

David Graeber, 1961–2020

Astra Taylor, Molly Crabapple, Marshall Sahlins, Beka Economopoulos, and Melissa Flashman, et al.

Dear David, It is an injustice to lose you, in a year so thick with other losses... as if it somehow takes away from the incomprehensibility of what it means for you to be gone. I draw your boys' face and remember mischievous fail, and that afternoon at Portabella Road, when you walked through the stalls beloved by everyone, talking with a solidarity, a Kurdish activist, an old man selling books, and you bought me a book I couldn't afford. I think of this boundless giving and getting. I think of your rebel generosity, of your soul, that made Athens, that loved in Rojava, New York, you in here in New York.



in the cold caverns of finance next to Zuccotti Park where I light a candle for you. How can you be gone? How can we have lost you?

David Graeber, the anthropologist and activist, died aged fifty-nine on September 2, 2020. The New York Review, to which he began contributing last year, is collecting tributes from his friends and colleagues.

Astra Taylor

I was supposed to talk to David this past week, the beginning of September, and record a conversation for this magazine. We were going to reflect on a few recurring themes of our friendship: the still-evolving legacy of Occupy Wall Street, the politics of debt (especially given the current economic calamity), how leftists should engage with and push beyond electoral politics, and the prospects of small-d democracy. The conversation was something I'd been looking forward to and meaning to arrange for months, but the pandemic gave me plenty of reasons to delay. And delay I did until last week, the end of August, when David and I finally decided to set a date. He told me he was going to Venice, and that he'd be there until September 7, but that we'd make time. It turned out to be a trip from which he would never return. After sharing some lines over text message from a piece he was writing for this publication about the upcoming election, his last and final note to me read: "No idea of time, time is being reinvented."

Looking through my emails and texts from David over the last decade, I'm struck by how instantaneously we became friends. A single coffee in the West Village in 2009 or so was all it took. We knew lots of people in common, so there was a sense we were part of the same extended community, but that was also just how David operated. There was an openness about him, a willingness to let people in and give strangers a chance. Given how knowledgeable and prolific he was, it's clear David spent a lot of time engaged in the solitary activities of reading and writing. But he was also wonderfully gregarious—he always seemed up for a phone call to check in, a ramble through an antique market, or a night on the town to talk shop or gossip. For some reason I keep thinking of David on the day I visited with him in London in 2014, when I was on tour playing with my partner's band, Neutral Milk Hotel. He dressed up for the show, in a long jacket, with these ridiculous colorful John Lennon glasses that made everyone laugh. He was a fun person, and his mischievousness suffused everything he did, including his writing and his activism.

David changed my life, and he did it without my realizing it. In August 2011 he tried to get me to go to the planning meetings of what would become Occupy Wall Street. I shrugged it off, but promised to come to the first day of the protest. I did. I remember how pleased he seemed that afternoon, like a radical maître d' going around welcoming people, checking in on our progress as we held the first assemblies. He didn't push me

into the movement, but he kept opening doors that I kept walking through, steadily becoming more deeply involved and invested. Before long, he had roped me into to an initiative that would be known as “Strike Debt.” One of our opening salvos was a propaganda video featuring a dozen of our friends in balaclavas dancing around a burning trashcan igniting their debt notices; David can be spotted amongst the throng and wrote the voice-over. Those were the early days of a project we called the Rolling Jubilee—David named the effort—that bought portfolios of debt in order to abolish them, erasing tens of millions of dollars overdue medical bills and payday loans belonging to tens of thousands of people. The group also collaboratively wrote the *Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*, a radical financial guidebook, and gave away thousands of free copies at Occupy Wall Street’s one-year anniversary protest. David never lorded the fact that he had written *Debt* over his co-authors, many of whom had not written a single article; he understood that mastering five thousand years of history doesn’t mean you necessarily know the best tricks to evade bill collectors or the most effective ways to fight our modern-day form of mafia capitalism. We were all learning and experimenting together.

After David relocated to London in 2013, the effort kept going and evolving. In 2014, a small group of us launched the Debt Collective, a union for debtors, which I remain involved in to this day. David’s work provided a potent critique of the dominant financial morality, which sees debtors as blameworthy or even criminal. “There’s no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt—above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it’s the victim who’s doing something wrong,” David has written. Building on his conceptual intervention, the Debt Collective has devised a comprehensive theory of debtor organizing, including an analysis of debt’s centrality under conditions of financialization and the development of concrete strategies that have helped win over a billion dollars of debt relief while opening up a national conversation about the need for mass debt cancellation. We’ve always taken heart knowing David was cheering us on from afar and ready to brainstorm or scheme—it pains us to know he won’t be able to witness all the campaigns and revolts he helped inspire.

David had very strongly held views, but he wasn’t dogmatic or sectarian. Disagreeing was part of the fun. David proudly called himself an anarchist while I could never embrace that label; we argued about things including consensus decision-making (I think it rarely works) and the role of the state (I want a strong one). We both embraced the word “democracy,” analyzing it and writing about it and trying to actualize it, but I was more critical of what I saw as our movements’ failed attempts to manifest the concept. And yet David pushed me to think in new ways every time we debated, and he expanded my view and helped me change my mind many times. In a conversation we did last October at the LRB Bookshop he spoke about the pleasure of changing one’s mind through deliberative processes, and said that it was an underappreciated form of “political happiness”—as in, “Oh, I don’t have to think what I think, why don’t I think

something else!” He was one of the only people I could count on to credibly make an even more far out, hopeful, utopian argument than I do—I’ll miss getting to play the curmudgeon in our duo.

“Credible” is the operative word, with David. His conviction that our society could be organized another way was empirically based, after all. As an anthropologist and generally curious person, he was well aware that human societies and value systems vary wildly across space and time. Very often, the stories we tell ourselves, or are told, about why things are the way they are simply aren’t true; our political and economic arrangements can be transformed and remade. But David also understood that you can’t produce such seismic shifts alone. A brilliant, best-selling book like *Debt* can help expand readers’ understanding and imaginations, but words on a page are no substitute social for movements, for collectivities, for rebellions and riots. David engaged in activism with extraordinary humility, as a peer among equals (his in-person kindness contrasted rather dramatically with his persona on Twitter, where he could be a bit punchy). In organizing meetings, he sat quietly and listened to others, never pulling rank. It was in one long grueling activist session that it hit me just how profoundly he embodied his egalitarian principles and how much I respected him for that. He despised affectation and abhorred hierarchy, even one that might put him at the top. Over a decade in, it seemed like we were still at the beginning of our comradeship. David thought in millennia-long spans, after all—I was so sure we were just getting started.

I don’t understand how the body can give out on a mind and spirit that alive, that excited and alert and full of passion and conviction and ideas and plans. I have no doubt that we’d all be grieving the loss of our friend David Graeber under normal circumstances, but the awfulness of this moment compounds the anguish. We’ve lost a central member of a precious tribe: activist academics are a rare breed, and rarer still are ones as eccentric, ingenious, and committed as he was. His perspective remains vital: his insistence on seeing things differently, siding with the underdog, engaging as an equal, challenging the pompous and powerful, finding joy, and keeping a utopian horizon in sight. Despite the gathering storms, let’s channel David’s astonishing and heartfelt faith in his fellow human beings and refuse to lose sight of the possibility, not inevitability, of our collective liberation. ■

David Wengrow

David Graeber died three weeks after we finished writing a book together about human history, which had absorbed us for more than ten years. It will be called *The Dawn of Everything*, because he wanted that. David and I became friends around 2007, an in-between time for us both. We used to meet on my regular visits to New York. David would say that every time we talked he learned something new. It’s how we bonded—but in truth I was learning much more, and soon we were learning together. He opened horizons. “We will change the course of history,” he said, “starting with the past.” I

wasn't keen. My mentor, the archaeologist Andrew Sherratt, had recently died, just as suddenly as poor David now has, and I was without direction. David sprinkled magic dust, and changed all that. He restored my faith in knowledge, but more, he gave it purpose, because he lived his social science; if you couldn't inhabit it, share it, practice it, then it was trivial theorizing.

"When Occupy was taking off," he used to tell me, "the most common objection I heard was, well, this kind of thing is great, but it could never really work on a large scale." Was that actually true? The history of the last few centuries, perhaps even the last few thousand years, would suggest so. But what if you dug deeper? That's why he needed an archaeologist like me, and to some extent to become one himself. We bracketed the Iron Age, and went below the surface. As David predicted, we were soon under attack for having "political motivations." He wasn't fazed. Neither was I. I knew what bonded us.

We questioned ourselves relentlessly; researched each point to death; read everything we could get our hands on; used our academic standing to access the top specialists on every subject. We were systematic (we have a thing called "the archive"). We published in the toughest scientific journals first—he insisted on that. We could see the cherry-picking going on elsewhere, often among those who shout most loudly about their "scientific" credentials. We just wanted to know why so much of what seemed to us important knowledge about the human past, all the stuff researchers found out in recent decades, still lay hidden from the view of most ordinary folks. It's relevant here that neither of us came from academic backgrounds, far from it; we bonded over that, too, over being weird Jews, and over Kurdistan, where I was running archaeological excavations at the time.

In theory, universities were all for it—having what the bureaucrats call "impact." I always found it hilarious how David could be churning out mind-bending op-eds in the *New York Times*, or travelling to war zones to sit on revolutionary committees, or finding other ways to inspire countless people to try and live differently, but somehow none of that "counted" in any official sense. It all proved his points about bureaucracy. I can't conceive of *The Dawn of Everything* being published without David here to see it. He was so looking forward, and had already started a sequel—one of three, he insisted. He wanted a movie.

It all started as a game really, an escape from our more "serious" responsibilities. Our only rule was no rules: no deadlines, no funding applications. Just a free space to ask questions and seek answers. It was somewhere to go when we felt like it, which turned out to be pretty much daily, often in the small hours of the night, after real life ended. The world threw a lot of personal pain our ways in those years. It changed around us, mostly for the worse. "For a very long time," David wrote, "the intellectual consensus has been that we can no longer ask Great Questions. Increasingly, it's looking like we have no other choice." We shared it all with each other, every day, the good stuff too, of course. And the book kept us going, transcending everything, making us feel safe when

the safety of home eluded us. It made us family. We didn't want it to end, this unexpected journey. ■

Beka Economopoulos

David had a way of communicating ideas considered radical that made them sound like common sense. And with an unassuming sense of humor. I first met him in Philadelphia in 2000, at the protests against the Republican National Convention. I was coordinating a “protester PR” operation out of the Independent Media Center space, pairing reporters with activists who could act as tour guides: an early experiment in embedding, I suppose. David showed up to volunteer, with his bad teeth, disheveled dress, and fast, mumbling manner of talking and laughing at his own jokes. I wasn't sure about him at first, but he proved himself to be sharp, media-savvy, and a hardworking and caring soul.

After that, we saw each other regularly at weekly New York Direct Action Network meetings, events, protests, and parties. His life was academia, movement politics, and caring for his mother. He was an activist-scholar, an insurgent anthropologist—deeply involved in the movements his ethnographies explored. This freaked Yale University out and they effectively gave him the boot—a move that was widely understood to be politically motivated. He took this hard, but soon landed on his feet, moving to the UK to teach at Goldsmiths and then at the London School of Economics. He resurfaced as a figure in New York in the lead-up to Occupy Wall Street, facilitating many of the meetings in the summer of 2011 at Tompkins Square Park. The plans seemed harebrained to me, but they blossomed into a social movement that I and countless others poured blood, sweat, and tears into—one that continues to have ripple effects, birthing new infrastructures and organizations (including The Debt Collective and the organization I co-founded, The Natural History Museum), renewing class consciousness, and helping to shape several subsequent social movements.

David and I understood the Occupy movement differently. He was invested in its “general assemblies” as spaces for direct democracy; I saw their power as largely performative. Nonetheless, I appreciated his tireless activism, his writing and thinking and global movement-building. Given his anarchist politics, I was intrigued by David's recent support of the UK's Labour Party and its socialist candidate for prime minister, Jeremy Corbyn. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to talk shop with him amidst the seismic socio-political shifts we're living through.

Throughout the years that I knew him best, he longed for a life partner. A lack in his life that he seemed to feel deeply. With a lump in my throat, it gives me solace to know that he found a true love and comrade in the artist, writer, and activist Nika Dubrovsky, and I feel her grief from afar for a life taken too soon.

David Graeber, *presente*! Rest in power my friend. ■

Isabelle Frémeaux and John Jordan

Dear David,

It's midnight. Tears come and go like tides. Last night under the full moon, you passed away suddenly and left this world that you have been so much part of transforming for the better. In the library on the ZAD (*Zone à Défendre*, Zone to Defend)—built where the French state wanted to put an airport, in the shadow of an illegal lighthouse erected on the site of a planned control tower—there are eight books on special display. One of them is the French edition of your *Bullshit Jobs*.

The library is crammed with books about anarchism, occupation movements, the Paris Commune, utopias, territorial and peasant struggles. Strangely, next to the display copy of your book there was a half-empty shelf: the only half-empty shelf in the library. That shelf seemed to be the place to mark your senseless passing, with just enough space to make a small shrine to your memory, your friendship, your brilliance and quirkiness.

We adorned it with candles, flowers from the meadow where they wanted to put the runway, a paving stone from an old barricade from the forty-five-year-long struggle here, and a photo of you smiling and looking up to your left into the air, as if calling the spirits of joyful rebellion to your side. If we followed your gaze, up from the photo across the books, it landed on the shelf marked ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards). You would have laughed your trickster laugh.

Not many libraries have an ACAB shelf, or are built on an occupied autonomous zone against an airport and its world, which worked with self-organization without police for six years. You would have loved the ZAD; it embodied your ideas where direct action became entangled with everyday life. We had often spoken about you and Nika visiting us, giving a talk here, spending time together walking through these farms and wetlands saved from destruction. But life, like revolution, is always unexpected. You were not to visit these four thousand acres which politicians once called the territory lost to the republic. We still can't believe that we have lost you. Tonight we shot a firework toward the moon for you.

One of the first anarchist thinkers, William Godwin, wrote that old books are the bodies of ghosts. Your books are not old, yet already ghosts' bodies—bodies that will continue to inspire so many in these dark times where we needed your radical imagination more than ever. In 2018, we were working on a book to support the ZAD after the evictions following the victory against the airport. We asked you to write the preface. Via telegram from the Rojava border you replied, saying you could not write because you were smuggling drones into the Autonomous region, which gave us all so much hope about living without the state. "Ghostwrite the preface," you wrote, which was a terrifying honor, and which JJ did, trying desperately to channel you like a kind of distant medium. It speaks volumes about how open and humble you were. You joked

afterward that you should get comrades to ghostwrite you more often to give you time to learn the guitar.

The last time we hung out with you and Nika, we were running from teargas in the streets of Paris on the biggest day of action of the Yellow Vests uprising, when Macron was ready to evacuate the Elysée Palace by helicopter (which, sadly, he never did). You were one of those rare intellectuals whose acts and forms of life corresponded with your ideas, who took risks in thought and deed, and whose words had such a clarity about them that they opened doors to radicalism to so many. You once wrote to Isa that one of your rules was to “be kind to your reader.” We miss that kindness already much too much. We will always love you, as a body and as a ghost. ■

Ayça Çubukçu

David and I first met in New York City. It was the summer of 2001. Soon, the Twin Towers would fall, and we would spend our nights at Charas Community Center in anti-war meetings organized by the Direct Action Network. David was an anthropologist at Yale. At first, I was uncomfortable as an object of his analysis, a fellow anarchist writing an ethnography of direct action. He would accept the cynical tease or two, keep his cool, and carry on organizing like a bull. We last communicated a few days before he died. He said he was feeling unwell, was going to Venice to see if that would help. David was dependable, hardworking, heart-warming, a caring friend. He was brilliant and sometimes difficult to understand. He lived and loved life utterly, as if it was the only one he had. We will miss you sorely dear friend, darer, dreamer, internationalist, scholar, lover of life and all its possibilities. Comrade, colleague, revolutionary thinker. David Graeber, *presente!* ■

Andrew Ross

Because David opened so many doors in people’s minds, it was common to hear it said, on his tragic death, that we owe him so much. He might appreciate the sentiment, but would strongly disapprove of the way it was phrased. For him, no one should have to feel indebted to individuals or institutions—and least of all, to banks. Whatever we owe, we owe to each other as a daily act of love and mutual aid. He devoted five hundred pages of his paradigm-shattering *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* to reaffirming this bedrock anarchist principle. The timing of its publication, just before Occupy Wall Street, turned out to be impeccable. Not only because debt, and debt resistance, emerged as a frontline preoccupation of Occupy, but also because, in Occupy, we all agreed, for a while at least, to abide by the anarchist playbook. Though David is often associated with the “We are the 99 percent” slogan, his contribution to the theory and

practice of Occupy's conduct and tactics was much more profound and formative for the movement.

When Occupy devolved, due to ruthless suppression by city police departments across the US, some of the energy and talent in the movement was channeled into debt resistance initiatives. David and I were among the founder members of Strike Debt, which launched two mutual aid projects—the Rolling Jubilee (which ended up abolished over \$30 million of debt) and the Debt Resisters' Operations Manual (which debtors of all types used to reduce their unjust financial burdens). Both were collective efforts, but they drew a great deal of their practical zeal from David's knack for innovative forms of organizing and public education.

The last time I saw him was in a vintage clothing store in London's Portobello Road Market. He was trying on a fur coat. We were so surprised to encounter each other in that place that we never got around to talking about the fur coat. But the incident reminds me now of an earlier contribution of his to political theater. On April 25, 2012, the Occupy Student Debt Campaign staged a showy demonstration to mark the day that aggregate US student debt passed the trillion-dollar mark. To call out the debt profiteers, some of us were dressed up as bankers, and the agitprop group Billionaires for Bush were decked out, as usual, in tuxedos and top hats, evening gowns and long gloves. David showed up wearing the uniform of a Roman centurion, a costume that had nothing to do with his scripted role of destroying a giant loan statement. No one asked why he looked like he had come from rehearsals in a *Julius Caesar* production at Shakespeare in the Park (he showed up later in the day, still in costume, to debate David Harvey.) In retrospect, I believe it was in his mind to pay homage to the ancient origins of the tradition of the Debt Jubilee. More than anyone, David helped to revive and push into public consciousness the idea that debts should be wiped clean in a single act of abolitionary justice. It will be his greatest legacy if we can see that day come to pass. ■

Marshall Sahlins

Some years ago, when David was chosen to give the prestigious Malinowski lecture in London, his introducer, Olivia Harris, called to ask about my experience as his PhD adviser. He's a fountain of ideas, she said, how did you supervise David Graeber? "You didn't," I told her. In any case, how would you supervise an anarchist? David was the most creative student I ever had, constantly turning the conventional anthropological wisdom inside out, often to show how ostensibly dominated peoples, by their own means, subverted the states, kings, and other coercive institutions afflicting them to create self-governing enclaves of community. His two years of fieldwork in a Malagasy village only confirmed that the people filled out tax forms but didn't pay taxes, that the reports of the existence of the state in the countryside had been exaggerated.

David's activism and his anthropology were of a piece, inseparable. The pamphlet *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* is his anarchist manifesto. It's not about bomb-throwing or insurrection; it's about how peoples around the world, from Amazonia to the African Congo, have slowly created asylums of self-determination in the face of spectral or governmental powers. Advocating thus for a global reconstruction, David became in many senses a global person in his own being. During 2016, when we were writing a book together, he sent email comments on it from Nablus in the West Bank, from Syria, and from somewhere in Turkey, where he had joined local anarchists in their respective good fights. The most generous of persons, with time, knowledge, and compassion for all in need, David became global in the extent of his personal and intellectual presence, the central figure of an international network of sympathetic comrades.

His politics, likewise, were global, including demands for the abolition of borders, giving free movement to peoples everywhere (and incentives to erstwhile metropolises to make Laotians happy in Laos), as well as the cancellation of all national debts in a worldwide "Jubilee Year." And in all this, David remained a profound anthropological scholar, global also in his science, one of the last anthropologists with an encyclopedic knowledge of world cultures and a deep command of the variety of the human experience. Upper Paleolithic hunters, West African kingdoms, Polynesian chiefs, Malagasy states, and Pirate Republics, among many others, were not foreign to him. They were instructive.

One of David's books is titled *Possibilities*. It is an apt description of all his work. It is an even better title for his life. Offering unimagined possibilities of freedom was his gift to us. ■

Brooke Lehman

To remember my friend and comrade David Graeber is to remember mass action organizing over the last twenty years. I met David in 1999 as we built the New York chapter of the Direct Action Network. He used to say, "To be a member of DAN, you don't have to be an anarchist, you just have to act like one." David was one of the most truly anarchistic people I have ever known. David would sit in our weekly spokescouncil meetings at Charas Community Center in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, participating in our decision-making with all his heart, as he also quietly ethnographized our movement. Though miles ahead in both knowledge and clout, David delighted in being one simple cog in a directly democratic wheel. A decade later, David called me down to Occupy Wall Street, where he was again organizing shoulder to shoulder with people half his age. He reveled in the seductive—and largely unwashed—energy of revolution. And with this, I will choose to remember David in his happy place: leading a crowd of thousands through the winding streets of Wall Street, arm-in-arm with his young comrades, under a shiny black flag. ■

Thomas Gokey

I first encountered David through his 2008 book *Direct Action: An Ethnography* and some shorter essays, but it was *Debt* that really blew the lid off my head. I was in debt myself, I knew the vampiric power of debt, but I didn't understand what debt really was. David's book was like finding a secret decoder ring, or the blueprints to the bear trap that was cutting off your leg. Later, during Occupy, I ended up on a listserv for people scheming about debt resistance. David sent a message about how debts were bought for pennies on the dollar, and said we could just buy some debt and burn it. This couldn't be, could it? It seemed too good to be true. How could such a thing work? The next thing I knew I was down the rabbit hole. It took nine months of research, but eventually I was able to tell him I had figured it out.

I bought a small amount of debt as a test. The timing was perfect, as a new debt resistance group was just forming that would take this idea and run with it. We ended up surprising ourselves. It was thrilling, at first, just to purchase and abolish millions of dollars of debt. But the scope expanded quickly, and as soon as we started organizing debt strikes we were able to force the government to discharge over a billion dollars of debt. Now it seems realistic to dream about getting rid of all \$1.7 trillion of student debt. I fully expect we will keep surprising ourselves.

What most struck me most about David was how curious, playful, and all around goofy he was. He was brilliant but his mind and manner were childlike. He was deeply supportive and generous with his time. He never made me feel stupid for asking him to explain, and then reexplain, and then reexplain again, how is it that money is just debt, or how exactly banks create money by lending it. I don't think there was a single conversation I had with him where I didn't end up seeing the world differently afterwards, which was exhilarating. I often turned to him—either to his writings or to the man in conversation—when I didn't know what to do, assuming he would have some helpful insight. With David, the really fun thing was trying to figure things out as a group. He could help us look at things in a new way, not so much because he had answers as because he had a faith that, with enough people, we could discover and invent our own solutions—that we have it within ourselves to take care of each other, and that it would be riotously fun to help everyone flourish.

The future needed David. I think we all have a sense of how difficult the next few years are going to be, and just how much work there is for us to do. David really believed that the future was full of possibilities, that it was up to all of us to make the world we want to live in together, and it was going to take all of our love and creativity to win. And David really wanted to win!

That work is going to be harder now without him. Things could get so much worse. At the same time, we have never been closer to a number of major shifts. Our society is on

the verge of collapsing, and everything is up for renegotiation. I was looking forward to being able to celebrate some big victories with him. I want to make him proud. ■

Nicholas Mirzoeff

When news broke that David Graeber had died, I felt incredulous that this could happen to a person who seemed to embody the concept that another world was possible. David always lived as if he were free, with a zest for life that brought out the best in those around him. Themes like grief, mourning, pessimism, and trauma, widely discussed among other scholars, were not at the heart of his work or activism, for all his awareness of failure and defeat. David was motivated by twin pillars, the radical capacities of the imagination and the need to place care at the center of any community. That's what we will have to hold onto.

Reading David's writing is like being in conversation with him: funny, incisive, and insightful at once, whether he's talking about Batman, debt, direct action, or kingship. Like Stuart Hall, David was "in the university but not of it." For all the times I heard him speak, I now realize none of them were in a university.

His capacity to transform and subvert the underlying concepts of established fields, as well as his sheer readability, made David to me the last great New York Jewish public intellectual. He often described growing up in public housing in a radical Jewish family with ties to the Spanish Revolution, the trade union movement, and Broadway alike. He did his undergraduate degree at SUNY Purchase and spent decades as an activist on New York City's streets.

And let it be said that this background embedded within the radical anti-capitalist Jewish tradition underscored his recent engagement with the Palestinian cause, and his rejection of the media-generated moral panic over anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Notably, Jeremy Corbyn and his former deputy, John McDonnell, posted moving tributes last week.

But this starts to feel too dry. Here's a real David moment: I was giving a talk in London, as we used to do before the pandemic, and he appeared without warning, dressed as the Artful Dodger in a waistcoat, checked trousers and a flowing coat. On the way out, he pulled us into a Bloomsbury shop, which turned out to be a magic bookstore. I had walked down that street countless times and had never before noticed this marvelously eccentric place. The people there knew him, of course, and embraced him. He pulled one esoteric text after another off the shelves while talking to everyone. He bought some obscure, leather-bound book, and it disappeared into the capacious pockets of his coat. And then he was gone. ■

Melissa Flashman

David and I had been corresponding over the week before his death about his forthcoming book with David Wengrow and his upcoming vacation in Venice with his wife, Nika, and friends. I was looking forward to getting the full download—life, work, pandemic, revolution—the day after Labor Day.

Now that conversation, like so many others, will never take place. As his literary agent for more than a decade, I always had an inbox full of requests for David from all the globe's corners: from London to Tanzania, from Norway to Japan. So many students, artists, and activists wanting to be in dialogue with him.

At first, I had only a vague sense of the range of people and organizations who would reach out to David on any number of issues, wanting his thoughts or just his ear. There were the rogue elements of the New York Fed during Occupy, for example, and supporters of Kurdish independence, and various scholars across the disciplines. At some point before the publication of *Bullshit Jobs*, however, David was finally persuaded to put up a personal website, and I became his contact for “media inquiries,” manning the David Graeber Request Line.

I fielded the full spectrum of expected media requests: activist newsletters and podcasts, the national and global press. There were requests from Brits to speak against austerity, from Spanish libertarians to speak against fascism, from systems theorists to speak on meaningful work, from the marketing division of a major social media company to speak on bullshit jobs (David and I laughed at this one, imagining the entire department tendering their collective resignation after he spoke). There were requests to speak to the UN, to an architecture firm, a European telecom, central banks, a Scandinavian labor union conference, a Scandinavian Crown Prince; to speak on idleness, on blockchain, on civil resistance, on debt, on currency, on the meaning of photography, on the World Bank. There were more invitations to speak about AI and UBI than made sense to either one of us.

My favorite of all were the notes just to say thanks, which continue to pour in. Thank you, David, for inspiring dissertations, theater productions, documentaries, and art installations, they say. Others describe how David's work helped them take stock of a life and a life's work, changing it for the better.

In the last, lovely, rambling voicemail David left me, he was in his favorite emotional state, exuberance, over the impact he hoped to make with the new book, *The Dawn of Everything*. His excitement was tempered only by a concern over the recent headlines that printing plants were facing delays. I was looking forward to telling him not to worry, that no crisis could prevent this book from reaching the world.

I am reminded finally of one of those requests for David to speak that might stand in for many others, expressed or not: a festival of Dutch activists once asked him to speak about “how to change the course of human history.” A daunting request to be sure, but

not one David would refrain from lobbing right back at anyone with a will to jump into the streets and be a part of making all that is possible. ■

Debbie Bookchin

I got to know David after my father, Murray Bookchin, died, in 2006. My dad, though a proud revolutionary, had become sharply critical of certain aspects of anarchism, and declared himself a communalist. I reached out to David as part of an inchoate feeling that it was necessary to build bridges where my father had sometimes (in my mind, anyway) created unnecessarily large chasms. Anarchists and communalists share so much in their visions for a free society, and it felt right to discuss these questions with David.

I knew that David was brilliant, and one of the most gifted writers of his generation, but I had no way of anticipating what an open-hearted, loyal, and gregarious friend he would be. He was profoundly unassuming and deeply generous: when you gave David a gift, he'd try to give you back three. And he was funny. David's humor was irrepressible, because to him, the irrationality of the world was something to laugh at—and to fight.

Then there was his intellectual generosity. He seemed to project his own brilliance onto others, taking the latent kernel of an idea unrecognized by a speaker and following its logic, then weaving it together with his own knowledge of history, anthropology, and political theory until he had spun a beautiful synthesis, a comprehensive analysis of the subject at hand, for which he was always inclined to give the original speaker credit.

Before he died, I had begun reading the manuscript for his new book with David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*. He had sent it to me with characteristic understatement, saying, "It's, um, kind of long." But when I texted back, staggered by how elegant the writing was—as if it were possible for him to be even more eloquent than in his previous work—he lit up with excitement. "Have you gotten to the part about Kandiaronk, yet? It's amazing no one has heard of him..." And off he would go.

David often told me that his favorite book by my father was *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*. That was no coincidence. David was a true utopian, and that work from the early 1970s was bursting with the promise of a new world made possible by extraordinary leaps in technology and the idealism of a counterculture that demanded that we do the impossible. Every day, David made that vision personal, through a lifetime of scholarship, analysis, and activism. This vision showed especially in his fierce commitment to the Kurdish project in Rojava, a largely stateless society that David felt proved that assembly democracy could work even on a grand scale. He was deeply disappointed that the broader left didn't embrace Rojava more forcefully, too.

David's humanity came naturally to him, and it gave all of us so much. It is impossibly painful to believe that he is gone. He had a buoyant belief in the untapped possibilities of the human imagination, and never lost his optimism that we would succeed in creating a society worthy of the best in us. I think he could nurture that dream even under the worst circumstances because, in his own actions, he exemplified the very humanity of which he dreamed. David's openness and willingness to be present with whoever was in the room was like a salve, a goodness that he projected guilelessly out into the world. It felt as if he could singlehandedly make right society's injustices just by being who he was. That dream will live on in his huge body of work. It is up to the rest of us to bring it to life. ■

Yvonne Yen Liu

Nasruddin was a thirteenth-century Turkish mystic and philosopher who used humor to teach. David got hold of a book of Nasruddin's tales in graduate school and would retell the stories to entertain us, over a dinner of dim sum, while walking in a protest march, or during an endless anarchist meeting.

I met David at my first such meeting in New York in 2001. The World Economic Forum announced that it was moving its annual meeting from Davos, Switzerland, to New York, ostensibly in solidarity with the tragedy the city had suffered on September 11. A group of students was organizing a rebuttal to the forum—a counter-summit of sorts—and I attended the gathering to connect with other activists. It was at Saint Mark's Church in the East Village, a hub at the time of anarchist organizing. David was one of the few friendly faces there.

He was writing an ethnography about the direct action movement, he explained, and then proceeded to break down the culture and social hierarchy of the New York City anarchist scene. I was captivated. David inspired me to study anthropology and to pursue graduate school. He embodied the example of the scholar-activist, even if that wasn't how Yale University felt. After being rejected for tenure, David moved abroad, and found work in England. Over the years, we stayed in touch sporadically.

I was gutted to learn that he passed away. I always thought I'd have another opportunity to share a meal, a story, or a laugh with him. I will remember him as our generation's Nasruddin, mumbling a joke with his eyes twinkling. ■

Dyan Neary

I first met David during the protests against the World Economic Forum summit in New York City in 2001, when I was a neophyte journalist on staff at a newspaper that covered UN conferences and other world summits. We quickly bonded over the ways

our working-class backgrounds contributed to a perennial sense that we were outliers in our professional lives. His mother was a garment worker and his dad a plate-stripper on offset printers. David, who was translating Mayan hieroglyphics by the time he was nine, never presumed he was destined for greatness, but instead credited his parents for his success: they worked hard all their lives in factories, he'd say, so that he didn't have to.

Over the next twenty years David became one of my closest and dearest friends. I watched him go from average-Joe genius to internationally famous public intellectual and never get a big head about it. He was convinced that if anarchist theory were demystified, people would naturally embrace the concept as a political ideology and way of life. He once wrote a pamphlet entitled "Are You an Anarchist? (The Answer May Surprise You)," in which he pointed to youth sports teams and waiting in line as examples of self-organization and mutual aid. I'd begun living and working in South America with my then-partner, the journalist and activist Brad Will, who was also close with David. A friend in Peru was so enamored with David's pamphlet that he translated it into Spanish. It quickly made its way into radical bookstores across the continent.

When my daughter was small, David and I lived together in the New York City apartment he grew up in. I remember the comical way he spoke to her when she was two and three and four as though she were a thirty-year-old. He never pandered, not to anyone, and least of all to a child he assured me would grow up to change the world—"Wittgenstein in the making," he called her. She'd put on her tutu and he'd dress in his Roman gladiator costume and they'd sit at their writing desks like that. He had a whimsical streak and took childlike delight in acts of ordinary insurgence.

David was crushed when he was effectively exiled from academia in the United States, and nothing made me happier than visiting him in London last summer and seeing how much he loved being at London School of Economics. I am very grateful to his colleagues and his wife, Nika, who helped make that place a real home for him. David and I spoke sometimes about faith and death. He was not a religious person, but he took refuge in the Dostoevskyan idea that when we die, we have eternal awareness of how our actions over the course of our lives affected others. Faith, he'd say, is simply the choice to act as if you know something you can't know. "I don't know if it will be possible for humans to exist in a just society," he said, "but I choose to believe that. So that's an act of faith."

I have no fear for David's soul, filled now with an awareness of his lifetime of magnanimity. Rest in power, my dear beautiful friend, and know that I'm just one of many carrying the torch of faith that another world is possible. ■

Luke Herrine

I never met David Graeber, but he changed my life.

When I walked into Judson Memorial Church during my first year of law school to see if I could join the post-Occupy conversations about how to organize debtors, I was walking into conversations that David had helped get started (he was even in the room for one or two meetings) and I was walking into them because I had been moved by David's writing. At that point, things were still inchoate, formless, anarchist-inspired, and I was quickly welcomed in. Over the next couple of years, several of us in that room would go on to organize a series of direct actions and legal strategies that would begin to win debt cancellation. We forced the Department of Education to begin to cancel student loan debts of for-profit college students, we formed a recognized committee in bankruptcy court that allowed these student debtors to negotiate alongside banks and private equity funds over the remains of the predatory for-profit college ITT Tech, and we even forced some elected politicians to begin to talk about the importance of debt cancellation. It was only a few years after those initial meetings in Judson that progressive candidates in the Democratic presidential primary were battling over who had a better plan to cancel student debt and make college free. Neither Bernie Sanders nor Elizabeth Warren would have done so had rebellious debtors not forced the issue. Nobody "inside the Beltway" was talking about debt cancellation before then. Indeed, so empty was the policy domain, that both candidates relied on legal and policy research *I* had done—research that would have never occurred to me had I not been involved with debtor organizing.

It's hard to reconstruct the way I thought about things before I encountered David's work. But, as I recall, the first time his rhetorical magic stopped me in my tracks was when he made the point—was it in *Debt*? In an editorial? In a talk? In the mouth of a friend who was recalling his work?—that financiers are always renegotiating, revaluing, and cancelling one another's debts even as they insist on the moral imperative of payment in full when poor people or nations are in debt. In an era of pervasive impunity and hypocrisy, this might seem a cheap "by your logic" rhetorical trick that can be easily ignored. But what makes it more than a trick—what makes it mind-changing, world-changing *magic*—is that it forces open the much deeper set of questions about the social logic of debt. Paired with David's other work, it undermines creditor morality rather than hoisting it on its own petard. David does not treat rich people as failing to live up to the higher morality of promissory obligations that they properly enforce against others. Rather, he treats the constant renegotiation that they engage in as an inherent feature of social relationships: any given arrangement can only exist because of a background of social solidarity that can never be captured by any rigorous logic. We need specific rules to order our relations, but we should never take them too seriously—solidarity must always come first. Then the political-moral question becomes: Solidarity on what terms? (Note that this is not a materialist analysis: it treats society as composed of moral relations all the way down.)

These points are not merely academic. David's rhetorical magic has been an essential element of organizing debtors. Among the many obstacles to organizing debtors is overcoming the internalization of the creditor narrative that one must always pay one's

debts. I have seen firsthand many times that if you can tell a debtor a story that re-contextualizes their debt and allows them to reconsider creditor morality, you turn immobilizing pain into politicizing anger. It is something close to a spiritual conversion. Some of the most moving experiences of my life have been watching as somebody's whole self-conception changes when they change their relationship to their debts. Only somebody who treats morality as a project everybody must engage in, who treats society as something we all have a part in creating—somebody like David—could lay the groundwork for that type of transformation.

All of this barely scratches the surface of the power of David's work, the profundity of his insights, the clarity of his moral vision. Suffice it to say that I firmly believe that we have only begun to see the full impact of David's intellectual and activist interventions. I am his evangelist.

I wish I could have told him how important his work was to me. I always assumed I'd be able to some day. The best I can do now is to try to repay the unpayable cosmic debt I owe. ■

Mark Read

I am re-reading Ursula K. Leguin's *The Dispossessed* this week, in preparation for teaching the text in my course "Practical Utopias," a title that I emphatically deny cribbing from [this essay](#) by David Graeber. In point of fact I think he may have cribbed it from me, though it isn't such a terribly original title that we couldn't have both arrived at it ourselves. In any case, I wouldn't feel entitled to lay claim to it any more than David would have, as doing so would be entirely antithetical to the Odonian philosophy to which I believe both he and I ascribe. Neither one of us would want to be called a "propertarian," ever.

The resonances between Shevek (Leguin's protagonist in *The Dispossessed*) and David are striking. Shevek is a brilliant physicist, raised in an anarchist (Odonian) society on the planet Anarres. He has come to the planet Urras (a stand-in for Earth, specifically the United States) on a mission of cultural/scientific exchange. Leguin uses Shevek's (Anarchist) perspective to examine consumer capitalist (Urran) culture, and the results are brilliant. Shevek is the outsider, with the "beginner's mind" (in Buddhist parlance), which grants his vision the kind of crystalline clarity one sometimes hears from a child. This brief passage is a good example:

"Is it true, Dr. Shevek, that women in your society are treated exactly like men?"

"That would be a waste of good equipment," said Shevek with a laugh, and then a second laugh as the full ridiculousness of the idea grew upon him.

The doctor hesitated, evidently picking his way around one of the obstacles in his mind, then looked flustered and said, "Oh, no, I didn't mean sexually—obviously you—they... I mean in the matter of their social status."

“*Status* is the same as *class*?”

Kimoe tried to explain status, failed, and went back to the first topic. “Is there really no distinction between men’s work and women’s work?”

“Well, no, it seems a very mechanical basis for the division of labor, doesn’t it?” A person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength—what has the sex to do with that?”

I read this passage the day after I heard of David’s death, and it rang as such a David-like exchange it kind of stopped me in my tracks. It could have come straight out of *Bullshit Jobs*. It reads like Plato, too, of course, as he wrote about his teacher Socrates. David was a gifted Socratic teacher, which comes through in everything he wrote. He wrote and spoke in a deceptively childlike way at times, probing accepted cultural norms to find their absurd edge, allowing the rest of us to reach our own conclusions about the legitimacy of those norms. Shifting our collective idea of what is or isn’t acceptable as political “common sense” is what David was all about. In David’s view this was the only worthwhile contribution that an intellectual could legitimately make to a revolutionary project. Changing common sense is how revolutions win, after all, which he explains in that aforementioned essay:

Before the French Revolution, the ideas that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called “the people” were considered the sorts of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spend their time debating in cafés. A generation later, even the stuffiest magistrates, priests, and headmasters had to at least pay lip service to these ideas. Before long, we had reached the situation we are in today: that it’s necessary to lay out the terms for anyone to even notice they are there. They’ve become common sense, the very grounds of political discussion.

As I mourn the loss of David, I cannot help but feel at the same time a kind of pride, or even relief, that this good man was actually able to do what he set out to do. Proud because his contributions as an intellectual have, I believe, fundamentally changed the political discussions that we are having. Relief because he did this within his own lifetime, and was able to see the effects of his work. These are not small things. It is for these reasons, as well as his resiliency and his utter determination to be optimistic, and to love deeply, that I count his life as one well lived. I am glad I knew you, David. Rest in power. ■

Annie Harper

In some ways learning from David came late for me. I met and worked with him during the first two years of my doctorate at Yale, from 2003 to 2005. I loved his classes and our conversations outside of class, and was looking forward to him supervising my

thesis when Yale's refusal to embrace him and grant him tenure eliminated that option. I pressed on with my degree in anthropology, overwhelmed with two very small children and another on the way, but then left academia almost immediately after graduating. I was tired of the lack of connection between my work and the real world, and put off by the prospect of endless commuting, childcare coordination, and parallel tenure anxieties that would likely come with being a dual-academic family.

After a few years I was lucky enough to find my way back to a kind of academia that made sense to me, conducting community-based research into the connections between poverty and mental health. I work at Yale's Program for Recovery and Community Health (PRCH), which considers experiences of living on the margins to be as valuable as academic expertise, and connects our community research with local activism.

Now, reflecting after his death, I realize how profound David's influence on my life and work has been. I had reconnected with his work just recently, as I began to study debt; I read, and then re-read, his monumental *Debt* (highly readable, often infuriating, sometimes wrong, but always thought-provoking and insistent on action). But today I realize that the connection never broke. David was always there, guiding me toward what really matters, his teachings a thread running through my thoughts. Not just his writings on money, debt, and human relationships, but his way of living and being in the world. Following David's refusal to stick within disciplinary boundaries—his recognition that those boundaries stifle thinking and action—my most exciting work has been with lawyers, psychologists, political scientists, and economists. And within this, the most thrilling of my collaborators have also read and listened to David.

The glorious realization that everyone has some type of expertise and that we all have something to learn, as we believe and practice at PRCH, aligns exactly with David's insistence on listening to everyone, believing that we all have a part to play in collectively creating a different and better world, and that we should not scorn or shy away from idealism. I strive to communicate like David, to write and speak not only for academic journals and audiences but also for the public—*really* for the public, as he wrote and spoke, humbly, engagingly, respectfully, and full of humor. He insisted on writing and talking with kindness, seeking to engage and share, not intimidate and marginalize.

Recently, I was thinking of getting back in touch with David. I thought I'd write him next time I was in the UK, find a time to meet for coffee. I thought there was no rush. We won't have that coffee now, but I am so grateful that I had the chance to learn from him, and that his ideas will continue to travel. ■

Alpa Shah

I met David when he joined Goldsmiths, in 2007. Yale's loss was our gain. Our lives became intertwined after I returned from a year and a half of field research in the

forests of eastern India, living with indigenous communities swept up in the spread of a Marx-, Lenin-, and Mao-inspired Naxalite guerrilla struggle and a brutal counter-insurgency. I was drowning in a sea of darkness. Slowly and gently, without knowing it, David gave me hope, helped me breathe again.

For years we talked every day. We wandered the streets of London, discovering the best angry lamb, soft-shell crab, and ceviche, laughing and dreaming of other worlds. When I moved from Goldsmiths to the London School of Economics in 2013, I told him he must come with me. I needed him across the river and the corridor. But I also thought he needed me.

By then, I had discovered both David's genius but also his extreme vulnerability. He wanted to live the world of everyday communism he imagined could immerse us all, yet he was confined by the structures of life around us.

Many colleagues, students, and activists have experienced both the meetings David never turned up for and those where his intervention was invaluable. Many have been in lectures he was late for, or that veered off course—but all the same saw the brilliance of what he said, and followed him into the corridors and the streets. Many know the chapters he never read but also the magic of his engagement.

We fought once. I called him a bully. He called me one back. Then we fought over what the word means. I honestly can't remember why. Probably some department meeting he hadn't turned up to. I decided to put aside such earthly matters. Our relationship had never been based on that.

David's driving purpose in life was to stop the vampires—the forces of inequality—from entirely engulfing the earth by keeping alive the dream of greater emancipation. When he described the lead character of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” the TV cult sensation he loved, as a reluctant hero chosen by mysterious powers to lead humanity's war against vampires, he was putting into words how he saw himself.

But life on earth presented contradictions. He deeply wanted the validation of the academy but hated its elitism, its bureaucracy and its racism. He longed to be married but also wanted us all together in a big house full of curios and children that we'd raise together. He loved talking about himself, but always wanted to put others first. He wrote furiously as though there was no tomorrow, but lived like we had eternity.

For years David wanted us to write together. I loved the beauty of his utopias, the possibilities they offered, but felt doubtful about how the majority of the world's population could get there, laboring in the brick kilns or construction sites or factories of India, Kenya, or Mexico. From my time with the Naxalites, I was aware of the dystopia that is embedded in utopia. I told David I wasn't quite ready, that I needed more time.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “we have our lives ahead together.” But he committed me anyway, on Twitter and to editors, I now find out. I shouldn’t be surprised. David was always having fun as a trickster, playfully disrupting systems to create better ones.

After the publication of *Debt*, David became a global figure, earned recognition within and beyond the academy. If David revolutionized the idea of pirates as rebels and abducted folk who had mutinied against their captains to create truly democratic communities onboard their ships, declaring a war on all of the world, then his own pirate fleet was growing. He was loved far and wide.

But at the same time, David remained in a way lonely, a loneliness that was inevitable from the tensions between trying to create another world while inhabiting this one.

As the good and the great among the anthropologists have taught us, death can be more powerful than life. It can regenerate life itself. David died at a moment when he and his ideas can be supremely potent, can transcend us all. Rest in peace, David, you will live through us, giving birth to more vampire slayers, tricksters, and pirates. ■



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David Graeber, 2012

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