation to something beyond my, or our, control. Although a different way of approaching freedom and autonomy, the end result may not be that different: David Graeber uses much of *The Democracy Project* to analyse the relations among individuals and groups within the movement and the relations of the movement to other groups and institutions. This is one of the strengths of the book.

There is a lot in *The Democracy Project* with which I agree, but I have tried to accentuate some differences in the form of critical questions that are precisely that: questions to open a conversation while also meant to draw attention to possible divisions.

References

Graber, D. (2004) Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Notes

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² See also David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

³ Let me be clear: Graeber's account of anarchism and the Occupy movement is by no means naive – one of the typical criticisms of anarchism. For instance, he has a very interesting and helpful discussion of the relationship between movements such as Occupy and state institutions and other groups in chapter 4.