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## In Rousseau's footsteps : David Graeber and the anthropology of unequal society

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Un compte rendu critique du livre de David Graeber, "Dettes : les 5000 premières années" publié sur le site web anglais The Memory Bank. Publié avec l'aimable autorisation des administrateurs The site administrators are Keith Hart et Justin Shaffner.

Debt is everywhere today [1]. What is "sovereign debt" and why must Greece pay up, but not the United States ? Who decides that the national debt will be repaid through austerity programmes rather than job-creation schemes ? Why do the banks get bailed out, while students and home-owners are forced to repay loans ? The very word debt speaks of unequal power ; and the world economic crisis since 2008 has exposed this inequality more than any other since the 1930s. David Graeber has written a searching book that aims to place our current concerns within the widest possible framework of anthropology and world history. He starts from a question : why do we feel that we must repay our debts ? This is a moral issue, not an economic one. In market logic, the cost of bad loans should be met by creditors as a discipline on their lending practices. But paying back debts is good for the powerful few, whereas the mass of debtors have at times sought and won relief from them.

What is debt ? According to Graeber, it is an obligation with a figure attached and hence debt is inseparable from money. This book devotes a lot of attention to where money comes from and what it does. States and markets each play a role in its creation, but money's form has fluctuated historically between virtual credit and metal currency. Above all Graeber's enquiry is framed by our unequal world as a whole. He resists the temptation to offer quick remedies for collective suffering, since this would be inconsistent with the timescale of his argument. Nevertheless, readers are offered a worldview that clearly takes the institutional pillars of our societies to be rotten and deserving of replacement. It is a timely and popular view. Debt : The first 5,000 years is an international best-seller. The German translation recently sold 30,000 copies in the first two weeks.

I place the book here in a classical tradition that I call "the anthropology of unequal society" (Hart 2006), before considering what makes David Graeber a unique figure in contemporary intellectual politics. A summary of the book's main arguments is followed by a critical assessment, focusing on the notion of a "human economy".

### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF UNEQUAL SOCIETY

Modern anthropology was born to serve the coming democratic revolution against the Old Regime. A government by the people for the people should be based on what they have in common, their "human nature" or "natural rights". Writers from John Locke (1690) to Karl Marx (1867) identified the contemporary roots of inequality with money's social dominance, a feature that we now routinely call "capitalism". For Locke money was a store of wealth that allowed some individuals to accumulate property far beyond their own immediate needs. For Marx "capital" had become the driving force subordinating the work of the many to machines controlled by a few. In both cases, accumulation dissolved the old forms of

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#### NOTES

[1] Cet article est issu de la revue en ligne The Memory Bank et disponible à l'adresse suivante :

<http://thememorybank.co.uk/2012/07/04/in-rousseau-footsteps-david-graeber-and-the-anthropology-of-unequal-society-2/>

society, but it also generated the conditions for its own replacement by a more just society, a "commonwealth" or "communism". It was, however, the philosophers of the eighteenth-century liberal enlightenment who developed a systematic approach to anthropology as an intellectual source for remaking the modern world.

Following Locke's example, they wanted to found democratic societies in place of the class system typical of agrarian civilizations. How could arbitrary social inequality be abolished and a more equal society founded on their common human nature ? Anthropology was the means of answering that question. The great Victorian synthesizers, such as Morgan, Tylor and Frazer, stood on the shoulders of predecessors motivated by an urgent desire to make world society less unequal. Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, a best-seller when published in 1798, was the culmination of that Enlightenment project ; but it played almost no part in the subsequent history of the discipline. The main source for nineteenth-century anthropology was rather Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He revolutionized our understanding of politics, education, sexuality and the self in four books published in the 1760s : *The Social Contract*, *Emile*, *Julie* and *The Confessions*. He was forced to flee for his life from hit squads encouraged by the church. But he made his reputation earlier through two discourses of which the second, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1754), deserves to be seen as the source for an anthropology that combines the critique of unequal society with a revolutionary politics of democratic emancipation.

Rousseau was concerned here not with individual variations in natural endowments which we can do little about, but with the conventional inequalities of wealth, honour and the capacity to command obedience which can be changed. In order to construct a model of human equality, he imagined a pre-social state of nature, a sort of hominid phase of human evolution in which men were solitary, but healthy, happy and above all free. This freedom was metaphysical, anarchic and personal : original human beings had free will, they were not subject to rules of any kind and they had no superiors. At some point humanity made the transition to what Rousseau calls "nascent society", a prolonged period whose economic base can best be summarized as hunter-gathering with huts. This second phase represents his ideal of life in society close to nature.

The rot set in with the invention of agriculture or, as Rousseau puts it, wheat and iron. Here he contradicted both Hobbes and Locke. The formation of a civil order (the state) was preceded by a war of all against all marked by the absence of law, which Rousseau insisted was the result of social development, not an original state of nature. Cultivation of the land led to incipient property institutions which, far from being natural, contained the seeds of entrenched inequality. Their culmination awaited the development of political society. He believed that this new social contract was probably arrived at by consensus, but it was a fraudulent one in that the rich thereby gained legal sanction for transmitting unequal property rights in perpetuity. From this inauspicious beginning, political society then usually moved, via a series of revolutions, through three stages :

The establishment of law and the right of property was the first stage, the institution of magistrates the second and the transformation of legitimate into arbitrary power the third and last stage. Thus the status of rich and poor was authorized by the first epoch, that of strong and weak by the second and by the third that of master and slave, which is the last degree of inequality and the stage to which all the others finally lead, until new revolutions dissolve the government altogether and bring it back to legitimacy (Rousseau 1984:131).

One-man-rule closes the circle. "It is here that all individuals become equal again because they are nothing, here where subjects have no longer any law but the will of the master"(Ibid : 134). For Rousseau, the growth of inequality was just one aspect of human alienation in civil society. We need to return from division of labour and dependence on the opinion of others to subjective self-sufficiency. His subversive parable ends with a ringing indictment of economic inequality which could well serve as a warning to our world. "It is manifestly contrary to the law of nature, however defined... that a handful of people should gorge themselves with superfluities while the hungry multitude goes in want of necessities" (Ibid : 137).

Lewis H. Morgan (1877) drew on Rousseau's model for his own fiercely democratic synthesis of human history, *Ancient Society*, which likewise used an evolutionary classification that we now call bands, tribes and states, each stage more unequal than the one before. Morgan's work is normally seen as the launch of modern anthropology proper because of his ability to enrol contemporary ethnographic observations of the Iroquois in an analysis of the historical structures underlying western civilization's origins in Greece and Rome. Marx and Engels enthusiastically took up Morgan's work as confirmation of their own critique of the state and capitalism ; and the latter, drawing on Marx's extensive annotations of *Ancient Society*, made the argument more accessible as *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Engels's greater emphasis on gender inequality made this a fertile source for the feminist movement in the 1960s and after.

The traditional home of inequality is supposed to be India and Andre Beteille, in *Inequality among Men* (1977) and other books, has made the subject his special domain, merging social anthropology with comparative sociology. In the United States, Leslie White at Michigan and Julian Steward at Columbia led teams, including Wolf, Sahlins, Service, Harris and Mintz, who took the evolution of the state and class society as their chief focus. Probably the single most impressive work coming out of this American school was Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1982). But one man tried to redo Morgan in a single book and that was Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Lévi-Strauss acknowledged Rousseau as his master. The aim of *Elementary Structures* was to revisit Morgan's three-stage theory of social evolution, drawing on a new and impressive canvas, "the Siberia-Assam axis" and all points southeast as far as the Australian desert. Lévi-Strauss took as his motor of development the forms of marriage exchange and the logic of exogamy. The "restricted reciprocity" of egalitarian bands gave way to the unstable hierarchies of "generalized reciprocity" typical of the Highland Burma tribes. The stratified states of the region turned inwards to endogamy, to the reproduction of class differences and the negation of social reciprocity.

Jack Goody has tried to lift our profession out of a myopic ethnography into an engagement with world history that went out of fashion with the passing of the Victorian founders. Starting with *Production and Reproduction* (1976), he has produced a score of books over the last three decades investigating why Sub-Saharan Africa differs so strikingly from the pre-industrial societies of Europe and Asia, with a later focus on refuting the West's claim to being exceptional, especially when compared with Asia (Hart 2006, 2011). The common thread of Goody's compendious work links him through the Marxist pre-historian Gordon Childe (1954) to Morgan-Engels and ultimately Rousseau. The key to understanding social forms lies in production, which for us means machine production. Civilization or human culture is largely shaped by the means of communication — once writing, now an array of mechanized forms. The site of social struggles is property, now principally conflicts over intellectual property. And his central issue of reproduction has never been more salient than at a time when the aging citizens of rich countries depend on the proliferating mass of young people out there. Kinship needs to be reinvented too.

## DAVID GRAEBER : THE FIRST 50 YEARS

Graeber brings his own unique combination of interests and engagements to renewing this "anthropology of unequal society". Who is he ? He spent the 1960s as the child of working-class intellectuals and activists in New York and was a teenager in the 1970s, which turned out to be the hinge decade of our times, leading to a "neoliberal" counter-revolution against post-war social democracy. This decade was framed at one end by the US dollar being taken off the gold standard in 1971 and at the other by a massive interest rate increase in 1979 induced by a second oil price hike. The world economy has been depressed ever since, especially at its western core. Graeber says that he embraced anarchism at sixteen.

The debt crisis of the 1980s was triggered by irresponsible lending of the oil surplus by western banks to Third World kleptocrats (Hart 2000 : 142-143) and by the new international regime of high interest rates. In market theory, bad loans are supposed to discipline lenders, but the IMF and World Bank insisted on every penny of added interest being repaid by the governments of poor countries. This was also the time when structural adjustment policies forced those governments to open up their national economies to the free flow of money and commodities, with terrible consequences for public welfare programmes and jobs. If the anti-colonial revolution inspired my generation in the 1960s, Graeber's internationalism was shaped by this wholesale looting of the successor states. He took an active part in demonstrations against this new phase of "financial globalization", a phenomenon now often referred to as the "alter-globalization movement" (Pleyers 2010), but he and his fellow activists call it the "global justice movement". Its public impact peaked in the years following the financial crisis of 1997-98 (involving Southeast Asia, Russia, Brazil and the failure of a US hedge fund, Long-Term Capital Management), notably through mass mobilizations in Seattle, Genoa and elsewhere. In the *Debt* book, Graeber claims that they took on the IMF and won.

David Graeber received a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Chicago based on ethnographic and historical research on a former slave village in Madagascar. This was eventually published as a long and exemplary monograph, *Lost People : Magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar* (Graeber 2007a). The history of the slave trade, colonialism and the post-colony figure prominently in how he illustrates global inequality through a focus on debt. Before that, he published a strong collection of essays on value, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value : The false coin of our own dreams* (Graeber 2001), in which he sought to relate economic value (especially value as measured impersonally by money) and the values

that shape our subjectivity in society. This hinged on revisiting both Karl Marx and Marcel Mauss, providing the main account in English of how the latter's cooperative socialism shaped his famous work on the gift (Mauss 1925). A theme of both books is the role of magic and money fetishism in sustaining unequal society.

Politics forms a central strand of Graeber's work, with four books published so far and more in the works : *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), *Possibilities : Essays on hierarchy, rebellion, and desire* (2007b), *Direct Action : An ethnography* (2009a) and *Revolutions in Reverse : Essays on politics, violence, art, and imagination* (2011c). These titles reveal a range of political interests that take in violence, aesthetics and libido. He insists on the "elective affinity" between anthropological theory and method and an anarchist programme of resistance, rebellion and revolution ; and this emphasis on "society against the state" makes him a worthy successor to Pierre Clastres (1974). Graeber's academic career has been fitful, most notoriously when he was "let go" by Yale despite his obvious talent and productivity. This fed rumours about the academic consequences of his political activities. These have led to numerous brushes with the police, but so far not to prolonged incarceration, although his inability to find a job in American universities could be seen as a form of exile.

*Debt : The first 5,000 years* was published in summer 2011 and Graeber began a year's sabbatical leave from his teaching job in London by moving to New York, where he became an ubiquitous presence in the print media, television and blogs. In August-September he helped form the first New York City General Assembly which spawned the Occupy Wall Street movement. He has been credited with being the author of that movement's slogan, "We are the 99%", and helped to give it an anarchist political style. OWS generated a wave of imitations in the United States and around the world, known collectively as "the Occupy movement", inviting comparison with the "Arab Spring" and Madrid's Los Indignados in what seemed then to be a global uprising. Some shared features of this series of political events, such as an emphasis on non-violence, consensual decision-making and the avoidance of sectarian division, evoke Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of the "general will" ; and it is not wholly fanciful to compare David Graeber's career so far with his great predecessor's.

Graeber and Rousseau both detested the mainstream institutions of the world they live in and devoted their intellectual efforts to building revolutionary alternatives. This means not being satisfied with reporting how the world is, but rather exploring the dialectic linking the actual to the possible. This in turn implies being willing to mix established genres of research and writing and to develop new ones. Both are prolific writers with an accessible prose style aimed at reaching a mass audience. Both achieved unusual fame for an intellectual and their political practice got them into trouble. Both suffered intimidation, neglect and exile for their beliefs. Both attract admiration and loathing in equal measure. Their originality is incontestable, yet each can at times be silly. There is no point in considering their relative significance. The personal parallels that I point to here reinforce my claim that Graeber's *Debt* book should be seen as a specific continuation of that "anthropology of unequal society" begun by Rousseau two and a half centuries ago.

## **DEBT : THE ARGUMENT**

Much of the contemporary world revolves round the claims we make on each other and on things : ownership, obligations, contracts and payment of taxes, wages, rents, fees etc. David Graeber's book, *Debt : The first 5,000 years*, aims to illuminate these questions through a focus on debt seen in very wide historical perspective. It is of course a central issue in global politics today, at every level of society. Every day sees another example of a class struggle between debtors and creditors to shape the distribution of costs after a long credit boom went dramatically bust.

We might be indebted to God, the sovereign or our parents : for the gift of life, but Graeber rightly insists that the social logic of debt is revealed most clearly when money is involved. He cites approvingly an early twentieth-century writer who insisted that "money is debt". This book of over 500 pages is rich in argument and knowledge. The notes and references are compendious, ranging over five millennia of the main Eurasian civilizations (ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Mediterranean, medieval Europe, China, India and Islam) and the ethnography of stateless societies in Africa, the Americas and the Pacific. Its twelve chapters are framed by an introduction to our moral confusion concerning debt and a concluding sketch of the present rupture in world history that began in the early 1970s. Graeber's case is founded on anthropological and historical comparison more than his grasp of contemporary political economy, although he has plenty to say in passing about that. There is also a current of populist culture running through the book and this is reinforced by a prose style aimed at closing the gap between author and reader that his formidable scholarship might otherwise open up.

Perhaps this aspect of the book may be illustrated by introducing a recent short film. Paul Grignon's *Money as Debt* (2006, 47 minutes) — an underground hit in activist circles — seeks to explain where money comes from. Most of the money in circulation is issued by banks whenever they make a loan. The real basis of money, the film claims, is thus our signature whenever we promise to repay a debt. The banks create that money by a stroke of the pen and the promise is then bought and sold in increasingly complex ways. The total debt incurred by government, corporations, small businesses and consumers spirals continuously upwards since interest must be paid on it all. Although the general idea is an old one, it has taken on added salience at a time when the supply of money, which could once plausibly be represented as public currency in circulation, has been overtaken by the creation of private debt.

The film's attempt to demystify money is admirable, but its message is misleading. Debt and credit are two sides of the same coin, the one evoking passivity in the face of power, the other individual empowerment. The origin of money in France and Germany is considered to be debt, whereas in the United States and Britain it is traditionally conceived of as credit. Either term alone is loaded, missing the dialectical character of the relations involved. *Money as Debt* demonizes the banks and interest in particular, letting the audience off the hook by not showing the active role most of us play in sustaining the system. Money today is issued by a dispersed global network of economic institutions of many kinds ; and the norm of economic growth is fed by a widespread desire for self-improvement, not just by bank interest.

David Graeber offers a lot more than this, of course ; but his book also feeds off popular currents too, which is not surprising given how much time he spends outside the classroom and his study. His analytical framework is spelled out in great detail over six chapters. The first two tackle the origins of money in barter and "primordial debt" respectively. He shows, forcefully and elegantly, how implausible the standard liberal origin myth of money as a medium of exchange is ; but he also rejects as a nationalist myth the main opposing theory that traces money's origins as a means of payment and unit of account to state power. In the first case he follows Polanyi (1944), but by distancing himself from the second, he highlights the interdependence of states and markets in money's origins. A short chapter shows that money was always both a commodity and a debt-token ("the two sides of the coin", Hart 1986), giving rise to a lot of political and moral contestation, especially in the ancient world. Following Nietzsche, Graeber argues that money introduced for the first time a measure of the unequal relations between buyer and seller, creditor and debtor. Whereas Rousseau traced inequality to the invention of property, he locates the roots of human bondage, slavery, tribute and organized violence in debt relations. The contradictions of indebtedness, fed by money and markets, led the first world religions to articulate notions of freedom and redemption in response to escalating class conflict between creditors and debtors, often involving calls for debt cancellation.

The author now lays out his positive story to counter the one advanced by mainstream liberal economics. "A brief treatise on the moral grounds of economic relations" makes explicit his critique of the attempt to construct "the economy" as a sphere separate from society in general. This owes something to Polanyi's (1957) universal triad of distributive mechanisms — reciprocity, redistribution and market — here identified as "everyday communism", hierarchy and reciprocity. By the first Graeber means a human capacity for sharing or "baseline sociality" ; the second is sometimes confused with the third, since unequal relations are often represented as an exchange — you give me your crops in return for not being beaten up. The difference between hierarchy and reciprocity is that debt is permanent in the first case, but temporary in the second. The western middle classes train their children to say please and thank you as a way of limiting the debt incurred by being given something. All three principles are present everywhere, but their relative emphasis is coloured by dominant economic forms. Thus "communism" is indispensable to modern work practices, but capitalism is a lousy way of harnessing our human capacity for cooperation.

The next two chapters introduce what is for me the main idea of the book, the contrast between "human economies" and those dominated by money and markets (Graeber prefers to call them "commercial economies" and sometimes "capitalism"). First he identifies the independent characteristics of human economies and then shows what happens when they are forcefully incorporated into the economic orbit of larger "civilisations", including our own. This is to some extent a great divide theory of history, although, as Mauss would insist, elements of human economy persist in capitalist societies. There is a sense in which "human economies" are a world we have lost, but might recover after the revolution. Graeber is at pains to point out that these societies are not necessarily more humane, just that "they are economic systems primarily concerned not with the accumulation of wealth, but with the creation, destruction, and rearranging of human beings" (2011a : 130). They use money, but mainly as "social currencies" whose aim is to maintain relations between people rather than to purchase things.

"In a human economy, each person is unique and of incomparable value, because each is a unique nexus of relations with others" (Ibid : 158). Yet their money forms make it possible to treat people as quantitatively identical in exchange and that requires a measure of violence. Brutality — not just conceptual, but physical

too — is omnipresent, more in some cases than others. Violence is inseparable from money and debt, even in the most “human” of economies, where ripping people out of their familiar context is commonplace. This, however, gets taken to another level when they are drawn into systems like the Atlantic slave trade or the western colonial empires of yesteryear. The following extended reflection on slavery and freedom — a pair that Graeber sees as being driven by a culture of honour and indebtedness — culminates in the ultimate contradiction underpinning modern liberal economics, a worldview that conceives of individuals as being socially isolated in a way that could only be prepared for by a long history of enslaving conquered peoples. Since we cannot easily embrace this account of our own history, it is not surprising that we confuse morality and power when thinking about debt.

So far, Graeber has relied heavily on anthropological material, especially from African societies, to illustrate the world that the West transformed, although his account of money's origins draws quite heavily on the example of ancient Mesopotamia. Now he formalizes his theory of money to organize a compendious review of world history in four stages. These are : the era from c.3000 BC that saw the first urban civilizations ; the “Axial Age” which he, rather unusually, dates from 800BC to 600AD ; the Middle Ages (600-1450AD) ; and the age of “the great capitalist empires”, from 1450AD to the US dollar's symbolic rupture with the gold standard in 1971. As this last date suggests, the periodization relies heavily on historical oscillations between broad types of money. Graeber calls these “credit” and “bullion”, that is, money as a virtual measure of personal relations, like IOUs, and as currency or impersonal things made from precious metals for circulation.

Money started out as a unit of account, administered by institutions such as temples and banks, as well as states, largely as a way of measuring debt relations between people. Coinage was introduced in the first millennium as part of a complex linking warfare, mercenary soldiers, slavery, looting, mines, trade and the provisioning of armies on the move. Graeber calls this “the military-coinage-slavery complex” of which Alexander the Great, for example, was a master. Hence our word, “soldier”, refers to his pay. The so-called “dark ages” offered some relief from this regime and for most of the medieval period, metal currencies were in very short supply and money once again took the dominant form of virtual credit. India, China and the Islamic world are enlisted here to supplement what we know of Europe. But then the discovery of the new world opened up the phase we are familiar with from the last half-millennium, when western imperialism revived the earlier tradition of warfare and slavery lubricated by bullion.

The last four decades are obviously transitional, but the recent rise of virtual credit money suggests the possibility of another long swing of history away from the principles that underpinned the world the West made. It could be a multi-polar world, more like the middle ages than the last two centuries. It could offer more scope for “human economies” or at least “social currencies”. The debt crisis might provoke revolutions and then, who knows, debt cancellation along the lines of the ancient jubilee. Perhaps the whole institutional complex based on states, money and markets or capitalism will be replaced by forms of society more directly responsive to ordinary people and their capacity for “everyday communism”.

All of this is touched on in the final chapter. But Graeber leaves these “policy conclusions” deliberately vague. His aim in this book has been to draw his readers into a vision of human history that runs counter to what makes their social predicament supposedly inevitable. It is a vision inspired in part by his profession as an anthropologist, in part by his political engagement as an activist. Both commitments eschew drawing up programmes for others to follow. Occupy Wall Street has been criticized for its failure to enumerate a list of “demands”. No doubt much the same could be said of this book ; but then readers, including this reviewer, will be inspired by it in concrete ways to imagine possibilities that its author could not have envisaged.

## TOWARDS A HUMAN ECONOMY

David Graeber and I came up with the term “human economy” independently during the last decade (Graeber 2009b, 2011a ; Hart 2008, Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010). The editors of *The Human Economy* : A citizen's guide distanced ourselves, in the introduction and our editorial approach, from any “revolutionary” eschatology that suggested society had reached the end of something and would soon be launched on a quite new trajectory. The idea of a “human economy” drew attention to the fact that people do a lot more for themselves than an exclusive focus on the dominant economic institutions would suggest. Against a singular notion of the economy as “capitalism”, we argued that all societies combine a plurality of economic forms and several of these are distributed across history, even if their combination is strongly coloured by the dominant economic form in particular times and places.

For example, in his famous essay on *The Gift* (1925), Marcel Mauss showed that other economic principles were present in capitalist societies and that understanding this would provide a sounder basis for building

non-capitalist alternatives than the Bolshevik revolution's attempt to break with markets and money entirely. Karl Polanyi too, in his various writings, insisted that the human economy throughout history combined a number of mechanisms of which the market was only one. We argued therefore that the idea of radical transformation of an economy conceived of monolithically as capitalism into its opposite was an inappropriate way to approach economic change. We should rather pay attention to the full range of what people are doing already and build economic initiatives around giving these a new direction and emphasis, instead of supposing that economic change has to be reinvented from scratch. Although this looks like a gradualist approach to economic improvement, its widespread adoption would have revolutionary consequences.

David Graeber's anarchist politics inform his economic analysis ; and he has always taken an anti-statist and anti-capitalist position, with markets and money usually being subsumed under the concept of capitalism. That is, he sees the future as being based on the opposite of our capitalist states. The core of his politics is "direct action" which he has practised and written about as an ethnographer (Graeber 2009a). In *The Human Economy*, we argued that people everywhere rely on a wide range of organizations in their economic lives : markets, nation-states, corporations, cities, voluntary associations, families, virtual networks, informal economies, crime. We should be looking for a more progressive mix of these things. We can't afford to turn our backs on institutions that have helped humanity make the transition to modern world society. Large-scale bureaucracies co-exist with varieties of popular self-organization and we have to make them work together rather than at cross-purposes, as they often do now.

Graeber also believes, as we have seen, that economic life everywhere is based on a plural combination of moral principles which take on a different complexion when organized by dominant forms. Thus, helping each other as equals is essential to capitalist societies, but capitalism distorts and marginalizes this human propensity. Yet he appears to expect a radical rupture with capitalist states fairly soon and this is reflected in a stages theory of history, with categories to match. At first sight, these positions (let's call them "reform" and "revolution") are incompatible, but recent political developments (the "Arab Spring" and Occupy movements of 2011, however indeterminate their immediate outcomes) point to the need to transcend such an opposition.

The gap between our approaches to making the economy human is therefore narrowing. Even so, there are differences of theory and method that point to some residual reservations I have about the *Debt* book. The first of these concerns Graeber's preference for lumping together states, money, markets, debt and capitalism, along with violence, war and slavery as their habitual bedfellows. Money and markets have redemptive qualities that in my view (Hart 2000) could be put to progressive economic ends in non-capitalist forms ; nor do I imagine that modern institutions such as states, corporations and bureaucracy will soon die away. Anti-capitalism as a revolutionary strategy begs the question of the plurality of modern economic institutions. As Mauss showed (Hart 2007), human economies exist in the cracks of capitalist societies. David Graeber seems to agree, at least when it comes to finding "everyday communism" there and, by refusing to sanitize "human economies" in their pristine form, he modifies the categorical and historical division separating them and commercial economies. Revolutionary binaries seem to surface at various points in his book, but an underlying tendency to discern continuity in human economic practices is just as much a feature of David Graeber's anthropological vision.

An argument of *Debt's* scope hasn't been made by a professional anthropologist for the best part of a century, certainly not one with as much contemporary relevance. The discipline largely abandoned "conjectural history" in the twentieth century in order to embrace the narrower local perspectives afforded by ethnographic fieldwork. Works of broad comparison such as Wolf's and Goody's were the exception to this trend. Inevitably Graeber's methods will come under scrutiny, not just from fellow professionals, but from the general public too. (He tells me that academics don't read footnotes any more, but laymen do). To this reader, the first half of the book – which relies heavily on ethnographic sources to spell out the argument – is more systematic, in terms of both analytical coherence and documentation, than the second, concerned as it is with fleshing out his cycles of history. In either case, little attempt is made to analyse contemporary political economy, although Graeber makes more explicit reference to this than, for example does Mauss in *The Gift*, where readers' understanding of capitalist markets is taken for granted. Nowhere in the book is any reference made to the digital revolution in communications of our times and its scope to transform economies, whether human or commercial (Hart 2000, 2005).

Well, that is not quite true, for the author does occasionally introduce anecdotes based on common or his personal knowledge. The problem is that many readers who take on trust what he has to say about ancient Mesopotamia or the Tiv, may find these stories contradicted by their own knowledge. It is something akin to "Time magazine syndrome" : we accept what Time has to say about the world in general until it impinges on what we know ourselves and then its credibility dissolves. Thus :

Apple Computers is a famous example : it was founded by (mostly Republican) computer engineers who

broke from IBM in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, forming little democratic circles of twenty to forty people with their laptops in each other's garages (Graeber 2011a : 96).

The veracity of this anecdote has been challenged by numerous Californian bloggers and the author's scholarship with it. Graeber is aware of the pitfalls of making contemporary allusions. In the final chapter (Ibid : 362-3), he cleverly introduces an urban myth he often heard about the gold stored under the World Trade Centre and then (almost) rehabilitates that myth using documented sources. Fortunately, David Graeber has not been deterred by the pedants from crossing the line between academic and general knowledge in this book and his readers benefit immensely as a result. I contributed to the publisher's blurb for this book and said that he is "the finest anthropological scholar I know". I stand by that. The very long essay he recently published on the divine kingship of the Shilluk (Graeber 2011c) covers the same ground as a number of famous anthropologists from Frazer onwards, but with an unsurpassed range of scholarship, as well as a democratic political perspective. Inevitably in a book like this one, the fact police will catch him out sometimes. But it is a work of immense erudition and deserves to be celebrated as such.

Our world is still massively unequal and we may be entering a period of war and revolution comparable to the "Second Thirty Years War" of 1914-1945 which came after the last time that several decades of financial imperialism went bust. Capitalism itself sometimes seems today to have reverted to a norm of rent-seeking that resembles the arbitrary inequality of the Old Regime more than Victorian industry. The pursuit of economic democracy is more elusive than ever ; yet humanity has also devised universal means of communication at last adequate to the expression of universal ideas. Jean-Jacques Rousseau would have leapt at the chance to make use of this opportunity and several illustrious successors did so in their own way during the last two centuries. We need an anthropology that rises to the challenge posed by our common human predicament today. No-one has done more to meet that challenge than David Graeber, in his work as a whole, but especially in this book.

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