

The Opposite of a Cynic: David Graeber, 1961-2020

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What is the opposite of a cynic?

I have been wondering about this question since I heard the news of David Graeber's death yesterday. I haven't quite been able to come up with an answer: believer, idealist, optimist? All of those words capture something of his character, though all of them sound too much like happy accidents of temperament. Put it like this, then: a cynic is someone for whom the world is reducible to a set of base motivations – violence, acquisitiveness, self-advancement – and who is determined to see this 'truth' behind the most varied of phenomena, and who often acts to ensure that this is the case. In doing so, the cynic believes he will at least escape being disappointed by the world, although the misery and poison he carries around with him can make one wonder how effective an escape it really is.

David was the opposite of this: a kind of anti-cynic, at pains to point out how common acts of altruism, mutual support, sharing and solidarity were, and that their absence from accounts of the world – because they were invisible to, or undervalued by, the people who wrote those accounts – was intensely political. The motivation for that exclusion on the right might be thought obvious: those acts don't fit comfortably with the contemporary capitalist conception of the human being, a perpetually value-maximising agent of economic exchange. David might also point out how fragile that conception is – why else must it so frequently be backed up and restated in advertising and mass media? – but also that it has gradually supplanted an older conservatism which recognised a place for non-market mutual support, especially if it could be subordinated, domesticated and kept in its proper place. That this secret history of solidarity should be frequently invisible to the left, as well, would often puzzle him: perhaps it was the result of unconscious acculturation in capitalist society, or perhaps the intellectual legacy of a tilt to economism on the British left. Perhaps it was simply a fear of looking trivial. Whatever its sources, David often pointed out that it diminished our accounts of politics, made them neater, more arid and less interesting than they actually were.

Like many of my political generation, I first met David in an occupied building: in my case a central London townhouse, squatted by activists to host the 'Really Free School', a kind of anarchic permanent festival of mutual education, 'free' in all of its senses. It was a hot time: the sudden eruption of the student movement in the UK, Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring. Few of us got much sleep that winter. One evening a few of us were speculating about what the future might look like: if we were successful – 'we' in the broadest of senses – if we weren't, what the world might look like in ten years, in fifty. Hot political moments can be like that, the imagination takes wing, and can flit between utopia and dystopia. It's not baseless speculation, either: what you think about the future helps stick a movement together, it tells you a lot about your comrades. I don't remember when the funny-voiced American joined the conversation, but I do remember his interest in what everyone said, his ability to take someone else's observation and find a richness in it, an unexpected direction

from it, that they themselves hadn't quite suspected was there. It was a generous form of teaching, all the more so for not advertising itself as teaching. It wasn't until later in the evening as we were sitting on the pavement eating chips and he started talking about Madagascar that I realised who he was. Lots of people have that sort of story about David.

That explains why, when I think of David, I think of him sitting with unstinting attention at the back of an occupation, or catching sight of him anonymous in the throng of a demonstration, or relating some surely impossible activist scheme with a twinkling enthusiasm, just enough to convince you that he might be able to pull it off. I think he relished the success of his later work, and the audience it gave him – he wasn't a fan of marginality for its own sake. Though he deplored the alternating spasms of adulation and denunciation any 'public intellectual' now receives on the internet, the prickliness with which he could argue back was rarely evident in person. The most uncomfortable I ever saw him look was on a panel expounding the virtues of the Occupy movement: after all, he said, he was the only one of those speaking about it who had actually bothered to turn up. His sources of hope were always a lot closer to the street than the seminar room. I can almost hear him over my shoulder as I type this, wondering if, well, the street couldn't be a seminar room.

Much will be written about the intellectual legacy David leaves, especially the later books: *Debt*, *The Utopia of Rules*, *Bullshit Jobs*. He was a gifted popular communicator, who neither sought to impress his reader with obscurity, nor condescended to them because he judged them incapable of thought. He had a gift for explanation, such that reading him was often like grasping an obvious truth – though one that, until you read him, had eluded you. Has a political moment – spanning labour relations, systems of value and mass culture – ever been summed up more pithily than in the phrase 'bullshit jobs'? His work often proceeded in great leaps, sparkling lines of inference and speculation between more careful scholarly sifting; it could earn him occasional academic reproach, sometimes from those convinced the era of 'big' books, attempts to really wrestle with fundamental questions, was over. From some of his critics you could get the sense that history was over, save the marginalia: David didn't think that, and thought we needed big, daring books – thinking that dared to make leaps – to move forward.

But it is the brace of earlier books – *Direct Action: An Ethnography and Possibilities* – that I really love. Brought out via an anarchist publisher, between the two volumes there is material for probably five separate academic monographs, provided he muffled the political conclusions and cut the most interesting reflections. Both books were real boons when, in the miserable gully between the unwinding of the Iraq war, the financial crash, and the return of the Conservative Party to government, I was trying to find both a serious way of thinking about politics and some small crumb of hope. The direct action book, in particular, is an extraordinary exercise in theory in its best sense: that of looking at the world, and the way people act in it, and thinking about it very hard – in order to change it. It is simultaneously a loving record of a protest movement, a reflection on force and compulsion in all its forms, the meaning of democracy, and the many varied hues of the radical left – a force, as he put it disarmingly, 'dedicated to the proposition that since human beings create and recreate the world every day, there is no inherent reason why they should not be able to create one we actually like'. The book has a fundamental, unshakeable optimism to it: that change really is possible, and in fact is inevitable. That means what we choose to do politically, right now, actually matters.

That conviction was what led David to picket lines for cleaners, unionisation drives for graduate students, Kurdish solidarity demonstrations and student occupations, as much as it ran like a red thread through all of his intellectual work. He paid the price for living his convictions in the US, where he lost jobs for it; I'm sure I'm not alone in the UK for being grateful it led to his migration here. Unlike many tenured radicals, his positions were not adopted for intellectual fashion or frisson: he did not retreat from them under pressure from the organs of respectability and professional

decorum, but nor did he inflate them into perfectionism, piety or puritanism. It was surprising to some that an avowed anarchist should fight so hard for the Labour party under Corbyn, but it shouldn't have been: he saw that that was where left politics was happening in the UK, even while retaining a healthy scepticism for the dead hand of parliamentarism. Why would he not go where the struggle is?

Novara Media would likely not exist without David Graeber: he helped give us the confidence to start out, and the conviction that left media – and especially left media that is able to think for itself – actually matters. It is no accident that Direct Action ends with a chapter on the imagination, a weapon he thought the left too often let rust through disuse; he reminded us that politics does not involve merely the calculation of seat numbers, or a checklist of swing voters' useful prejudices, but that it encompasses the whole span of human being, its yearning, loathing, contradictory, dreaming mess – and that it is usually from those messy corners that revolutions are sparked. Every interview with him involved the thrill of co-thinking, of keeping up as he hurtled along around speculative corners and digressions. We had our last recorded conversation after having not seen each other for some while: I wish I'd kept the tape running as we chatted for some hours afterwards. I confessed that I felt my innate pessimism rising again: he chided me by saying that he didn't really understand why so many leftists seemed to think of themselves as pessimists. "After all, we all do incredibly, insanely optimistic things all the time". Campaigning, arguing, protesting, even voting – trying to intervene wherever, however we can: "We just seem to have forgotten the optimism that's underneath them."

It will be harder to recover that optimism without him. We have his books, and one more to come, though the many he left yet to be written, that only exist as ideas shared between comrades and friends, jotted down hazily after some helter-skelter chat after a demonstration – those will have to be written now by other hands. Even more important, I think, than the books and essays is retaining sight of the horizon to which David was so closely trained, and his method for thinking, which combined seeing things as they really are along with the conviction that they can be otherwise. He believed, fundamentally, in human emancipation. At the end of Debt, he writes that the coming economic transformation, like previous epochal shifts, could be apprehended as catastrophe – certainly it will, if we fail to recover our sense of ourselves as historical actors, something he saw as being increasingly and deliberately effaced. Debt, he says, is 'just a promise corrupted by math and violence'. He wanted that book to throw open new perspectives, to push us to 'think with a breadth and grandeur appropriate to the times'. What kind of promises might truly free human beings make to one another? I promise you David: we will try to find out.

James Butler

@piercepenniless

P.S.

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- James Butler is a co-founder of Novara Media.